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A STORY OF RESILIENCE:

FOR TWO OKLAHOMA NOVICE EDUCATORS,

THIS IS WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

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A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Julia's Cultivating Experiences

My life has been full of cultivating experiences that led to me becoming Dr. Prise, and with that, full of amazing people who supported me, believed in me, and most importantly, loved me, every day of this journey. It is to them, named and not, that I dedicate this dissertation to.

To my committee members, Dr. Davis and Dr. Stewart, thank you so much for your support and guidance throughout this journey. To Dr. Raymond, thank you for always knowing, deep down, that I would pursue a PhD, even before I was ready to acknowledge it for myself. To Dean Reeder, there are not words to express my gratitude. From undergrad to doctoral student, you have been my chair and north star throughout this entire journey.

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To my Mom and Dad, thank you for always believing in me and supporting me, from day one. If I could've wished for parents, I would've wished for the two of you. It is because of you that I am who I am today. To James, this PhD is for both of us.

To my husband, Leith, you have been my greatest cheerleader throughout this entire process, and without a doubt, I would have given up without you. Thank you for believing in me, loving me, and most importantly, reminding me that, if I quit, our envelopes would say "Dr. and Mrs. Prise," and that just wouldn't do. #Dr.AndDr.Prise

Finally, to my participants, thank you for you sharing your story with not only me, but with the world. I hope you know that *your work matters*. Because of you, I now know that I can do hard things, and will always strive to be the somebody that everybody needs.

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Abstract

Teacher shortages across the United States have created challenges for public education systems, particularly in Oklahoma. This study sought to understand the experiences of novice Oklahoma mathematics teachers and the factors that influenced both their satisfaction within the profession and the development of their teacher resilience. Additionally, the study explored how these factors and teachers' individual resilience shaped their decisions to remain in the profession. This qualitative case study involved two novice middle school mathematics teachers who completed their education degrees through the same teacher preparation program. Data were collected over the course of one academic year through a series of virtual interviews. Findings revealed that key cultivating experiences contributing to teacher support included a sense of community, instructional support, and administrative support. Conversely, barriers to support included a lack of follow-through on collective commitments and unclear communication from administrators. The study suggests that teachers who are provided opportunities to engage in cultivating experiences develop resilience reserves that can be drawn upon during periods of professional stress caused by these barriers. However, this claim warrants further research to strengthen its validity. To enhance teacher resilience and, in turn, improve novice teacher satisfaction and retention in Oklahoma, the following recommendations are offered: ensure clear and consistent administrative communication, provide structured opportunities for teachers to build both personal and professional community, maintain collective commitments among staff, and invest in cultivating experiences that empower teachers to sustain their impact on students.

Chapter 1: A Story of Resilience in Education

In Oklahoma, most children begin school between the ages of five and six and continue until they graduate from high school around eighteen. A typical school year in Oklahoma is approximately 180 days. If students spend eight hours a day, 180 days a year, for their entire schooling career of roughly thirteen years, they spend 18,720 hours of their childhood with Oklahoma educators. In other words, 780 full 24-hour days throughout a child's life are spent with various Oklahoma educators. During this time, students learn to consider new ideas, find their curiosity about the world around them, and develop into the adults they will soon become (Noddings, 2013). Research supports the notion that schooling is an integral part of students' lives and, thus, should be of the highest importance (Rutter, 1979). When high-quality teachers work with all students daily, these 780 days can be maximized so students can reach their full potential. However, when students work with a teacher who is unprepared or struggling in their role, they may suffer during a vital time of growth. Each hour is crucial for student growth and success (Haycock, 1998).

Even with the recognition that all 18,720 hours of a student's K–12 experience are essential to their development, education in the United States has faced significant challenges over time. Specifically, student learning outcomes in most of the country have steadily declined in recent years (Sparks, 2022). For example, in the 2024 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), often referred to as the Nation's Report Card, a large number of US fourth and eighth-grade students scored below a basic understanding in reading and mathematics: 4th grade math - 24%, 8th grade math - 39%, 4th grade reading - 40%, 8th grade reading - 33% (The Nation's Report Card, 2024). In other words, roughly one-third of students in the United States need remediation to be on grade level. Although outside factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic

might appear to offer a straightforward explanation for these scores, this attribution is not necessarily accurate. According to the National Report Card, in 2012, 37% of third graders read below grade level, while 39% of seventh graders read below grade level (US Department of Education, 2012). Thus, test scores have been relatively stagnant nationwide over the years, not just in the post-pandemic classroom, and these scores leave much to be desired. Such statistics prompt curiosity into the evolution of education in the United States - what it has looked like historically, where it stands now, and how students have experienced the 18,720 hours of K–12 schooling.

The Nationwide Teacher Shortage - A History

American astronomer Carl Sagan once said, "You have to know the past to understand the present" (1980). This sentiment rings true when considering the landscape of America's public schools. Before we can understand where the US public education system is today, we need to look to the past.

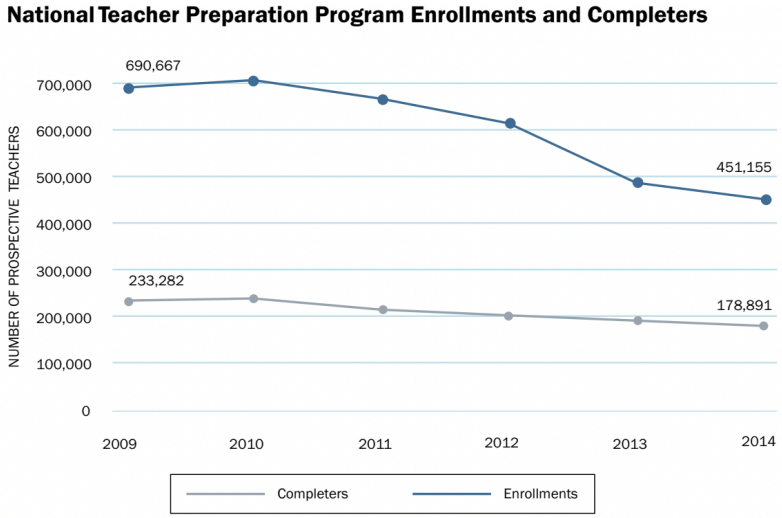
The Great Recession and Its Impact Nationwide

In 2008, the economy in the United States experienced a detrimental crash that would later be compared to the Great Depression of the 1930s. Evans et al. (2019) described this event as the Great Recession, noting that unemployment hit an all-time high of 10% in 2009. Education was not immune to this event, and according to Evans et al., roughly 300,000 educational employees in America lost their jobs during this time period. These massive layoffs for educators led to a rise in unemployed teachers, a dip in new teacher hires, the cancellation of various school activities, and skyrocketing class sizes (Sutcher et al., 2016). The hardships of this period in America's history would have a lasting impact on the public education system for years.

As teachers were being dismissed from the classroom due to the Great Recession, teacher preparation programs across the nation began to see a sharp decline in their enrollments. Since there was a host of educators searching for jobs after being let go due to budget cuts, many young people chose other careers with less oversaturation. Between 2009 and 2014, there was a 35% decrease in teacher preparation enrollment, which translates to approximately 240,000 educators (Sutcher et al., 2016). Additionally, the number of undergraduate students who completed their teaching degrees fell by 23% from 2009 to 2014. The figure below (Figure 1) details Sutcher et al.'s data. Coupled with the decline of teacher preparation enrollment was the rise of teachers reaching retirement age, specifically the 'Baby Boomer' generation (birthdays from 1946-1964). Specifically, it was predicted that 3.9 million new hires in the teaching profession would be needed between 2008 and 2021 due to a host of needs, including teacher retirement (Aaronson & Meckel, 2008). As enrollment in teacher preparation programs decreased and the demand for teachers increased, the shortage of qualified educators to fill classroom positions became more pronounced.

Figure 1

National Teacher Preparation Program Enrollment and Completers

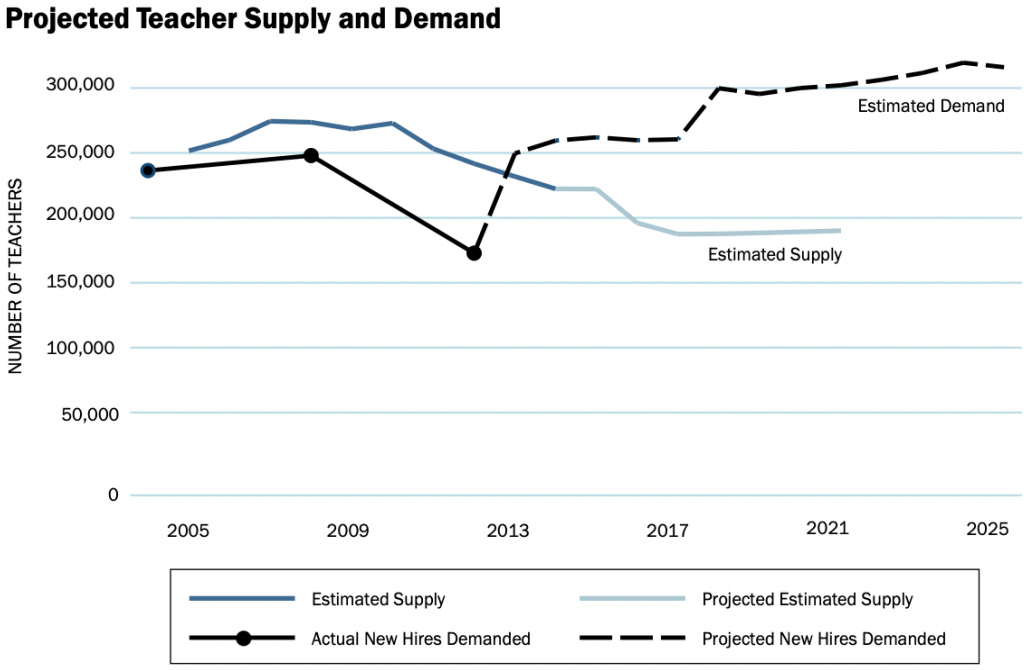


Note: Data for Teacher Preparation Enrollment versus Completion

However, as the Great Recession ended in 2012, there was the hope that enrollment in programs would rebound to normal as defined by pre-Great Recession standards. Hopes for teacher rehiring, smaller class sizes, and the restoration of programs were diminished by the reality that the teaching workforce had significantly declined and no longer resembled its previous strength. The need for more pre-service teachers graduating from universities posed a new problem for public education. According to Sutcher et al. (2016), the supply of new teachers was no longer sufficient to meet the nationwide demand for teachers. Moreover, predictions suggested that the divide between supply and demand would only grow over the years. The projections are detailed in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Projected Teacher Supply and Demand



Note: Prediction Data for Teacher Supply and Demand from 2005 - 2025

Unfortunately, these predictions came to fruition, and in the Fall of 2015, the nation began to see the effects of the Great Recession. Sutcher et al. (2016) reviewed publications referencing or including concerns about the growing teacher shortage between June and November of 2015, and found 300 articles the matched their criteria. It is important to note that, according to Sutcher et. al, there were only 20 publications discussing similar concerns during the same months two years prior. Teachers were in increasingly short supply, and the effects of these shortages were beginning to be felt across the nation's public education system.

Not All Shortages are Created Equal - Who and Where?

Given the shortage of qualified, well-prepared teachers, states nationwide would experience a sharp increase in hiring teachers who were not highly qualified over the next few years. Sutcher et al. (2016) noted a shortage in certain teacher certification areas compared to others. For example, in the 2015-2016 school year, special education teachers were in high demand, with 48 states struggling to find qualified teachers. Specifically, 48% of special education teachers were not fully qualified for their teaching positions in California. Special Education was not the only area struggling to find certified classroom educators. Mathematics teachers were also in short supply, according to Sutcher et al. (2016). Specifically, in the 2015-2016 school year, 42 states struggled to find qualified mathematics teachers. Sutcher et al. surmised that the compensation discrepancy between education and other mathematics careers partially influenced this shortage.

In addition to an increased shortage in teaching certification areas, certain regions and states in the nation experienced greater teacher shortages. Sutcher et al. (2016) examined each state in America, gathering data regarding turnover, teacher stress, wage comparison, and other data factors to better understand where teacher shortages occurred across the nation. Table 1

below details some of this data. Additionally, each state was awarded a Teaching Attractiveness Rating (out of 5 points), which is noted by the state's name.

Table 1

Overview of Sutcher et al.'s State-Level Data

United States	Wage Compared to Non-Teacher Salary: 74% Teachers Hoping to Leave As Soon As Possible: 6.6% Total Teacher Turnover: 14.2% Support from Administrators: 48% Teachers Feeling Stress Due to Testing: 12% Staff Who Report Staff Cooperation: 38% Teachers Who Feel They Have Control in their Classroom: 77% Teacher-Pupil Ratio: 16.1 Non-Certified Teachers: 1.9%
Lower Rated States	
State	**Lowest Scoring Factors**
Arizona 1.50	Wage Compared to Non-Teacher Salary: 62% Total Teacher Turnover: 23.6% Non-Certified Teachers: 5.04%
Colorado 2.00	Wage Compared to Non-Teacher Salary: 68% Teacher-Pupil Ratio: 17.5 Non-Certified Teachers: 11.3%
Florida 2.25	Teachers Hoping to Leave As Soon As Possible: 9.3% Teachers Feeling Stress Due to Testing: 25% Teachers Who Feel They Have Control in their Classroom: 58%
Louisiana 2.42	Total Teacher Turnover: 21.4% Teachers Feeling Stress Due to Testing: 21%
Mississippi 2.18	Total Teacher Turnover: 17.4% Staff Who Report Staff Cooperation: 34.5%
Oklahoma 2.50	Wage Compared to Non-Teacher Salary: 67% Total Teacher Turnover: 17.9%
Texas 2.00	Total Teacher Turnover: 20.7% Teachers Who Feel They Have Control in their Classroom: 67%

Higher Rated States	
State	**Highest Scoring Factors**
Oregon 4.09	Support from Administrators: 56% Teachers Feeling Stress Due to Testing: 6% Staff Who Report Staff Cooperation: 46.2% Teachers Who Feel They Have Control in their Classroom: 82%
Pennsylvania 3.92	Wage Compared to Non-Teacher Salary: 80% Total Teacher Turnover: 9.3% Non-Certified Teachers: 0.54%
Wyoming 4.00	Wage Compared to Non-Teacher Salary: 94% Total Teacher Turnover: 10.5% Non-Certified Teachers: 0.19%

Note: This table highlights the findings from Sutcher et al.'s work.

An analysis of these statistics highlights that numerous factors influence a state's Teacher Attractiveness Rating. However, states that scored highly, according to Sutcher et al., had comparable wages to non-teaching professions, low teacher turnover, and low percentages of non-certified teachers. In comparison, states with a lower Teacher Attractiveness Rating had low compensation comparability, high teacher turnover, a high proportion of non-certified teachers, and high levels of interpersonal conflicts among staff, often due to issues with administration, camaraderie, or testing.

Sutcher et al. included the percentage of non-certified teachers in statewide classrooms as a notable data point. In their 2016 publication, Sutcher et al. found that, nationwide, non-certified teachers held 1.9% of teaching positions. Later, Nguyen et al. (2022) found that, nationwide, 5.16% of positions are held by non-qualified teachers, with an additional 1.67% of positions unfilled. This increase represents a significant jump over a small number of years. More recently, according to Franco and Patrick (2023), 8.9% of teaching positions nationwide are filled by non-certified educators.

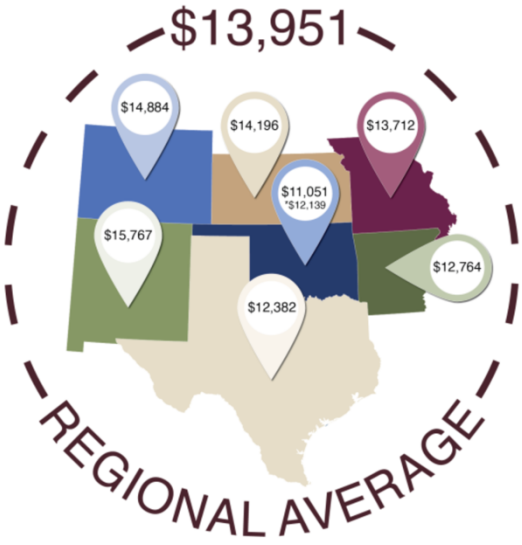
Sutcher et al. (2016) notes, specifically, that "the South has a particularly high turnover rate in comparison to the Northeast, Midwest, and West census regions. [Additionally,] the higher-spending Northeast averages the lowest turnover rates" (p. 47). If teacher turnover rates are consistently higher in the South relative to other regions across the nation, it warrants closer examination of the states within this area.

Narrowing Down on the South - Oklahoma

If teaching positions are being filled nationwide with non-certified teachers, and the South has an exceptionally high turnover rate, special consideration should be given to specific states in this region to better understand what contributes to this high turnover. The Oklahoma State School Boards Association (2024) published comparative statistics for Oklahoma and its surrounding Southern states. One such illustration (figure 3) details the per-pupil funding in Oklahoma, noting that Oklahoma spends less per student than all surrounding states.

Figure 3

Regional Per Pupil Spending

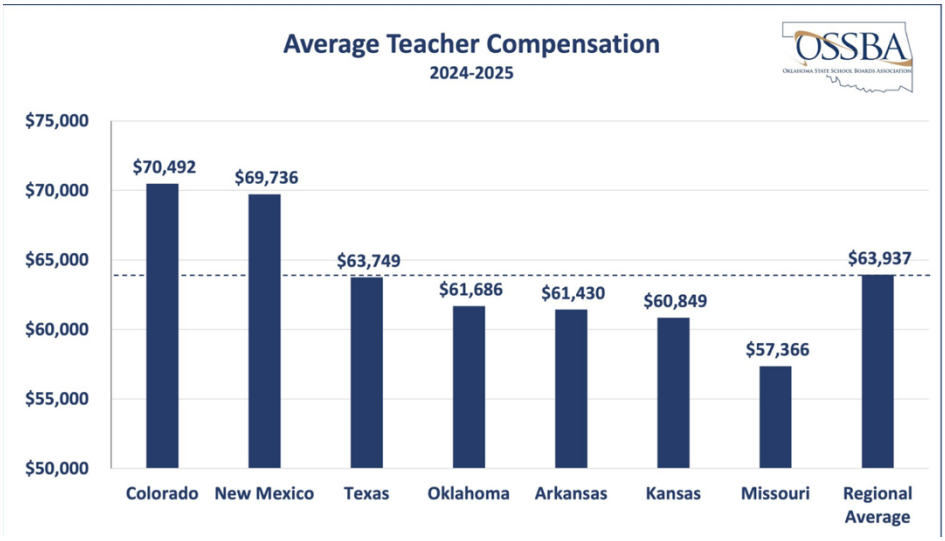


Note: The Oklahoma State School Boards Association's (2024) graphic representation of per-pupil spending for various southern states

Additionally, Oklahoma is much lower comparatively in terms of teacher compensation. Figure 4 compares the state of Oklahoma to its surrounding states.

Figure 4

Average Teacher Compensation



Note: The Oklahoma State School Boards Association's (2024) graphic representation of teacher compensation for various southern states.

When considering the data in Table 1, Figure 3, and Figure 4, a conclusion can be drawn that Oklahoma has experienced high teacher turnover and low overall funding for its educational system, both for students and teachers. Hedges et al. (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of studies, examining whether financial resources affect schools and education. In their findings, it was reported that "money really does matter" regarding school achievement (p. 13). Such findings, in combination with high turnover rates, only serve to support the idea that Oklahoma and its educational system are a case worth considering.

Oklahoma Education - Looking Back to Look Forward

While the United States may be experiencing teacher shortages, for this study, this study will focus on Oklahoma due to its low per-pupil spending, low teacher compensation, and high teacher turnover rates. To gain a clearer understanding of the current state of education in Oklahoma, it is necessary to examine Oklahoma-specific definitions and provide a brief overview of the state's educational climate over the past several years.

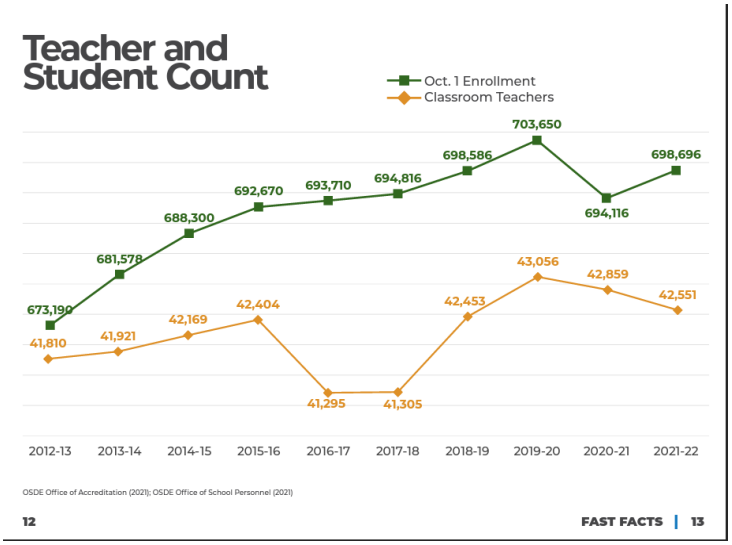
Oklahoma Education Definitions and Statistics

Clearly defining what constitutes a traditionally certified teacher versus other forms of certification in Oklahoma is essential, particularly given the varying terminology used across the literature to describe different teacher certification pathways. The Oklahoma State Department of Education (2019) articulates the requirements for teachers to obtain a standard teacher certification. The requirements include holding a Bachelor's Degree from an accredited education preparation program, receiving a certification recommendation from an Oklahoma institution of higher education, and passing the appropriate Oklahoma Teaching Standardized Tests. If one accomplishes these requirements, a traditional teaching certificate will be awarded to that person. Additionally, the Oklahoma Department of Education Fast Facts Report (2022) defines two additional types of certifications. Alternative certification is defined as "a pathway to becoming a teacher for those who did not complete a teacher education program. A college-credit course in classroom management and pedagogical principles is required during the initial certification." Emergency certification is defined as "a teaching certificate issued on an emergency basis for one year to someone who has not yet met the certification qualifications of a state-approved program. Districts may request emergency certification for a specific candidate only after exhausting every option to find an appropriately certified person for the open position." For my study, these terms and definitions will be used moving forward.

According to the Oklahoma State Department of Education's 2021-22 Fast Facts report, which is the most up-to-date data available online, 42,551 public school teachers are actively working with students in the classroom. This number has been steadily decreasing since the 2019-2020 school year, when 43,056 teachers were employed in public schools across the state. The chart below (Figure 5) illustrates this trend.

Figure 5

Oklahoma Teacher and Student Counts



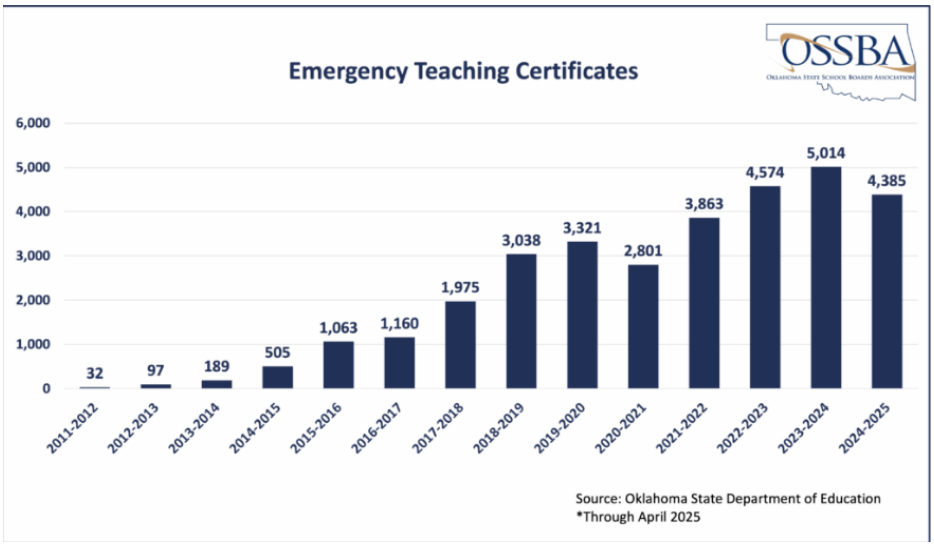
Note: The Oklahoma State Department of Education's (2021) Fast Facts Report's teacher and student counts in Oklahoma from 2012-2022 (most up-to-date data available online). The Oklahoma State Department of Education no longer publishes FastFacts online and has since removed this publication from its website.

While this chart illustrates growth from 2012 to 2020, there is an additional factor to consider in this data: the increase of emergency-certified teachers in Oklahoma classrooms. The number of emergency-certified teachers is primarily trending upward, with currently 4,385 individuals utilizing this certification type. In comparison, only 32 teachers were considered emergency

certified in the 2011-2012 school year. This diagram is attached below (Figure 6), as described by the OSSBA (2025).

Figure 6

Oklahoma Emergency Teacher Certifications



Note: The Oklahoma State School Boards Association's (2024) Oklahoma Emergency Teacher Certifications from 2011-2025

Taking the most up-to-date data available online from the Oklahoma State Department of Education from both Figures 5 and 6 into account, between the 2011-2012 school year and the 2023-24 school year, the difference in total Oklahoma educators is an increase of 741. The difference in the number of emergency-certified teachers during this same time period is an increase of 3,831. While it may appear on the surface that the number of educators is rising, a closer review of the data reveals a different story. Specifically, while the total number of teachers has increased by 1.8%, emergency-certified teachers have increased by 11,971.l9%. This drastic increase in emergency-certified teachers compared to traditionally certified teachers greatly concerns me as a researcher, educator, and citizen of Oklahoma.

It is also important to consider the turnover rate of teachers, regardless of preparation and certification pathway, for the state of Oklahoma. The 2021 Oklahoma State Department of Education Supply and Demand report indicated that roughly 18% of teachers did not stay in their current teaching positions at the end of the 2019-2020 academic year. Roughly 10% of those teachers moved to a different teaching position in an Oklahoma public school or a non-teaching position in an Oklahoma public school while the remaining 8% left the field of Oklahoma education, either for retirement or other reasons. The Oklahoma State Department of Education's 2021-22 Fast Facts report stated that, in the 2019-2020 school year, there were 43,056 classroom teachers employed across the state. Thus, if 18% of those teachers left their current teaching position at the end of that school year, roughly 7,750 classrooms did not retain their teachers. The Oklahoma State Department of Education no longer publishes reports detailing this data, and the original Fast Facts report from 2021-22 is no longer accessible online. As such, this is the most up-to-date data available.

These data support the idea that Oklahoma educators may be experiencing dissatisfaction in their careers, and thus, it follows that there is a need to better understand the lived experience of teachers in the state. According to Hendricks (2015), approximately 35% of teachers do not continue employment in their first school site in Oklahoma after their first year in the classroom. Additionally, 29% leave for another district, while another 17% exit the Oklahoma public school system. This data shows that teachers exit the classroom alarmingly after their first year with students. Hendricks compared this information with Texas educators and found that compared to Oklahoma's 17% of new teachers who leave the field, only 11% of new teachers exit the Texas public school system after one year. This study shows that Oklahoma, specifically, is losing first-year teachers at a much quicker rate than its large neighboring state.

Oklahoma Education Climate

The Oklahoma educational climate has been replete with challenges and opposing viewpoints over the past several years. With the passing of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation nationwide in 2002, a purported aim was to provide better educational opportunities for all, especially those in need. Unfortunately, this legislation often prompted teachers to adapt their teaching practices to support students on standardized tests while disregarding non-tested ideas or so-called soft skills, such as collaboration and problem-solving (Murnane & Papay, 2010). This legislation aimed to ensure all students obtained growth throughout each school year, and by 2014, all students were to be proficient in reading and mathematics. Standardized testing was solely used to measure students' academic achievement and growth. Many teachers felt pressured to ensure students knew how to test appropriately and effectively. Additionally, some felt they needed to change their teaching practices to support standardized testing strategies instead of academically rich, task-filled environments.

During this time, Oklahoma educators were also among the nation's lowest-paid, leaving many teachers feeling unable to support their families (Pasquantonio, 2018; Will, 2018). Additionally, funding for Oklahoma schools had been stagnant, if not decreasing, over the past several years, due partly to the impacts of the Great Recession. This lack of funding led to larger class sizes, reduced extracurricular activities for students, and four-day school weeks for some districts. The lack of support and the pressure to ensure all students grew academically created a space where teachers felt unable to do their jobs appropriately (Pasquantonio, 2018; Will, 2018).

These factors led to the Oklahoma teacher walkout in 2018. Public schools across Oklahoma were closed for ten days as teachers, administrators, parents, and students flooded the state capitol with their concerns. Teachers and administrators met with representatives

throughout the walkout to advocate for a raise in teacher pay and school funding. After ten days, teachers received a $6,000 raise, short of the $10,000 goal but a small step in the right direction. According to Eger (2019), the increase in salary after the walkout ranked Oklahoma's teachers' salaries as 34th in the nation. Beyond teaching salary increases, no other funding for schools was increased at this time.

The 2018 Oklahoma teacher walkout allowed many teachers to engage in advocacy in ways previously not considered. While the state has been and remains conservatively driven, many teachers felt empowered to meet with legislators to discuss their concerns about education. However, this momentum stopped in March of 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. For two years, teachers worked with students remotely and in person. While conservative-leaning government members felt schooling best occurred in person, the Oklahoma governor rejected a mask mandate for all students. As teachers battled to care for their own health, their family's health, and students' growing needs during the pandemic, the temperature of the educational climate in Oklahoma continued to rise.

As the state enters a new era post-COVID-19, conservative policymakers fight to ensure that ideas such as diversity, equity, and choice are limited in schools. There is frequent debate on what students should be learning, how they should be learning, and how best to ensure students grow academically and socially. In 2021, Oklahoma passed House Bill 1775, often described as the anti-CRT bill, which prohibited schools from teaching content that would make students feel uncomfortable or guilty based on past actions. (Korth, 2022). This legislation led to the banning of books and created an environment of intimidation, fear and frustration for teachers (Brinkman, 2022). Students and parents could report a teacher if they felt that a book or lesson presented something that fell into their definition of CRT. If teachers were found engaging in teaching

practices such as these, consequences from the state level were possible, including teacher license removal (Brinkman, 2022).

While the Oklahoma teacher walkout was a small success for teachers at the time, many continue to feel the increased stresses of working in classrooms across the state due to working conditions, inadequate school funding, and teacher intimidation tactics around topics discussed in the classroom (Willits, 2023). The ongoing political and social tensions are important to remember when considering Oklahoma's educational climate for all teachers, particularly new teachers.

Significance of Topic

Teachers are considered one of the most influential factors in a student's educational career and success (Mobra & Hamlin, 2020). Knowing this, it is imperative that students work with the most highly qualified educators to ensure positive outcomes for student success in academics and life. With the rising number of emergency-certified teachers in Oklahoma, it is timely to examine the factors that teachers perceive to impact their decision to stay in Oklahoma education versus leaving the field, opening the door for emergency-certified educators in the classroom. The alarming statistic that emergency certifications have grown by 11,971.9%, coupled with low per-pupil spending and high teacher turnover, makes Oklahoma a case worth considering. While the findings of this study may specifically speak to the needs of Oklahoma teachers, the findings may also transfer to other states facing similar challenges. Oklahoma is not alone in its teacher shortage, and this study is but a first step in better understanding the struggles faced by teachers.

Chapter 2: Foundational Understandings - A Review of the Literature

The primary focus of this study was to examine the factors that novice mathematics Oklahoma public educators feel affect their satisfaction during an academic school year and how those factors additionally affect their choice to remain in Oklahoma public education the following school year. Another foci of this study considered how a teacher's resilience influences these factors throughout the academic year. To provide a foundation for this study, it is important to examine and summarize the prominent literature on the topics of teacher satisfaction and retention. Also, an overview of research regarding new teachers and their experiences will be addressed. Finally, the topics of self-efficacy, teacher self-efficacy, and teacher resilience will be discussed.

The Connection Between Teacher Satisfaction and Teacher Retention

This study aims to better understand the factors that affect a teacher's satisfaction and, thus, how that satisfaction affects teacher retention. Previous research studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between teacher satisfaction and teacher retention (Bobbitt et al., 1991; Cockburn, 2000; Cohn, 1992; McLaughlin et al., 1986). Additionally, Zhang (2006) not only supported these findings regarding the positive connection between teacher satisfaction and retention, but also went one step further, noting that "teachers are more likely to stay either in teaching or in the same school after a school year when they are satisfied and are more likely to leave when they are dissatisfied" (p. 260). Thus, research supports the idea that teacher satisfaction and retention are connected and are dependent on one another.

Throughout this literature review, studies are summarized and discussed, detailing findings of satisfaction and retention. Because research has shown that these two ideas affect one another, I have worked to consider both satisfaction and retention as interdependent constructs.

Thus, high satisfaction and high retention are grouped together, while low satisfaction and low retention follow a similar model. Given they are interrelated, both are examined in parallel throughout this literature review.

Factors that Impact Teacher Satisfaction and Retention - What Research Says

Studies focused on the concept of satisfaction and retention of public school educators is something that researchers and educational scholars have pursued (Ansley et al., 2019; Borman & Dowling, 2017; Cross, 2019; Curtis, C., 2012; Darling-Hammond, L. & Sykes, G., 2003; Gu, Q., & Day, C. 2013; Heaton, 2014; Jackson, 2018; Liu, X. S. & Meyer, J. P. 2005; Rinke, C. R., 2014; Stockard, J., & Lehman, M. B., 2004; Zhang, 2006). These publications have aimed to better understand why teachers feel satisfaction or lack thereof in their profession. To better understand their findings, significant themes, in no particular order, found throughout the literature from a wide range of studies, publications, and articles are detailed

Compensation

An important consideration of teacher satisfaction and retention is the question of whether teachers are being compensated appropriately for their work in and outside the classroom. In the United States, the average teacher works roughly 55 hours per week (Gallop, 2021). This means that teachers, on average, work fifteen additional hours outside of their contractually stated hours weekly to support students in their classroom. Additionally, the minimum salary for a new educator in the state of Oklahoma, per the 2021-22 Fast Facts publication from the State Department of Education, is $36,601. According to the National Education Association, the average salary for teachers in the United States is $42,844 (NEA, 2023). It is important to note that, according to the NEA, this is roughly $3,644 less than teachers' salaries in 2013 because of inflation.

In 2018, one study was conducted in Oklahoma City Public Schools to better understand the factors that impact teacher retention. The research revealed that teachers did feel they were underpaid for their work (Raymond, 2018). Similarly, in an interview with Richard Ingersoll, an education professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Ingersoll stated that "salary is definitely a factor" for teachers related to teacher satisfaction (Walker, 2015). Darling-Hammonds and Sykes (2003) found similar results, noting that pay was the second most important factor when considering teacher satisfaction and retention. Additionally, in a dissertation study conducted by Heaton (2014), it was found that compensation was a factor that contributed to teacher dissatisfaction. Specifically, 32.8% of teachers were dissatisfied with their compensation. Thus, according to Heaton, approximately one out of every three teachers felt their compensation negatively affected their satisfaction in teaching. Collectively, these studies confirm the idea that compensation has an effect on teacher satisfaction.

Additionally, there are several studies that specifically draw the connection between teacher satisfaction and retention. Specifically, a meta-analytic study completed by Borman and Dowling (2008) found that high compensation correlated with lower teacher turnover rates. In other words, when teachers were compensated appropriately for their work in the classroom, there was a smaller amount of teacher turnover at the end of each school year. Zhang (2006) also argued this idea as an implication of their study that focused on teacher satisfaction and retention, noting that "in order to retain teachers and maintain a qualified teacher force, improving teacher compensation is a must" (p. 266). Compensation is a factor, according to previous studies and publications, that can positively or negatively affect teacher satisfaction and retention.

Administrator Support

Support from site and district administrators was another common theme that emerged from research relevant to teacher retention and satisfaction (Ansley et al, 2019; Cancio et al., 2013; Drake, 2022; Heaton, 2014; Metlife, 2008; Stockard & Lehman, 2004; Zhang, 2006). One such study, conducted by Drake (2022), aimed to understand teacher satisfaction and dissatisfaction in urban schools and ultimately found that the role of a principal had a significant impact on a teacher's choice to stay in urban education. The survey findings revealed that teachers at highest risk of leaving the classroom within five years reported multiple sources of stress, most notably a perceived lack of appreciation from supervisors and heightened anxiety associated with supervisory evaluations. In other words, "when teachers feel valued and have a relationship with their principals, they are more likely to feel satisfied with the work in an urban school district" (Drake, 2022, p. 138.). This study suggests the importance of a principal and their role in teacher satisfaction. The community formed by and with a principal and their staff can be a factor that allows a teacher to feel connected to a school group. The lack of connection may feed into a teacher's dissatisfaction, and thus cause educators to look for other teaching assignments or career opportunities. Gu and Day (2013) noted similar themes regarding the importance of school leadership, supporting the notion further that administrator support is a key factor that can influence a teacher's satisfaction and retention.

Metlife (2008) conducted a survey of new teachers to better understand their experience in the classroom, specifically focusing on ideas of satisfaction and retention. The results of this survey indicated that teachers most likely to leave the classroom within the next five years experienced multiple sources of stress. Among these, two prominent factors were feeling undervalued by supervisors and experiencing heightened stress and anxiety related to performance evaluations. These two factors are directly related to the leadership and culture

cultivated by a site-level principal within their teacher community. When teachers experience stress or anxiety in relation to interactions with their supervising principal, they may perceive a lack of support, which can hinder their professional growth and development. Administrator support is a significant factor influencing overall teacher attrition and satisfaction.

Stockard and Lehman's (2004) focused on understanding the factors that impact new teacher satisfaction and retention. Specifically, they found the following:

> 1st-year teachers' satisfaction is greatly influenced by the environments in which they work—the support they receive from others, the control they have over their work environment, the mentoring they receive, the extent to which they are successful in the classroom, and the extent to which these environments are safe and orderly. These are characteristics that are directly under the control of building administrators and can be encouraged by school district–level policies. (p. 763)

The various environments described are all directly impacted and influenced by the site and district-level administrators, and thus, their leadership and response to the needs of teachers in their buildings is crucial when considering retention and satisfaction as a whole.

Zhang (2006) specifically found that support from administrators directly affects teacher satisfaction. When considering the impact of an administrator on teacher satisfaction and retention, Zhang noted the following:

> An implication is that perceived good leadership in the eyes of a teacher supports teacher job satisfaction. In other words, good principal leadership is always connected with teacher job satisfaction. Conversely, poor leadership in the eyes of that teacher may be an important cause of his or her job dissatisfaction. (p. 263)

Thus, the support that a teacher feels they receive from their administrator can directly impact a teacher's satisfaction, which in turn directly affects the retention of that particular teacher. Heaton (2014) confirmed this, noting that positive repertoire with a building administrator often correlated with high levels of satisfaction in their jobs. A few years later, Ansley et al. (2019) agreed, finding that teacher's perceptions of their administrators affected the satisfaction they felt in their job position.

Administrators play a critical role within the sphere of influence that impacts teacher satisfaction and retention. When teachers perceive administrators as supportive and collaborative, their overall job satisfaction tends to increase; conversely, a lack of perceived support from administrators can contribute to diminished satisfaction and a higher likelihood of attrition.

Teacher Connectedness

Teacher connectedness was another prominent theme throughout research studies and publications focused on teacher support and retention (Ansley et al., 2019; Drake, 2022; Jackson, 2018; Olsen & Anderson, 2007; Raymond, 2018; Waddell, 2010). In her 2022 dissertation, Drake detailed two additional studies and their findings regarding teacher satisfaction. Specifically, these studies have cited teacher relationships and connectedness as key driving factors for teachers. In a 2010 study of urban educators, Waddell found relationships were essential for teacher satisfaction. Olsen and Anderson (2007) found similar results regarding connectedness and its importance to teachers. If teachers feel like they are on their own without a support system, it could lead to dissatisfaction in their career and their eventual choice to not remain in their current teaching assignment.

Raymond's (2018) study found that multiple factors affected a teacher's satisfaction, including a lack of professional respect, an overabundance of responsibilities, dissatisfaction regarding district and state policies, and interpersonal relationships. Walker's (2015) interview with Ingersoll tells a similar story, in which Ingersoll described the importance of "improving workplace conditions, giving teachers a voice, [and] treating them as professionals." For teachers to be treated as professionals, they must not only be seen as professionals but also have the space to connect and collaborate with others in the field.

In a study focusing on elementary and middle school educators during the same time period as Raymond (2018), Jackson (2018) also found that school climate played a role in teacher satisfaction. A year later, Ansley et al. (2019) confirmed Jackon's findings, noting that teacher connectedness was a prominent factor impacting both teacher satisfaction and retention. Specifically, they stated that "the relationships teachers have with their administrators and each other may be the difference between staying at or leaving their current schools" (p. 12). When teachers lack opportunities to build relationships and a sense of community with their colleagues, sustained connection over time becomes difficult, particularly in environments with low retention rates. Collegial connectedness is a potentially significant factor in fostering professional fulfillment and encouraging teachers to remain in the classroom.

For novice teachers, specifically, mentorship is a powerful tool to build teacher connections. Smith and Ingersoll (2004) found that teachers who were not provided with a new teacher induction program/mentoring support were less likely to be retained at their school site after their first year as a teacher. Specifically, 41% of these teachers did not remain in their school site after that first year. Terada (2017) echoes this finding, noting that "without a mentor, nearly one in three new teachers leave by their fifth year, but with a mentor, that ratio drops by

more than half, to one and seven." This research supports the belief that new teachers need substantial support built through teacher connections during their first year in the classroom. With these connections, new teachers are more likely to find their footing and remain in their teaching position as compared to those who are not given this support. Furlow (2019) took this idea one step further, noting that "new teachers rely on onsite training for classroom success." The onsite training that Furlow refers to is the teacher connectedness idea that both Smith, Ingersoll, and Terada have alluded to.

Fry (2007) conducted a study specifically examining new teacher satisfaction and provided suggestions to improve new teacher satisfaction amongst faculty, noting first that induction and mentoring were key components needed in the foundation of new teacher support. It is important to note, however, that induction and mentoring are not something that happens once in isolation, but instead must be a living, breathing process. Ingersoll (2012) specifically noted the following:

> Importantly, the data also indicates that induction can help retain teachers and improve their instruction. The data also shows that the kinds and amounts of support vary. And some research suggests that content, intensity, and duration are important: The effect depends on how much induction one gets and for how long. (p. 51).

In other words, if mentoring and induction processes are to be effective at retaining teachers and raising their levels of satisfaction, a commitment must be made by all active parties to ensure new teachers are given high-quality support and connections for an extended period of time, not just for the first few days leading up to the beginning of school.

Teacher connectedness is a significant factor influencing both job satisfaction and retention. Whether fostered through mentoring relationships or broader collegial interactions

within the school environment, the presence of meaningful professional connections should be considered when examining factors that contribute to teacher persistence and fulfillment in their roles.

Student/Parent Behavior

An essential aspect of teachers' professional roles is engaging not only with colleagues and site leaders, but also with students and their families. While these interactions often represent a core motivation for entering the profession, many teachers report experiencing considerable stress in navigating relationships with students and families (Curtis, 2012; Heaton, 2014; Liu & Meyer, 2005; MetLife, 2008)." A survey from Metlife (2008) detailed stressors regarding student behavior and family collaboration. Specifically, according to this survey, teachers felt stress and anxiety about discipline and complaints while also feeling unprepared to interact with parents and engage them in support. Heaton's (2014) study supports Metlife's work, finding that 21.6% of respondents noted levels of dissatisfaction when asked about parental support. Thus, collaboration and interactions with parents can significantly influence a teacher's job satisfaction, which in turn may affect their decision to remain in their current position or pursue other opportunities.

Teacher satisfaction has been linked to student behavior in other bodies of literature as well. Liu and Meyer (2005) reported similar findings in their study, noting that teachers who experienced greater student misbehavior tended to report lower levels of satisfaction and increased stress. Specifically, they noted that "our analysis suggests that student discipline problems were a major reason for teachers' dissatisfaction with their jobs." Student discipline can derail a full classroom activity and overall learning environment, and thus the stress of successfully managing a classroom can take a toll on teachers. Zhang (2006) confirmed these

findings in their study, specifically noting the connection between teacher satisfaction and student behavior. Curtis (2012) conducted a study of new mathematics teachers and had similar findings, stating that "issues of classroom control and administrative support are significant factors in the decision to leave teaching" (p. 7). More recently, Ortan et al. (2021) also found that student behavior affects teacher satisfaction, noting that positive behaviors from students will impact teacher satisfaction positively.

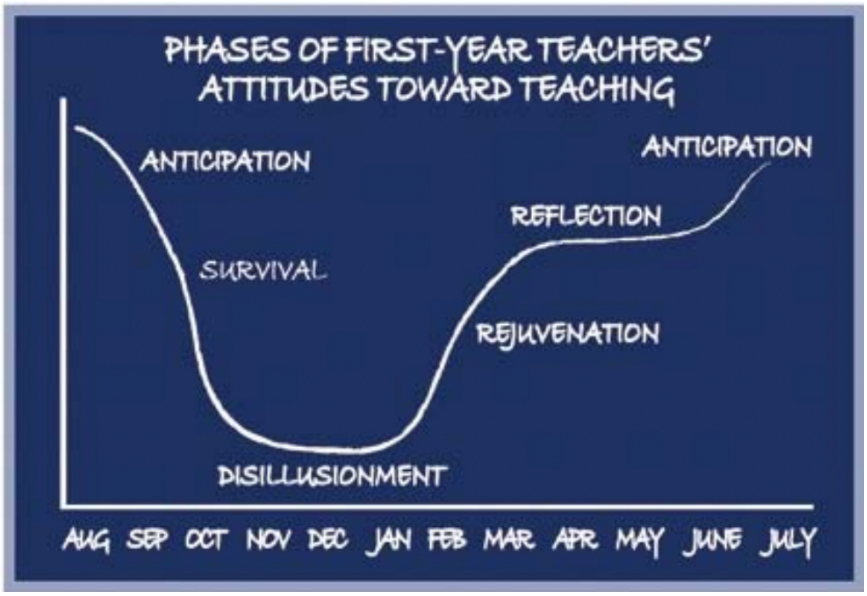
Engagement with students and families constitutes a fundamental aspect of the teaching profession. Research indicates that the quality of these interactions can directly influence teacher satisfaction and retention. Positive relationships tend to enhance professional fulfillment and stability, whereas negative experiences may contribute to dissatisfaction and increased turnover.

Research on New Teachers - Moir's Phases

Moir (1990/1995) conducted research with new teachers throughout their first year in education and, from that work, developed a framework that outlines the predicted phases a new teacher might experience. These five phases correspond with a teacher's academic calendar year and explain what a new teacher might be feeling at different times of the year and why they might be experiencing these feelings. A graphic (Figure 1) detailing the framework displayed below.

Figure 1

Moir's Phases of First-Year Teachers' Attitude Toward Teaching



Note: A graphic that illustrates Moir's (1990/1995) work and findings.

According to Moir, first-year teachers first experience the anticipation phase. This phase begins during teacher orientation and typically lasts through the first few school days. Moir describes this period as a joyous time when teachers are excited about meeting their students and starting their work. In Moir's 2016 publication detailing these phases, she noted that, during the anticipation phase, one teacher commented, "I was elated to get the job but terrified about going from the simulated experience of student teaching to being the person completely in charge." Moir describes that conversations of this nature are typical in the anticipation phase - new teachers are nervous yet excited about what will come.

However, the anticipation phase is quickly replaced by the survival phase. This phase begins after the first week of school and lasts until roughly mid-October. During this phase, new teachers are overwhelmed with everyday teaching. The time it takes to lesson plan, manage a classroom, and take care of small daily activities can be overwhelming, and new teachers, according to Moir, feel like they are barely keeping their heads above water. Specifically, Moir (2016) noted that one participant stated, "I thought I'd be busy, something like student teaching,

but this is crazy. I'm feeling like I'm constantly running. It's hard to focus on other aspects of my life." This busy stage of a new teacher's journey can lead to a dip in their attitude toward teaching.

While the dip during the survival phase, according to Moir, is significant, it is small compared to the emotional stresses of the third stage, disillusionment. This stage may begin in mid-October and continue through January. During the disillusionment phase, teachers may be unable to see a way forward. This is the time of year when student behaviors may have increased, cold/flu season is on the rise, and significant events are taking place, such as conferences, school plays, and formal evaluations. During this stage, a new teacher told Moir, "I thought I'd focus more on curriculum and less on classroom management and discipline. I'm stressed because I have some very problematic students…" During this phase of a new teacher's first year in education morale may be at its lowest.

According to Moir's framework, as February begins, new teachers often enter a new phase known as rejuvenation. This phase lasts until the end of March, and teachers feel a sense of understanding of school-wide procedures. Additionally, a general understanding of their work as a classroom teacher raises their spirits. Teachers feel more comfortable with their students and classroom policies by this time of the year. During this time, teachers often feel like they have improved and seen growth in their teaching and their students compared to the beginning of the year. One teacher told Moir, "I'm really excited about my story writing center, although the organization of it has at times been haphazard. Story writing has definitely revived my journals." As this phase progresses, teacher morale and attitudes typically improve

In the final phase of a new teachers, according to Moir, experience what she coined as the reflection stage. During this stage, teachers can examine their year as a whole and see the areas

of success and need for growth. As the school year ends, many teachers plan for the following year, detailing things they want to continue and changes that need to be implemented. For example, one teacher noted, “I think that for next year I’d like to start the letter puppets earlier in the year to introduce the kids to more letters.” This reflection time leaves teachers on a high as they conclude the school year and begin their summer break.

Although these phases are fluid and may not align precisely with the suggested timeline, Moir’s research indicates that most new teachers generally experience their first year in a similar progression. While not a universal model, this framework offers valuable insight into effective approaches for mentoring and supporting novice teachers throughout their initial year in the profession.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Initially founded by Albert Bandura (1977), Self-Efficacy Theory details the relationships between the belief that one can succeed in a task, which tasks are chosen, and how long one will persevere until success (or failure) is achieved. Another way to think about self-efficacy is to focus on one’s perceived ability to complete a task. Tschannen-Moran et al. (2001) later defined self-efficacy as one’s perception that they can complete a task, not their actual level of competence. Bandura theorized that the stronger a person's self-efficacy, the more likely they would be to engage in stressful situations and continue persevering through a task despite negative setbacks or perceived failures. Specifically, Bandura states the following:

> The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more active the efforts. Those who persist in subjectively threatening activities that are in fact relatively safe will gain corrective experiences that reinforce their sense of efficacy, thereby eventually eliminating their

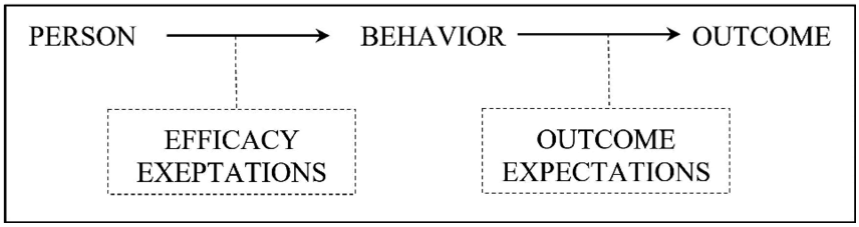
> defensive behavior. Those who cease their coping efforts prematurely will retain their self-debilitating expectations and fears for a long time. (p. 194)

According to Bandura (1986, 1990), self-efficacy differs from self-confidence in that self-confidence refers to a general feeling about one's ability in life overall. In contrast, self-efficacy can change from task to task. For example, one person could feel a strong self-efficacy in playing tennis but have low self-efficacy in baking a cake, all while having an overall high level of self-confidence in life.

Bandura (1977) first detailed how individuals choose various tasks and how they perceive their own self-efficacy developing the figure below. After one had chosen a specific task, efficacy expectations affected their behavior during the task, which Bandura defined as "how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences" (p. 194). These influenced behaviors would lead to various outcome expectations, which Bandura defined as not only the predicted outcome but also "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes" (p. 193). A graphical representation (Figure 2) of Bandura's relationship between these ideas is pictured below.

Figure 2

Relationship between Efficacy and Outcome Expectations



Note: A graphic representation of Bandura's (1977) work

Bandura (1977) details the sources that affect self-efficacy expectations: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal feedback, and emotional arousal. Described as being the most influential, performance accomplishments refer to the successes and/or failures as one completes various tasks. In other words, this is when someone is actively engaged in and completing a specific task. High success rates will raise self-efficacy, whereas repeated failure lowers it. Bandura notes that after one experiences repeated success, their self-efficacy strengthens in a way that provides cushion against future failures or missteps.

Bandura also identifies vicarious experience as a key source of self-efficacy. This occurs when individuals observe others successfully completing a task, leading to the belief that they too may be capable of achieving similar success (Bandura & Barab, 1973). Additionally, as a participant watches another complete a task successfully, internally, the participant sees that success is possible and threatening or stressful activities may no longer seem as daunting. This source focuses on pure observational analysis.

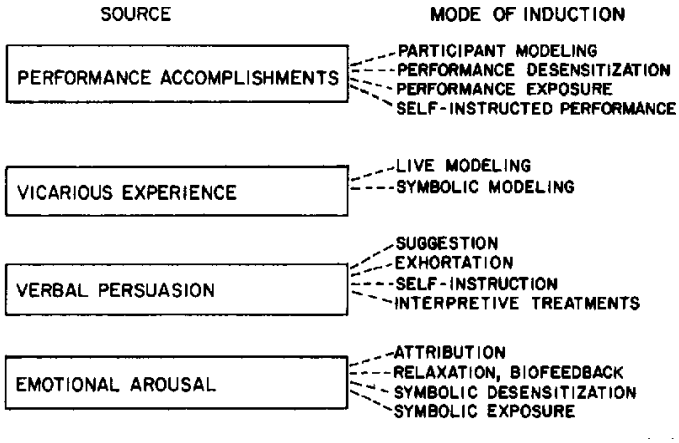
Verbal persuasion refers to using words to convince a participant they have the skills to complete a task successfully. This source is weaker than the others because it relies on an outsider's words instead of an authentic experience to solidify one's perceived ability to complete a specific task. Bandura also notes that with verbal persuasion, "mastery expectations [that] are induced by suggestion can be readily extinguished by disconfirming experiences" (1977, p.198). Verbal persuasion is a source of influence but weaker than other sources.

The final source Bandura describes is emotional arousal. Bandura says that if one feels less stress in a situation, their self-efficacy will be higher than if they think of immense tension in the face of a task. Specifically, Bandura notes that "by conjuring up fear-provoking thoughts about their ineptitude, individuals can rouse themselves to elevated levels of anxiety that far

exceed the fear experienced during the actual threatening situation" (p. 199). The way one feels before, during, and after the event or task can significantly influence their feelings of self-efficacy. Figure 3 detailing this information, according to Bandura, can be seen below:

Figure 3

Sources that Affect Self-Efficacy



Note: A summary of Bandura's (1977) findings regarding sources that affect self-efficacy

Teacher Self-Efficacy

Implications of Bandura's work have affected many fields of study, including education. Teacher self-efficacy can be described as "the extent to which the teacher believes he or she has the capacity to affect student performance" (Berman et al., 1977, p. 137). This strand of Bandura's work laid the foundation for examining the role of self-efficacy in educational contexts, particularly its impact on teachers in the classroom. Building on Bandura's framework, research suggests that teachers who possess a strong belief in their ability to succeed are more likely to persevere through challenges than those with lower self-efficacy. This belief has been shown to influence job satisfaction, which in turn plays a critical role in teacher retention (Buric & Moe, 2020; Kasalak & Dagyar, 2020; Moe et al., 2010; Ortan et al., 2021; Türkoglu et al., 2017).

Türkoglu et al.'s (2017) study detailed the relationship between teacher self-efficacy and teacher satisfaction. It was found that high teacher self-efficacy also reflected high teacher satisfaction. More than that, Türkoglu et al. noted that "according to the results, self-efficacy correlated positively with teacher job satisfaction, which shows that when teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy increase, their job satisfaction will also increase" (p. 770, 2017). A few years later, Kasalak & Dagyar (2020) also found that there was a relationship between teacher self-efficacy and satisfaction. During the same time period, Buric & Moe (2020) published a study with similar findings, also stating the relationship between teacher self-efficacy and satisfaction. A year later, Ortan et al. (2021) published additional confirming results, stating that teacher self-efficacy had significant impacts on teacher satisfaction. Since research previously discussed in this literature review has stated that teacher satisfaction directly impacts teacher retention, we can thus conclude that teacher self-efficacy not only affects teacher satisfaction, but also teacher retention.

In 2010, Moe et al. considered the effects of teacher self-efficacy and its impact on retention. However, their findings were not only confirmed by the above studies, which noted that teacher self-efficacy affects teacher satisfaction, but also stretched this idea further. In their study, they noted the following:

> Being able does not guarantee satisfaction if (despite the good practice) one fails to experience positive affect or feel self-efficient. This leads on to very important practical implications: our findings can help in the planning of effective training designed to increase job satisfaction, with particular emphasis on self-efficacy beliefs and positive affect. (p. 1151)

This insight is particularly valuable, as a teacher may possess the skills and effectiveness required for success, yet a lack of belief in their own ability to teach can diminish their overall job satisfaction.

Teacher Resilience

Day & Gu (2005) built on the ideas of teacher self-efficacy in relation to teacher retention and teacher effectiveness in their *'Variation in Teacher's Work, Lives, and Effectiveness'* (VITAE) mixed methods study, which aimed to examine these ideas more closely with various teachers at all stages of their careers. This four-year longitudinal study was completed with 300 teachers in 100 schools. Through their work, they found a positive correlation with both retention and effectiveness with strong resilience, which they defined as "the ability of an individual to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions" (xviii). Additionally, they found three major categories that greatly affected teachers' commitment and resilience: personal, professional, and situational factors (2005). Day & Gu described the personal sphere as ideologies that may be internal to the teacher and experiences unique to that individual. The professional sphere, in contrast, refers to where that specific teacher is on their teaching journey in terms of experience and beliefs regarding teaching and learning. The final sphere, situational, refers to the school at large, in terms of its makeup, student population, funding, leadership structure, and colleague support.

At the conclusion of their study, the authors emphasized the need for further research on resilience, with particular attention to teacher resilience. In connection with self-efficacy, they specifically noted the following:

> A strong sense of self-efficacy is an essential component of teacher commitment and resilience. To rebound from setbacks and adversity, teachers need the strength of

> self-efficacy beliefs; and conversely, their sustained effort and perseverance in the face of difficulty will strengthen their sense of efficacy and result in a stronger sense of resilience. In other words, the development of teachers' self-efficacy interacts with the growth of their resilient qualities. It is by nature a dynamic, developmental process – the key characteristic of resilience. (p. 259)

Thus, from their point of view, self-efficacy is a piece of the puzzle to consider when discussing teaching retention and satisfaction. However, it is a component of a larger construct: teacher resilience.

Day & Gu (2005) identified three scenarios that assisted in measuring how much one's teacher resilience would be tested in a given situation. Scenario #1 refers to all three categories that affect a teacher's resilience in the classroom (personal, professional, situational) are at equilibrium with little to no movement in any direction. The teacher can handle any small distraction or issue that may arise with ease. Scenario #2, however, is when at least one or two categories require additional energy from the teacher for a short amount of time. For example, a teacher might be experiencing a personal crisis at home and is leaning on a loved one while also struggling with a parent interaction at school, relying on their mentor to navigate the situation. Finally, Scenario #3 refers to all three categories needing maximum attention from the teacher, requiring support from all available systems and parties for short or potentially longer periods of time. The VITAE study found that the more often a teacher found themselves in a situation like Scenario #3, the more their teacher resilience was tested.

One specific finding of the VITAE study is important to note. Throughout three different stories from three unique teachers, there is one common theme amongst them: a call to teach. Specifically, Gu & Day (2007) stated:

> These internal values and motivation, fueled their capacities to exercise emotional strengths and professional competence and subsequently provided them with the resilience which enabled them to meet the challenges of the changing environments in which they worked. As a consequence, then, the potentially negative effects of experiencing stressful work and life events were managed and translated into positive personal and professional resources upon which these teachers could draw and benefit when developing and sustaining their positive professional life trajectories over the course of their careers. (p. 1311)

It was their internal drive that kept these teachers going when their resilience was truly tested. This connects to the idea that teaching is more than just a job: it's a passion that many devote their life to. It is that passion that fuels and ignites educators, argues Nieto (2003), when their resilience is tested. It is the unspoken feeling that some feel deep within, calling them to the classroom, that adds a special layer of armor to their teacher resilience.

While teacher resilience is a relatively new research topic, the concept of resilience has been studied for some time (Block & Block, 1980; Gore & Eckenrode, 1994; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Waller, 2001). Resilience, similar to self-efficacy, is something that is not formed in isolation, nor is it static. Rather, it is dynamic and continually shaped by each individual's social interactions and the specific challenges they encounter. (Gu & Day, 2007; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Rutter, 1990). This notion carries over to teacher resilience, with Gu & Day (2007) specifically stating:

> The social dimension of teacher resilience recognizes the interactive impact of personal, professional and situated factors on teachers' work and lives and contextualises teachers'

> endeavour to sustain their professional commitment. An individual may demonstrate resilience in a certain context and/or in a certain professional/life phase, but fail to display similar qualities when time or space changes. Personal lives and working contexts may become unstable (e.g. failing health and classroom behaviour problems) in unpredictable ways, but whether the sudden changes are perceived as adverse conditions by the individual may vary depending on his/her scope of experience at the time of change, perceived competence and confidence in managing the emerging conditions, views on the meaning of engagement, and the availability of appropriate support within the context of change. (p. 1305)

Because the context and experience are subject to change for any individual at any time, building teacher resilience capacity for individual teachers is variable. Each teacher comes to the classroom with a different story and book of life experiences, and thus will react to each challenge with a different amount of teacher resilience based on that story and their experiences.

It is important to recognize that teacher resilience is not a fixed or innate trait that one either possesses or lacks. Rather, research emphasizes that resilience is a dynamic and active process that can be intentionally cultivated to help educators withstand periods of high stress or pressure (Beltman et al., 2011; Gu & Day, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2016; Hiver, 2018; Cobb, 2022; Davis & Borden, 2024). Beltman et al. (2011) note that the characteristics associated with resilience can not only be learned but also strengthened over time as individuals mature and gain experience. Similarly, Mansfield et al. (2016) introduce the BRiTE framework, developed to both conceptualize and teach the cultivation of teacher resilience, beginning within teacher education programs. Mansfield et al. argue that when developing teacher resilience, four interconnected themes should be emphasized: relationships, well-being, motivation, and

emotions. These elements represent key areas of focus for fostering resilience within teacher preparation and professional development programs. Hiver (2018) echoes a similar sentiment, specifically noting that "resilience can be enhanced, strengthened, or honed if the conditions and supports that teachers need to perform at their best are available" (p. 237). Teacher resilience is not something that one does or does not possess, but instead is something that can be taught, learned, and strengthened over time.

Beltman et al. (2011) reviewed fifty publications examining teacher resilience among early career educators and identified two central concepts within the literature: protective factors and risk factors. Protective factors were defined as those conditions or supports that bolstered teachers' capacity to persist, whereas risk factors referred to the challenges or obstacles that undermined that capacity. Beltman et al. (2011) noted that both protective and risk factors can emerge from multiple sources, including "school administration, colleagues, and pupils" (p. 185). Moreover, they emphasized that these factors meaningfully influence a teacher's resilience and their ability to persevere during periods of heightened stress or anxiety. Specifically, Beltman et al. (2011) stated:

> The presence or absence of positive experiences had a stronger impact on teacher efficacy than negative experiences. In addition, the frequency of experiences (at the local level) was a stronger influence than their intensity. Therefore, it was concluded that removing negative experiences is not enough to promote the commitment and efficacy of early career teachers since frequent positive experiences (such as positive relationships with students) are far more influential. Teachers were able to cope with negative experiences, as long as they had regular, local positive experiences in their schools and with their students. (p. 197)

In other words, these positive experiences, or protective factors, were instrumental in building and sustaining one's teacher resilience. Although risk factors could negatively influence resilience, the absence of protective factors was more detrimental than the presence of both, provided that protective factors occurred with some regularity, even when such interactions were relatively minor.

Across the literature, it is evident that teacher resilience is a multifaceted, dynamic, and ever-changing trait that can be not only be taught, but also enhanced and strengthened in teachers (Beltman et al, 2011, Gu and Day, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2016, Hiver, 2018, Cobb 2022; Davis and Borden, 2024). While originally, Gu and Day (2007) categorized this idea more formally in the three spheres of personal, professional, and situational, more recent literature examines this conceptually as protective and risk factors, as categorized by Beltman et al. (2011), with or without using that exact terminology.

Conclusion

Drawing on the findings presented in this literature review, several studies have utilized Moir's framework to examine the emotional stages experienced by first-year teachers throughout an academic year. However, this framework has not yet been applied specifically to novice teachers in conjunction with factors such as teacher satisfaction, retention, or resilience. This represents a clear gap in the existing literature and highlights the need for further research. My study seeks to address this gap, focusing on the context of Oklahoma public education. As outlined in Chapter 1, Oklahoma is ahead of the national curve in both educational outcomes and teacher shortages. Therefore, this research has the potential to offer valuable insights not only for our state but also for the broader national landscape, where Oklahoma may serve as an early indicator of emerging trends in education.

Chapter 3: The Story Behind the Stories - Methodology and Design

The teacher shortage and its impact on Oklahoma public education motivated this study. Gaining an understanding of the factors that influence novice teachers' satisfaction in Oklahoma public education over the course of an academic year may provide valuable insights into the aspects of public education that most significantly shape teachers' experiences. This study focused on novice mathematics teachers in Oklahoma, and the immediate impact of its findings will relate directly to Oklahoma public education. However, the findings from this study may shed light on the larger narrative of education in the United States as a whole, as Oklahoma is not the only state currently experiencing a teacher shortage. The research questions for this study are the following:

1. What factors affect a novice mathematics Oklahoma teacher's satisfaction during an academic school year?
2. How do these factors connect to their personal teacher resilience?
3. How do the above factors and their teacher resilience affect a novice mathematics teacher's choice to remain in Oklahoma public education?

Theoretical Framework

Previous studies on teacher attrition in public education have detailed numerous factors influencing overall satisfaction and retention, such as compensation, administrator support, teacher connectedness, parent and student interactions, teacher self-efficacy, and teacher resilience (Ansley et al., 2019; Block & Block, 1980; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Cross, 2019; Curtis, C., 2012; Day & Gu, 2005; Darling-Hammond, L. & Sykes, G., 2003; Gore & Eckenrode, 1994; Gu, Q., & Day, C. 2013; Heaton, 2014; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Jackson, 2018; Liu, X. S. & Meyer, J. P. 2005; Luthar, Cicchetti, &

Becker, 2000; Rinke, C. R., 2014; Stockard, J., & Lehman, M. B., 2004; Waller, 2001; Zhang, 2006). The findings of this study will be examined using a fusion of two theoretical frameworks: Teacher Resilience, as defined by Day (2007), and New Teacher Phases, as defined by Moir (1990/1995). This study aimed to understand the perspective of novice traditionally certified mathematics teachers in Oklahoma public education and what factors impact their experience as educators throughout an academic school year. Moir's work will be used as a guide for the timeline of when participants will be interviewed, suggesting that interviews should be spaced throughout the year. This framework will also serve as a touchstone as the researcher examines data, looking for common trends between Moir's work with first-year teachers and novice teachers in this study. Additionally, teacher resilience will serve as a focal point throughout data collection and analysis, examined specifically through the lens of Beltman et al.'s (2011) protective and risk factors as they were described and experienced by each participant across each phase. Because protective factors are defined as supportive conditions, factors that enhance participants' satisfaction in their teaching careers will be conceptualized in this way by the researcher. Conversely, because risk factors represent challenges or obstacles, factors that diminish participants' satisfaction will be conceptualized accordingly. This study also examined trends in both participants' teacher resilience in comparison to Moir's New Teacher Phases, identifying any factors that affected this resilience, and how this resilience, in turn, affected each participant's outlook on Oklahoma public education. Finally, participants were asked to reflect on their school year in its entirety and to explain their decision either to remain in or leave Oklahoma public education. The researcher's aim in this process was to better understand how factors related to teacher resilience and satisfaction influenced that decision.

Research Design

This research study employs a case study design, as outlined by Merriam (2009). Specifically, Merriam (2009) notes that the key feature of this research design is that it is "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 40). For this study, the bounded system refers to the conditions under which both participants came into the teaching profession, as well as the number of years they have served as teachers. First, both participants were prepared to be teachers through a teacher education program within a college of education at a comprehensive research-intensive university in the state of Oklahoma. Moreover, all the teacher preparation programs within the college of education are nationally recognized. Participants were also required to have less than five years of teaching experience and to teach mathematics in an Oklahoma public school currently. This case study is a tightly bound system, meaning that, in addition to these conditions, both participants not only teach middle school mathematics but also work with 7th-grade students at least one hour per day. Collectively, these conditions constitute the bounded system that Merriam described as the necessary component of case study research.

As defined by Merriam (2009), narrative analysis will serve as an additional methodological framework to support this dissertation. According to Merriam (2009), "the key to this type of qualitative research is the use of stories as data, and more specifically, first-person accounts of experience told in story form having a beginning, middle, and end" (p. 32). This study will be conducted to answer the research questions through the stories of novice teachers in an academic school year in Oklahoma public education, using Moir's (1990/1995) framework as a guide for data collection and as a lens to understand the data. Each participant's story will be shared - Chapters 4 and 5 - showcasing their experiences throughout the 2024-25 school year, primarily in their voice, with narration and commentary from the researcher. Each participant's story will be organized into five sections, mirroring Moir's (1990/1995) phases. These

narratives, in tandem with the researcher's commentary, will help shape the findings and enduring understandings found in Chapter 6.

Participants and Sampling

Initially, there were three participants in this study. However, due to circumstances beyond the researcher's control, only the data from two participants could be included. Participants were chosen using purposeful sampling, as defined by Merriam (2009) and Patton (2002). Both participants attended and graduated from the same university in Oklahoma, having majored in mathematics education in the college of education. At this university, the college of education is nationally recognized for its programs and research impacts. Additionally, participants were both novice teachers, defined as those with less than five years of classroom experience (Makoa & Segalo, 2021). The final requirement was that participants were current teachers of mathematics in an Oklahoma public school. The participants are described in detail below:

Participant 1 - James Smith

James Smith (pseudonym) was beginning his 3rd year in Oklahoma public education this year. He was proud that his entire teaching career, to date, had been at Emerald Middle School within Emerald Public Schools. Emerald Public Schools was considered a large school district in Oklahoma. Specifically, Emerald Middle School had approximately 2,500 students, 130 teachers, and 10 administrators. The average class size, as described by James, was roughly 25-28, with some flexibility on either side. This middle school housed only 6th and 7th grade students, so 6th graders had one area of the building while 7th graders occupied the other. James believed the community was supportive of Emerald, and recently passed a bond to add and expand the space, providing additional room for Emerald Middle School.

Emerald Middle School employed a core model with its students and teachers, meaning that all students shared the same Mathematics, Geography, Language Arts, and Science teacher. These core units were named and color-coded to not only organize students but also to encourage camaraderie amongst teams. Throughout the year, the cores had various competitions, including dodgeball tournaments, spirit days, and other community-building events. Additionally, this allowed teachers to collaborate to best support students who may be struggling in multiple classes and to set common expectations across their core.

James had taught a different age group or schedule each of his first three years as a teacher. During his first year, he taught 6th grade all day. The following year, he was moved to 7th grade and, as a result, changed classrooms to be near his new core team. During this academic year, he joined a new core once again, but as the team lead, he moved classrooms once again, while also adding Algebra 1 to his schedule along with 7th-grade math. However, all of his students would be in 7th grade.

Participant 2 - Paige Woods

Paige Woods (pseudonym) was a true first-year educator. After completing her student teaching internship at Poppy Middle School, she began her professional career there by accepting her first full-time teaching position at the same site. She student taught in a 7th-grade classroom, but during her first year in the school, she taught primarily 8th-grade mathematics with one section of 7th-grade mathematics. Her 8th-grade students were mainly those she worked with during her student internship.

There was one other teacher on the 8th-grade math team. However, they were often uncollaborative and chose to follow their own pace in the curriculum. On the 7th-grade team, there was also one teacher. This teacher was not only the teacher Paige student-taught with, but

was also her school-assigned mentor. She worked very closely with her mentor on both curriculum and personal/professional needs in the classroom. Additionally, Poppy Middle School had an on-site Instructional Coach, previously a middle school math teacher, to assist teachers with instruction, planning, and PLCs.

Town B, where Poppy Middle School is located, was a rapidly expanding rural community. Poppy Middle School had approximately 500 students in grades 6 - 8. There were roughly 30 teachers, two administrators, and one instructional coach. Paige estimated that her class sizes were around 20 students, with flexibility on either side. Additionally, Poppy Middle School was under construction for the Fall 2024 semester to expand the facilities for students and teachers. Thus, Paige taught in a portable classroom for the first semester of the year and moved into a permanent classroom in January. Poppy Public Schools had also adopted four-day school weeks for students and staff.

Data Collection

For this study, data were collected via interviews, or, as Dexter (1970) describes, "conversation with a purpose" (p. 136). The researcher felt interviews were most appropriate for collecting data throughout this study because "interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them" (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). A fundamental aspect of this study was to better understand how novice teachers interpret factors that impact their satisfaction in public education and how those factors affect their personal teacher resilience. Thus, interviews were the preferred method for data collection. Additionally, each interview had a guiding set of questions but also left room for flexibility so the researcher could let the conversation flow and take shape as needed. This process of preparing questions while also reserving space for emerging topics of conversation can be described as

semistructured interviews, as defined by Merriam (2009). All interviews were completed virtually via Zoom so that participants could engage in conversation with the researcher in the space they felt most comfortable in, whether that be their home, car, or favorite coffee shop. Participants were given a choice about when their virtual interview occurred within a set time window and where they were physically located during the virtual meeting. Moir's (1990/1995) work details five specific stages that new teachers experience throughout an academic school year; thus, interviews were conducted using a time frame mirroring those stages, as explained in more detail below.

The first interview took place in August when novice teachers returned for in-service training, during what Moir refers to as the 'anticipation' phase. This interview focused on participants' thoughts and feelings about the start of the school year, their class schedules, and their plans for the year as a whole. In this interview, James and Paige were asked primarily the same guiding questions in their virtual interviews (see Appendix A and B for interview questions). These guiding questions established a shared foundation of understanding between the participant and the researcher regarding the upcoming school year, classroom and school dynamics, and the overall culture the teacher aimed to cultivate.

The second interview took place in October, during which Moir coined the 'survival' phase. This interview continued discussions from the previous interview while also focusing on how the year was progressing and on any celebrations or concerns participants had about their teaching assignments. For example, in Table A2 in Appendix A, it is noted that a follow-up question was added for James regarding the Yellow Squad, reminding the researcher to follow up on this topic if the conversation didn't naturally flow in that direction. This reflects the semistructured interview style, as planned research questions were followed by additional

questions and topics to connect with the previous conversation, while still allowing space for additional topics of discussion. Similarly, Paige's questions in Table B2 of Appendix B follow up on classroom management topics from the previous interview.

The third interview occurred in the weeks surrounding Winter Break, either right before or directly after, during the 'disillusionment' phase. This interview focused on how participants felt as the semester came to a close while also following up on topics from previous interviews. Just as before, both participants had questions added to reflect earlier topics of discussion. For example, in Table A3 of Appendix A, the researcher included an additional question about James's assistant principal to follow up on a previous incident. For Paige, the researcher listed many specific individuals to ask specifically about in Table B3 in Appendix B, such as Paige's mentor teacher, Instructional Coach, and 8th-grade content teacher. By the third interview, the two participants may have been asked similar guiding questions; however, each conversation had now been unique, shaped by the participants' narratives and evolving relationships with the researcher.

The fourth interview took place midway through the Spring semester, during both participants' spring break vacation. Known to Moir as the 'rejuvenation' phase, this interview focused on how the semester progressed compared to the previous one, giving participants space to discuss any concerns or positive growth. During this interview, no additional guiding questions were added to Table A4 in Appendix A for James Smith. By this point in the study, the relationship between the participant and researcher was strong enough that the conversation flowed smoothly, with few guiding questions required. However, in Table B4 in Appendix B, two additional questions were added for Paige to ensure those topics were specifically discussed, as they were of great interest to the researcher.

Finally, the last interview occurred at the conclusion of the school year, during the 'reflection' phase. The interview allowed participants to reflect on the school year as a whole, verbalize their future goals, and discuss their choice whether to remain in Oklahoma public education or pursue different opportunities. The questions for both participants, as seen in Tables A5 and B5 in Appendices A and B, respectively, are noticeably similar. In this final interview, the researcher focused on the last research question, which examined teacher retention in Oklahoma public education. While both conversations were distinct and authentic, the guiding questions for each participant largely remained consistent.

Data Analysis - Narrative Analysis

For this study, narrative analysis was utilized. Labov's (1972) narrative analysis approach was used to examine each participant's unique story and experience during an academic year in Oklahoma public education. Labov described six elements crucial for narrative analysis: abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation, and coda. First, Labov describes the abstract, providing a general narrative overview. The next element is the orientation, which involves the narrator setting the stage for the event. Things to consider during this stage of analysis include the active participants of the story, the location in which the story takes place, and the time at which this narrative occurred. After that, the complicating action involves detailing the important details and events of the story. For example, this is the part of that narrative where the reader is truly engaged, wondering what will happen next. The resolution provides closure to the narrative. The final component is the coda, which allows the reader to see the connection between the narrator's story and the world of which the reader is part. The coda allows the reader to reflect on the narrative and see how the lessons from the narrative fit into their larger worldview.

For this study, James Smith's data was analyzed first, beginning with the digital transcription of his first interview. From this transcription, the researcher started identifying and highlighting key moments, experiences, and individuals that shaped his educational experiences, both positively and negatively. These key moments, experiences, and individuals were organized into a linear, narrative-style model told primarily through James's own words. The researcher's interjections throughout James's story connected the narrative, providing contextual grounding and analytical commentary. Additionally, the researcher contextualized the time period for the reader before each interview to give a more holistic understanding of each participant's point of view as their narrative unfolded. To do this, the researcher provided additional commentary that situated the participants' stories within broader state and national developments, both social and political. This approach enabled the researcher to follow each participant's experiences across the school year in a way that closely mirrored how the participants themselves described them. The researcher repeated this process for the remaining four interviews, continuing to add her own commentary to ensure linkages across past, present, and future experiences. By integrating this commentary and contextualization, readers can connect more deeply with the narrative as it unfolds, engaging with and relating to each account in alignment with the academic year timeline experienced by the participant. This same process was used for Paige Woods.

After both narratives were completed, the researcher revisited each account and compiled a comprehensive list of factors that James and Paige identified as influencing their satisfaction, both positively and negatively, throughout their experiences. These factors were then compared and contrasted to identify emerging patterns and trends. Subsequently, these findings were examined through the lens of existing literature to determine points of alignment or divergence. In addition, the patterns and trends shared by James and Paige were analyzed through the

frameworks of Moir's (1990/1995) Phases of First-Year Teaching, teacher resilience theory, and the interaction between the two. The goal of this research was to provide practical, actionable ideas for school leaders and administrators, grounded in the experiences of these novice educators, that may inform their practices to support novice educators in not only Oklahoma public school classrooms but public schools around the country for years to come.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

After Chapters 4 and 5, which detail both James and Paige's stories, were completed, the researcher engaged in member checking, as described by Merriam (2009). This process ensured that each participant proofread their narrative, offered any needed revisions, and submitted suggested edits before finalizing their research. Additionally, this served as an additional measure of security, ensuring the researcher not only understood the meaning of each participant's narrative and experience but also accurately and appropriately interpreted them. This additional touchstone adds additional reassurance to participants, the researcher, and the reader that this study and its findings are valid and sound.

As each participant's story is presented and discussed in the following chapters, the researcher aims to provide a thick and rich description, as described by Merriam (2009), to illustrate the influential factors that participants' felt impacted their satisfaction, how those factors influenced their teacher resilience, and how their choice to remain in Oklahoma public education was affected by these factors. This thick description, from the participant's words to the researcher's commentary and discussion, aims to allow the reader to feel confident in the study's nature and the findings detailed in later chapters.

Confidentiality is a key component of this study, as discussion topics focus on professional satisfaction, professional career choices, and professional opinions in a state where

discourse is publicly discouraged at the state level. Because of this, the researcher has taken great lengths to ensure the confidentiality of each participant, from the first interview to the final publication of this study. When discussing a teacher's satisfaction, or lack thereof, in their personal career, it is vital that readers of this study cannot trace this back to any city, school district, or specific teacher. All research documents, interview transcriptions, consent forms, and other pertinent data were stored in a secure Google Drive accessible only to the researcher. All identifying names, locations, and other personal information were changed, except for the consent forms, to enhance privacy and security. Pseudonyms were used for all identifiable information except for the state of Oklahoma, because Oklahoma public education was a key focus of this study.

Chapter 4: Everybody Needs a Somebody - James Smith's Story

This narrative follows the journey of James Smith during the 2024–2025 school year. It offers a firsthand glimpse into the experiences of a middle school educator whose enthusiasm positively affects their environment. Their natural leadership facilitates the development and maintenance of meaningful relationships, which appear to be central to their overall sense of professional fulfillment.

The Smallest Seeds Grow the Largest Trees - August 4th, 2024

The first time I spoke with James, there was an air of excitement and joy from the minute our conversation began. James inherently connects with others, whether in person or through a screen, and it was clear that the connections we would build together regarding his story over the year would be authentic, vivid, and full of life.

Our conversation began with a discussion around his decision to teach. Unsurprisingly, James noted that he knew his career would involve him creating and maintaining quality connections with people. However, a seed had been planted while he was a high school student that changed his trajectory years later. He explained:

> She was my AP calculus teacher…and she definitely kind of laid the foundation for my life way early on, jumping back into high school. I remember a situation where she was doing a group activity, and I was a senior in high school, and we were to explain a problem. Then other groups would rotate in, like in the classroom, but one person would stay at the table and explain the solution, and I would stay back and explain the solution to the upcoming people. And there was one little comment, one small comment, that she said, walking by just in passing, when I was explaining it to them, she just said, either underneath her breath or just kind of monotone, 'That's a characteristic of a teacher.'

Upon digging further into this small, yet life-changing interaction, James expanded further:

> She didn't like, sit down that night or the night before and say, 'Okay, I'm going to plan this; I'm going to say this just in passing, and it's going to be this great big thing.' It was just this little comment that didn't even mean much then. I wasn't like 'I'm going to college and I'm going to be a teacher.' But it was, like, two, almost three years later, that I was like, 'Okay, there's something that, you know, she saw. I think if she's going to say it, then I might be able to say it myself and have some confidence behind it.'

It was the power of one teacher, in one moment, that changed James' life forever. As he reflected on this teacher's impact, there was a reverence and thankfulness in his recollections. By recognizing his worth and affirming him as "someone," this teacher left an enduring impact, one that would shape him for the remainder of his life.

As our conversation continued, we transitioned to the location where James began his teaching career. While our conversation had already been lively, it was as if the screen glowed brighter as we discussed James' hometown, which has become his now permanent residence. James animatedly shared with me:

> I was born and raised in Town A, and I always wanted to come back to Town A, regardless of my occupation. I knew when I was going to college, I wanted to get the degree wherever it was, and then I had to try to get back to Town A, because I, well, I kind of have some ownership with Town A. I feel like it's my town. And since Town A was in Oklahoma, it was just kind of a no-brainer for me. Plus, another reason why I just felt this way is because, like, my family's there; my sister, my mom, my dad, I have a couple of grandparents in Town A, too.

However, it was not just the town itself that called him home, but also the school community, specifically the one that had so positively impacted him as a student. As our conversation continued, I wasn't surprised to learn that James began his teaching career in his home school district as well, and has continued with this district and middle school site for his entire teaching career. He reflected on this, noting:

> I just knew I wanted to do it. And I wanted to go back to Emerald Middle School, which I'm from Town A, and I went to Emerald, and now I still teach at Emerald. I saw the impact, how it affected me in my journey in education, and I want to repeat that. You know, we always said that 'you always want to be somebody's somebody,' right? And someone was super important to me, and they didn't even plan it. I want to do that for someone, especially in my community. I want to go back to my home, and I want to do that for the people in my community.

When we dove deeper into the people in James' community, he spoke specifically about his privilege in life, and wanted to ensure all students had a 'somebody' in their corner, noting:

> I still want to be able to give back, and I still want to be able to bring those individuals who, you know, might have a mind that thinks mathematically, and their home life is much different. They might be a foster kid or jumping from house to house. I want to, like, hone in on those skills and be able to lift them up, because it's something that I think, as an educator, you want to be, you know, the cheerleader for those kids, and honestly, every kid, but specifically, I'm always thinking about that kid.

James expanded on this pull to better the community that built him with strong influences from his grandmother, as an educator, noting:

> I had a grandma who taught for fifty years, and everywhere she goes, they're asking, 'Did you teach?' and it's somehow a connection, or 'You taught my son,' or, 'You taught my grandson,' you know, stuff like that. So, seeing that, seeing what my grandma did, I guess I saw that, and I was like, that's what I want, and I want that in my hometown. So, I'm back in Town A. I'm going to stay in Oklahoma. And that's kind of why I kind of wanted to stay in Oklahoma and teach.

It was all of these influences - a strong tie to both the geographical and community of Town A, his family's positive impact, and the desire to be a somebody like his AP Calculus teacher that drove James back to Town A. His passion, joy, and excitement were contagious as he described what had brought him back home.

Our conversation then led us to James's time at Emerald Middle School, leading up to the 2024-25 school year. James happily explained his teaching schedule, noting that he would work with seventh-grade students daily - four sections of seventh-grade math and one section of Algebra 1, which was for students who were two years ahead in math. Seventh-grade math was a particularly sweet spot for James, specifically his collaborative teammates, as he described the past two years, noting:

> Comparing the sixth-grade collaboration that I had my first year teaching and my second year being a seventh-grade collaboration, I was seeing a very big difference. The sixth grade just wasn't the type of communication I was wanting very much. It was very isolated, the individualized type, you know, planning and lesson planning. In seventh, everyone brought their ideas and presented their ideas, and you can kind of pick and choose what you would like to do. And everyone kind of sprinkled in new learnings from other people.

When asked about examples of the types of ideas were presented by seventh-grade teachers, James shared:

> Some seventh-grade teachers are a flipped classroom, so they're going to be more having the videos online, and the learning kind of begins in there. They present that, and I can kind of see, 'Oh, I like that resource that you had in your class,' or, 'I like that activity that you had in your class, but I'm not going to do that in a flipped classroom; I'm going to do it with like, a more lecture style,'

It was the collaborative sharing of ideas that James enjoyed. This process gave him a team to work with while still having autonomy to run his classroom in the way he felt was best. This interest in collaboration aligned with his earlier comment that he was looking for a career where he could build meaningful connections

James also had a lightness when reflecting on the year ahead regarding his own practice in his classroom. He felt his experience in the classroom was going to serve him well this school year, sharing with me:

> So, I think, I can see it in my face while I'm talking, like I'm the most confident I think I've, you know, ever been since I started teaching, because I've been able to see what has worked. I've been able to see what hasn't worked, and I've been able to see new strategies moving forward from other teachers. And I'm just very excited to, you know, kind of move forward with those.

James continued this thought with an analogy that specifically stood out to me:

> I think of it like a tool belt. I think of, like, when you first start teaching, you know, you have a couple resources and all this stuff, and they're, well, they're kind of good, you know, they're good in your toolbox. And then when the situation arises, you go, 'Oh,

> here's my tool! I have my tool to, you know, to use, because I learned it, I read about it, but I haven't had very much experience with it.' And then after a little bit of experience, and over time, you're going to be like, 'Okay, I added like, ten new tools that I didn't know I had,' or 'I read about ten new tools, and then did it in my classroom so that I could see what worked.' And so the confidence level is definitely just up.

At this point in the conversation, James's enthusiasm for the school year was especially palpable, even through the screen. As a researcher, I found myself reflecting on the energy he brought to his classroom and thinking, *this must be an exciting time to be one of his students!*

However, James soon shifted the conversation to his anxieties about the upcoming school year. This marked the only moment in the interview when his typically vibrant demeanor noticeably faded, an emotional response tied, perhaps unsurprisingly, to a disruption in his professional relationships. In the previous year, James had been part of a core team of four teachers whose professional alignment was matched by deep personal connection. This year, however, he would be transitioning to a new team in order to assume a leadership role. As he reflected on the conflicting emotions of mourning the loss of a trusted team and embracing the beginning of something new, he shared the following:

> I think it was just something that I was sad that I was leaving my previous team, because all that foundation, all those expectations that we set as a team, weren't there anymore. And it's only four people, right? It's like we were a core four. We were very close. We had a social life outside of school. We texted, sent, you know, tiktoks and videos and all these things to each other, to make each other laugh. And that was something for me personally. You are a human being outside of being a teacher, so I want to connect with you on a, you know, a friendship level, right? And so that's important to me. So, stepping

away from that definitely was something that I was like, ‘Oh, that's gonna hurt, that's gonna that's gonna take some time to get used to.’

The brief moment of diminished energy quickly passed as our conversation shifted from the conclusion of his ‘core four’ team to the possibilities that lay ahead. James expressed a mix of nervousness and optimism about the upcoming year, voicing a hopeful vision that, by May, he would be able to reflect, *“*This year has been so good, like the communication, the group, the camaraderie!*”* Yet, uncertainty remained. Underlying his hopes and apprehensions was a consistent theme: the importance of connections.

Falling into New Team Dynamics - October 22nd, 2024

Before either of us realized it, autumn had arrived; the air had turned crisp, the leaves had begun to change, and the season marked the setting for our second virtual interview in October. Nationally, the country was invested in the presidential campaigns of both Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. Additionally, since the last time James and I had spoken, Oklahoma public education had been active in the news. One Key topic in the media surrounding public education in Oklahoma included State Superintendent Ryan Walters’ mandate and open bid for Bibles in all Oklahoma classrooms (Wallis, 2024). Additionally, there had been a delay in Title I funding for many Oklahoma public schools (Wallis, 2024). Continued discussion surrounding the rise of issued emergency certifications for Oklahoma teachers also was a newsworthy story during this period (The Oklahoma, 2024).

It was a chilly afternoon, yet James entered our conversation just as he had before: with a broad smile and an unmistakable sense of enthusiasm. When asked to reflect on his experiences thus far in the school year, it was no surprise that James immediately spoke about the

connections he had formed within his school - a theme that had strongly emerged in our initial interview. He shared the following:

> So far this year, it's been a really good one. I actually had a teacher who had been out for up until fall break due to medical issues, so we had a long-term sub. And so it was, you know, four teachers on each team, and we got really close with that long-term sub. They were awesome, but we basically built, you know, camaraderie, a team. And then she had to step away because our teacher came back.

I was curious about how one teacher could change a school's dynamic and culture, especially in a school as large as Emerald Middle School. James continued, explaining,

> So, he came back this week, actually, and so far, it's been really good, because he's very open to anything that we have. Like he was a teacher here, obviously, he just had to step away last semester or last year, into this quarter of this year. So having him this week definitely raised spirits, because I couldn't imagine coming in, like, in the middle of the quarter or after the first quarter, and just picking up, like, it's the first day of school. So it was, it was very rewarding just to, like, have him, because I was a little bit timid on how it was going to be or how the dynamics were. So overall, it was kind of a 'we'll see how it goes' type of way. And so in the end, it's been really, really good. Obviously, it's his second day, but he's awesome. And so he's been helping out, just kind of getting back into the swing of things, because having a long-term sub is much different compared to, you know, having a teacher who's, you know, certified and has been in the classroom and experienced it all. So it's been good having him back.

James's tone and expressions during this portion of the interview clearly conveyed his genuine happiness regarding the teacher's return. While he had appreciated the contributions of the long-

term substitute and their collaborative efforts, the return of the certified teacher appeared to be a morale-boosting moment, both for James personally and for the broader school community.

Our conversation then turned to a topic that had previously been a significant source of anxiety for James at the start of the school year: the team dynamics within Yellow Squad. I was eager to learn how the group was functioning. When asked about his experience with Yellow Squad, James broke into a broad smile and responded enthusiastically:

> We've gotten, you know, a lot closer since the last time we spoke. It's the little things, you know, it's kind of like an expectation we have now, that we're just going to, like, pop our heads into each other's rooms and say, 'It's time to go grab water,' like, twenty minutes into our plan. So it's just a little bit of time to get prepped for, you know, the next class, or if you need to grade or call, we have like, a twenty-minute, like, buffer time. And then after the twenty minutes, it's like, 'Alright, you guys ready to go?' Then we take a trip down to the office, refill water, and make any prints. They also have breakfast for sixth grade, and so the sixth graders come in, like, an hour later than us. So, we go and we just kind of grab breakfast, eat it, hang out for a little bit, and then go back upstairs for like the last 15 minutes. So it's, it's a really close-knit group, and that's what I wanted.

I probed further, seeking to understand why James felt so strongly about the importance of connection within Yellow Squad, or any team, for that matter. He elaborated, stating:

> I mean, you can focus and harp about how your team is working with behavior and curriculum and being in the hallway. But for me, it's like nothing speaks more highly than how the team works as human beings, right? And so that's one of my big things that I was kind of excited about, and now I'm seeing, kind of, how we are as a team. I mean, we're not sending, you know, memes on Facebook to each other, but we're, we're still texting

> saying, ‘Hey, don't forget to wear your black for tomorrow’ or stuff like that. So I feel like my team is really strong, because we all think as one. You know, we all have the same reaction as one. And I'm also wanting to make sure that if there's ever a time where they feel like they have a different opinion than the group, then they would feel comfortable with that, but overall, it feels like we're a very tight-knit group.

To conclude our discussion about Yellow Squad, I invited James to share a specific example that illustrated a moment of strong team cohesion or collective spirit. He responded with a laugh and offered the following anecdote:

> We had a pep assembly last week. Yellow Squad created a chant, we did karaoke as our team at this pep assembly, and we won the spirit stick. And like, we all wore black. They had someone in the communications department record us the entire time. So they made like, a five-minute thing they posted, and that literally, like, sent me through the moon, like, I'm like, we are a team. We are like, teachers, students, everyone's a team. And it made me feel so good, because it was something that I always, always wanted, and I felt like I got it. I was worried that, obviously, moving teams, that it might not happen, but that happened.

By the end of this portion of the interview, James was laughing and clapping, his enthusiasm unmistakable. It was evident that a strong sense of unity had developed within the Yellow Squad, extending from the teachers to the students, with James playing a pivotal role in fostering that cohesion. His excitement was infectious, and the concerns he had expressed earlier in the year appeared to have significantly diminished just nine weeks into the school year.

James went on to explain that his collaboration within the Yellow Squad was just one of several meaningful professional partnerships. He also described his content-specific

collaboration with his Algebra I teammate, who additionally served as the math department head. He noted:

> So, when I'm working with creating assessments, curriculum, all those different things that we're pacing ourselves, it's a little bit easier to have one other person talk to, rather than a whole group of, you know, seven to ten teachers when you're trying to be on the same page. And so when it's Algebra, it's very much like we sit down together, it's more quiet, and we're just kind of working together. And since she's done this a lot, like she's a department head, so she's been through this, I'm very like, I vocalized like, 'I understand that you've been here a lot longer, and you have the like, you are the seasoned veteran.' So most of the time she's going to vocalize an opinion, I'm just going to be like, 'That sounds great,' like I'll be able to roll with that. If there's ever a time where I feel like I need to speak up, I'll speak up, for sure. But right now, I don't feel like I need to say anything that could alter it, because this is the first year, so maybe next year, when I see, oh, students aren't picking up, you know, evaluating expressions, or evaluating absolute equations, like all those different things, I can say, 'Maybe we need to slow it down.' But I don't have a template to look back on. So right now, I feel like I'm learning, just kind of how the pacing is and everything.

Although the nature of his collaboration with his Algebra I colleague differed significantly from the dynamics of the Yellow Squad, James spoke about this partnership with equal reverence and enthusiasm. He expressed deep appreciation for the close, personalized nature of their collaboration, contrasting it with the broader and more energetic interactions typical of the larger Pre-Algebra content team. This distinction is noteworthy, as it underscores James's belief that while connections are central to his professional satisfaction, they need not follow a single

model. From my perspective as a researcher, what mattered most to James was that these relationships were strong, meaningful, and grounded in mutual respect - connections that honored each individual as a human being first.

As in the first interview, James's typically upbeat demeanor shifted only once, when the conversation turned to connections that were not as strong as he had hoped by this point in the school year. In that moment, his posture changed subtly; his shoulders dropped, and it appeared as though an unseen weight had settled over him. He exhaled deeply before offering the following explanation:

> I have had some pushback, in a way, from some admin, which has been kind of my first experience with that. Just, I think it's new. We have two new assistant principals, so they're stepping into a new role for themselves. And so I guess, kind of having the background of previous APs, and now it's going into a different route, that's just kind of seeing a different kind of environment with that.

When I questioned further about an example of the differences he was referring to, James discussed miscommunication and unclear expectations, elaborating further, noting:

> Last year was like, 'You sent an email, at least one of the APS is getting back to you now.' Now, for my team, at least, we've been receiving some pushback for disciplinary things. Like we want to give them discipline, and it's like, 'Have you followed this flow chart? Have you, you know, done this?' And it was kind of like questioning us, as a team. We're all agreeing upon something that we want to do for a certain student, and so when we all agree on that, and we're brought in for questioning. It's kind of like we're, I would say, being questioned about our authority.

I was curious about what kinds of questions his team was asked, and he continued, saying the following:

> The kind of questioning, like, ‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ It's like, ‘Yes, as a team, we've all collectively agreed. So, could we get some support in that?’ Or, even having the question come up, kind of lets me know that they don't agree with what we're saying.

James had mentioned in his first interview that he was passionate about being a strong leader for Yellow Squad, so I knew this lack of connection would be especially hard for him. I was particularly interested in understanding how this was impacting James on a personal and professional level. I asked him to share any feelings about this situation to understand his perspective better. He continued, saying:

> Frankly speaking, I think that I am a very easygoing kind of teacher. And so for my team to experience this, I'm kind of like, I want to, like, I have two new teachers to Emerald. I'm like, I want to keep them here. Like, I don't want to lose these people. So I want to be able to do things that can support them. But that's not my role to step that up. I just need my assistant principal to do these things so that they can feel supported. And since there is no action step moving forward, I'm feeling disappointed in my higher-ups. And even though it's not connected to me, I feel like I have ownership of the team. And if the team is feeling down, then I would say, ‘Well, who's in charge of that team? Oh, he is me.’

James was passionate about support in the classroom as he spoke, and it became clear as he continued that this was due to his past experiences in the classroom regarding management and discipline. He wanted to protect teachers on his team from his past mistakes, explaining to me the following:

> My first two years, unfortunately, I wasn't big on discipline, like I wasn't giving out detentions. And that's because in my eyes, when I was a student, when I got one lunch detention, I was crying for a whole week, like it was a big deal, big deal. So when I was handing it out as a first-year teacher, I was like, still experiencing that, like, it's a big deal, and some students don't see it as a big deal. And so for me, I kind of had to step up into that. So from last year moving up, I was able to be like, 'No, it's just a way of life as a teacher. It's just, like, something that you have to get used to.' And so now it being my third year, it's very much like, 'Okay, like, let's get this going. Let's rock and roll. Like, you're a veteran now, you're able to do these things and not have to feel weird about it.'

I asked James why he thought he was feeling this way now in comparison to the last two years, besides feeling more comfortable in assigning detentions to students when necessary. He answered the following:

> So I just feel like, overall, it's my first year of feeling like a little bit not as supported as I thought I was the previous years, so that's kind of like how it is right now, and just kind of maneuvering and seeing how I'm going to handle this, making sure it's in a professional way, or just being open and bringing it to my admin of saying, 'Hey, I'm not feeling supported in a certain way, or my team needs some more resources with this, because we feel like we've said everything we needed to say, we've waved the yellow flag, red flag, and it's like there's no help in that. So it's, it's a new feeling for me, and I don't know how to react to that.

The light in James's eye was still dim as I asked if there was anything else he wanted to share about this experience. He took a breath before giving one final example surrounding this lack of connection:

> So it was just a situation where I wanted to assign an after-school detention, like the steps are, lunch detention, after-school detention, referral. That's kind of like the one, two, three, and instead of going to a number one, I thought the behavior warranted a number two, after-school detention. I just felt like I received a little bit of pushback from my AP, who said, 'Did you follow the flow chart? Like we need to make sure we're following the flow chart.' And it rubbed me a little bit, just a little, because it seemed like a pushback. And so during parent-teacher night, I was told that my AP wanted to talk to me, and I was like, 'Okay, sounds good.' I have two hours after school. That's probably, like, the best time that he can probably come by. It's nothing that I scheduled. I never told him. I just assumed that he was going to come by. And so, you know, the two hours go by, and then it's our dinner time, and we start going downstairs. And while I'm going downstairs, my AP pulls me aside and says, 'Can we have that conversation now?' And looking back, I should have said no, because I need to go eat, and this is my time to go eat. But I then I didn't, and so I talked to him. It was like a thirty to forty-five minute conversation. I lost my time to eat, and that kind of rubbed me the wrong way, given the awareness of seeing you need to go eat right now, like this is your time. But overall, it just seems like there's a lot of tension right now with me and my assistant principal.

As James concluded this story, he took a deep breath, and a faint smile returned to his face, the light that had momentarily dimmed began to reemerge. With a steady inhale, he continued, stating:

> So I'm going to keep showing up, right? My team's going to keep showing up, doing their darndest, yeah, and then we'll see if things change moving forward. Because, I mean, my biggest fear is like, I lose my team, or my team goes somewhere else or whatever, and

> I'm going to have some ownership in that of being like, I don't want you to leave. I want to fix those things that you feel bad about. Like, I want to make sure that you, just like a principal wants to make sure that their team feels supported and that they want to stay in teaching. I feel that on a smaller scale, with regards to my teachers, so totally, that's kind of how, like, I'm feeling.

The disappointment James felt in his administrator went far deeper than his own classroom. He felt the repercussions of those actions across his team, and worried for how that might affect the connections he was cultivating across the Yellow Squad, a group that he deeply cared about and felt very protective of. Only time would tell if support would or would not be felt by both him and his teammates.

As our time together came to a close, I questioned James about the state of Oklahoma and public education as a whole. He reflected on the following:

> As a state, I just know that we have been recently required to do a daily moment of silence. And I don't know if that's been a big thing that's happened from the, like, overall state. But that was something that was a little bit different. We have to do a daily sixty seconds, like, it's usually, like once a week, but now it's like daily, and they have to read from the script and everything, because we have to, like, check it off the list, I guess. But that was something that I was kind of like, it was like an email at like, 8pm and we're like, oh, tomorrow, we're doing this. Got it. So it seemed kind of odd.

As a researcher, I felt a slight awkwardness from James during this portion of the interview that I had not felt at any other time during our discussions. I wondered if, since James didn’t know my views regarding Oklahoma Public Education, he felt uncomfortable sharing too much on this

topic. He did not elaborate or give any indication that he wished to continue this topic of discussion.

As we wrapped up our time together, James was hopeful about the weeks to come in the semester, energized by the camaraderie of Yellow Squad, and excited to build on the momentum and connections that had already been built in such a short time. Even though stressors were looming in the background, they would not extinguish his light or energy.

Closing 2024 with Pride - December 18th, 2024

On a chilly afternoon, James and I met virtually for our third conversation. It was the final week of school before Winter Break, and there was an air of excitement for the upcoming holiday and relaxation that was only a few days away. Nationally, the country had been abuzz with energy from Donald Trump's win over Kamala Harris for president in November, and topics surrounding his first 100 days in office and his plans for the Federal Department of Education were beginning to be discussed. In Oklahoma specifically, State Superintendent Ryan Walters had been vocal regarding his views on physical Bibles in all public education classrooms (Greco, 2024). Additionally, during this time, he released the revised Oklahoma Social Studies Academic Standard, which had been edited from what had previously been reviewed by a committee of educators and scholars. These edits included additional elementary standards surrounding Christianity, American Exceptionalism, the claims of fraud of the 2020 Presidential Election, and the claims of creation of the COVID-19 pandemic in a Chinese laboratory (Greco, 2024).

As our conversation began, James immediately began to reflect on the importance of this time of year with students, specifically in terms of structure and management. He noted:

> These are like, you know, the most important time of the year, because not as many students might be as locked in as we thought, you know. It's a new school year in August, you know, in terms of anticipating, you know, the brand new year, like, "How is it going to go?" Well, students have been around the block for about four months now, so they're either really, really comfortable at this point or, you know, they're still structured in a way. So I think these few months are kind of where it kind of falls on the teacher in that regard. So if you, if you came out of the gate, you know, setting your expectations, you know, not only setting them, that's one thing, but enforcing them, even on the days that you're tired, you have to make sure you're constantly doing that.

As our conversation continued, James reflected further on this topic, drawing back on his past two years in the classroom versus his current reality. He expanded further:

> Since the last time I've talked to you, I've had more self-reflections of my classroom, like, "Wow, I really set the expectation pretty well this year," because I'm seeing it pay off, and I'm able to see when I say things or when I have activities, the students know exactly what to do and they get to it, and there's no back and forth power struggle. It's just, "Oh, this is what I need to do. Let's go." And so I think since the last time I've seen you, I think it's been a really, really important shift in my teaching career.

I wanted to hear more about this growth in his classroom management and how it had changed his experience during this time of year, so I pushed for more information about this change. James continued:

> I feel like I was a little bit more strict in those early months, so that if there was ever a time of redirection later on, it might be one or two, and then that, that's all I need. It's not as constant as it was. I know this might seem like a very interesting win, but there's just

> many times where I'm working with students, you know, at the front of the room, with them at my desk, and the rest of the class is in independent working time. And if they're not in independent working time, they're just at least silent. And that was something that, even in the third year, like, that's a pretty big deal for me, because I'm not constantly having to make sure that a student isn't getting up or anything. And I mean, last year, you know, computers were always something that we always have, but I set the expectation that there's no games in class on the computer, there's no videos, there's nothing. It's very much if you're on your computer, it's for work. And when students understand that, or as I repeated it, ever since August, they know, "Oh, once I'm done, I got to put this laptop away, because I don't even want Mr. Smith thinking I have something out that's not on Canvas or on Clever or whatever we're working on." And so it's just sometimes, I think it takes some time for teachers to learn that their words have power.

As James spoke, he exuded a sense of pride in himself and his classroom. He was excited and proud of what was happening in his room and what he was experiencing as a teacher at this point in the year. James continued, explaining the following:

> I think the change was seeing the outcome of how it was at the end of last year's teaching. I had a fun group. I enjoyed myself, I made memories with my students. I pushed them on to the next level, and, you know, I still go and support some of them at certain things. But I think one of the biggest things that I reflected on is, it's not going to be a bad thing to be a teacher who sets high expectations, because you can shoot for the stars, and you know, it won't always be perfect. You can always emphasize this super high expectation, but you won't always get it. But even if you're setting the expectation high, you're going to be able to at least move the bar of where the students are. Like, in this class, if the bar

> is really low, I actually can do maybe even less than the bar, or way below it. But if the expectation is high, it's like, “Oh, I gotta do this, this, and this.” Maybe the student might not be the most perfect, sits in the chair, does all this, but one redirect gets their attention. You know, “Hey, Johnny, this is your warning,” and I write their name on the board. That's all I have to do, because they know if they get another warning, then there's consequences. Even though I mentioned it was a great year, I don't really want to repeat last year. I don't want to see last year again, because I've already experienced that. And after this year, I'll be able to say, “Okay, I like this year.” I think I could probably double down and even be even more consistent with certain expectations, so that you know, when December happens in 2025 I'll say, “Wow, look how far I've grown from last year,” you know. And so that's kind of where I'm at right now.

The changes that James had implemented in his classroom were paying off, and he believed those changes to be directly attributed to the reflection that had taken place at the end of the previous school year.

As we discussed James’s growth and excitement about his experience during this critical time of year, I couldn't help but wonder if anyone had supported his growth during this transition. In previous interviews, James often mentioned the importance of collaboration and connection, so I questioned who, if anyone, he worked with as he implemented the necessary changes to this classroom management this school year. His smile widened as he responded:

> My department head definitely helped me with that. And you know, the entry point on my questions to my department head was very low. Like, it's just, like, so, you know, “How do you try to counter these types of situations?” And so she would tell me what she would do, and then I would just kind of bring it up and, you know, kind of play around

> and say, “Okay, let's use this one week, or maybe this the next week.” And so it's just been, it's been interesting to see how she's been able to look in that. And there's also times where I don't really ask her, I just see the expectations, maybe on her walls when we have meetings and stuff like that. I was like, “Oh, I like that. I'm gonna take that.” And I probably should, like, go and tell her and acknowledge, “Hey, you doing this made me do this in my class.”

Surprisingly, though, James found supportive connections not just inside his building but through a social media connection with a stranger! He continued:

> But I've also seen a lot of influence from social media and Tiktok. One of the big ones that I saw was the one that I actually used for my PLF this year - levels with computers. So, if you call Level One Computer, that's like your computer's closed, right? It's on your desk, but it's closed. Level Two is a forty-five-degree angle, so you're basically being able to see their eyes, but they're not on their computer. And then Level Three is all the way up. And so just using that, a ninety-second video, was something that I implemented this year, and that was something that I had seen a lot more, like, reaction time from this year and last year. Like, “Okay, guys, let's get our computers.” All I have to do is say, “Level Three,” and I don't really need to repeat myself, but I'm just walking around the room with my hand up at a three. We could probably have looked at the measurements of this year and last year, of how fast it took students to get computers out. But I can, I feel that there's a difference in, “Okay, I need to get my computer out, sign in, and get on Canvas,” all in a matter of a certain time. But this year, because I'm holding up a three rather than saying, “Get your computer out, computer out,” they just know it is Level Three, and I just make big letters on the board that is in my slideshow, Level Three. So

> it's just been something that has been really, really nice, because I can see it. I can see the difference because last year I didn't do it. This year I did do it.

This specific example illustrated how a connection made through social media, even non-directly, allowed James to redefine his classroom management around technology and better serve his students and run his classroom more efficiently.

While James was seeing positive gains in his room concerning classroom management, this was not a common theme across his building or team. Specifically, he noticed a difference in teachers who were newer to the profession. He continued, noting:

> Obviously, I have some new teachers on my team, which I've talked about my team in our previous interviews. And you know, some of mine are new to the district. Some are new to teaching. And so I can kind of use that as a guide to see, "Okay, how are these students treating the teacher in those classes? How are they treating me in these classes?" Is it more of a, you know, buddy, pal friendship, like the first-year teacher would always be, or is it more of the respect of a veteran that you see with, you know, teachers who've been here for five plus years? So I think the big thing for me is that since the last time we spoke, I have definitely been able to see and self-reflect on, "Wow, I really hit the ground running," from day one, so that in these hard months, you know, November and December, well, now those are mentally fatiguing months.

James's reflection brought to life his realization that, during his first few years in the classroom, this time of year was particularly stressful and draining due to classroom management needs, feeling overwhelmed, and other factors. However, since he had intentionally set policies and procedures and stuck to them all semester, he didn't feel the same stresses and drain that he

typically felt at this time of year, or that he could see on the faces of his newer-to-teaching colleagues around him.

James's use of the word 'mental fatigue' stuck with me, however, and I was curious what he meant by that. I asked him to expand on this idea further, and he happily went deeper, explaining the following:

> It's more that students have been here the longest. They've, well, they've walked the block more than once. It's not, it's not anything new, either. In regards to classroom procedures, lunchroom procedures, behavior procedures, like this is where, you know certain redirections are, are going to work or are not going to work. If the redirections are not working, that means we've been, well, we've kind of drove that nail into the ground too. One of the examples I think about currently is lunch detention, like we have daily lunch detention for certain students. For my students who are in the advanced classes, that might be able to catch their attention faster in the months of November and December, because they have a higher expectation of their behavior. They're more self-aware of what they're doing. But for our consistent students who are making poor decisions, that's something that's already been going on for the previous two months, which was September and October. So when I say mentally fatiguing, the students have already, have already basically ran the marathon of certain punishments or certain things that they have to do. So, either as an admin or as a team, we need to find new ways to get their attention, or we're going to have to, you know, I don't know, ask for resources and other ways to get them, maybe, to start looking towards their behavior, of taking ownership of their behavior. And so I think the biggest thing is that November and December are where the behaviors start to become more problems. And because when behavior

> problems are more prevalent, then you're fighting battles on behavior, rather than the academics that you might have early on.

When referring to 'mental fatigue,' I needed to clarify with James who he was describing as feeling this fatigue. I asked James to clarify this for me, and he gave more detail, noting:

> I'm speaking up for myself, but it might be a similar feeling of other teachers. There's so many behavior problems of disrespect or shouting out, like those things, having to redirect one certain student or a group of students over and over, that if you add up all that time that we're trying to redirect, which probably won't happen early on in the school year, like in August, September, maybe in October, when the students don't feel comfortable at that time because they don't know the people around them. They don't know, like, they're just a little timid, which is totally fine. They're all shy. But once they reach that comfortability, that's where, that's where behaviors become a certain way, and when the behaviors become a certain way, then the time that we take to spend on, "Hey, Johnny, let's make sure that we're working on our stuff," and we're doing that every thirty seconds for, you know, total of five minutes. Well, that's five less minutes that we have with another student who might be too shy to say anything, and then that student gets overlooked. So yes, definitely, in regards to the teachers and behaviors from our students.

James's description of this time of year regarding management and student behavior reinforced his earlier comments about the importance of processes and procedures from the beginning of the year and their steady and continued enforcement. James opened the interview by describing this time of year as particularly significant, and as he recounted these behaviors, that characterization appeared especially apt.

To conclude our conversation around his classroom management and this time of the school year, I asked James to compare his fatigue levels from last year to this year. His response came with a smile and bright eyes:

> So in regards to last year, I would probably put myself at, probably like an eight last year. It was just a much more rowdy bunch, a lot more fights, statistically, which we saw this past week when we made it to the break. Last year, we had about 1400 failing grades over the entire building for seventh grade. This year, after implementing a multitude of things, like Thursday School, which is after school, and a lot more communication with parents via newsletters and texting, we cut that down to about 790. Last year, I was at an eight, at exhaustion, and then now seeing a huge difference in that, totally, I would probably say, that the number has gone down to this year, I would probably say it's about, knock it down, let's say down to a six, maybe down from an eight to a six.

This lowering in fatigue levels was a win for James. Even at a challenging time of the year for others in his building, his spirits were high, and fatigue, while moderate, was not debilitating as he approached Winter Break.

The decrease in failing grades naturally transitioned our conversation to the topic of school and administrative support. In our previous interview, James had expressed mixed feelings and described a strained relationship with his assistant principal. I was interested in exploring how this relationship had evolved since our last discussion. When I followed up on the topic, James smiled and, with a sense of relief, shared:

> That has definitely improved since the last time we talked. I sat down with the assistant principal that I was kind of butting heads with and having some miscommunication with, and just kind of laid out my current feelings towards the situation, of the tension that I felt

> with the assistant principal. So, it wasn't a mutual feeling, it was kind of more one sided, which, if, if it's one sided, I feel like that's good, because it's not, you know, butting heads at that point, it might just be, we need to communicate what's kind of, what you're thinking, because I'm feeling this way when you do these things. And so we talked, and it was a good conversation that helped me kind of understand their viewpoint, and hearing from their viewpoint painted a picture of, okay, so the things that they're doing, well, there's no bad intent behind it, it's just how they think. And so when they were able to vocalize their opinion, and I was able to vocalize my opinion, we were able to move forward in that regard. So things, things are, well, with that assistant principal, things are so much better since that last conversation, and that was all instigated just by a conversation I needed to have with the assistant principal.

James exhaled as he finished and smiled. This had taken a weight off his shoulders, and this miscommunication, had it not been resolved, might have continued to cause additional stress for James. However, with one conversation, James's connection with his assistant principal was reestablished and stronger than ever before, much to his satisfaction.

Speaking of connections, our topic of conversation then turned to the Yellow Squad, specifically the connections formed between teammates. Jame had mentioned the importance of these connections in previous interviews, especially in response to his previous team's collaborative spirit. James reflected on the Yellow Squad's growth, specifically on the return of the fourth teammate earlier this fall, noting:

> So that teacher is back, and fits just like a glove. It's just perfect. And they're around my age, so it's pretty easy to click up on current social trends or hobbies that we enjoy doing. And so it was just really nice to have that kind of friendship in the team. You know, I

> already said my last team was really close, but that teacher coming back was a perfect fit, and just came in at the perfect time. And things are just really, really, really good with them. And you know, we're already trying to schedule times, like, we want to go shoot some pool. We love playing pool. And so it's kind of more, not just coworkers, right? We want to be friends in this regard. So it's been a, it's been a really cool time, and that's something that we want to do as a team. So it's not just the new teacher that came onto the team. It's everybody. And I think that adding the new teammate kind of completed the whole team, so that we can go do these things. So it's been really, really rewarding.

James's fears about moving teams this school year seemed to be fading away as the connections with Yellow Squad fell into place.

James and I then moved on to his satisfaction as a teacher; specifically, connections that heightened that satisfaction. James was quick to respond, naming Yellow Squad immediately, describing their connection as a team that was deepening by the day.

> So 100% it's my team, because after every class, we're either chatting it up or talking about either personalized things and other things. It just means a lot when we're able to chat, and we understand that if one person's not chatting for the day, something happened in class, and they can either want to talk to us about it, or we'll give them the space. And it's just an unspoken rule that's been very cool to see, kind of, from like, a psychology standpoint, like how we're just like, okay, like, this person's not wanting to talk today, that's okay. We're just going to give you space for the day, or something like that, and we know that we're not going to take it personally. It's just how it goes. And so that kind of awareness is very, very cool and definitely should be looked at from, like, a psychology standpoint. But it's been really rewarding for my team this year, 100% just how we are,

> not only as co-workers, but just, you know, they're just kind human beings to each other and that's rewarding beyond the teaching, beyond it all.

Connections emerged as a consistent throughline across all of James's interviews, and there was little indication that this central theme would diminish in significance over time.

As our time together came to an end, I asked James to reflect on the state of Oklahoma as a whole regarding public education and his satisfaction. Like before, I felt a slight awkwardness from James during this portion of the interview that I hadn't felt at any other time during our discussions. I couldn't help but wonder if James felt hesitant to share his feelings, not knowing my thoughts on the topic. However, he did answer more openly this time than before, describing his negative thoughts and emotions with the following:

> I would vocalize that the impact of what I have seen and read on social media about Ryan Walters has kind of negatively impacted me in how I feel education is in Oklahoma. I don't feel comfortable with the things that he's saying. I am very much a Christian. He's vocalizing these very Christian viewpoints, saying things like the classroom needs to have these Christian viewpoints, like a Bible in the classroom. Lessons have to be these things. You would think, if the thought process of a person who shares a similar religion, it would be assumed that I would agree with this person, and I actually don't agree with this person. I see my Muslim students, and I don't want to do a Christian lesson plan, because I know that they did their pilgrimage this year and just came back last week, which is a true statement. They did do that. And so it makes me uncomfortable, because not only do I just disagree with the idea that he has, which it's okay to disagree with somebody, but it's not okay to force it onto someone who might subscribe to a different religion. And being in the Title I school that I'm in, I see it all. And so it's just, not only

> do I feel like he's representing Oklahoma poorly, I think he's representing the Christian faith that I believe in poorly as well. The viewpoints that we think is to love thy neighbor, and I don't think that the actions that he wants to put in place agree with that.

James continued discussing statements and ideas that Ryan Walters had vocalized and hopes to implement in Oklahoma public education classrooms. He continued:

> It doesn't make me feel good. It doesn't. It makes me feel uncomfortable. I know that there's many times that he says that we're going to have these certain things in classrooms. I have yet to hear of certain' said' things that need to be implemented. So, I feel like we're far from actually having to do those things. We do have a moment of silence every morning, sixty seconds, and it's read verbatim, every sixty seconds during that time. I mean, my students are quiet. They are silent. I close my eyes, I say a prayer, I hold a moment of silence. But that's not something I'm forcing my students to do. I'm not, we're not doing the Lord's Prayer in those moments, or any of that nature, because I respect the ideas of others. I respect the idea of this country, of freedom of religion, and we do have private schools for those things. And I think that's where you have the separation of church and state. And so that's kind of where I think about those things recently.

James finished this reflection by explaining how he made peace with the outside forces, discussing public education while, simultaneously, he worked with students daily. He explained further:

> I don't, I don't hold it, I don't, I don't feed into it, because a social media word you might see a lot is rage bait, and in which they're trying to get people to get mad, they're trying to, and I think if, if you're trying to become angry, you're always going to be angry. So if

> you're trying to look beyond that, or don't waste your energy on that, that's kind of my mentality. I don't want to waste my energy on that right now, because that's just going to either burn me out of education or make me just an angry person. And I don't want to be angry. I want to be, you know, I want to be a good teammate for my team. I want to be a good teammate for my building. I want to be a good teacher for my students. I want to, like, I want them to be able to see that in me, rather than just an angry person. I can hold them accountable with expectations, but if I'm just angry all the time, that goes a little bit far beyond that. So, that's my current feel on how I feel with things outside of the seventh-grade building in regards to education.

As our time came to a close, James ended our time together with a grin, his light shining brightly. It was evident to all that he was closing his 2024 educational journey with pride, even if outside forces threatened to darken the Oklahoma landscape. James conveyed confidence in his ability to manage his classroom effectively, describing a sense of control and stability that reflected the positive gains he had made. At the same time, he credited the Yellow Squad for helping establish a strong foundation of collaboration and support, which he viewed as essential for the positive changes taking shape as the new year approached.

Navigating the Wild Winter of 2025 - March 20th, 2025

The first nine weeks of 2025 had not been easy for the people of Oklahoma. In January and February, multiple winter storms brought snow, ice, freezing temperatures, and bitter winds, causing several days of school closures or virtual learning. Additionally, during these months, a significant outbreak of viral illnesses occurred, forcing many schools to close due to increased absences and the need to deeply clean and sanitize buildings. Political tensions were running high across the country as well during this time. President Donald Trump was sworn into office

on January 20th, and soon after, began defunding and dismantling many educational departments and policies, including Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Brinkley, 2025).

Additionally, immigrants and their rights as K-12 students were a focus point as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers began to approach public schools across the nation to remove students from campuses (Chatlani, 2025). There was increased discussion around President Trump's plan to dismantle the Federal Department of Education and return its power to the states (Bennett et al., 2025). In Oklahoma, State Superintendent Ryan Walters echoed the federal sentiment regarding immigration and K-12 education, supporting ICE agents in their work in the community and schools (Wallis, 2025). Additionally, the Oklahoma State Board of Education approved the Social Studies Academic Standards during this time, which emphasized biblical teachings in certain grade levels and other politically charged ideas, such as the claims of fraud of the 2020 election and the claims of creation of the 2020 COVID-19 virus in a Chinese lab (Wallis, 2025). The State Senate also approved a law for the 2025-26 school year that would prohibit all personal electronic devices from being used by students during school hours on school campuses, including student cell phones.

As James and I sat down for our fourth virtual interview, there was much to catch up on since the last time we had spoken. Not only were we in a new calendar year, but specifically, it was the week of Spring Break, which meant James and his students had completed half of this semester and were preparing for the final nine weeks of the school year. As always, James was eager to get started, with a smile on his face and a story ready to tell. He began, reflecting on the wild winter of 2025, saying:

> So for my schedule, I went to school for like, a six-week span, four days a week. So we had a snow day one time, we had a professional development day one time, we had a day

> off one time, and then I was sick one time. So like, for a span of a few weeks, I was there for four days a week, which, for me, I feel like kind of throws the students off just a little bit. And so, when that's happening, I get a little worried because the students don't get to their rotation of seeing things, doing things, and that's a little bit of a struggle. So most of the time, January was a little tough, and once that was over, February happened.

I tilted my head and asked James to expand on February. He chuckled and shook his head, then continued:

> There was a lot of sickness. I did see a lot of flu, and it was a lot of students out for a week, a week and a half. But then, the Monday of President's Day, we had professional development on the Friday before. So, I start to feel sick on President's Day. And then that Tuesday, the snow comes, or it's going to come in the afternoon, and they call because they were knowing it was going to be feet of snow, which was the right call. Had they not called it, the snow would have been awful, busses would have been awful. And then that Tuesday morning, I just started feeling awful. I was hit by the flu. I felt fatigued. I felt awful. And so all that built up to the break. So that whole week we had snow, I was sick, and so I felt like that was the most, well, uh, the biggest blessing, to be able to have the sickness while we're off, right? Because I would have had to miss a whole week of school using my sick days. So that was huge. That was absolutely huge. And so I felt like my delayed sickness was perfect, because if I got sick with the students, I would just be like, "Okay, I'm out for a week," or like, "I'm out for however many days I could be off."

It was clear that the combination of sickness and snow days had put stress on James during the third nine weeks of the semester, even if he was relieved that he had caught the virus during a snowstorm, thus not having to use sick leave for his recovery days.

I was curious how the instability of the schedule during January and February affected his students. James's eyes got wide when this question was asked, and he smiled, noting:

> Since December, it's just been kind of behavior and managing behavior because of all those days that we were out. I think the main thing was that, since we were gone for so long, the first thing is just kind of like, well, sleep schedules. I kind of have it in my brain right now, for most 12-to-13-year-olds who have smartphones, one of the main things is that they don't typically go to bed - they shut down. Yeah, they don't go to bed - they just shut down. Like, they're in their room, they're just on their phone doing whatever, and then their body's like, "Okay, it's time to get some sleep." So they put the phone down, and then they just shut down instead of, like, putting it in a different room, falling asleep, something like that. And so, you know, I saw a lot of, especially after lunch, after they had, you know, carbs, protein, their bodies are like, "Okay, it's a nice quiet room, because Mr. Smith has set the expectation that it's a quiet room, we're going to shut down because we're tired, because the food was yummy, and now my tummy is full, yeah?"

I asked James if this 'shutting down' was the only behavior he was seeing in the classroom, but he chuckled and shook his head before continuing:

> So, with, like, behavior-wise, for Yellow Squad, specifically, it was, you know, like five or six boys, and three of the six boys had been in in-school suspension or IP at the time. So some of that time frame, we were getting new people stepping up. We're like, "Oh, we're not used to these new students who are having behavior problems because we're so focused on the six," which I think that's a good thing, because if we're only focused on the same six guys, it's tough for us to either highlight the good in other students. Like, if we're putting out fires for these six boys, we're not going to be able to see the good in the

> other students, or we're going to let other things slide from students who are not up to, like, the high tier of behavior, but just, like, constant, constant, constant. And so for behavior, it was just roughhousing. I had a lot of language, like inappropriate language, cursing, and that's always been a tough one for me, because when I like, when I hear it, my first reaction is to audibly just be like, "Let's change our language." And I sometimes do it as, like, a blanket statement, like, I'm not saying it to one student. But recently, it's been like, "Okay, student, please change your language. I don't want to hear those terms, I don't want to hear that curse word. I don't want to hear those things in this classroom. If that's how you speak outside of the school, I would like you to keep that for outside the school, but not in the school, or specifically, in Mr. Smith's class." Yeah, so cursing had been a big one recently.

I asked James if any other behaviors had been prevalent in his school due to the instability in the schedule, due to weather and illnesses. He continued, saying:

> Just a little bit of disrespect to a teacher, which I think, well, it's tough sometimes, because with the disrespected teacher, that's just their natural response to authority or a natural response to an adult. Maybe that's what they say to their family, maybe that's what they say to their parent, even though they love their parent, they respect their parents, but their natural reaction might be of like, like a, like a, like a roll your eye, stuff like that. And so I think for me, it took this semester, well, this year, honestly, to see that that just might be how they show their love. I know it sounds insane to believe, but if that's something that they do to their family or their adult or their grown-up or their guardian, whatever their situation is, if that's how they show their love, then that should be like something endearing to me, right? So sometimes, I'd be like, "Okay, 'So-and-So's' rolling

> their eyes at me, ‘So-and-So’ is like, giving a big sigh to me, they probably do the same thing to their parent. Don't take it personally. Just move on.” It gets to an extent of, you know, cursing or like anything inappropriate, that's obviously the next tier. But I just felt like that was kind of like a lower tier. And for me, being a younger teacher, I felt like that's not a hill that I would like to die on. I think I have really high expectations, and I feel like I meet students' energies where, if they're, you know, giving attitude or talking back, I'm like, “Okay, let's step outside. Let's have a conversation. I feel like you need to cool down. Let's go somewhere else.”

To wrap up this portion of our conversation, I asked James if he felt that his administrators had been supportive during this time of high behavior management, both in and out of his classroom. He grinned as he replied:

> For student behaviors, I think those first six weeks of just four day weeks, I think that was the best time that I was seeing help from my admin, because at that time, there was a lot of students who were just being removed or suspended, pulled in and having conversations with the assistant principal and teacher and parent, because that's where we had the most behavior problems, but that's where I saw the most support.

It was clear from his answer and smile that the support he received during that time was not only appreciated but also contributed significantly to his satisfaction. The behaviors that his students were experiencing during the first two months of the Spring semester had taken up a lot of space and energy in James’s day, and it was clear he was very thankful and appreciative of his administrator’s support.

As in all of our conversations, we, of course, spoke about the importance of connections in James’s work. However, in this interview, our discussions revolved around a central idea:

collective commitments. We first began with a discussion of James's Professional Learning Community, or PLC. James had been asked to facilitate the PLC meeting for his team and had been honored and excited about the leadership opportunity. While he greatly enjoyed the experience, he expressed concerns as well, stating:

> It was an absolutely phenomenal time. All of the teachers were like, "You did a great job." I guess when I was facilitating, it was a good time. But, I feel sometimes like, in full transparency, I'm back in the classroom. I go seven hours a day, five days a week, into teaching, where there are just thoughts flying out of nowhere, you know, and side conversations. And then in PLC, I'm seeing those same tendencies that you see in the classroom, but the classroom is now full with adults, and so it's a little tough for me. And anytime I see tension, like I physically, like I look down, I just shrivel at the thought of like, uh, any type of tension. And so sometimes, there are some individuals within the math department who have those side conversations that are completely off topic that aren't benefiting anybody. And one of our norms is to limit the side conversations. And so when that's a norm that we all understand and set that expectation, and it's happening, well, it makes me cringe, it makes me tighten up, because I'm actively working. I'm actively doing what I'm supposed to be doing. But sometimes the energy isn't matched.

I asked James to expand on how the lack of holding to those collective commitments made him feel. He shrugged and continued:

> I think now I'm more stressed about how are we as a department communicating. Because even though we have an assistant principal there to monitor and to join the conversation, like we have an assistant principal who's kind of talking with us and bringing up ideas with us, the norm checker doesn't want to articulate by saying, "Hey,

> you know, hey, Julia, I see you having a side conversation. Can we circle back to this real quick?" It's just, it's really tough, because we're all adults. No one wants to speak to each other like that in that tone, because someone might think that's passive-aggressive or something. I know that if I was having a side conversation and someone said that to me, I'm like, "Yeah, no worries, my fault." Like, it would be quick and easy. But for some of the, you know, egos and personalities that we have in the classroom for PLC, that would come off as headbutting. And that's where sometimes a norm checker might say something to someone, and that person snaps back at them, and then I'm like, "What? What in the world? We're on the same team, why? Why? Where'd that come from?" In regards to how I communicate with other humans and how humans communicate with other humans, it's just been really tricky for me. It's been really, really tricky.

I asked James for another example of collective commitments that were important to him, and to share how that commitment might have been broken and repaired, if applicable. James's light brightened once more, as he began talking about the Yellow Squad:

> The teacher on my team who's a first-year freshman out of college, obviously, very young. It's been tough, a little bit, in regards to her, because there's some days where she was gone for a little bit in those sick days. I think just communication with your team is really important. So, for me as the team lead, it just kind of rubbed me a little bit the wrong way that when you are taking days off for sickness, maybe one or two times, first thing in the morning, saying, "Hey, woke up really sick, so sorry, guys. Can you do these sub plans?" Absolutely one or two times! But, like, four to five times, that's where it kind of got to be a lot. Like sending the email at like, 1:00 am or 7:00 am when we have to be here at 7:20 am, well, it just seemed like it was really delayed. And if you know that

> you're not feeling well, I would want you to send the message to your team as soon as possible, because I just, I think you are obviously looking out for your team.

James continued to explain that, of course, his first concern was always for his teammate's well-being and safety, which was not at all surprising due to his strong belief in connection and camaraderie. However, for a team to survive and thrive, he felt their collective commitments needed to be upheld. He continued:

> I feel like there's, like, a disconnect, because the emails at 7:00 am, saying, "Can you print these up? I'm not going to be in." That seems a little like an emergency brake. Like, if you keep pulling the emergency brake, it's going to wear it down a lot. And so I think that affected me. And there were a couple times where I sent messages saying, like, "Hey, are you going to be in tomorrow?" And like, even asking that question kind of, like, made me feel a certain way, not a good feeling. I don't know what I could say to describe it, like, it was an uncomfortable feeling, just because I had to go out of my way to ask, "Are you going to be at work tomorrow? I just want to know. I want to make sure I'm there early so I can print your sub plans or cover your subs, or cover your duty shift."

I asked James where this situation was currently, and he grinned, noting:

> So with this teacher, it was a couple of tough conversations that, you know, I would walk on, or she would walk in my room, like, "Hey, I saw your message, and, you know, it kind of made me feel a certain way, like kind of uncomfortable." To which I was like, "I totally understand, and I'm sorry if it made you feel uncomfortable, because I just sometimes don't know how to word things, but I just wanted to make sure that you were going to be in today, or you were going to be in tomorrow, because as a team, we've kind of seen just a lot of absences, and we want to make sure you're okay. But when it happens

> a lot, we don't know if it's a big illness or not. We just want to be prepared as a team." And so we had some tough conversations, and I obviously can apologize and say I didn't say it the right way, but it was just tough sometimes to have those conversations that she wasn't being there as much. And when you're not there as a team, when you only have three of the four, it affects the whole class, the whole hallway, because as a team, for Yellow Squad, students are seeing the same faces, but then there's one missing, and you're like, "Ah, where is she there? She's not here today." When you're hearing students say, "Oh, she's not here today," like that affects me, and it also affects the students. And so that was something I had to kind of deal with, which was important, I guess, because if I'm going to be in this leadership role, I need to have those conversations. I struggled with that, but we were still able to have a fruitful conversation, and things were able to change.

These two examples clearly highlighted James's need for connection and his colleagues to follow their collective commitments. If these commitments are not upheld, James's satisfaction was affected negatively. However, as was the case with Yellow Squad, a crucial conversation was all it took to reform the bond and resolidify the connection needed for the collective commitments not only to survive, but to thrive.

As our time came to a close, I asked James to reflect on factors outside of his school building, namely at the state and national level, and their effect on his satisfaction in Oklahoma public education. Oklahoma and its lawmakers were at the top of his list. While he still seemed more reserved during this portion of the interview in comparison to other questions, he was more open and comfortable answering this question than in any of his previous interviews. He began

by reflecting on the state law prohibiting cell phones in schools for the upcoming school year, noting his interest and excitement for consistent messaging and expectations. He noted:

> So anything in regards to technology and cell phones in the classroom is mind-numbing. It is mind-numbing for me, just because the parents, the families, the guardians, they'll pick and choose when to be like, phones are bad. And then when it's something, like, revolving around them, it's like, well, they need their phone right now. I'm like, "They're picking up their lunch money at the front, you don't need to text them that, we'll be able to handle it."

James also reflected on State Superintendent Ryan Walters and his thoughts regarding Christian values and the Bible in public education, noting how his own Christian values directly conflict with Walters's stance on Bibles in classrooms. James reflected, stating:

> It's like, it's tough sometimes, because I don't think the things that I'm reading are good for our teachers, and I don't think it's good for students, and I just want to make sure that the well-being of our students is, like, the first thought. And I don't think that's what's happening in regards to, "oh, we need to have a Bible in each class." Well, surprisingly enough, I'm a Christian, and I don't agree with that. I don't think the people who aren't Christian are going to support that. And if you have people who are Christian who don't support that, then I think you're just losing the battle right there. We have the Pledge of Allegiance that we do every Friday, 25% of students stand up as is their right to do so. So if the thought is, "Oh, we need to have a Bible," I don't think that's going to change anything in the classroom. But, I typically disagree with what Ryan Walter says. And it kind of makes me sad that we share the same Christian beliefs in regards to what we

believe spiritually, but in regards to education, it's like, “I wholeheartedly disagree with what you say. Respectfully.”

While Oklahoma lawmakers’ choice to prohibit student cell phones in schools was of interest and intrigue to James, Superintendent Walter’s continual push of Bibles in the classroom was a point of dissatisfaction for James in Oklahoma public education.

As our time came to a close, it was clear that, although the winter months had brought hardships and trials to Emerald Middle School, James Smith had navigated the Wild Winter and was looking forward to the bright fourth-quarter horizon.

Looking Forward to the Excitement Ahead - May 21st, 2025

A few short months later, the summer heat had returned to Oklahoma, and tensions in public education matched its energy. In Oklahoma specifically, there was still much discourse around the Social Studies Academic Standards from community members, but also from newly Governor-appointed State Board of Education members (Wallis, 2025). Additionally, the Oklahoma legislature passed a bill that would increase the public school calendar year by one additional day, without, however, providing additional funding for this increased academic time.

James and I met for our final interview two days before his school year was to conclude, and an air of celebration, but also reflection and reverence, surrounded him. As always, he was excited to get started, beginning with an overview of his experience with state testing. Since this was James’s third year in the classroom, he had had experience with state testing before, and told me, “Since I've had experience with state testing, I felt like it went so smooth - I wasn't stressed about it.” He continued, explaining to me his school’s procedure for testing, discussing how it took roughly three days for all of the seventh-grade students to take their tests, with only three students being absent during those days. He also discussed how he was able to give the state test

to his math students, which was helpful because he knew those students, noting, “I had my algebra students for state testing for the math portion, so behavior wise, that was never a problem, like they were very well behaved, and I didn't have to worry about behavior problems.” Still, when it was time to test students in English Language Arts, he had a group where he didn’t know all the students, and while his group was excellent, he recognized how that could’ve been more challenging. Overall, he had the following to say about the state testing experience: “It was a very successful state testing. Before, I wasn't stressed, after I wasn't stressed, and during it went fine. So overall, very successful.”

James noted, however, that one aspect of state testing caused him some stress, and that is the questions asked on the test. James discussed that, in his PLC meetings, his team works hard to ensure students leave their classrooms with the essential skills of the standards mastered, but that he had additional concerns with the state test. He explained further, sharing, “I think state testing does a really good job of taking essential skills and just putting a lot of fluff on it.” He continued with an example, further explaining, saying, “Like, okay, we have this root of finding what the operation of division between two fractions are, but we're going to fluff it up into a really nice, complex word problem to see if the students can pull that out or distract them enough to make them not get the root out of it.” This is something that greatly frustrates James, because ultimately, to him, “my stress always, every state test, is that I hope that I do a good enough job for my students to see through all that fluff, I'm going to use that word, fluff, yeah, to find the root, essential, essential skill.” While state testing overall did not impact James' satisfaction, he had strong feelings about how some questions were asked and presented.

James and I then began to discuss his school year as a whole, and one significant win in James's mind was his growth and confidence in his personal teacher clarity with his mathematics content. He explained:

> It's my content expertise of how, how to plan, how to say, "Okay, we've spent two weeks on this, I think we can now move on," or "We spent three weeks on this because I wanted to reinforce this, we might be able to skip this next one so that we can transition into the next one, because there's only, like, one question that I want to go over in that unit." So I think, just, like, just learning being a teacher, you are able to see what you need to go over and what you need to teach. And I think I felt confident being able to say, "Okay, the math teacher next door, they're on chapter six. I'm still on chapter five, but I am cruising, like I'm not trying to rush this. We are perfectly fine. We're all going to make it to the same goal." And, you know, first year teaching, I would, I would overdo it and go fast. And then, do the students really understand it? Like, well, I don't know. I'm just going based off the schedule that I'm given. And now that I have it and see, you know, I can see their brains, I can see their work right here in front of me. Now using the experience I have is like, "Okay, this might look like they understand it, but there's actually more to work on," or, "I can see they're understanding it, we can move on, we can do something else."

He elaborated further on this topic, describing the differences he felt in his participation in PLC meetings, comparing last year to this year. He reflected:

> Like my first year in seventh grade, I don't think I said very much during those meetings, because I didn't know what I didn't know. And that's what you do in those first couple of years, you're just like, "I don't know if we should be doing mean, median, and mode

> before Geometry." Now, I can voice my opinion and say, "I think that's probably what I would do." But for them to get that from me, my first year, I was kind of, well, too timid to do that. And I think my personality was more like, "Just tell me what I should do, and I'll rock with that." Now, I have experience with that, I'll voice my opinion and say, "You know what? Actually, Geometry, I feel like just clicks a little bit easier for students. I want to get that done earlier than later." And I can say that, and I can bring that up by saying, "I have reports, I have quizzes that show success in that." But my first year, you're just like, "Right, okay, whatever."

James was very motivated and excited by his increased teacher clarity in his content. He was especially excited about continuing to build student capacity in seventh-grade math students next year. This confidence was directly linked to the fact that he had taught the same content and curriculum for two consecutive years and would continue to refine his craft next school year.

Additionally, James also reflected on his growth in classroom and behavior management this school year. He smiled as he celebrated this success, explaining:

> I was able to peak, or, I don't want to say peak, because it makes it sound like on the back end, it's going to go down, but I feel like I've reached a milestone of, like, classroom management skills and being able to handle certain behaviors and try new tactics. And so I'm going to say that because of this year, there was a lot more times where I wasn't fighting as many fires in classrooms, like, "Okay, sit down, okay." Or, having power struggles, like, in front of the class, like being able to handle situations either with ease or, I just, don't give a lot of energy to it to be like, he's really, like, frustrating me and letting the students see that. I think it was much easier for me to just have classrooms that are all regulated, and we're quietly, individually working. Because, before, I would go to

> a teacher's class, I'm like, “How do you have students so quiet? Like, how do you do that?” Because my first couple of years were really tough dealing with that, and I think this year was my best year in regards to classroom management.

I pushed James on this, asking what he thought contributed to this change, and without hesitating for a second, he answered quickly, citing Yellow Squad and connections. He continued:

> Because of the high closeness in my team, because I have friends out there who are my friends, not just my colleagues, and that helped me be more positive in here. I think the first couple of months of school, students are like, “Why are you always smiling? Like I don't, I've never seen you not smiling.” But take that energy of, “Oh my gosh, you're always smiling,” with others saying I'm the strictest teacher. Like, I'm very like, “We have a schedule, we have everything that we need to do,” and I can do it all with a smile on my face so that they're not going to take offense to it. Like, that energy of like, negativity, like, if you redirect a student with negativity or redirection with positivity, there's a big difference in their response. And so this year, I think being able to see what to do in specific scenarios helped me so, so much.

James's ability to tap into this positive energy source and utilize it in his classroom had clearly improved the classroom environment, and his response indicated that it had also positively impacted his teaching satisfaction.

James’s passion for connection and the Yellow Squad did not end with this one example, however. He continued to explain how the Yellow Squad's camaraderie and closeness were an enormous driving force behind the year’s success. He noted:

> So last year, I was with a team for the first year. Obviously, it was my first year moving up to seventh grade, two young female teachers, and kind of one older male teacher who

was kind of the rock. But we befriended each other very quickly. We got really close, really quickly. Yeah, we were hanging out outside of school, so when I was stepping away from that team, you know, we were on the complete opposite sides of the building, physically, right? I didn't, I didn't want that to be our friendship moving forward, like I want us to be still friends and moving and seeing each other outside and hanging out. So reflecting on this year, I think with my team that I have this year, I have gotten as close, if not closer, than the team from last year, okay? And so I think that might be because we have, you know, kind of one young teacher, kind of my age, and then two teachers who are kind of in their 30s, but still relatively young compared to the whole building, right? And we've all gotten really close, even closer than I thought, than my team last year. It's just like even today, like me and one of my teachers, we have plan period third hour, and after about 20 minutes into that plan period, that's when breakfast starts for sixth grade, because sixth grade just got here later. And so at that time, usually that's enough time for me to get everything ready for my fourth hour. And then I can start, you know, going and printing stuff, or going to the bathroom, or just going to the lounge. But every single time, we're always leaving at 9:25, we're all like, me and this other teacher would just always go, and we've been doing that for like, the last ten months, and it's just so funny to see, like, human behavior that we're just like, I mean, I just like, look at the clock, see that it's 9:25, and if I'm not walking to her door, then she's walking to my door, and she's like, "You ready?" Or if I walk to her room, I go, "Are you ready?" Yeah, so team water, yeah, time to go get water. Time to refill. And so that meant a lot to me, because that's what I wanted to build for Yellow Squad, being the team lead this year, I felt like that was part of my duty, like trying to build that camaraderie.

When our interviews began in August, one of James's anxieties for the year had been about the Yellow Squad and whether they would form a team spirit like the team he had previously been on. I asked him to reflect on the year overall with the Yellow Squad and see how he felt now. His grin was larger than life as he answered, noting:

> I am really proud of the team that I built from this past school year. I didn't know any of these individuals a year ago; we were even looking through the text messages, like, this past week, because I wanted to get lunch or get dinner during the summertime. And they're like, "Why didn't we get lunch or dinner last year?" And so we went back to this text I sent back in like August, like August 7, I sent, like, a little introduction, like a message to all the teachers. I sent it to my team for the Yellow Squad, and one of them responded like that, that second, like they saw the text and responded like, "Thank you so much. Excited to teach with you." One didn't see it for like a week, and then one didn't respond at all. So I was like, "We couldn't even do anything, because you guys left me on read for like a year now!" So, I'm just very proud of the team, being a team lead. I think I just want to claim ownership of that. That might just be a little bit of pride, but I will take that, absolutely.

James wasn't only excited about their camaraderie outside of the classroom, but also about how connected they became as a team within the school community. He continued, explaining:

> I'm just really proud that we, I mean, we did a lot of competitions, we did a lot of dress-ups. Yeah, every single dress-up day that we did, we all dressed up. We all set the expectation early. Like, let's, I don't care if it's just like, if it's, you know, neon day, you don't have to go full dress, like, I'll do that. You don't have to worry about going all out. If you could wear, like, a shirt or socks or something like that. Just give me something.

> Just do what you're comfortable with. And every single one of them committed to something. We had a step challenge. We did challenge, like, how many steps you could do in like a three-week period, and our team won, and that was really, really cool, because we were really close for like, the first couple weeks, and we got scared, so we set, like, the expectation that instead of doing 10,000 steps a week, we were like, "Let's do 20,000 steps a week." And we all, every single one of us, just stepped up and just absolutely knocked it out of the park. So I just think the team, well, it's just something that I was really proud of.

However, Yellow Squad didn't just commit to each other for things such as school spirit and competitions. They were also committed to their students and their success. James continued:

> When I think about it, like last year, my first year in seventh grade, we would go to IEP meetings, and the requirement is one teacher to go to each, or one teacher had to go to the IEP meetings, and it's optional for everybody else. Last year, the team that I was on, we would switch around. I'll go to this one if you get the next one. I'll go to this one if you get that one. So, this year, I was a little devious. And I was like, "Okay, guys, we all have to go to these meetings." Because they're new teachers, I was like, "We all have to go to these," and in the back of my mind, my intent is good, because I think it's best to have a conversation with the parent to say that this is, this is important. This is important to talk about. If you're busy, if you have a doctor's appointment, stuff like that, that's okay. You go do your stuff. That's okay. But if you're able to make these things, I would like all of us to be there. And so every single IEP, you know, all my team would always show up. And I was like, "Man, that just took me, like, this little message just to say, 'Hey, it would mean a lot to me, if you guys made it.'" And that was back in August. And then

> every single IEP had been full with my whole team. And so I just feel like that was something, on top of the idea that I'm just proud of the team, that I went through and built from the ground up.

It was clear that Yellow Squad was a substantial contributing factor to James's satisfaction with education. As this portion of our conversation came to a close, James was delighted to report that not only would he remain teaching seventh-grade math next year, but Yellow Squad would return in full the following school year, with him as team lead. He shared happily, "My four, my core four that I have for Yellow Squad, we're going to be staying in the same team, same place, for next year. So I'm very excited to have that."

Our conversation then shifted to reflecting on James's year as a whole, focusing on factors that negatively impacted his satisfaction. James first began with the narrative that had affected him early in the Fall semester, but to James's happiness, had resolved as the year had continued. He discussed administrative support, explaining:

> I was kind of building a narrative that there was tension, there was disconnect, there was confusion, there was just uncomfortable feelings. And so with that, at the beginning of the year, I think that was a negative factor of kind of how administration was handling behavior problems, academic problems, and just kind of emotional problems. I mean, reflecting now, there was a lot of growth overall that, just as I am learning my last year, my first year teaching, and this being my second year in seventh grade, that admin position was also learning and hearing the vulnerability from that helped me move forward. But I just think that first part, the admin support, I think, was a negative factor for me that kind of made me feel, you know, uncomfortable feelings. And, you know, it shifted for the better. It shifted for the positive.

I asked James if this positive shift had not occurred, would his satisfaction have been negatively impacted, and he agreed that a lack of administrative support for the entire school year would have negatively impacted his satisfaction. As we continued talking, I sought clarification, asking if clear communication was something he was looking for in the first semester out of his administration. He partially agreed, but expanded, stating:

> Yeah, and I think a little bit of curiosity in that of like, when you say clear communication, it's always great to feel, to feel that you can communicate with somebody. I think it's even more intimate, and more and deeper when it is led with curiosity from the admin position, or from even, like, the teacher position of being able to say, like, “Hey, how are you feeling about this?” Like, “Hey, okay, you talked to me about a couple of weeks ago,” or “A couple of weeks ago we talked about this. How do you feel about that now? Do you feel like you've had support?” Just like, lead with questions and lead with curiosity. Because I feel like if that was something that came up, like, if clear communication was even deeper into asking and checking in on us, then that would have been another positive thing, but that wasn't something that came up. That's definitely something that could come up, but yes, clear communication would have been something that would've been able to not have this as a negative factor. Because it's one thing to have that conversation, that clear communication. It can be a one time thing, and then crumble it up and trash, throw it away, and then it's gone. Which it's great to feel that you can have a clear communication and talk, but to be checked up on moving forward, that's something that I think would be even more.

James emphasized the importance of not only clear communication from administration but also leadership grounded in humility and consistent check-ins with teachers - practices he identified as critical for fostering and enhancing teacher satisfaction.

James also discussed school-wide collective commitments by the adults in the school building as a source of frustration throughout the school year. He provided a specific example of technology expectations, such as headphones in the hallway, which are not permitted in the school. Yellow Squad has a strict no-tolerance policy that is methodical and tiered in consequences if students choose to use headphones. However, other teams in their building, especially in Yellow Squad's hallway, are not as strict in enforcing this rule. He explained how this complicates his work during passing periods, noting:

> That's the expectation, but that expectation does not transition over to other teams. So another team, those students are going to the bathroom, they're walking through our hallway, they're leaving class, they're going to different places, headphones on, and that's where it's tough. Because, I mean, I think I said it until I was blue in the face for the first semester, and then I thought, "Okay, this might not be a student problem, it might be an adult problem." It might be moving up to the higher of the adults, because if I'm telling them to take their headphones out or put it in their pocket or put it away or put it in their backpack, obviously, I don't know their name, so I can't do that. And let's be honest, me going out of my way to go to a teacher to say, "Hey, this student had their AirPod in," well, then there's a conversation of, "Well, I allow them to have headphones on in my class, but they left and forgot." And then it's just this whole debacle of, we're going down a rabbit hole.

James's frustrations with adult behavior and the disregard for collective commitments appeared to negatively impact his overall sense of professional satisfaction. He explained that when building-wide policies were not enforced consistently among adults, the result was an increased workload and added challenges to his role. When I asked whether he anticipated any change in this dynamic in the following school year, James smiled before explaining:

> So there's teams that walk through Yellow Squad's hallway, a lot that we're worried about with headphones and IDs and stuff like that. So before hearing about this news, I would say, "Well, I think we should probably maybe move certain teachers and certain vibes to go with other ones, because those rooms on the other side of Yellow Squad are a little bit more laid back, and so if we get a little bit more of a classroom expectation in those classrooms, that whole hallway might be completely different," and that's what I was hoping for, and that's what it is going to be next year. Like my neighbor, my new neighbor that's going to be on the other side of me, is a teacher coming in from the other side of the building. He's an amazing math teacher and super excited. He always dresses up and does all the crazy stuff, like, like I do. So we're able to bring that energy, and we can have fun, and have a super fun time and say all the Tiktok phrases that the students are saying, but also have those high expectations, and that's exactly what he brings. So him being over here, I think, is going to be huge.

As we concluded this portion of our conversation, I asked James if he had high hopes for positive changes regarding collective commitments from his fellow teachers in the future. He smiled happily, starting:

> I mean, I might be speaking it and manifesting that it's going to change. But you know, we always have high hopes for the next school year when we're, like, at the end of the

> spring semester, you're just like, next year is going to be so different. It's going to be so different, it's going to be amazing. So I think just that dynamic of moving certain individuals and personalities with other teachers to see, and hopefully set those expectations for the building, will be good.

Only time would tell if the teachers around James would uphold these collective commitments, but he seemed hopeful that the changes in place would yield positive results.

As James and I reflected on his school year as a whole and factors that impacted his satisfaction, there were two suggestions he felt were critical that all new and novice teachers sought out during their beginning years in the classroom. The first, to no one's surprise, revolved around connection and community. James suggested:

> I think community with teachers, with teachers, that's a huge factor. So if you are working with your department or with your neighbors, like in regards to, like, you're across your room, next to your room, do the smallest things of inviting someone or being with someone outside of school, right? Go to that restaurant with those other teachers, or go to that event outside of the school. I think investing in, like, the social aspect with teachers is super important for novice teachers, because you are someone outside of these walls. And so if you're someone who might be like, "Oh, I'm a little shy or it does not matter," being able to invest in your friends and people outside the classroom makes it a lot easier when you're dealing with, you know, with students. Because if I have, you know, my teacher's back outside these walls, it's going to make it so much easier inside these walls. And so I think investing in the community with who you have. So if you're a new teacher, don't be closed off, like, that's kind of, like, that kind of makes it really tough. Because you can learn how to manage a classroom, you can learn to do all these

> things, but it's going to be a, I feel like it's going to be a lot harder to do, if you're doing it by yourself versus talking to other people about it. Find your teacher bestie, right? Find that teacher bestie.

Connection stands as the central pillar of James's professional satisfaction, and without it, his sense of fulfillment in education would likely be far less robust. This theme is evident in his narratives about the Yellow Squad, which highlight how collaborative relationships have strengthened him not only on a personal level but also professionally - enhancing his instructional practice, classroom management, and overall resilience as an educator.

James was also passionate that novice teachers take care of themselves mentally and physically, through both physical activity and self-compassion. He expanded on this, noting:

> I think fitness is a very, very important thing. It doesn't have to be going to the gym seven days a week. This job overstimulates you four out of five times a week, like this is so overstimulating, and I even think it could be five out of five. So if you enjoy walking, if you like going outside, decompressing right after, go walk. But when you get home, when you need to decompress, when you need to do those things, I think fitness is very important. You don't have to go hit 250 on the bench. You can go walk, you can go run, you can listen to a podcast. You can read stuff or audiobooks, stuff like that. But I think fitness is very important, because when you get overstimulated, you obviously don't want to do anything. You're very tired. But I think doing something that helps your mind as well as, like, maybe moving your body, is really important. So fitness, and then when I talk about fitness, that can be physically and mentally. So that can also be mindfulness. I think mindfulness is also a very important key. My newest thing that I just started is meditations. It's five minutes. Apple fitness has it. It is so amazing. I sometimes do it

> during my plan, breathing techniques, stuff like that, just helps me come back to center myself.

James's commitment to both physical and mental well-being emerged as a central theme in his reflections. As he described the importance of self-care, it was evident that he viewed it as essential not only for sustaining his own satisfaction in the profession but also for enabling him to remain a positive and impactful presence within the field of education.

As our time came to a close, I asked James to reflect on the state of Oklahoma public education. Tensions were high as graduation caps were thrown across the state and students began to look to not only the future, but also to summer vacation. With the uncertainties of political influence on the upcoming school year, I asked James to reflect on why he chose to stay in Oklahoma public education. His words were spoken confidently, without a hint of uncertainty. He explained:

> The reason why I want to stay in public education in Oklahoma, I think, is just that I always have that mentality of I want to do something that makes me uncomfortable. I think that's what I want to say. And I'm not saying, like, when I'm teaching, I'm uncomfortable, because I'm like, I'm very comfortable being in front of a crowd or talking with people, or, like, just being crazy in front of students. But I think I want to challenge myself. And, you know, some days I go home and I'm like, "Oh, public education makes me want to put my head through a wall." And then there's other times where I'm like, "Okay, this was a big win for me today, and it's a win in a really tough spot and in a really tough school, or in a really tough state or a really tough part of town," and that is what I always want to kind of give back, kind of for the community. I mean, being a Town A citizen, being someone who's from this side of, you know, the city, being

> from this part, I think it just makes me feel like a little bit closer to home. Like, obviously, this is my home, and I want to be here in my home, because I feel comfortable here. I want to make Town A better. And I think that's kind of why I want to stay even though it's a tough position, I want to stay here so that I can hopefully make Town A better.

However, it is not merely the pull of his hometown or the challenge of striving for improved outcomes that sustains James's commitment. His motivation is rooted in something deeper and more enduring. He elaborated, noting:

> And, you know, math, math will come and go. I always was saying this when I was going through my undergrad. It's like, you know, I could be an absolute amazing mathematician, but it's like, "Is that what they're going to remember you by when you leave? Right?" There's some quote that says "it's not what you teach, it's how you made them feel," right? It's something like that. And that's my big focus, it's that I want them to leave here, right, with the mentality that, you know, I really care for them. Every single test they have. It's more than just a test or a person outside this building. You might get your degree in high school, you might go to college, you might become a doctorate. I want you to be better and higher than where I'm at. That's, that's where I'm at. Like, I don't want them to be, I don't want them to meet me where I'm at. I want them to go higher than that. Like, if you're a millionaire and you come back to school and you're like, "Mr. Smith, I made millions!" I'm like, that is exactly it, like, I don't even care. Like, that's all I need to hear. And that poster that I got when I graduated, "Be somebody that makes everybody feel like a somebody," well, that is, like, my favorite quote of all time,

> and that's probably why I stay in Oklahoma, because I want to make these kids feel like that, like I want them to feel that in my classroom.

That is why James Smith stays in Oklahoma public education. To ensure that every student who walks through his door, who is a member of the Yellow Squad, knows without a shred of doubt, they are a somebody, and they matter.

Chapter 5: You Can Do Hard Things - Paige Woods's Story

This narrative documents Paige Woods's first year in education during the 2024–2025 school year, offering insight into her experiences as a beginning teacher. Paige is characterized by her energy and passion for teaching, with her enthusiasm for education evident in all aspects of her work. Her story serves as both a testament to the realities of the first-year teaching experience and a reminder that, while the work is demanding, it is also profoundly meaningful and worthwhile.

As One Door Closes, Another Opens: A New Chapter - August 10th, 2024

The first time that Paige and I met virtually, there was an immediate sense of connection and camaraderie that flowed across the space. It was as if, from the first moment, the two of us simply 'clicked,' and conversation flowed easily. Paige's energy and excitement for the year ahead were evident in her words, her bright smile, and her excitable hand motions as she spoke.

Paige began by detailing her journey to education, first beginning with her relationship with mathematics. She explained:

> In high school, I was advanced in math, and didn't really have a love for it. Like, being advanced, you know, normally advanced kids are like, "Whoo math!" I didn't really care. I was just there to get the credits. But, due to being advanced in math, I had to take an extra math class because I didn't have all the credits to graduate. So I took Calculus, and that teacher was amazing, and really got me to think about math in a different way and made me enjoy math. So he kind of switched my mind.

It was the impact and influence of a teacher that pushed her to consider mathematics as a major in college, and ultimately, when she attended a comprehensive four-year university in Oklahoma,

was what she chose. However, upon taking mathematics classes at the university level, she still felt unfulfilled. She continued:

> I started out majoring in mathematics, just plain. And then, you know, as I was sitting there in Calc three, I was like, "Man, do I want to just, like, just do math my whole life?" And I was like, "No, maybe we'll try education," even though, in high school, I was like, "Absolutely not education! Not ever going to be a teacher." Then, you know, I switched my major, started taking education classes, and really enjoyed it. Yeah, and, you know, got through this, graduated, so yes, we're excited!! And yeah, now I'm a teacher!!!

While it may not have been Paige's original plan, the influence of an impactful teacher and the internal pull to do 'more' with mathematics drew her to education. Once she had decided to join a college of education, she knew that she had not only made the right decision, but more than that, she was home.

Speaking of home, Paige's choice to teach in Oklahoma public education also revolves around that sentiment. Paige not only grew up in Oklahoma, but her family also lives in different parts of the state. While her connection to her family geographically was a factor in her choice, another factor was the financial incentives offered upon graduating from university. Paige explained:

> Um, just because, you know, my family, like my grandma, adopted, like, not adopted me, but had legal guardianship over me. So, she was having to pay for me, and then my sister was coming closely behind. I have another sister, so it was like, I kind of want to gather as much money for college as I can, so you know, she can support my sisters in college and not have to support me, you know? When they talked about the scholarships, like, what was I gonna say? The one that I have is the one for Math and Science educators,

> where you teach for, like, five years in the state. So I knew I was going to stay in Oklahoma, at least for a little bit.

While location was important to Paige, her main driving factor for choosing Oklahoma public education was her family. She wanted to be able to support herself with her college tuition so her grandmother could then financially support her younger siblings when they attended college. Her commitment and ties to her family were a driving force that committed her to Oklahoma education. It is also important to note, however, that Paige also discussed that being close to them was a factor in her choice as well.

Paige did mention, however, that throughout her college experience, many of her peers discussed leaving the state for better opportunities as public school educators. She noted:

> I can't say that throughout the course of my education in college, that I wasn't hearing about, like, "Let's go to a different state." Especially because I feel like, whenever I entered the college of education, that was when it was, like, a big boom of, "Let's go to Texas instead, or Kansas or Arkansas," you know, like states nearby Oklahoma, yeah, because they pay a little bit more. So, of course, teacher pay is a big conversation that I heard going into the college of education. So I was like, "Well, might have to start thinking about that, even though I'm a baby educator," you know?

While teacher compensation was a highly discussed topic in the college of education among her peers during her time in college, Paige ultimately decided that the scholarship program to relieve student loans would be better suited for her situation, versus leaving the state for a higher compensation package.

Our conversation then shifted to Paige's first year in education, and her smile grew roughly three sizes at this point in our discussion. It was clear that she was excited about the

school year with her students, mainly because of her connection to the school site. Paige began by giving me a quick overview of her teaching situation, specifically regarding her classroom. She noted:

> So, it's in a rural area. But we're growing a lot. So the middle school that I'm working in, we're rapidly growing. So we just, we are, like, getting through construction, we should be done in January, hopefully, to get a bunch of new classrooms to fit all of our students. Um, I'm in a portable, so we're in a portable classroom, which I was like, "This is going to be really small," but I'm honestly surprised how spacious it is! But we're just, like, rapidly increasing in student growth.

While Paige began her teaching career in a portable classroom, she hoped that she would be in the building with the rest of the school by Winter Break. However, she was positive about the space and had already begun decorating her portable, making it feel welcoming for her students.

Paige was connected to this school site because she had completed her student internship at this school the previous semester. She animatedly explained:

> So, I student-taught at this site, so that's kind of fun. Plus, when I student-taught here, I really enjoyed it and really loved the students. And, I'm teaching mostly eighth grade, and last semester I student-taught seventh grade. So I know, like, 99% of my students! So, as far as, like, student relationships, I like the position I'm in!

I asked Paige why she felt like knowing her students already seemed like such an important factor for her. She gave an example from the first week of school, which had just occurred, explaining:

> Some of them, I didn't get to, like, click with much, because, you know, there is that barrier of, "Oh, she's still the student teacher, and like, we're not going to take her

seriously.” But like, I noticed in the first week that, like, some of them are kind of taking me seriously. Like on Friday, I can think of an example: I have this student that is a little defiant, but, you know, we're working through it. And I do this randomized seating, so they pick a card, and they go to that group. And I had two students in that hour with this defiant student that are best friends, and when they sit together, they recognize that they talk a little bit too much, and the day before, I separated them. So they pulled the same group again today, and they go, “Ms. Woods, can we switch?” And I respect that, so I let them redraw and get a different group. And this student saw, came up to me, and said, “Can I redraw?” I said,” No.” And he said, “Why?” I just said, “We don't switch seats.” And we just started this back and forth. And then I just kept saying, “We don't switch seats. We don't switch seats. You know, I'm not going to sit here and argue.” And then I said, “Will you go sit down?” And he turns around and says, “No.”

Paige paused to take a breath before continuing, but never lost her smile as she explained:

So I said, “Why don't we step outside?” and, you know, I was like, “We're coming in hot. We need to breathe there. Just step right here.” And luckily, the teacher in the portable next to me is, like, a man for one, and also has this student, and was, naturally, a really calming presence who happened to be out there. So, that teacher kind of, like, brought him into, like, a little side conversation to redirect and, you know, calm the student down. I finished, you know, letting all my students in. I said, “Just stay out here for a second,” closed the door, and got all my students started on bell work. Then I went out there and I said, “So why did I ask you to stand outside?” He goes, “I don't know.” So I’m like, “Okay, well, I want you to think about it, and I'll come back.” So, I went back in and, you know, just walked around, observing all the rest of the students, and went back out. And I

> said, “I would love for you to join the class again, but we need to talk about why you’re outside.” And, you know? Then he finally was like, “I was trying to switch.” And I was like, “So what's my expectation on switching?” And then he goes, “But?” And I said, “Let me, let me address this before you and I go in, there's a special situation with those two that allowed them to switch, but I'm not just going to switch just because you want to switch.” And he said, “Yes, ma'am.” I said, “Okay, it's good. Let's do better.” And he was so good the rest of the class!! It was such a win! Like, it was such a win! So like, those little moments of like, we didn't, like, I absolutely did not connect with the student last semester at all, in any way. It was just always fighting, and already, we’re not. Yes, that's a win!

Paige was thrilled with this restorative interaction between herself and this student. While there was tension at the beginning, they were able to have a productive discussion and allow the student to rejoin the class successfully without additional disruption. Additionally, Paige felt that their relationship strengthened during that interaction, rather than being weakened, which was a first for the two of them. This was only possible because of the previous interactions she had had with this student throughout the entire last semester.

I asked Paige if any other factors had influenced her decision to teach at Poppy Middle School, the school where she had interned the previous semester. She grinned as she answered:

> My cooperating teacher from student-teaching is my mentor teacher now. Having that mentorship was a huge factor going into it. So, we still get to work together. I have one grade level, one class that’s the same grade level as hers, so we get to plan together. Plus, I get to work with a really more experienced teacher who has been doing this for a long time. I didn't get to collaborate with her much this week, with it being the first week of

> school, but we're also not on curriculum yet. We're on the behavior and routines and procedures part. But I know that, even though she teaches seventh grade, she has a lot of activities that even work for eighth grade, and we have the same sort of teaching style. So I think that as far as collaborating, we're going to click really well.

It was evident that mentorship and professional connections played a central role in Paige's decision regarding where to begin her teaching career. The opportunity to continue learning from and working alongside her cooperating teacher served as a powerful incentive, making Poppy Middle School an especially appealing choice for her first year in education.

Paige had mentioned multiple times that the first week of school had already passed, so I was interested to know how she was feeling, specifically about her first day in the classroom. She giggled, shook her head, and blew out a breath before beginning her story, explaining:

> The first day, I was pretty, like, there was, like, a slight tinge of nervousness, but mostly I was excited because I get to see all my students again from last semester, and my first hour of seventh graders! So I was a little bit unsure of how this was going to go, because I didn't, I didn't know them. My seventh graders, last year, I didn't have them, but it ended up going really well, and I was pretty excited about it!

I asked Paige what she had students do on the first day of school, and she nodded excitedly before continuing, noting:

> I was, of course, being my goofy self! We did the tax collector task, which, I don't know if you've heard of it, but it starts out with, like, "Congratulations, you won the lottery!" And I was like, "I'm going to embarrass these kids so much." I was like, "Congratulations, you won the lottery!" Silence. Like, of course, I say, like, really bright and cheery, and then…. silence. And I said, "Oh, come on! Congratulations, you won the

> lottery!" And I just kept saying it until I got them hyped to get comfortable in the classroom. Anyways, being my goofy self! I just got to be my goofy self all day, because I did that with my eighth graders, too. You know, they know me, though. I would say the first day went really well!

It was exciting to hear that Paige's first day in the classroom went well, and that she was able to bring her authentic teaching style into the school from the beginning. She was pleased with her first activity and the interactions she had with students, both new and old.

However, the first day was not without incident. Paige quickly pivoted as her smile fell, exhaling while shaking her head. Unfortunately, the entire day did not have the same glimmer as the story above. She explained:

> In my classroom, I do one redirect, two redirects, and the third time we're talking after class, it's a phone call home, because they want us to communicate with the parents a lot. So, with a student I had last year, Student A, we got to a phone call home on the first day. And you know, it's my first-ever phone call home. And the assistant principal, you know, helped me out with it, because this is a severe behavior case I had last year, too. This assistant principal is new, too, so he wanted to, like, get a feel for the situation with the family, too. The reason we got to call home to Student A on the first day was because there was another student, Student B, and Student A would just, like, he would just constantly say, "Student B flipped me off, Student B did this, Student B did that," and it just kept blowing up. And so both of them got to a phone call home because the other student kept, you know, lashing out back and escalating the situation. And so, that afternoon, we phone called home Student A, and then Student B, I had to phone call and had a lengthy conversation about how Student B had another situation that was going on.

However, the story did not stop there. Paige exhaled, shook her head, and continued:

> The next day was little bit better, but still not great. And then I remember on the third day, (pauses) Student B walks into my classroom and, you know, takes a seat and had asked to go to the bathroom because they came from the portable right next to me. So, we don't have any bathrooms outside the portables, they have to go inside. But he was utilizing the passing period, so came to the portable and asked to go to the bathroom. I said, "Absolutely, utilize the passing period to go to the bathroom." Then, Student A walks in, and then Student B walks back out to go to the bathroom, and Student B says back to me, "They're already telling me to shut up, and I just walked in! I haven't even done anything!" And I said, "Okay, we'll talk about that when you get back." Well, that student doesn't show back up for another 20 minutes, and I get a phone call saying that Student B is in the office filing an incident report. And like, I had no idea that they were going to the office. Nothing happened in my class that I witnessed.

Paige paused, exhaled, and shook her head as she looked down. I asked her what happened next, and she continued, saying:

> Student B had a talk with the assistant principal. I heard this from my instructional coach, who was also taking care of the situation, since I had no idea this was going on. And so I get caught up by my instructional coach, and then after that, I go to the assistant principal, just to make sure he didn't need what I witnessed or anything. And he was like, "So I had to talk with them. I think tomorrow will be a whole lot better, because I gave him the ultimatum of, if it doesn't get better, then I'm moving one of them out of your class." So okay, you know, I'm just trying my best here, and I go on with the day, come back the next day, and then, Student A gets another phone call home. Now, apparently,

> that student is getting moved out of my class to the other teacher, and that's where we're at right now. I don't even know what to think about it. So it's a rough situation. It's been a rough week.

The events of the week clearly had put immense stress and pressure on Paige. The excitement and energy she had exhibited while she explained her first day of school were not present during this portion of our conversation, and it was clear that these student behaviors were already affecting her satisfaction in her teaching career.

I asked her to reflect on the support, or lack thereof, provided by her administrator from her perspective. She smiled at the question, noting:

> So, I had talked to the assistant principal before school ever started, about Student A, and said, “Hey, I'm concerned as a first-year teacher. How do I deal with this? Because, you know, we get some classroom management in college, but, like, a lot of that's like experience. So it's like, I don't know, like, I'm going to be 100% real with you. I have no idea how to handle this because, you know, I watched my CT last semester, and even she struggled with it as a veteran teacher.” That was a really good conversation. He was, like, “We'll see how the first week goes,” with most of the conversation. And then, you know, he helped me with the phone call, which was nice, you know, he pulled them aside, talked to them once the incident report was filed, and said, “I think tomorrow's gonna be a lot better.” And then, not only that, but yesterday, he had a conversation with them before, like, in the morning, before we ever got to my class. So he has been super supportive in it.

As Paige spoke, the lingering anxiety from her first week’s classroom management challenges was still visible in her body language and overall demeanor. Yet, her words, and the slight smile

on her face, also conveyed deep gratitude for her administrator's support, which she identified as having a positive impact on her early experience and satisfaction in public education. It is reasonable to speculate that, without this timely intervention and support, her stress levels would have been considerably higher and her initial sense of satisfaction in the classroom much lower.

So, as the door closed on Paige's student internship, a new, exciting door opened, welcoming her into the bright world of Oklahoma public education. Her first week had already brought many highs and lows, but surrounded by a supportive administrator and mentor, she was hopeful that a positive year lay ahead in the months to come.

Navigating New Roles and Challenges - October 27th, 2024

The Fall season brought more than just cooler air and the changing colors of leaves to Oklahoma public education as Paige and I sat down for our second virtual interview. Nationally, conversations were abuzz about the upcoming presidential election between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, which was just a few weeks away. There were many topics of debate, ranging from educational reform to immigration to a highly conservative and controversial policy proposal known as 'Project 2025' (CBS, 2025). In Oklahoma, specifically, discussions around American Exceptionalism education and the inclusion of American Bibles in all classrooms were a priority for Oklahoma State Superintendent Ryan Walters (Wallis, 2024).

As Paige and I began our conversation, her smile was large and cheerful, but there was also a sense of exhaustion to her spirit. While it was clear that she was happy, it was also apparent that she was working incredibly hard. This educator and researcher definitely recognized the look of a hard-working first-year teacher, as she had worn it not too long ago herself. The conversation began at the heart of teaching, of course - students. Paige began by describing her first few months in the classroom, detailing:

> It was pretty rocky for a while, mostly just because most of all my students I have now, I had last semester when I was a student teacher. A lot of them had that, like, mental block of, “Oh, Ms. Woods's the student teacher, she's not the teacher, you know, she’s just, like, not qualified.”

I asked Paige to explain what she meant by not being ‘the teacher,’ and what that meant for students and their actions. She continued, explaining:

> They were like, “We don't get this. We can't understand this.” I get it, they might not always understand the way I explain something, but, I was telling my mentor teacher, I was like, “I might not be able to explain it in a way that gets them, like, deep conceptual understanding, but I can explain how to do a procedure, and they should be able to tell me something, you know? But, they're just shutting me down every chance they get, rather than even trying to show me something.” I mean, they're like, “We can't do this.” I'm like, “Okay, well, we did, we just did notes over steps. So, what's my first step?” And they're just completely shutting down at that point. They're like, “I can't even tell you the first step.” And I'm like, “Guys, read the notes.” That's the kind of experience I've had.

Paige shook her head, exhaled, and took a deep breath before continuing. She said:

> Even other teachers came back to me and they were telling me students were saying stuff like, “If we all fail this unit test, maybe she will blah blah blah.” And I'm like, “No, I'm not!” I think that after that unit one test, they kind of learned, like, “Okay, even if we all fail this, she's not changing how she does things, right? It's still gonna happen.” I was like, “I know you guys can do it, and I know you're at least understanding something. You just can't sit there and not do anything and expect me to walk you through everything.”

Navigating these challenging circumstances with students she already knew, while working to establish herself in their eyes as a professional and knowledgeable authority in the classroom, presented a significant challenge for Paige. This challenge had already impacted her emotionally, and more than that, had diminished her overall satisfaction as an educator.

However, Paige smiled and clapped her hands at this point in the story, cheering quickly before continuing gleefully. She continued with pride, referring back to the idea that students knew much more than they thought they did, saying:

> So, that realization happened after that unit one test, and they slowly picked it up, which is why they did well on the unit two test! Like, they completely rocked it! Oh, and they knew it. Because I was kind of grading as I went, and they were like, "Did you grade mine?" I was like, "You kind of killed it!" Oh, they were thrilled!! We celebrated a little bit on that day, and we're going to celebrate a lot tomorrow!

By the conclusion of this story, there was a noticeable sense of relief in Paige's demeanor, as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. It was evident that her students' emotional struggles had, in turn, taken an emotional toll on her. However, witnessing their success not only brought her genuine happiness but also reinforced her sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in the teaching profession.

Our conversation then shifted from collaborative interactions with students to relationships with adults. Paige primarily worked with 8th-grade students and curriculum for four hours per day, so I asked her to describe her connection with her 8th-grade math team partner. She explained:

> So it's weird, because my district got a new curriculum, and they were like, "Please follow the curriculum, because we just spent a lot of money to buy this curriculum for

> you to use." And I love the curriculum, so I'm like, "I'm down, yeah." And the other teacher has been teaching for a long time and has what works for him and has chosen to not follow the curriculum. So, I am doing what my boss asked me, and following the curriculum. And, basically, I was just trying to fit in some of his stuff into what I'm doing in my curriculum. But it's kind of weird, because everything he does second semester is my first semester, and everything I do first semester is his second semester. So we're on like, completely different timelines.

I asked her to clarify what she meant by separate timelines, and she not only gave more information but also provided more context for why her students may also have pushed back against her as a teacher at the beginning of the year, too, saying:

> So, he's not doing any inequalities until next semester, and I've already done inequalities. All my students were like, "Oh, we're so behind, Mr. Max, and blah blah blah." And I'm like, "Guys, we're really not, we're not behind, but he's doing completely different stuff." So they're like, "Oh, we must be behind because they're covering stuff that we have never seen." I'm like, "Well, we're covering stuff that they have never seen, either."

This information provided clarity not only on her struggles with collaborating with Mr. Max, but also on the tensions with students at the beginning of the year. As a new teacher, she was following the district curriculum, but it was different from that of a veteran teacher, which, to students, could seem concerning. This disconnect in curriculum expectations and implementation seemed to negatively affect Paige's satisfaction. Additionally, this continued lack of alignment had the effect of cutting off potential collaborative opportunities for Paige and Mr. Max for the current school year due to their differing curriculum calendars, which could also lead to a possible decrease in satisfaction.

I asked Paige if other math teams in her building were experiencing the disconnect in curriculum alignment and implementation that she was experiencing at the 8th-grade level. She noted:

> I think that the 8th-grade team is the only one that has that disparity. The 7th-grade team, we all meet weekly and talk about the curriculum. I just got off the phone with my mentor teacher about what she's doing this week. And then, the 6th-grade team, from what I've heard, is on track with the curriculum, too.

Thus, it was only this veteran teacher who chose not to implement the district curriculum, and because of that choice, the 8th-grade team was not able to be aligned or collaborate. It was only October, and the consequences of this choice were already being felt.

Since Paige is also part of the 7th-grade team, I asked her to reflect on her collaboration with this team in comparison to the partnership between her and her 8th-grade counterpart. She explained:

> Well, it's me, my mentor teacher, and one other teacher. And we just got together on our last PD Day, and we talked about our data for our Unit One test, and we went over them, like, percentage-based, because I have one class against her four classes. So, of course her stats are going to show that she did way better than me with my twenty-five students. But we put them as percentage-based, and then, we compared what we did and whose class maybe scored better on the test, and we talked about how we could do stuff differently next year. And for planning for this year, we talk about what's worked for them in the past. Because, of course, I'm a first-year teacher, and I haven't taught this stuff to students yet, so she's like, "This worked really well in the past." And another teacher was like, "Listen, we sing this song, it's really annoying, but they remember the

> rules for adding rational numbers when you do it." I said, "Deal!" So, like, we're sharing little things like that, like, "Oh, they'll remember x if you do y." And so we pass those around.

I asked her to reflect on this collaborative time with her 7th-grade team and her feelings around their time together. She noted:

> It's nice to have them to compare data with because with that Unit One test, I was like, "Oh, I'm gonna, like, we're gonna compare data, and mine's gonna be awful, because I'm a first-year teacher." But I was right on par with them. Like, it wasn't anything crazy. So, even my mentor teacher looked and said I was a little lower, but like, same trends, basically. And like, my proficiency was high, and so was my mentor teacher's, so we had the same sort of trend. And so she's, like, "Based on this data, I wouldn't say that you're low because you're a first-year teacher." I was like, "Okay, good, good." Because I didn't want that to happen either, I was scared that that was going to happen.

Paige smiled as she recounted this story. The reflective process with her mentor and team not only encouraged her professional growth but also enhanced her confidence and teacher self-efficacy, as she was able to learn from and celebrate alongside her colleagues. She was not teaching, planning, and reflecting alone. Instead, she was seeing if her methods were truly successful alongside veterans who were able to guide her along the way. This process of reflection, supported by a team, positively impacted her satisfaction.

Paige did voice, however, a hope for future collaboration that would improve her satisfaction in education, and I predict that without this, her satisfaction may decrease in the coming years as well. While Paige greatly enjoyed the support she was given from her 7th-grade team, she also wanted to be given the time and space to voice her own opinions and be used as a

resource for someone, even as a novice educator. She has much to offer education, and she yearns for the opportunity to share her own ideas. She elaborated:

> I feel like sometimes, it's good to be led, but sometimes you want to lead too. So, um, I was talking with my mentor teacher about that, too. I was like, “Listen, I might not be, like, a super seasoned veteran, but, like, compared to all the other new hires that they got this year, I'm the only one that is traditionally certified and went through schooling for it. So I'm so down to be a value to them, you know?” Because, I have one other guy, but he teaches the direct instruction math and so, I kind of help him, like, “Hey, here's the CFA that we all did,” and, “This is what I'm doing with this lesson” and stuff like that, because he's actually following the curriculum with me.

Although Paige is new to the profession, she demonstrates valuable insights and a willingness to contribute her ideas. She expressed eagerness to share these perspectives when opportunities arise, identifying this as both a hope for her future practice and a potential source of professional satisfaction. At the same time, she recognized that the reception of her contributions could influence that satisfaction in either positive or negative ways.

Our conversation continued around the theme of meaningful and impactful connections. When I asked Paige who had made the most positive impact on her thus far in the school year, her smile widened noticeably, and she responded with unmistakable enthusiasm and excitement. She explained:

> My mentor teacher! Definitely my mentor teacher. She was my cooperating teacher in student teaching, so she can read me really well. So, there's been, like, decisions I’ve had to make, like, with my grade level person, Mr. Max, where I basically already have made the decision in my head, and honestly, she already knew that I made the decision on what

> I needed to do, too. When I went to her, she told me, “I just think you need a mother hen to come beside you and be like, ‘you should make that decision. So, yes, you're making the right decision.’” And then also, like, not only just, like, feeding me stuff, but like, asking me, “What ideas do you have that could help us here?” And I like that.

The support provided by Paige’s mentor teacher has been incredibly impactful and has had a substantial positive impact on her satisfaction with education. Specifically, Paige appreciates that her mentor teacher supports her, offers advice when needed, and seeks out her thoughts and feelings regarding topics they are collaborating on. This connects to the hope that Paige mentioned earlier, yearning to be utilized as a resource, rather than always being seen as a novice asking for resources and needing support.

Paige also described finding support in a unique space within her school building: the main office, where she worked closely with the office staff. Because her classroom was in a portable outside of the school building, she often worked in the main office for a change in scenery and thus had built strong relationships with the adults there. She detailed their positive influence, noting:

> Every day, I go by the office, whether it's during my plan, right before school, when I have to go to monitor the hallways, or after school, I go and say hi to them. I feel like sometimes I hang out in the office just because I don't want to sit in my room anymore. So, during my plan period, I'll just take papers and I'll go sit in the office and grade, and it's really nice to, like, talk to the Secretary and stuff, because she's the one who gets subs. So I'm like, “Hey, like, we're friends, right? Like, throw me a good sub, you know, and stuff like that.” But like, just becoming friends with them, and then, sometimes I see what actually goes on behind the scenes, and like, everything they're dealing with.

Paige went on to detail a specific example of how the front office staff had supported a student in her class during the first few weeks, helping her believe in herself and her ability to be a mathematician. She explained:

> So, that office worker kept being that emotional support for the student when they were an office aide. And then, I graded my Unit One test, and this student got a 92 on my Unit One test, when most students failed my Unit One test, and with that student, we, like, literally had a mini celebration in the office for the student. So that's someone you wouldn't expect to collaborate with on a student's success in a math class. And we totally did, absolutely! We love our secretaries and front office workers, absolutely.

While this connection was unique, it highlights Paige's emphasis on collaboration with colleagues as a vital means of supporting student success in the classroom. Paige enjoyed working with someone else to ensure this student's success and then celebrating with all parties upon achieving that success.

The last positive influence Paige specifically mentioned was her Instructional Coach. She was thankful for the emotional and instructional support her site's Instructional Coach provided, specifically noting:

> I love my instructional coach. I've cried in her office. I'll just stop her in the hall and be like, "Hey, so about this," and she is immediately on it. Or like, I literally texted her one time, I was like, "they're wearing me down, I'm gonna cry," so she came. Also, she's a math teacher too, so she's, like, pretty good at being like, "Here's what you could do to help them understand the math." Or, if I'm like, "Hey, like, this thing really didn't work," I seek her out for, like, instructional support or emotional support, like I can actually talk to her.

Having additional support, not only for instructional resources but also for emotional support, was important to Paige. This clearly was impacting her experience as a teacher in the classroom, and thus her satisfaction as a public school educator in Oklahoma.

Although Paige's educational environment contained many positive influences, not every factor contributed constructively to her overall experience as an educator. Before our second meeting, Paige had scheduled and completed her first formal evaluative observation with the mathematics principal, who was also the head principal of Poppy Middle School. While she acknowledged the large workload on administrators, she was also concerned by the lack of a post-observation conference, which still had not occurred almost one month after her formal observation. She noted:

> I didn't realize how much principals deal with, and I'm like, "Okay, so there's a lot going on, which is why I don't, like, actually, like, see them often." And like, my head principal is the one over math that comes and does our observations and stuff, and he came and observed me once, and we're supposed to have a meeting after to talk about what he observed. But he's never scheduled it, I guess, because he's busy, so I don't even know, like, what he thought about coming in and observing me or anything. So, I don't know where he's at on that, especially because, you know, I'm not tenured. I'm like, "Are you liking what I'm doing?" Because if you're not, I can improve, and hopefully you'll hire me again next year. Like, are we vibing? I don't know.

While Paige was calm during this portion of our conversation, it was clear that this lack of communication and follow-through from her evaluating principal was creating stress and anxiety for her. In turn, these emotions were negatively impacting her satisfaction as an educator.

Another growth opportunity Paige mentioned was the topic of teacher coverage and substitute teachers in the building. Paige brought up that, while she felt fortunate at her site, she knew of many other Oklahoma public school educators who, due to a lack of substitute teachers, often had to give up their planning period to cover classes that did not have a teacher multiple times a week. She expressed her displeasure with this and the anxiety that it caused her as an educator, noting:

> I've talked to friends in other districts, and they were, like, "I had to cover a class during my plan, like, three days out of the five-day week." I think my district's, like, probably one of the better districts on that. They try to do a maximum of one day, so if I covered yesterday, they're not going to ask me to cover today. It's kind of how they do it. We technically get a choice, and typically, my answer is, if I'm the last resort, if you can't pick from anybody else, then I will. But doesn't make it any more fun.

I asked Paige to explain what it is like for her on the days when she has to cover a class when she is the last resort, and she does not want to. She nodded and continued:

> Normally, I'm like, "Okay, cool, whatever. Just send them to me. They can sit in here, and I'll just keep doing my thing, and they can work on whatever they need to work on that they were left with." But then, there are days where I'm teaching, and then during lunch I have to teach, because sometimes I'll do a test, reteach, and retake for those who just like, want to move from like a C to a B or something like that. And so that means that if I cover my plan, I have no time throughout the day to just breathe, yeah? And that's hard when I have to do that, yeah, because someone decided to call out last minute.

The frustrations Paige described appeared to stem from two distinct sources. First, she noted the absence of time throughout the school day to pause or recenter herself, as she was constantly

moving from one task to the next without any meaningful downtime. Second, she expressed concern about inconsistencies in collective commitments among adults in the building, specifically referencing issues with teacher attendance. Seeking clarification, I asked her to elaborate, and she continued:

> It's the same teachers very often that I have to cover for. I don't understand how they can afford to do that, you know? I don't have the time to do that. I can't just take off. And some of them, like, call in, like, last minute, because, again, I've sat in the office and, like, our secretary does the subs and the coverage. And, like, one time it was like, 7:20, and I was about to leave to go do my morning duty before school started, and a teacher had just called her. And, of course, she was frustrated because, you know, there are twenty minutes until their classes start, and they just called out. And I'm like, "Dang, it's kind of crazy how you can just do that. Like, why would you even consider doing that?"

From Paige's perspective, the issue of class coverage extends beyond the simple matter of time. A deeper concern lies in the breaking of collective commitments among adults in the building, particularly the shared responsibility that showing up for students is non-negotiable. Together, these factors contribute to a negative impact on her overall professional satisfaction.

As our time came to a close, our conversation shifted a final time to the wider scope of Oklahoma public education and the national landscape at large. When I asked Paige to reflect on the state and nation as a whole and its influence on her satisfaction as a public school educator in Oklahoma, she clearly felt uncomfortable with my question. Halfway through her answer, she even voiced the following: "I mean, I don't know your opinions on who we have in the state right now…" Without confirming or denying her responses, I feel that Paige felt slightly uncomfortable being fully transparent with her views.

However, Paige first reflected on the nation as a whole, specifically on her fears regarding Project 2025 and its plans to dismantle the Federal Department of Education. She explained:

> The big thing that you hear about is Project 2025. It's how, like, Donald Trump is wanting to get rid of the Department of Education as a whole. Like, just thinking about that, I'm like, "What would that mean?" So, Project 2025, and like, a scenario that's taking away federal and moving it to the states, I mean, I'm just being blunt and honest. I wouldn't be stoked about that because of who we have in the state department right now. So, you know, just trying to figure out, like, what that means, and what their intended purpose of that is, and what that would end up meaning. So it's like, would that be positive for me, or would that be negative, you know? I think that I'm trying to figure out what that would mean for my satisfaction as a teacher, you know?

Paige expressed more questions than answers regarding the state and national political landscape as our conversation came to a close. However, regarding her personal teaching career, she navigated her new role and challenges day by day, making positive gains thanks to the connections and collaborative partnerships she established across her building.

Ring in the New Year of Change - January 17th, 2025

While Paige was highly engaged with students during her first semester as a classroom teacher, the nation was also deeply engaged in political discussions surrounding the November presidential election, in which Donald Trump was elected the 45th President of the United States and would take office the following January. Shortly after the election, Donald Trump began to submit proposals for his cabinet formally. For the Secretary of Education, he proposed Linda McMahon, who had previously served during his last presidency as the Head of the Small

Business Administration. There was considerable discussion surrounding this choice for Secretary of Education due to the candidate's experience and qualifications (Schultz, 2024). In Oklahoma, State Superintendent Ryan Walters publicly endorsed Donald Trump, and, shortly after Trump's election, reinforced this alignment by formally declaring his support for dismantling the U.S. Department of Education (Greco, 2025). Additionally, a recording of Superintendent Walters engaging in prayer was sent to educators, with explicit instructions mandating the video be shown to all students (Wallis, 2024). The fall semester ended as Superintendent Walters continued to discuss the Social Studies Academic Standards, around which there was much community debate (Greco, 2024). He also was vocal about his personal push for a Christian Bible to be present in every public school classroom in Oklahoma (Wallis, 2024).

As Paige and I began our third virtual conversation at the start of 2025, there was much for us to discuss, even though it had only been around nine weeks since we had last spoken. As our conversation began, Paige immediately separated the last nine weeks into two distinct time periods - the before and the after. Paige began:

> At the end of last semester, I was tired and so over it. Last semester was rough because I felt like I was doing so much, and it was getting nowhere. And then even though the data showed that my students were getting somewhere, like they were doing fine, all my kids were like, "This is confusing, I can't understand!" And no matter how much I helped, they just kept telling me that they couldn't do it. And I was like, you know, so tired of it by the end. It was, well, it was a struggle.

I asked Paige to dive deeper into the struggle of last semester, specifically how she was feeling during November and December. She continued, even naming her emotion:

> Burnout was definitely what it felt like. Everything was piling up. Students had been saying stuff to other people and having breakdowns all semester. And I'm just coming home exhausted every day like, “I've had to say the same thing a million times, that they can do it, and they know how to do this, and they just can't get out of the mindset that they can’t.” By the end, I was like, “I cannot keep reassuring them anymore. I’m just ready for this to be over.” And then I had, like, family stuff happen on top of that, so I was burnt out there, too.

Paige described burnout as a significant contributor to her stress during the latter half of the fall semester. Multiple factors shaped this experience, including the constant navigation of emotionally charged conversations with students, interactions with colleagues, and the management of dynamics across entire classes. These professional demands were compounded by additional responsibilities and stressors at home, leaving her feeling as though she was burning at both ends.

Based on these details, I was curious if Paige’s stress was derived from student behaviors tied to a limited growth mindset and fear of success in mathematics. I questioned Paige about her student’s behaviors, and she expanded on her experience. To my surprise, my thoughts regarding a growth mindset were far from the truth. More than that, one of Paige’s biggest excitements for the year turned out to be one of her most significant barriers. She explained, animatedly using her hands for extra effect:

> I thought it would be easier teaching the kids I student taught for my first year. It sounded like a great idea at the beginning. I was like, “Oh, I already have these relationships, they already know who I am, yeah, and they were asking for me!” But, I feel like it ended up making my first semester of teaching harder because, well, that first semester was like, I

> was already trying to learn how to be a teacher, you know, like how to be the sole teacher. And then on top of that, I was having to deal with this mental block of them still seeing me as a student teacher. It was just a lot. I think, maybe, most new teachers juggle one thing at a time, whereas I juggled two things at a time.

Paige was surprised that one of the things she had been most excited about as a new teacher quickly became one of her most significant hurdles. This challenge caused her stress, which led to substantial burnout going into winter break. This contributed to a negative trend in her satisfaction during her first year in education.

Paige continued to describe her feelings of burnout leading up to winter break, adding another contributing factor: the daily stresses of teaching, aside from the actual teaching itself. She noted:

> It's just all the stuff that comes with teaching, because I'm, like, I can stand up and give a lesson. I'm cool with that. I'm not burnt out doing that. It's just all that extra stuff that comes with teaching, which I know is a given, but that's the hard part of teaching for me. I can put together a lesson and give a lesson. It's just that whenever students come in and they're burnt out, so they're acting up, and then when they act up, I have to, you know, address it, and like, I'm already tired, but then I'm staying late calling parents. And it's not just the behavioral needs; it's the emotional needs on top of that. There are times when I'm like, "Kid, I love you to death, and I love that you love to talk to me the whole five minutes before class starts, but please, I need one minute." There's just a lot.

Paige's narrative directly relates to the complexities of teaching that exist outside of content and pedagogy. While some may believe that teachers focus only on transferring their content from their minds to the minds of their students, Paige's words showcase a vibrantly different narrative:

one where many pressures surround teachers at any given moment. These pressures can be overwhelming, and as Paige describes, contribute to and lead to teacher burnout, in her case.

With a slight shake of her head, Paige finished her description of the stresses of the Fall semester with an overview of her students' behavior, echoing that they, too, were experiencing burnout as Winter break approached. She explained:

> I just noticed that, like, getting close to winter break, I'm burnt out, but they're burnt out, too. They're all tired, and they're just done and checked out. My last unit was Unit Three, so we did linear equations, and they were fine with the classwork and with, you know, taking notes. Like they were fine with that. But then we got to the test, and they just like, dropped the ball. They were just done with school.

However, it was not just academics that students were responding to differently - behaviors were also trending upward in areas that had previously been non-issues. She continued, exhaling slightly:

> You know, when they get tired, they don't know how to express that appropriately. Because, yeah, of course, they're thirteen. But like, I would say anything to them, like, I might just be like, "Can you sit down? Please?" Like, not getting on to them, just being like, "Can we please sit down?" And they'd be like, "Well, I was getting something!!!" as if I was like, greatly offending them. I literally would say back to them, "I wasn't accusing you, I just asked you to sit down." So it was just, like, not fully understanding, like, them being middle schoolers, essentially.

This uptick in negativity and disrespectful behavior was the final contributing factor to Paige's stress during the fall semester. All of these stresses, which she referred to as a feeling of burnout,

negatively impacted her experience during her first year in the classroom, which, in turn, negatively affected her satisfaction with Oklahoma public education as well.

I asked Paige who, if anyone, helped support her during this emotionally taxing season of her first year in the classroom. Her face lit up immediately as she described her mentor. She noted:

> I feel like I know what I'm doing. But sometimes, I'm just like, well, I overthink myself and I go crazy. But, since I have her, it's just awesome, just like having that person to talk to, to be like, "I think that totally makes sense, or "No, I think you should do it that way." We talk about like, "Is that valid? Like, what can I do better?" It's nice getting that extra viewpoint that I don't necessarily have. Like, that's really what I need. And yeah, I've cried to them, too.

The emotional support provided by Paige's mentor appeared to be incredibly impactful on Paige's success and satisfaction in education. The time they spent together discussing situations, scenarios, and solutions allowed Paige to develop confidence in herself as an educator, which led to a higher level of satisfaction in teaching.

However, Paige's mentor was not the only person who supported her during this emotionally taxing season. Paige's Instructional Coach also played a vital support role. She noted:

> There's been times where a class really frustrates me, and then I'm about to cry, because when I get frustrated, I cry. So, I've called my Instructional Coach and been like, "Hey, can you just like, pop in and let me walk down the hall and walk back right now?" And she literally comes and knocks on the door, and she goes, "What are y'all doing?" Because she's a math teacher, too, so she can take over for me. And then, like, I walk out

> and take a lap. So it's kind of nice to have an Instructional Coach that's also a math teacher, because I feel like other types of teachers get intimidated with math, but she's always ready to jump in to help with that. So it's great.

By providing Paige with the opportunity to pause and reset, her Instructional Coach offered a much-needed resource that enabled her to reenter the classroom with renewed capacity to engage effectively with students. This support proved especially meaningful for Paige, as it enabled her to sustain success in her teaching practice, even on the most challenging days.

In our last interview, Paige had mentioned the office staff as being an especially supportive group for her, and it was not at all surprising to hear that this group had continued to provide support during this taxing season. She smiled as she explained:

> During my plan and during my lunch, I go and sit in the front office and, when I'm having a crap day, we just sit up there and we just joke around and have fun, and just like, sit there and laugh. And I'm like, "I kind of needed this today. I needed someone to sit there and make me laugh." And like, in a space where we can just be adults and not have to be, like, the teacher. I mean, like, yeah, we're professional in the workplace, of course. But you know, being able to joke with other adults, and talk to other adults, and not hear 'sigma' every five minutes, you know what I mean?

Paige was grateful for her connections with other adults in the building, where they discussed topics unrelated to education or school. She greatly enjoyed laughing at jokes and being in camaraderie with others. Community filled her bucket on days when she needed an extra lift.

All of the stresses and anxieties Paige experienced could be classified in the 'before' category of our conversation, referring to before winter break. However, after winter break, a

new, bright reality welcomed Paige back to Poppy Middle School. She grinned and glowed as she explained the change between the fall and spring semester:

> So, all the students used to hate me last semester, but then, over winter break, they decided they missed Ms. Woods, and so they're, like, coming back, and they're so sweet, and I haven't gotten a single complaint! So, I've actually enjoyed teaching this semester because, yeah, I'm like, it's not a struggle anymore, so I don't know what happened. I'm like, "What has changed?"

Paige smiled, and her smile continued to grow as she talked about the current Spring semester. She elaborated on the growth of her students and their positivity, specifically in relation to her teaching and their response to her class content, noting:

> So, this semester, we started with functions, and I've been dreading functions all year. I was like, "I do not want to teach functions, like they're not going to understand." And like, we started doing functions, and they were fine! Like, they were just like, "Oh, this is easy, Ms. Woods, like, this is so easy!! Like, I can't believe that you said this is going to be hard!" Because I warned them. I said, "This might be a harder unit than what we have covered, and it uses stuff from last semester." I could tell by the looks on their faces that we were all thinking, "Yeah, we're gonna have a repeat of last semester." But then, we kept going, and they're like, "This is so easy!"

Paige shook her head, laughed to herself, and continued:

> Yeah, they're like, "This is so easy!" If you ask the front office, they have not had students in there breaking down. They haven't heard a bad thing about my class. Suddenly, I don't have seventh-grade students coming to me saying, like, "I heard you're

> a hard teacher." So I've actually enjoyed teaching this semester because, yeah, I'm like, it's not a struggle anymore. So, I don't know what happened, but it happened!

The tone of our conversation at this stage differed significantly from the earlier discussion regarding Paige's experiences during the fall semester. Her demeanor appeared noticeably brighter, and her overall spirit seemed lighter. It was evident that the positive changes she observed in her students, along with improvements in her daily teaching experiences, were exerting a meaningful influence on her satisfaction with public education.

I asked Paige if anything had changed in her teaching environment that might have contributed to this change, and she immediately began discussing her new classroom, which was no longer a portable. She explained:

> Our building's construction ended, and I'm in the building now, not the portable, so I feel like that's part of the mental shift in students. My portable used to always be trashed, like there was trash left everywhere, but now, they take better care of the classroom inside the building. So, I think that there's a mental shift happening with my kids, like they're taking it a little bit more seriously now that we're in the building.

The physical space was having a drastic impact on Paige's students. She continued:

> So, they're starting to see me more as a teacher, too, like, I've realized that they started to open up to me a little bit more. Like, some students were talking to me about how they like anime, and I was like, "Oh, I like anime too!!" And so we just got to talking about that, and this is the first time they've talked to me about something that they enjoy doing that's not math, you know? And then, a student walks in and, well, he makes bracelets, so I said, "Hey, I like your bracelets, they're really cool." The next day, he comes in and

> gives me a waist chain that's beaded. It's the first thing I've ever gotten from a student, and now it's on my backpack! I mean, this stuff doesn't happen to me, but now it is!

Paige's excitement and energy were contagious at this point, and her joy was uncontrollable. It was so clear that the changes from the fall to the spring semester had greatly affected her satisfaction in her teaching career for the better. The mental block students had no longer seemed to be an obstacle; she had a classroom environment for students to thrive in, and she was beginning to cultivate relationships individually with students that she had not been able to create before. All of these things positively impacted her satisfaction.

Because the spring semester was off to such a positive start, I asked Paige if she had implemented any new changes to her classroom or professional life that we had not yet discussed. She nodded and began to discuss consistency in classroom behavior, recognizing that, during the fall semester, this was an area where she could improve. She explained:

> At my school, we have, like, a three-warning system, so kids get one warning, then they get a second warning, and then the third warning is a phone call home. And so, there were times last semester, where I was exhausted, so I let behaviors slide so that I didn't have to call a parent. Now, yeah, that was lazy on my part, but like, I'm a first-year teacher trying to survive. But now, I'm just trying to be more consistent in those warnings and even calling a parent, even when I'm tired. I'm working hard on that.

Although the fall semester proved especially challenging for Paige, she not only persevered but also emerged from the experience with a reflective goal to strengthen her practice in the spring. Rather than allowing the emotional difficulties of late fall to diminish her resolve, she returned from winter break rejuvenated and prepared to engage with her teaching responsibilities with renewed energy and focus.

We continued our discussion on collaborating with parents as Paige explained her positive interactions with families thus far in her career. She enjoyed working with and speaking to students' families, noting:

> In my district, we have super supportive parents, and honestly, in my experience, it's been really positive. I've never had, like, a bad reaction from parents. They all have been super supportive, and that definitely helps in the classroom. And I'm always like, "I appreciate your support." Like, I always end my phone call letting them know that I appreciate their support.

Paige was appreciative of the support she received from families, as it allowed her to ensure students were successful in her class. More than that, however, she appreciated working with families for behavior conversations instead of other discipline options, such as detention. She elaborated:

> With detention, that's how I very quickly get cut off from them, because it's not like with their parent. Like, the parent has more of a connection with that student, whereas detention is just them sitting in a room, no connection. So, I feel like it would break down those relationships I've built or am, like, building, with kids, and that would affect me in the end. I don't want them to feel like I'm just attacking them. I'd rather connect with a parent or something, if that makes sense.

Paige's passion for collaborating with families was rooted in her desire to ensure that students experienced success across all aspects of school. She expressed skepticism toward traditional behavior systems, such as detention, which she felt risked undermining her relationships with students and, consequently, their success in her classroom. Instead, she emphasized family collaboration as an alternative avenue for support - one that allowed her to foster stronger

connections and provide more holistic guidance to students both inside and outside of the classroom.

As this portion of our conversation drew to a close, I asked Paige if any other factors within her school building were affecting her satisfaction, positively or negatively. She shook her head, shrugged, and shared:

> I feel like there's been a lot of drama lately, lots of petty stuff between adults in the building. Like, we already have so much to deal with on top of students. It's why I don't sit in the teacher's lounge. I mean, I would love to connect with people, and I do when I'm walking down the hallway and I see them, I'm like, "Oh, hey, how are you?" But not sitting in the teacher's lounge gossiping. It's why I love sitting in the front office, but now I'm like, "I don't want to hear about that too," you know? I wouldn't say it's a drain or anything. It's just annoying.

Paige did not spend much time talking about how the gossip circulating in her school affected her satisfaction. However, it was clear that it was an annoyance and was something that, if it continued to grow and spiral, could negatively impact her satisfaction in the future.

As our time came to a close, Paige and I ended by discussing Oklahoma public education and the nation as a whole in terms of education. While Paige was more comfortable discussing political topics than in our previous interview, I still felt a distinct change in demeanor when I asked specifically about her thoughts regarding state and national policies and how they have impacted her satisfaction in Oklahoma public education. She first reflected on the fact that it was inauguration season, and that often led to political conversations. However, she did not elaborate any further. Paige also stated the following: "Oh my goodness, I am not a fan of Ryan Walters."

Otherwise, she shared feelings of confusion and felt she needed to research and become more informed about educational policies, noting:

> What are they trying to do for state education? Because the last thing that was, like, really popular was trying to bring the Bible into schools. And I'm like, "Okay, but what are they really trying to do for education?" Because, nothing's happened since then, and so, I'm like, what's happening state-wise, with education? So that's been, you know, it's got me thinking (pauses) it's got me thinking.

As for those thoughts, Paige had not decided if those pushed her satisfaction in a positive or negative direction quite yet. She shared that she needed time to reflect and think about what was happening and what was to come.

As our time came to a close, Paige celebrated the success and excitement that 2025 would bring and was happy to close the door on the fall semester of 2024. She was hopeful that the rainclouds were clearing off and there would only be sunshine in her future at Poppy Middle School.

Finding My Voice in the Classroom - March 20th, 2025

The first three months of 2025 kept not only the people of Oklahoma, but also the United States as a whole, preoccupied with political discourse and debate. President Trump was sworn into office in January of 2025, and soon after, his administration placed increased emphasis on immigration policy and procedures. Throughout these months, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers began to approach public schools across the nation to remove students from campuses (Chatlani, 2025). Additionally, there was much discussion regarding the Federal Department of Education and President Trump's plan to dismantle the organization and return these powers to the individual states (Bennett et al, 2025).

In Oklahoma, a significant outbreak of viral illnesses occurred during these months, forcing many schools to close due to increased absences. Teachers across the state worked to continue classroom instruction while students rotated in and out of their classes with various illnesses. Additionally, while ICE agents were nationally approaching and entering schools, Oklahoma State Superintendent Ryan Walters publicly supported President Trump's initiatives and spoke openly regarding his feelings about undocumented students not being welcome in Oklahoma classrooms (Wallis, 2025). In response to these messages, multiple public school district leadership teams publicly released statements to their communities, ensuring all students were welcome and safe in their classrooms. The hope of leadership teams, written in these messages, was that students and families would feel safe attending school and would not fear continuing their public education (Modersitzki, 2025).

As Paige and I met virtually for our fourth interview, there was much to discuss, as she herself had made it to her first spring break vacation as a teacher, which brought much joy and needed relaxation. As our conversation began and we reflected on the busyness of the past few months, we naturally started at the beginning of the year when illness swept across the state. Paige explained that students rotated in and out of her classes as they caught various viruses, which made teaching challenging for a time, mainly because of parents' expectations of students while they were home and after they had recovered. She explained:

> Some parents are really on them, like, "You need to do your schoolwork while you're sick, like, you can stay home, you can lay down, you can rest, but when I get home, we're gonna work on the stuff." But, I could also see that some people got behind because it was like, "You can catch up when you get back," and some students never got caught up.

I asked Paige to elaborate more on what this process looked like from her point of view, especially as students were transitioning in and out of the classroom. She continued:

> So I had to talk with them, like, "you're in eighth grade, it's your job to get yourself caught back up, not my job. I have 120 students. I cannot track you down individually and make you do your work. I post everything on Google Classroom. That's always the expectation. I've always posted everything on Google Classroom. There's videos, there is notes, the assignment is on there. Like, the expectation is that you need to do your job, like, you're a student. Your job is being a student. You need to do your job and catch up on your own. And if you have questions, of course, I'm here for it, but you have to go watch the videos first."

Paige took a breath and continued, noting:

> It's kind of the conversation I've had to have with some students, but especially going into high school. I said, "Listen, in high school, they're going to do the same thing. There's a reason I'm being tougher on you this year than I would if you were seventh graders, because my seventh graders, again, I'm a little more lenient."

At this point in her narrative, I began to understand that Paige felt she needed to prepare her students for high school not only academically, but also socially and emotionally. In this case, that meant teaching students to catch up on missing work outside of class, advocate for themselves when needed, and make a list of targeted questions over missed material. As a teacher, Paige was teaching more than just math content in her classroom.

Paige continued to discuss feelings of being overwhelmed during this time, especially as parents reached out when their students were ill and needed to access work remotely. She explained:

> I was a little stressed, just because I had parents getting with me, like, “Hey, my student says that x isn't posted.” And like, one student emailed me and was like, “I can't find this assignment, and you said it was posted on Google Classroom, and I'm gonna get grounded because of this.” So, I literally sent them a slideshow with screenshots of, like, click this button, click this button, scroll down to this. It was on there. I mean, like, don't be emailing me, you know, telling me that you're gonna get grounded. It's not my fault.

As Paige explained the stress she felt during this portion of the school year, I could tell by her facial expression that it had taken a toll on her. Having to juggle teaching students in her classroom while also ensuring students rotating out of her classroom with various illnesses had access to all materials had been difficult, and it was clear that it had negatively affected her satisfaction as a classroom teacher.

However, she smiled and noted that her mentor had been her main support system during this stressful teaching period, and that she could not have made it without her. She compared the stress she felt during this period to the stress she felt at the end of the first semester, and spoke about the difference between the two, pointing specifically to the impact of her mentor. She explained:

> If I did not have anybody to spill my thoughts to, it would definitely fester. Last semester, I felt almost like I was trying so hard not to like, (pauses) resent, (pauses) because I'm like, (pauses) I'm trying so hard to help you, but you're still mad at me, and I can never do anything right, even though I'm trying so hard to help you. And it was like, I need to not put my emotions into this for a while, because I don't want to resent these children because I love these kids, but they're just frustrating me. But this semester, I go rant to her, it’s, like, emotional support, I guess? And I'm like, “I just don't know what to do.”

> Like, our new saying it's like, “It is what it is.” At some point, I can't do anything more to help. I just have to accept that it is what it is. And so, like, that's literally our saying before we leave our conversations every time we rant, I'm just like, “So and so did this, and it made me stress, and I don't know how to help.” And then she just goes, “It is what it is.”

The comparison between Paige’s first and second semesters highlights the central role of connection and mentorship in shaping a first-year teacher’s experience. During the challenges of the spring semester, Paige turned to her mentor, sharing concerns rather than allowing them to fester, which she acknowledged as critical to maintaining her emotional well-being. This support not only enabled her to continue teaching during a demanding period but also mitigated the negative impact of stress on her professional satisfaction. Her experience illustrates how connection, camaraderie, and mentorship function as key protective factors that positively influence teacher satisfaction in the early years of practice.

As Paige and I continued to discuss her Spring semester, she detailed the struggles of maintaining classroom expectations, especially regarding classroom discipline, during the third nine weeks. She provided a specific example, noting:

> We did test corrections one day, and I was like, “Listen, here are my rules: No talking, you can use your notes, but you can't help each other, voice level zero, you can ask me questions - some questions I'll answer, some questions I won't, but you know, we're doing test corrections.” I had those strict rules on the board. Then, I said, “Violations of these rules will result in me taking away your test corrections and a phone call to your parent to explain why.”

Paige paused and nodded at me as if to see if I, too, understood the expectations. I nodded back, and she continued:

> There was one student who, no matter what I did, would not stop. He had three warnings to stop talking, but would not stop. So I took his test corrections away. And he goes, "Miss, I'm sorry, I won't do it again, give me another chance." I was done. And he was dead silent, for the rest of class. After class, I told him, I said, "You're the only person I had to take my test corrections away from, I didn't have to take it away from anybody else." So yeah, it was rough.

This need to hold the line on behavior expectations clearly affected Paige. Her face was somber as she finished her story. I asked her to reflect on the parent phone call that occurred later that day. To my surprise, her mood brightened at that question, and she answered quickly, explaining:

> I mean, honestly, parents are great! I don't think I've had a bad parent experience. I was like, "Hey, we had this situation, I had to take away their test corrections, and I will not be grading them because of this." And she was like, "Okay, we understand. We'll have a chat with him." I was like, "That's amazing." I mean, parents are great, like, really great, especially here. Like, from some stories I've heard from friends, my parents are nothing like some of the bad stories I've heard. (pauses) We love our parents.

Paige's words and overall demeanor made it evident that support from parents and families had been a consistent and positive influence throughout her first year in the classroom, contributing meaningfully to her professional satisfaction. She also acknowledged, however, that this had not been the reality for all of her peers. For colleagues in other districts, family interactions were sometimes less successful and, in those cases, appeared to affect satisfaction negatively. Paige's

experience, by contrast, reflects a reality in which family partnerships functioned as an affirming factor in her first year of teaching.

While collaborating with families was a particularly positive influence on Paige's satisfaction in her teaching career, unfortunately, not all collaborations yielded such results. Paige explained how her district was implementing Professional Learning Communities (PLC), and because of this, her administrator expected specific documents to be uploaded to particular team folders detailing their work. When these expectations were explained at the beginning of the year, Paige described the requirements as "pretty easy." However, a few weeks ago, her understanding of these expectations changed. She explained:

> So, it turns out our PLC folder was going to be audited. And suddenly, this little thing that we had to do was, well, it's way more than what was outlined to me. I was talking to my mentor teacher, because she's the head of the department, so she was trying to get our math folder in order. And I was like, "Listen, I understand the expectation was clear in their eyes, as far as like, they had this document saying everything we need to do, but it's way more than what he talked about at the beginning of the year."

Paige shook her head and continued:

> He downplayed it at the beginning, and apparently, it's a whole lot more than what it was. And so I was like, "I understand that the expectation was clear, because they have that document available to everybody, and that he apparently sends it out in all the emails and stuff, but the urgency of the expectations wasn't clear, and that's what's frustrating to me, because now, I'm freaking out because of the PLC folder." I didn't realize there was so much more on top of what he told us I had to do for this folder. If they had just told me about the urgency at the beginning of the year, this all would have been done a while ago.

> But instead of grading, instead of planning something out, I had to spend time fixing a PLC folder up to where they wanted. It was frustrating.

When I asked for clarification about whether this experience had negatively affected her satisfaction in education, Paige responded, answering, “Definitely a con or a dissatisfaction is when admin is unclear.” Thus, Paige values clear, consistent communication from her administrators. This is something that can either enhance her satisfaction or diminish it. Unfortunately, in this instance, the communication was unclear, and her satisfaction was affected as such.

Our conversation then transitioned to a state of reflection from January to now, with Paige sharing continued excitement and momentum about the positive growth occurring in her classroom. She began with a reflection on the transition from portable to a physical classroom, noting:

> The portable was awful, like, it worked for a classroom, but it wasn't homey, if that makes sense. And I like my classroom to be kind of homey. And now, I need to get more things! I’ve found that students like (pause) I have a standing desk, and there's a student who stands in the back and would prefer to stand and work. So, I let her do that. I’m just figuring out, like, I'm like, “What do I need to get for next year to make it more homey?” You know, it's like, it's great now, but I want to make it better. I want a rug, I want vertical whiteboards, because I found that I have, like, I have one vertical whiteboard, and I've read all about vertical whiteboards.

I asked Paige to expand on vertical whiteboards, what she had read about them, and why she wanted more. She smiled and continued:

> Typically, students tend to be more engaged at vertical spaces and, like, doing work on vertical spaces. And they just naturally enjoy vertical spaces, which is weird. But like, today, I have a vertical whiteboard in my room that I was using for, like, I had groups, and if one group was confused, but I wasn't near a whiteboard, I would pull that one over and work on that one, and it helped a lot.

Paige's energy was notably elevated as she spoke about her new classroom space and her plans to continue enriching it in the future. Her reflections made clear that the physical environment played a significant role in shaping her overall satisfaction with teaching. In retrospect, she recognized that the portable classroom had negatively impacted her more than she had initially realized. Looking ahead, her plans for cultivating a more supportive and engaging space generated renewed excitement and optimism for the future.

Additionally, Paige reflected on the positive momentum with teaching and learning in her classroom this semester. Specifically, she noted:

> It was rough first semester, and I think that's because I was just a first-year teacher my first semester, and I really did not know how to teach. Like, I knew how to teach, but it was rough. And honestly, they really understand the second-semester stuff. So, now, I'm gonna go back over everything. Hopefully, when I go back over the stuff that they struggled with first semester, I obviously know how to teach better now that I've been doing it for a while.

I asked Paige to expand more on what she meant by growing in her teaching. She continued, explaining:

> I feel like, now, I have a better hold on, like, when I walk through a problem of, like, being like, okay, they really didn't get that. I didn't make sure they asked questions,

> because I could tell that they were just giving me blank stares and not understanding what I just said. So, when I get that sense, I'm like, “Okay, I need three questions. You need to ask me three questions about what we just did.” That way, I can kind of, like, know what they're struggling with. I feel like that sensory part is getting better.

However, Paige explained that it was not just her teaching practice that had improved, but also her knowledge of and relationship with her students. She continued:

> I feel like, now, I know my students better, and I can kind of gauge when they understand and when they don't. So, I think that's kind of helped, that I know them better, because they may feel like they weren’t being heard last semester. That was not because I wasn't hearing them, but more like I didn't know how to address what I was hearing. And now, by making them ask three questions and stuff, I do.

The patterns Paige described reflect the development of her teacher self-efficacy over the course of her first year. During the fall semester, her sense of self-efficacy was relatively low, which contributed to feelings of limited success and, in turn, negatively influenced her overall satisfaction. In contrast, during the spring semester, her growing experience led to increased success, which strengthened her self-efficacy. This strengthened efficacy enabled her to attempt new strategies, resulting in further success and an ongoing cycle of growth. This positive, reinforcing cycle enhanced not only her self-efficacy but also her broader satisfaction and happiness in teaching.

As our time came to a close, our conversation shifted to state and national influences on Paige’s satisfaction in public education. While this portion of our discussion typically brought up visible walls for Paige, she did not seem to find our discussion around politics at all uncomfortable and shared her thoughts openly. Paige first reflected on the stresses of national

immigration policies, specifically the role of ICE agents and their interest in public schools. Paige is very protective of students and their rights while enrolled in public education, and was deeply upset by the happenings around the nation. However, her district made a public statement ensuring the safety of all students while in school, which brought her much relief. Specifically in relation to her district's statement, she responded:

> Luckily, my district was like, "One, we don't collect that information. So, like, if a student's undocumented, we don't know. And two, they will not come onto school sites without a Judicial Warrant and an admin to escort them around." And I said, "Period, that's all I need to know. Thank you, district."

While national policies were weighing heavily on Paige, her district's stance had not only strengthened her resolve in teaching, but also her satisfaction with her specific district within Oklahoma public education.

Paige also reflected on President Trump's discussion regarding the Federal Department of Education and plans to dismantle this organization to return its powers to the states. She noted:

> Everybody's talking about, like, Trump dismantling the Department of Education, and for some reason, I feel like that would never happen. Like, no way, that's not gonna happen. I mean, he came into office, and the conversation switched to, like, immigration stuff, immediately. So, I don't think it's gonna happen. I don't think he can do that. I mean I don't even think that's even something he has the power to do. I think that has to be like, I don't even know, I don't know the details. I just know that, like, that's something that's come up again in the news, but I don't think it'll happen.

Paige and I wrapped up our conversation together, and I wished Paige an excellent remainder of her spring break vacation at 1:37 pm. While the exact time of the executive order is not available to the public, President Donald Trump signed *Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities,* the executive order that began the process of dismantling the Federal Department of Education on March 20th, 2025, the same day as Paige and my interview. News of this executive order broke approximately between 2:00 pm and 5:00 pm that evening.

A Successful First Year in Review - June 3rd, 2025

Thunderstorms quickly blew across the Oklahoma plains throughout the weeks of April and May, and during this time, the educational landscape was equally turbulent. Students across the state completed mandatory state testing requirements in April, while simultaneously, Oklahoma State Superintendent Ryan Walters and State Legislators chose not to vote on the Oklahoma Social Studies Academic Standards, effectively acting as a passing vote (Martinez-Keel, 2025). Additionally, as school districts across the state celebrated their final days of school and held graduations, the legislature also passed a bill that would lengthen the following school year without increasing funding for public school districts.

Paige and I met for our final interview virtually after her school year had concluded and she was officially on Summer Break. There was an air of relaxation, joy, and peace surrounding her throughout our conversation, and I believe that is because of her successful completion of her first year in the classroom. As we began discussing the last nine weeks of her year, she started by detailing her experience with state testing. Paige explained that, while she was nervous about the procedure of state testing and reading the instructions wrong, the lead-up to testing wasn't stressful. She explained:

> I was really surprised with how my kids reacted. I mean, like the whole year, it was like, "This is too hard, Ms. Woods, like, I don't understand this." And then we start reviewing for state tests, and suddenly they're like, "This is so easy!" And I said, "This is the stuff that I taught you before that you said was difficult, like, nothing new is happening!" And then! Like, after the test, they were like, "Ms. Woods, I was so locked in. I feel like I did well!" They felt good, (pauses) Yeah, they were so confident.

Paige was pleased that her students felt so confident on their test, but more than that, she was very proud of how confident they felt in themselves leading up to the test. As she reviewed with students, her teacher self-efficacy continued to rise as her students continued to find success in mathematics, which in turn allowed her to continue her work and persevere in the classroom.

While the process of administering state tests did not, in itself, serve as a significant source of stress for Paige, the broader context of testing nonetheless remained a significant stressor for both her and her students. At Poppy Middle School, the end of the academic year is heavily structured around a series of mandatory assessments, particularly for eighth-grade students. She elaborated:

> Oh, my God, I tell you, my eighth graders took, we'll let's just see - they took the ELA state test, the writing state test, the science state test, the math state test, then they took a math placement test for math tutoring, and then they took six finals - and ALL in the span of three weeks. Like, why would they do that to the eighth graders? Like, I understand, like, state tests you can't get out of. We have to do those. And I feel like the math tutoring testing is important. But I'm like, why can't we just, like, mix finals for eighth graders or, like, let some of them be exempt.

Paige was frustrated by the amount of testing that took place at the end of the year with her students, and was especially concerned about the fatigue that they experienced in these last few weeks. However, this process is part of her school's culture and protocol, so it is not open for discussion or debate, which did negatively affect her satisfaction slightly.

Our conversation then transitioned to reflecting on her first year in education as a whole, discussing moments, factors, and people that stood out to her as meaningful or impactful, whether that be in a positive or negative capacity. Paige began by reflecting on the impact of her assistant principal. She noted:

> I think the big, the big, like number one was just like, admin support, because I went through teacher education, so I know how to make a lesson plan. I know how to do my job. But the part that's hard to teach is, like, discipline, and talking with parents about discipline, and my assistant principal was really supportive in that, and told me how to, like, he goes, "Here's how I would have this conversation." He would outline the conversation kind of like how he would, and that way, he's like, "You can word it however you want to, but this is the outline that I would use." That helped a lot, just because, like, that's something new that I didn't know how to do.

Having an administrator with whom Paige could turn to for mentorship regarding student discipline and parent communication was incredibly impactful and essential to her as an educator, and this greatly affected her overall satisfaction. However, her administrator was also supportive of her in other ways, namely with students regarding classroom and building expectations. She gave an example, explaining:

> So, we were studying for our final, and I was like, "Once you walk into this room, you're in this room. We're not going to the bathroom - we have too many important things to do

> that you need to be here for." During those last couple of weeks, their grade depended on them participating in class, because I knew that if I sent something home, I'd never get it back. So, I had two students decide they were going to write incident reports on me because they got mad that I wouldn't let them go to the bathroom, but I did for an emergency dire situation, like a girl had a feminine issue, like, you can't really control that. And so they got mad, like, "Ms. Woods, let so and so go, but I couldn't go."

Paige shook her head and continued:

> Um, so, yeah, and then the admin was like, "I knew that you're reasonable in the sense of, like, you would let them go if you had the opportunity to, but if they're missing instruction, they can't go, that's our school rule. They can't miss instruction." And I was teaching the whole class. We were doing stuff the whole class, and so, my admin definitely had my back. And like, these two kids thought they were gonna past Ms. Woods and get her in trouble. But then that didn't happen.

Paige expressed deep gratitude for the way her administrator supported her classroom expectations in that moment, noting that this intervention had a substantial positive impact on her overall satisfaction. For Paige, the presence of an administrator she could rely on was not simply helpful but vital to her sense of stability and effectiveness as a classroom teacher.

However, Paige noted that not all of her interactions with her administrators had been positive. Unfortunately, unclear expectations from administrators this school year had caused her stress, anxiety, and an increased workload, which had negatively impacted her teaching experience. She described the PLC miscommunication from earlier this semester, noting:

> At the beginning of the year, when my head principal was talking about PLC, he goes, "Just put it in this folder and you're done." I mean, that was essentially what he made it

> sound like. But then, we had the span of, like, a couple of bad weather days to make sure our PLC folders were in order because we were getting audited. And so I thought that I was doing what I was supposed to do the whole year because of the expectation that he set at the beginning of the year. But, during the span of three or four days, I had to completely revamp everything because the expectation wasn't clear to me. I was very frustrated.

The lack of clear expectations resulted in significant last-minute stress and additional work for Paige. Challenges she believed could have been avoided had communication been transparent from the outset. For her, consistent and explicit guidance from administrators is not simply beneficial but essential, as it directly influences her professional satisfaction. In this instance, the absence of clarity diminished that satisfaction.

Another individual who greatly supported Paige during her first year in the classroom was her mentor. She was especially grateful for her mentor's support with curriculum and teaching strategies. Paige's face lit up when she spoke about her mentor. She shared:

> Of course, I know how to teach. But like, if I'm like, "This is why I want to achieve, but I don't have a task that does that," I would go to my mentor. I'd go see her, and she'd be like, "I would try this," and she would offer a task that she's done before. That was really helpful. It was great idea building, but also a place for me to run ideas through and with.

While Paige expressed gratitude for her administrator's support in managing student behaviors, she relied primarily on her mentor for guidance with curriculum, pedagogy, and instructional strategies more broadly. This mentorship proved instrumental as she began to shape her professional identity as a teacher and strengthen her sense of teacher self-efficacy in the classroom.

Unsurprisingly, Paige's final reflection focused on the growth that she had found with her students in her classroom. While the first semester had been challenging for all of them, they seemed to have found their flow after winter break. Paige reflected:

> These were all the students I had while I was a student teacher, and I didn't know what I was doing at first, you know? I mean, of course, I was still learning my first semester, but they all thought of me as the student teacher, and she doesn't know what she's doing. And so I think that a majority of my issues in the first semester were because they still saw me that way, and so they didn't want to learn from me, if that makes sense. That mental block was very difficult, but then after, for some reason, after winter break, that all changed, and suddenly, they loved me. But the first semester was hard. And had that continued the whole year, it would have been really difficult.

I clarified with Paige if she thought that students did not respect her as the authority in the room at the beginning of the year, and she shook her head, answering:

> I don't even know if it's necessary, like respect, either. Like, it's just like a belief that they didn't think I knew I was doing because, like, I was student teaching and they always had another teacher to fall back on. And so, I wasn't seen as, like, the person in the room that knew what they were doing, even though I did know I was doing. But in their brains, their middle school brains, I was still a student teacher.

Paige and her students had to build a shared trust in one another that, previously, had involved another teacher, for success in the classroom to be achieved. As Paige began to build her own teacher self-efficacy and believe in her ability as a teacher, her students, as well, began to believe in their abilities, which allowed their class community to thrive. This, in turn, significantly improved the satisfaction of all.

As Paige reflected on the growth of both herself and her students over the course of the school year, she was especially proud of her students' confidence levels in mathematics and their progress. She provided a specific example that was particularly important to her. She explained:

> One student did notoriously bad on all of my tests, and she's like, "I'm gonna fail this final." I said, "I want you to take it, and I think you're gonna surprise yourself." And, she got 77, and this student normally gets, like, 30s. And so she flipped out, and she said, "Can you email my mom?" I said, "I will email your mom!" We both jumped and cheered together, and she was so excited, and that was, like, a huge win. Now she knows that she can do hard things.

Paige paused, smiled to herself, and then continued:

> For some reason, at the beginning of the year, she did not like me, not at all. So, her IEP case manager invited me to that meeting, because she didn't like me. So, we all sat in there, and then she walked in because she's in eighth grade, so we're starting to get them into all that stuff. And she goes, "Why are you here?" First thing she says, and her case manager says, "Because we all care about you and want you to succeed." And so, we had a long talk of, like, "Do you hate this student?" "Of course not. I just expect more out of her because I know she can give me more." And, you know, that sort of conversation of like, you can do hard things, you've done it before. So I feel like doing well on that final really helped. She can do hard things. Like seeing that growth, I was like, "I've won. That's, well, that's why I do what I do."

Moments such as these reaffirmed for Paige the reasons she chose to enter the teaching profession. As she recounted this story, her pride and enthusiasm for teaching were unmistakable. She recognized that experiences like this would serve as touchstones - memories

to draw upon during difficult days - helping her persevere and continue to model for her students that they, too, can do hard things.

As Paige looked to the future, she was excited to share that not only would she be returning to Poppy Middle School for the 2025-26 school year, but she would also be teaching eighth-grade students again. However, her partner teacher in the eighth grade was moving to a different position in the district, which meant the advanced math classes were available, and she had been approached about teaching a section or two. She was excited about this possibility, and explained:

> I'm staying in eighth grade, so it's still the same on-level class, but I'm going to add an advanced class, possibly two, which is my dream. So I'll have the same curriculum, same sort of stuff, just adding an advanced class. I told my mentor that I'm kind of stoked!

Paige was very excited about the opportunity not only to continue to grow in her understanding of the curriculum she taught this school year, but also to add an additional prep to her schedule. This schedule was a dream of hers, but she didn't think the other teacher would leave Poppy Middle School, so it was an exciting surprise for these classes to come her way so soon.

As our final interview came to a close, I asked Paige to reflect on what factors, if any, kept her in Oklahoma public education. Her answer was authentic and genuine, truly representing the love for Poppy Middle School and the community she has found. She remarked:

> It's not specifically Oklahoma, I would say. Specifically, it's the school district I'm in, because, like I told my friend whenever I left college, I said the number one thing I want is supportive admin. Like, if something happens and something bad happens and I make a mistake or something, I want supportive admin behind me that has my back. And so, that's my non-negotiable, and this school really has it. So I don't think it's specifically

> Oklahoma, but it's specifically this school and the admin I have. And wanting to continue to collaborate with my math team, they’re pretty awesome, too.

For Paige, her administrators are the non-negotiables that make all the difference for her regarding satisfaction not only in Oklahoma public education, but in public education in general. Her assistant principal was the person who, from the first day of school, not only provided support but also walked alongside her to help her see, as she showed her students every day, that she, too, can do hard things.

Chapter 6: Enduring Understandings

The goal of this study was to examine factors that affect novice mathematics teachers' satisfaction in Oklahoma public education in relation to their teacher resilience and, in turn, seek a better understanding of how these factors influence their decision to remain in Oklahoma public education. Specifically, these three research questions were named:

1. What factors affect a novice mathematics Oklahoma teacher's satisfaction during an academic school year?
2. How do these factors connect to their personal teacher resilience?
3. How do the above factors and their teacher resilience affect a novice mathematics teacher's choice to remain in Oklahoma public education?

The final chapter of this dissertation presents discussion about the findings of this study in relation to the research questions. Specifically, I will discuss the similarities between James and Paige's stories, as well as how they both align with or diverge from current literature on this topic. Additionally, conjectures will be made regarding the participants' stories and how they relate to Moir's (1990/1995) work. The limitations of this study and the need for future research will also be discussed. Finally, based on the findings of this study, recommendations will be provided to school leaders to strengthen the resilience of novice mathematics teachers in Oklahoma public education. These insights aim to guide not only Oklahoma education leaders but also inform national efforts as other states confront similar teacher shortage challenges. The ultimate goal is that research like this, and future studies, will help states learn from past mistakes and take proactive steps to ensure today's challenges do not become tomorrow's crises

As a classroom teacher, I often reminded my students that while they might not remember every detail of each mathematical formula, I hoped they would carry with them the

broader lessons; skills like persevering through complex tasks, understanding that problem-solving often requires thinking outside the box, and recognizing that every question is a good question. As a teacher, I intentionally designed activities with topics such as these in mind, with the aspiration that students would take these lessons with them long after class had ended, whether they chose a career in mathematics or not. As this dissertation began to take shape, I, too, as an author, began to share this same hope for you, the reader. This aim is formally described as enduring understandings and they "are the big ideas that have lasting value beyond the classroom. They reside at the heart of the discipline, require uncoverage because they are abstract or often misunderstood, and offer potential for engaging students" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 342). The unique details of this dissertation will fade as time goes on - you may forget the names of the participants, the exact sizes of their schools, or their number of years of experience. However, my hope for you, reader, is that the findings of this chapter will serve as your enduring understandings and be the ones that you take with you long after the fine details have faded. I hope that these are the big ideas you will wrestle with, consider, and reflect on as you continue in your life, whether as an educational leader, researcher, parent, or community member. May these findings be your enduring understandings, and may they stay with you for a lifetime.

As I analyzed both James and Paige's stories, I examined their experiences in relation to their personal teacher resilience using the categories first identified by Beltman et al. (2011), which have since become prominent in the current literature, as stated in my theoretical framework. Factors that enhanced their satisfaction, supported their growth, or strengthened their resilience in preparation for later periods of stress, what Beltman et al. termed protective factors, are referred to in my findings as cultivating experiences. Conversely, factors that diminished

satisfaction, generated stress, or lowered their resilience during challenging moments, what Beltman et al. described as risk factors, are identified in my findings as identified barriers.

Trends Over Time: The Factors that James and Paige Share

Throughout their school year, James and Paige both had similar cultivating experiences that provided the space and opportunity for positive growth and satisfaction in their Oklahoma teaching journeys. Similarly, they also identified shared barriers that stalled their satisfaction in their work, often resulting in increased stress and discontent. These factors and experiences are detailed below.

Shared Cultivating Experiences

James and Paige described three shared experiences they believed played a central role in cultivating their satisfaction as educators, enabling them to grow in their practice and thrive within the classroom. One such cultivating experience was a supportive, strong school community. Both James and Paige discussed the importance of community, specifically in terms of human connection. For example, a common thread throughout James's narratives was his discussion of the Yellow Squad. He started the year with feelings of anxiety about leaving a strong sense of community from his old team, even stating, “I want to connect with you on a, you know, a friendship level, right? And so that's important to me.” Later on, however, with the Yellow Squad, he reflected on their connection and camaraderie, noting that, “We're either chatting it up or talking about either personalized things and other things,” and, “It's been really rewarding for my team this year, 100% just how we are, not only as co-workers, but just, you know, they're just kind human beings to each other and that's rewarding.” This sentiment was echoed in Paige’s narrative in her description of having lunch with the office staff, specifically when she noted, “We just sit up there and we just joke around and, like, have fun, and just like,

sit there and laugh. And I'm like, “I kind of needed this today. I needed someone to sit there and make me laugh.” And like, in a space where, like, we can just be adults.” For both James and Paige, relationships with other adults in the building provided an important space for camaraderie and brief moments of stress relief; opportunities that allowed them to reset before reengaging in the demands of classroom teaching. This community helped them develop the resilience required to navigate the everyday demands of teaching, echoing the sentiments of Olsen and Anderson (2007) that relationships are a driving factor in teacher satisfaction. Importantly, they were able to draw upon this reservoir of resilience during periods of significant stress and challenge. Community, while important to Paige, was the foundation of James’s cultivating experiences.

Another foundational support for both James and Paige was the presence of instructional support, whether that be through a collaborative team or a trusted mentor. James had previously experienced a lackluster collaborative team, but now he was part of a highly functioning seventh-grade math team, and the difference had been noticeable. Specifically, he said, “Comparing the sixth-grade collaboration that I had my first year teaching and my second year being a seventh-grade collaboration, I was seeing a very big difference.” He later said, “The sixth grade just wasn't the type of communication I was wanting very much … in seventh, everyone brought their ideas and presented their ideas, and you can kind of pick and choose what you would like to do.” James valued a content team that shared ideas and resources, which in turn, allowed him to strengthen his own teacher clarity in the classroom. By the end of the school year, his growth in his content expertise was one of his greatest celebrations, even stating specifically that one of his most significant areas of development had been “my content expertise of how, how to plan.” Paige shared similar sentiments when comparing data with her content team, specifically

saying, “It's nice to have them to compare data with.” Paige also discussed how she collaborated with her Instructional Coaching, noting that, “I seek her out for, like, instructional support.” Both participants emphasized the value of content-specific collaborative support, whether it came from colleagues or trusted mentors. This support provided the space for both James and Paige to grow as professionals, which aligns with Walker’s (2015) conversation with Ingersoll regarding teacher connectedness and mentorship. Through these collaborative interactions, Paige and James were able to refine their instructional practices, critically reflect on their work with students, and foster more positive classroom experiences.

A final shared experience that cultivated positive momentum for both James and Paige was the timely support of site administrators. While James and his administrator encountered some early conflict, they had resolved their miscommunication by the end of the first semester, paving the way for clearer communication and productive collaboration. This collaboration was greatly needed at the beginning of the second semester when behaviors were at an all-time high, as James noted that, “For student behaviors, I think those first six weeks of just four day weeks, I think that was the best time that I was seeing help from my admin.” Paige echoed this sentiment, but felt her administrator was one of the most foundational building blocks of her success, noting that, “I think the big, the big, like number one was just like, admin support” when discussing what supported her throughout the school year. For Paige, the experiences her administrator intentionally cultivated were instrumental to her success in the classroom, supporting the findings of Drake’s (2022) dissertation regarding teacher satisfaction in urban schools. His support enabled her to stand with confidence on the days when she felt most assured in her role as an educator, but also to endure on the days when her resilience was at its lowest, such as the final weeks of the first semester, when she felt nearly unable to continue. Just as their teacher

community played a stronger role in James's positive satisfaction and resilience, administrative support held that space for Paige.

Community, instructional support, and administrative support were the three cultivating experiences that proved instrumental in both James and Paige's experiences during the 2024-25 school year in Oklahoma public education. These factors, which Beltman et al. (2011) describe as protective factors, helped build, cultivate, and strengthen each participant's individual teacher resilience.

Shared Identified Barriers

While James and Paige shared experiences that they believed played a central role in cultivating their satisfaction as educators, they also identified common barriers that prevented such positivity and satisfaction. One such barrier that both James and Paige identified centered on the notion of collective commitments among adults in each respective school building. James experienced a lack of follow-through with collective commitments from adults in his building on a few different occasions, but one particular instance with a member of the Yellow Squad caused heightened stress. A member of the Yellow Squad was requesting a substitute teacher at the last minute, and this pattern was beginning to weigh not only on James but also on the students and other teachers who were part of the Yellow Squad. James explained that, "When you're not there as a team, when you only have three of the four, it affects the whole class, the whole hallway," and he needed his full team in attendance for the Yellow Squad to be successful. For James, the expectation that his team would demonstrate consistent presence and accountability to students was essential. A lack of commitment from colleagues, however, undermined this expectation, creating obstacles to his effectiveness and resulting in increased stress within his professional role. He echoed a similar sentiment, building on the building-wide expectations, and explicitly

noted that inconsistencies with students' understandings of what is acceptable for headphones "might be an adult problem." James's frustrations with adults were not unique, however; Paige also vocalized similar frustrations, specifically with teacher coverage and absences. She noted that, "It's the same teachers very often that I have to cover for … And some of them, call in last minute." When teachers requested a substitute at the last minute, it would require teachers in the building, such as Paige, to cover their classes during their planning time because substitutes were often unavailable. The failure of adults to honor the collective agreement of attending school or reporting absences promptly created significant challenges for Paige. These lapses frequently resulted in last-minute class coverage, diminished planning time, and an overall busier day with less opportunity for personal balance than she had anticipated. When collective commitments were not upheld by adults in the building, both James and Paige encountered barriers that undermined their classroom satisfaction. Rather than strengthening their resilience, these identified barriers, or what Beltman et al. (2011) coined risk factors, actually weakened their teacher resilience in moments of greatest need. Although this barrier significantly influenced the experiences of both James and Paige, it diverges from the prevailing literature on teacher satisfaction and retention, where such factors are rarely addressed.

A second identified barrier was a lack of clear communication and expectations from site administrators. James identified this barrier early in the fall semester due to miscommunication. While this barrier was transformed into a cultivating experience, it did still cause him a great deal of stress during the first semester, even vocalizing that he felt "disappointment in my higher ups." By the end of the school year, this communication error had been resolved, but James still had hopes for better communication and collaboration, seeking more connectedness to his administrator, stating that, "It's great to feel that you can have a clear communication and talk,

but to be checked up on moving forward, that's something that I think would be even more." James's limited communication and connection with his administrator hindered his ability to consistently cultivate positive experiences and resilience as an educator, which echoes Ansley et al.'s (2019) findings regarding the connection between administrative support and teacher satisfaction. James believed that establishing more stable and open lines of communication would help remove this barrier and create greater opportunities for professional growth. Paige expressed similar frustrations regarding a communication and clarity barrier with PLC expectations. Due to unclear expectations and communications from her lead administrator, Paige endured a great deal of undue stress, rushing to complete a task that, right before the deadline, she thought she had completed correctly. Paige explicitly stated that it is "definitely a con or a dissatisfaction is when admin is unclear." The lack of clear communication created an unforeseen barrier for Paige, leading to heightened stress that she had not anticipated. Both narratives illustrate the potential consequences of this barrier in the educational professional setting and highlight the importance of clear communication and expectations from administrators to avoid undue stress.

The Experiences We Bring: The Space Between James and Paige

While James and Paige shared similar cultivating experiences and identified common barriers, their narratives and individual experiences were nevertheless distinct. Moreover, both of their narratives showcased specific cultivating experiences and barriers that were unique to their stories, and those factors directly affected their satisfaction in Oklahoma public education throughout their school year. James and Paige's unique factors are detailed below.

James's Cultivating Moments

As James's final interview concluded, he shared his advice for current and future novice educators, emphasizing strategies for sustaining motivation, caring for one's well-being, and continuing to pursue success and satisfaction in the profession he remained deeply passionate about. Specifically, he offered two pieces of practical advice that he felt would help cultivate his personal teacher resilience during times of high stress when he might need to call on it. The first focused on community, which was discussed in the section before as a shared factor of support. The second, however, was unique to James and revolved around the physical and mental well-being of teachers. Specifically, he explained that, "I think fitness is very important, because when you get overstimulated, you obviously don't want to do anything. You're very tired. But I think doing something that helps your mind." However, fitness, to James, wasn't referring to just physical activity, but also to one's mental state, as he later explained, noting, "when I talk about fitness, that can be physically and mentally. So that can also be mindfulness." James is a passionate advocate of ensuring that everyone, especially new and novice educators, takes care of themselves both physically and emotionally. If educators are not taking care of themselves, they are unable to be the best version of themselves in the classroom, from James's perspective. To him, a focus on fitness for both the body and mind is a crucial cultivating experience that allows him to recenter himself during times of high stress in education so that he can return to the classroom and give the best version of himself for his students. This experience, while unique to James's story, was highly influential to his overall satisfaction this school year, while also strengthening his teacher resilience.

Paige's Cultivating Moments

Paige's narrative detailed three unique cultivating experiences that had a significantly impactful effect on her satisfaction throughout the 2024-25 school year. The first

cultivating experience, unique to her journey as a first-year teacher, centered on the impact of positive student relationships and their influence on the overall classroom environment. Before the school year began, one of Paige's greatest sources of excitement for the upcoming year centered around the idea that the majority of her students would be those she had worked with during her student internship the previous semester. She was overjoyed with this reality, even stating that, "I know 99% of my students! So, as far as student relationships, I like the position I'm in!" She expressed excitement about beginning the year with a pre-established rapport with her students and the benefit of their prior experience with her. Paige anticipated that this familiarity, built during the previous semester, would support a smoother and more efficient transition into her first year of full-time teaching. However, as detailed later in *Paige's Identified Barriers*, these pre-established connections resulted in high levels of stress and anxiety for Paige and her students during the first semester of the school year.

While Paige's connection to the majority of her students caused much dissonance in the classroom during the first semester, when both students and staff returned from Winter Break, Paige noticed a drastic shift in her students, noting that, "I've actually enjoyed teaching this semester because, yeah, I'm like, it's not a struggle anymore." She explained further that her students were more friendly, worked harder in class, and even succeeded in a challenging unit that she had been concerned about teaching. It was, as if overnight, her entire teaching reality had shifted. During an interview early in the second semester, she even detailed events where students felt more comfortable opening up to her about things they enjoyed and hobbies they had outside of school, including crafts. One student in particular made her a bracelet, and she noted that, "It's the first thing I've ever gotten from a student, and now it's on my backpack! I mean,

this stuff doesn't happen to me, but now it is!" Through that one small interaction, Paige was beginning to see herself differently.

Throughout the semester, as her relationship with students continued to grow and evolve, so did her classroom environment. Her students continued to excel in the mathematics content, even having time to review content from the previous semester, where she noted that students said content from the first quarter was now "so easy!!" She also spoke more highly of herself as an educator, discussing how she had grown and was now more attuned to the needs of her students. Before, she explained, she may not have been able to understand their needs. However, during the second semester, she was able to read their faces, understand their confusion, and better target them with remediation and questioning strategies. These instances can be described as an increase in Paige's teacher self-efficacy, which directly connects to her teacher resilience. Through the intentional development and maintenance of positive relationships with her students, Paige established a classroom environment that encouraged both the teacher and students to take risks, learn from failure, and persevere. This supportive climate nurtured a shared belief in the capacity for success and, in doing so, provided the cultivating experiences that had been absent from Paige's first semester of teaching. These positive student interactions greatly increased her satisfaction in teaching, aligning with the findings of Ortan et al. (2021) and the impacts of such interactions on teacher satisfaction.

Paige also specifically mentioned the importance of parent support as a specific cultivating experience for her throughout her first year in the classroom. Multiple times throughout her narrative, she expressed how she valued the support from families in her community, even going as far as saying, "I mean, honestly, parents are great! I don't think I've had a bad parent experience" Her experiences with parents and families always resulted in

collaboration between herself and them so that they could best support the student, whether that be academically or behaviorally. One example involved a student who was talking during test corrections, which resulted in his being unable to continue or receive credit for the activity. After collaborating with the student's family, Paige found them to be very supportive of her decisions as the teacher and willing to reinforce classroom expectations with their child at home. This support was invaluable to her, and this and other similar instances provided the foundation for these cultivating experiences. Supportive relationships with parents and families allowed Paige to engage more successfully with her students while avoiding the added strain of parental discord. This decrease in stress contributed meaningfully to her overall satisfaction as an educator in Oklahoma public schools.

The final cultivating experience that greatly enhanced Paige's experience during her first year in the classroom was the completion of her school site's construction and her establishment in a building classroom versus an outdoor portable classroom. While this factor was not reflected in the prominent literature, it proved to be a significant influence on Paige's overall satisfaction as an educator. Paige was able to transition fully into a building classroom at the beginning of the second semester, and this adjustment, while seemingly small, had massive effects on her teaching environment and satisfaction. She spoke specifically about the mental shift in her students between the two spaces, noting that, "My portable used to always be trashed, like there was trash left everywhere, but now, they take better care of the classroom inside the building." Her students felt more pride in their classroom than in the portable, and thus they felt more motivated to keep the space picked up and tidy. However, the students weren't the only ones who were proud of the classroom space: Paige was too, and had plans to continue to improve the space. She discussed adding more elements to the room, saying, "I want a rug, I want vertical

whiteboards." Having a classroom to call her own allowed Paige to take pride in her role as a teacher and to design an environment that supported the type of instruction and learning experiences she envisioned for her students. While teaching in a portable classroom had limited her ability to create such a space, moving into a permanent room within the school building provided her with the ownership and agency to design a setting that facilitated meaningful and effective learning opportunities. This cultivating experience significantly enhanced her satisfaction as an educator, enabling her to not only focus on her current students but also envision and plan for those who would enter her classroom in the years to come.

James's Identified Barriers

During the fall semester, James and his assistant principal experienced a period of dissonance due to miscommunication, which caused James high levels of stress. During this time, he relied heavily on his stored reserves of teacher resilience to maintain professionalism in his leadership role and continue giving his best to his students, despite significant internal frustration and anxiety. While this specific incident was resolved, James discussed the potential communication barrier between teachers and administrators. He emphasized the importance of clear, open lines of communication, warning that without that, relationships and satisfaction can and will likely be damaged. Specifically, he noted that, "there was disconnect, there was confusion, there was just uncomfortable feelings." The uncomfortable feelings, as James describes, pose as potential barriers that, if not addressed by teachers and administrators collaboratively as respectful partners, can limit a teacher's satisfaction in the classroom, aligning with the findings of Zhang (2006). Furthermore, such situations may generate additional stress for teachers, increasing the frequency of identified barriers, or as Beltman et al. (2011) describes,

risk factors. However, with clearer communication, these circumstances might have been avoided.

However, James goes one step further than just clear communication, but instead recommends leading proactively, not reactively. Specifically, he noted that, “It's great to feel that you can have a clear communication and talk, but to be checked up on moving forward, that's something that I think would be even more.” James identified a particular barrier in his working relationship with his administrator, noting that while communication was often initiated, it frequently lacked the essential final step of follow-up and follow-through, which he viewed as critical for maintaining trust and clarity. This is something that James felt would greatly enhance not only his communication with administration, but also his satisfaction in teaching. Additionally, one could conjecture that if administrators scheduled or created space for regular follow-ups with James, these interactions would further strengthen his teacher resilience and, in turn, enhance his ability to persevere during periods of heightened stress or anxiety.

A second barrier James identified in his narrative was not directly connected to his school site or district, but rather to Oklahoma Educational Policies and political climate as a whole. Throughout the school year, State Superintendent Ryan Walters openly supported and advocated for Christian-centered educational policies, such as the placement of Christian Bibles in all public classrooms and the inclusion of Christian topics in the Oklahoma State Social Studies Academic Standards. During his narrative, James self-identified as a Christian, but also vocalized his internal struggle reconciling his personal beliefs and how those beliefs were being used in educational policy. He stated that, “You would think, if the thought process of a person who shares a similar religion, it would be assumed that I would agree with this person, and I actually don't agree with this person.” He even went one step further, noting that, “I think he's

representing the Christian faith that I believe in poorly as well." James strongly disagreed with Superintendent Walters's stance on incorporating Christianity and its beliefs into public school classrooms for a variety of reasons. He expressed frustration, noting that although both he and Walters identified as Christians, he felt Walters' approach misrepresented the faith and reflected it in poor taste.

However, James's satisfaction was not only negatively affected because he felt that his personal faith was being portrayed poorly; at his core, he does not believe that Christianity, as it was being used by Superintendent Walters, has a place in the public school system. He explained that, "I respect the idea of this country, of freedom of religion, and we do have private schools for those things. And I think that's where you have the separation of church and state." For James, this barrier was twofold; it not only challenged his beliefs as a public citizen and as a person of faith but also conflicted with his professional convictions as a public school educator regarding what is appropriate to teach within the public education system. Confronting both these factors simultaneously resulted in elevated stress for James in his role as a public school educator, thereby necessitating the use of his personal teacher resilience to persist through these challenges. Because this particular barrier is deeply tied to the sociopolitical context of Oklahoma, it is important to recognize its specific impact on educator satisfaction within the state's public education system. Although this factor held clear significance for James, it is notably unaddressed within the prominent literature, suggesting an area for further exploration in understanding teacher satisfaction.

Paige's Identified Barriers

While Paige had been excited about working with students from her pre-service internship, shortly after the school year began, what had initially been her most significant source

of excitement quickly transformed into one of her primary sources of anxiety. Very early on in the first quarter of the year, students began to push back against Paige during classroom instruction, due to what Paige referred to as a "mental block." She believed students felt this way because, in their minds, they still classified her as a student intern, not a certified teacher. Because of this, she felt that students weren't able to see her as a competent, highly qualified teacher, which often led to students shutting down quickly in class or having a high level of resilience to persevere through any confusion or discomfort.

By the end of the fall semester, she articulated that, due to a multitude of factors, including her relationships with students and its effect on the classroom environment, "No matter how much I helped, they just kept telling me that they couldn't do it. And I was like, you know, so tired of it by the end. It was, well, it was a struggle." As Paige departed for winter break, both her professional satisfaction and personal teacher resilience levels had reached an all-time low. Fortunately, when she and her students returned in January, a series of cultivating experiences, detailed earlier in *Paige's Cultivating Moments*, enabled her to strengthen that resilience and experience the restorative effects of strong teacher–student relationships within the classroom. Had those experiences not occurred, Paige explained that, "it would have been really difficult." Thus, the disconnect between herself, her students, and the resulting impact on the classroom environment not only significantly harmed her personal teacher resilience but also emerged as a major factor that negatively influenced her overall satisfaction as an Oklahoma public school educator. These experiences and their impact on her satisfaction directly align with the findings of Liu and Meyer (2005) and the importance of teacher-student relationships.

Connections To Literature

Just as James and Paige's narratives both shared and had differing cultivating moments and identified barriers of support, so, too, did they support previously published literature discussing teacher satisfaction and retention. However, their unique perspectives also contradicted such literature, as well as added to the information available. These connections, omissions, and additions are explained in detail below.

Factors of Impact - What James and Paige's Narratives Confirm

Research indicates there are a variety of factors that affect teacher's satisfaction and retention in the classroom - specifically compensation, administrator support, teacher connectedness, and parent and student interactions (Ansley et al., 2019; Block & Block, 1980; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Cross, 2019; Curtis, C., 2012; Day & Gu, 2005; Darling-Hammond, L. & Sykes, G., 2003; Gore & Eckenrode, 1994; Gu, Q., & Day, C. 2013; Heaton, 2014; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Jackson, 2018; Liu, X. S. & Meyer, J. P. 2005; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Rinke, C. R., 2014; Stockard, J., & Lehman, M. B., 2004; Waller, 2001; Zhang, 2006). Based on the findings of this study, James and Paige's narratives support three of these factors: administrator support, teacher connectedness, and parent/student behavior.

Administrator support was an important factor that shaped satisfaction for both James and Paige. While James's experience with his administrator began with miscommunication and conflict, they were able to work through their tension and find a strong working relationship on the other side. Specifically, James noted that they were able to have a discussion about growth and "vulnerability," and that conversation really allowed the two of them to move forward and best support the Yellow Squad. Paige, additionally, was incredibly vocal about the importance of a strong administrative presence throughout her first year in the classroom. From the first day of

school, when she had to call home about a behavior issue, to the final week of school, when students were angry about the school's bathroom policy, Paige's administrator was beside her, encouraging her every step and supporting her along the way. His support never wavered, and that support is one of the main reasons she has chosen to remain not only in Oklahoma but at her current school site. For both of these teachers, but Paige especially, administrative support was instrumental in their satisfaction as educators.

Teacher connectedness was also a shared factor for both James and Paige. For James, this was the single most impactful factor in his satisfaction as an educator. Beginning with the first interview, James expressed anxiety about making connections with the Yellow Squad, and in every subsequent interview, a majority of our time was spent discussing their progression, growth, and development. However, it wasn't just their growth as a team of teachers - it was their growth as a team of people. James, above all else, believes in the importance of building relationships so that everyone, including himself, can grow to be better people. He specifically mentioned how the Yellow Squad had made him better, stating that, "I have friends out there who are my friends, not just my colleagues, and that helped me be more positive in here." In other words, James means that the Yellow Squad is more than just a group of teachers to him - they're his close friends, and they bring him happiness and joy. That happiness and joy are then translated into his work in the classroom, and he can be a better, more positive version of himself for students, which, in turn, greatly enhances his satisfaction as an educator. Paige echoed similar sentiments with her teacher mentor, noting that she sought her support many times throughout the year. Specifically, she even noted that her mentor provided her "emotional support," which was something she greatly needed at the time. Having someone Paige could confide in, brainstorm with, or seek advice from was pivotal to her success during her first year in the

classroom and a significant source of support. Teacher connectedness is a prominent protective factor in teacher resilience research, so James and Paige's experiences directly confirm the literature surrounding this topic as well (Beltman et al., 2011; Cobb, 2022; Davis & Borden, 2024; Gu & Day, 2013; Hiver, 2018; Mansfield et al., 2016).

A final factor that shaped both James' and Paige's satisfaction in the classroom was interactions with students and parents. As a third-year teacher, James spoke briefly about his own personal interactions with students and families, but often spoke about classroom management successes in his classroom in comparison to members of the Yellow Squad in their first year or himself in his first or second year in the classroom. Before winter break, specifically, he discussed how some of his students treated him like a veteran teacher, but some of his teammates, who were first-year teachers, treated them like friends. He was proud of this distinction because, in the past, he had been treated as a friend at this point in the year, but had worked hard to ensure boundaries and expectations were in place from the first day of school so he would be prepared during November and December, or what he called the "mentally fatiguing months." This was the time when student behaviors rose due to a comfort in routine, environment, and readiness for winter break. Paige echoed a similar sentiment in terms of this fatigue, but instead referred to it as "burnout" due to exhaustion, being overwhelmed, and student behaviors being at an all-time high. Where James, in his third year, was excited by his growth and comfort during this normally stressful period, Paige felt extremely high levels of stress due to student interactions and behaviors, leading to a lower level of satisfaction.

However, not all student interactions led to low levels of satisfaction. In the spring semester, Paige had many cultivating experiences that provided the space for student relationships to blossom into impactful classroom experiences. For example, Paige mentioned a

student who, up until the last day of school, had often not found success in her class. However, this student was successful on her final exam, and the two celebrated together, dancing, and the student asked Paige, “Can you email my mom?” This moment was crucial for Paige, as this student had not felt success in her class throughout the year, and now, had. This celebratory moment gave both the student and Paige hope and satisfaction that both of them, collectively, could do hard things, as Paige hoped all her students believed. James had similar hopes for his students, wishing them all to be better than he is, no matter where they end up. More than that, his motto is to ensure that all students feel seen in his classroom, because he wants to, “Be somebody that makes everybody feel like a somebody.” The moments with students when James could make them feel like a somebody were the moments that brought him the most satisfaction, and they were the reason that kept him coming back to the classroom every day. Like teacher connectedness, teacher-student relationships is a prominent protective factor in teacher resilience literature, and James and Paige’s stories directly confirm these bodies of work (Beltman et al., 2011; Gu & Day, 2013; Hiver, 2018; Mansfield et al., 2016; Cobb, 2022; Davis & Borden, 2024).

Factors of Impact - What James and Paige’s Narratives Omit or Add to the Literature

While both James' and Paige’s narratives directly affirmed the three previously identified factors of impact, there was one notable omission: compensation. Throughout James’ narrative, he never referenced compensation or teacher pay in any form. It was neither a consideration in his decision about where to teach nor a factor influencing his satisfaction in education up to this point. This lies in direct conflict with Darling-Hammonds and Sykes (2003) work, where it was stated that compensation was in the top few factors for influencing teacher satisfaction and retention. Similarly, Paige mentioned compensation only once during her first interview when

recalling general discussions about teacher pay from her undergraduate experience. However, she did not appear to consider a specific compensation package in her own decision-making process when selecting a teaching position. Instead, her choice was shaped mainly by the financial scholarship reimbursement program, which, although financial in nature, was not tied to ongoing teacher compensation packages from school districts. After this initial reference, Paige made no further mention of the program or any financial factors in subsequent interviews. Additionally, a study in Oklahoma found that teachers felt specifically underpaid for their work (Raymond, 2018). However, for these two Oklahoma educators, throughout a full year of interviews and discussions around factors affecting satisfaction and their choice to remain in Oklahoma public education, neither ever broached this subject.

These findings complicate prevailing literature on teacher satisfaction in the United States and, more specifically, in Oklahoma. Collectively, the results of this study may suggest that, for novice teachers, compensation may not serve as a primary driving factor for satisfaction within Oklahoma public education. It may be theorized that because the participants were early in their careers, compensation was not yet a dominant concern at this particular career stage. However, had the participant pool included educators across a broader range of experience levels, compensation may have emerged as a more salient factor, aligning with the findings of Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) and Raymond (2018). As Zhang (2006) asserts, compensation remains a key factor in sustaining the teaching workforce; therefore, this area warrants further investigation among Oklahoma educators at varying stages of their careers. Given the recent rise in emergency certifications across the state, examining the relationship between compensation, certification pathways, and long-term teacher retention represents an important direction for future research.

Just as James' and Paige's stories confirmed and rejected aspects of the prominent literature, their unique experiences also suggest additional factors as to what possibly impact teacher satisfaction and retention. James specifically discussed the importance of physical activity and mental well-being as paramount for novice educators as they enter the field of education. He argued that, "This job overstimulates you four out of five times a week," and thus it was of the utmost importance that educators take care of themselves mentally and physically. This could be done through formal workouts, walking, mindfulness activities, or meditation. Additionally, James identified the conflict educators face when their personal, civic, and professional beliefs converge within the same space in unexpected, and at times, ethically troubling ways. In this space, educators are forced into spaces where they feel unable to be their true selves in any way, which can greatly affect their satisfaction. Paige also emphasized the importance of a teacher's physical space, namely the classroom in which one teaches. While she did not realize the subtle messages of her portable during the fall semester, there was a significant change in her students' treatment of her space during the Spring semester once she was in a building classroom. She, too, felt a change, and began to plan for the future, looking to make the space more welcoming and educationally sound. These factors proved influential for the participating educators and warrant further research to determine whether they hold similar significance for other teachers.

Teacher Resilience Through the Lens of Ellen Moir's New Teacher Phases

This study was structured to utilize Ellen Moir's (1990/1995) Phases of First-Year Teaching as a framework for understanding novice teachers' experiences. As each participant's narrative was analyzed, the researcher examined whether Moir's framework could be applied to the broader experiences of novice teachers, as Moir's original work focused exclusively on first-

year educators. Through analysis of both narratives, it became evident that each participant's personal teacher resilience, shaped by their personal cultivating experiences and identified barriers, played a distinct role in shaping their journey, influencing the intensity and duration of their emotional highs and lows throughout the phases. The findings related to these intersections are presented below.

James's Third Year Journey - Moir's Graph 'Lite'

Throughout James's third year in the classroom, his narrative follows the general pattern and flow outlined in Moir's (1990/1995) research, which describes the emotional highs and lows that first-year teachers experience during their entry year in the classroom. For example, he begins his year with excitement for the upcoming year, specifically detailing his new adventure with the Yellow Squad and his hopes for this team. This directly relates to Moir's description of the anticipation phase because James is expressing excitement for what is to come during the new school year. During his second interview, he discussed feelings of frustration with his administrator and how that affected his ability to lead and support his team, which led to an emotional dip in satisfaction and overall confidence in his efficacy as a teacher leader. The survival phase, according to Moir, is characterized by feelings of being overwhelmed, not being able to get everything completed, and an overall feeling of stress. During his third interview, in January, he expressed an increase in his teacher self-efficacy as a teacher leader, but also discussed the trials of November and December. By March, things were looking up for James, as he was gaining substantial confidence in the Yellow Squad and their camaraderie as a team, despite working through various team dynamics, which resonates with Moir's description of rejuvenation as a period where many begin to feel hope and restoration. As May arrived, when we had our final interview, James was reflective on the year as a whole, ready to maintain

practices that had improved his classroom and team, while also prepared to implement new strategies with hopes for continued improvement the following school year.

While James' experiences and feelings generally aligned with the phases that Moir describes in her research, it is important to note that James's emotional dips were not nearly as extreme as Moir's graph depicts for entry year educators. Even at James's lowest times, his emotional dip was still much higher than Moir's predicted low for teachers. This illustrates that, while Moir's emotional phases may be applied to novice teachers as well, the emotional dips may not be as significant as teachers gain more experience in the classroom. James made comments throughout his narrative that support this idea. For example, when discussing his time in the classroom during the months of November and December, which Moir refers to as Disillusionment, James stated that, "Last year, I was at an eight, at exhaustion, and then now seeing a huge difference in that, totally, I would probably say, that the number has gone down to this year, I would probably say it's about, knock it down, let's say down to a six." This decrease in exhaustion was due to a host of factors, most of which were within James's direct control upon reflection from the year before. He had implemented stricter expectations and procedures from the beginning of the school year so that, by the winter months, students would not be able to act out or push him as they had in the past. These changes allowed him to endure less unnecessary stress, which in turn reduced his emotional dip at this time of year. He was satisfied that his students were treating him with the respect he often saw veteran teachers receive, rather than the playfulness that first-year teachers on his team experienced from the same students.

Paige's First Year Journey - Moir's Graph Right on Schedule

While James's narrative echoed Moir's work with less intense emotional highs and lows, Paige's experience, however, was quite reflective of Moir's work, namely all five of the

described phases. Paige began her year with uncontained excitement, overjoyed by the idea of working with students she had previously taught during her student internship, mirroring Moir's description of the anticipation phase. Her second interview highlighted feelings of stress and overwhelm, as she described students pushing back against her teaching methods, unclear communication during her first formal observation, and the pressure of covering classes for teachers at the last minute. The end of the first semester brought about the lowest emotional dip for Paige, which she actually named her emotional state as "burnout" as she left for winter break. She described November and December as particularly stressful and challenging months, both professionally and personally. During this period, she felt little sense of success or optimism in her role as a teacher. This directly mirrors Moir's (1990/1995) description of disillusionment, detailing the lowest emotional phase for new teachers. It is during this time that teachers, according to Moir, may feel like they are not able to continue in their teaching career due to high levels of stress and workload. However, when she and her students returned in January, the beginning of the new semester brought a renewed sense of possibility and a markedly different atmosphere within Paige's classroom. It was as if she and her students had suddenly found their connection, and, as she described it, "I don't know what happened, but it happened!" With this new energy in the classroom, the second semester seemed to fly by. When Moir describes the rejuvenation phase, she often describes it as a time when things start to fall into place and make sense for new teachers, which connects with what Paige experienced right after Winter Break. Paige and her students continued to find success as they thrived as a classroom community, even taking the time to review past content that had previously been challenging. By the end of the year, Paige reflected on the year as a whole. She was excited about her growth as an educator, specifically in terms of understanding her students' needs, their sources of confusion, and how

best to ask questions to better understand how to provide remediation when needed. Her final interview was full of ideas and hopes for the following year, which aligns with Moir's description of the reflection phase as teachers look back on the past year while also looking to the year ahead with new ideas, thoughts, and changes for the future.

Paige's narrative reflects the emotional dips Moir generally describes in her research. She began the school year in August with an emotional high marked by excitement and enthusiasm By December, however, she had reached what she described as burnout - a period of emotional low and exhaustion. Following the return from winter break, she expressed feeling a sense of renewal and gradually felt her spirits lift, ultimately returning to an emotional high by the conclusion of the school year.

Cultivating Stores of Resilience - A Proposed Metaphor

Using Moir's emotional framework for first-year teachers and broader theories of teacher resilience, I created a conceptual metaphor to illustrate James's trajectory throughout the school year. Beltman et al. (2011) discussed the constructs of protective and risk factors, emphasizing that these experiences significantly influence teachers, particularly during periods of heightened stress. Additionally, Cobb (2022) examined how teachers develop resilience over time as they cultivate their professional identity and exercise increasing levels of teacher agency within the classroom. This process requires time and experience; consequently, early career teachers typically do not exhibit the same level of resilience as veteran educators, as they have not yet had sufficient opportunities to fully establish their teacher identity or enact their agency in sustained ways. However, with time and exposure to strong protective factors alongside manageable levels of risk, novice teachers may progressively develop into educators with greater capacity for resilience.

With these constructs in mind, I propose visualizing teacher resilience as a metaphorical 'crop' that teachers can plant, cultivate, grow, harvest, and ultimately, store. Consider teacher resilience as bundles of harvested wheat. All teachers have the capability to plant their personal seeds, cultivate their own soil, protect their crops as they grow, and ultimately, harvest the wheat to store in their own personal reserves from which they can draw from as needed. Cultivating experiences, similar to protective factors, are interactions that assist in the facilitation of this process. These experiences provide ample sunshine, water, fertilizer, and the strength to harvest healthy crops. The more often these experiences occur, the quicker and more bountiful wheat harvests will be, which in turn, results in more stored reserves. Identified barriers, similar to risk factors, can disrupt this harvesting and growth process. When these identified barriers occur, teachers are forced to draw from their reserves of wheat to endure times of stress and hardship, since harvesting cannot occur. The hope is that the times of identified barriers does not exceed the reserves of wheat in such a way that the store of reserves runs empty. If or when teachers are forced to draw from an empty store of reserves, levels of satisfaction may diminish, which could lead to a decrease in teacher retention, regardless of experience level.

Throughout James's narrative, he expressed many moments of high satisfaction in the classroom, whether through interactions with the Yellow Squad, moments of support with administrators, or collaborative experiences with content colleagues. During these cultivating experiences, James's reservoir of teacher resilience was replenished, allowing him to deposit additional stores of strength for future challenges. The more of these positive, resilience-building experiences he encountered, the more robust his reserves became - a figurative harvest of resources he could draw upon in times of need. Because a strong teacher community surrounded James, a supportive collaborative content team, and a mostly supportive administrative team, he

was able to continually cultivate and store resilience resources. As a result, when moments, or extended periods, of stress or dissatisfaction arose, James could draw upon these reserves, lessening the severity of his emotional dips. His resilience functioned as a stabilizing force, helping him navigate the more demanding points of the school year, while his growing professional experience further informed his understanding what not only cultivating experiences to seek out, but also how to ensure those supports remained to strengthen his resilience harvest and storage.

James's experience not only confirms that findings of Beltman et al. (2011) regarding the importance of frequent, protective factors and their influence on teacher resilience, but also Cobb's (2022) findings regarding teacher identity and agency. As James began to find himself in the classroom and become comfortable in his own decisions, he also felt his teacher resilience strength rise. This connects to the above metaphor in that, by James's third year, he had identified and knew the cultivating experiences required to assist in the harvesting process, namely teacher connection. Thus, he surrounded himself with a strong collaborative team in the Yellow Squad and with a 7th-grade math team eager to share resources that would push and grow him as an educator. By his third year, he recognized the importance of these factors for his professional wellbeing, and thus actively worked to ensure he had those supports. By starting this process before the school year began, James was already cultivating and storing "wheat" to sustain him when stress or barriers emerged. These reserves of resilience, his stored wheat gave him something to draw upon during challenging times.

While James's experiences generally followed the pattern described by Moir, his stored reserves of resilience provided crucial support during periods of heightened stress, lessening the severity of his emotional lows. In contrast, as a first-year teacher, Paige entered her career with

an empty reservoir of resilience resources and a limited understanding of which cultivating experiences would support the growth, development, and replenishment of those reserves. Davis and Borden (2024) note that protective factors can, under certain conditions, transition into risk factors - a dynamic that was evident in Paige's experience. Paige initially believed that her prior relationships with students would serve as her most significant cultivating experience; however, this factor ultimately emerged as her most significant identified barrier. This finding not only aligns with Davis and Borden's assertion but also offers important insight into the complexity and fluid nature of the proposed resilience metaphor. When Paige began her first year in the classroom, she not only lacked a reserve of resilience resources to draw upon, but, more critically, she had not yet developed an understanding of which experiences would serve as cultivating experiences to build those reserves and which would emerge as identified barriers that could hinder their development. Without yet knowing how or with whom to build these supports, Paige entered her first semester drawing from an already depleted well, which resulted in deeper and more immediate emotional dips, unbuffered by established resilience resources. Over time, as she gained experience, she gradually learned how to cultivate and store resilience through supportive relationships and positive professional experiences, which confirms the findings of both Cobb (2022) and Davis and Border (2024). Consequently, when faced with future challenges, she could draw upon these reserves to soften the emotional impact while continuing to build new ones. By the end of her first year, even if her reserves were again depleted, she had acquired the knowledge and strategies necessary to cultivate and sustain resilience more effectively in her second year, beginning the next cycle of her teaching career with a stronger foundation. This supports the idea that, as teachers continue in the teaching

profession, their emotional dips may not be as extreme or impactful as long as teachers can cultivate and utilize the necessary resilience resources during times of heightened stress or need.

Extending this reasoning, I propose that, as teachers progress through their professional careers, they may continue to follow the general trajectory of Moir's emotional phases. However, the intensity of their emotional variations may lessen over time. I conjecture that this is due to the accumulation of teacher resilience resources; as long as educators have stored reserves they can access during periods of high stress and the cultivating experiences necessary to support and sustain the growth of continued reserves, their emotional dips are likely to be less pronounced. Experienced teachers tend to be more aware of the conditions and practices that help them cultivate, grow, and sustain resilience, allowing them to maintain a steady supply of such resources and, in some cases, a substantial reserve to draw upon when needed. In contrast, newer teachers often have few, if any, resilience resources to rely on and are still learning how to cultivate and replenish them. As a result, their emotional lows are often more profound and more difficult to recover from. When teachers are repeatedly forced to draw from an empty well without opportunities to rebuild or harvest resilience, they may reach a sustained emotional low that contributes to their departure from the classroom and, ultimately, from the profession - a pattern that has intensified the teacher shortage, much like the one in Oklahoma. Future research is warranted to explore this idea.

Limitations and Need for Future Research: The Invisible Chains That Bind Us

Every study has its limitations, and this study is no different. One primary limitation of this study stems from a culture of fear ingrained in Oklahoma public school educators. In this state, teachers are seemingly under attack, and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters often publicly speaks about revoking teachers' licenses, invoking fear and distrust across

the state (Martinez-Keel, 2025). Many feel uncomfortable sharing their opinions for fear of losing their livelihood due to their beliefs or words (Martinez-Keel, 2025). This often presents itself as silence because, if one does not answer a question or provide an answer, they cannot be prosecuted for their words. In this research study, participants were very forthcoming about the factors that influenced their decision to teach in Oklahoma, the experiences that positively and negatively affected their satisfaction with Oklahoma public education, and why they chose to remain in an Oklahoma public education classroom for the 2025-26 school year. However, when questions shifted to a political nature, both participants clearly shifted as well. From their body language to their answers, it was clear that there were feelings of discomfort, uneasiness, and general apprehension. As the year went on, both participants opened up some, but neither was ever truly comfortable during portions of the interviews that addressed the education political climate in Oklahoma. I believe that, if the participants had known my personal beliefs regarding both state and national policies, they might have been more open with their thoughts and ideas. However, by sharing my views, this would also skew their perception as participants. The culture of fear that has been fostered in Oklahoma public education limited the quality of genuine, unedited thoughts I received around state and national educational policy for this study.

Enduring Understandings from James and Paige

Enduring understandings are the points from a lesson that, as an educator, one hopes their students take with them for a lifetime. They are understandings that, years later, they hope students still remember and hold onto because they were that important and made an impact on their lives. As Oklahoma educational leaders, academic researchers, or public school administrators, throughout James and Paige's narratives, you undoubtedly noticed that there are elements over which you have little or no control. Both James and Paige felt a strong connection

to the state of Oklahoma due to family living there. Additionally, Paige received a financial scholarship that would assist with her tuition if she began her career in Oklahoma. These are outside of your direct sphere of control. However, the following implications may be within your control and are the enduring understandings that you can bring with you as you lead with curiosity, grace, humility, and strength, ensuring that teachers have what they need to support every student in the state of Oklahoma, not just for today, but for every day ahead.

Readers, Let This Be Your Call

Throughout James and Paige's stories, there were common themes that emerged that directly relate to the work of public school administrators and Oklahoma educational leaders. The first theme directly within the power of such leaders is the importance of ensuring teachers have clear, effective communication from their administrative team. Both James and Paige discussed the importance of clear communication and how it significantly impacted their classroom satisfaction and overall teaching experience. Had clear communication and expectations been established regarding the PLC folders, Paige would likely have avoided the heightened stress associated with making last-minute document revisions. For James, clear communication was more closely tied to discipline expectations and procedures, ensuring that he could convey consistent expectations to his team and operate effectively within those parameters. Beyond procedural clarity, James envisioned communication as a collaborative process, one in which teachers and administrators worked together to problem-solve, with regular check-ins serving as a norm rather than a rarity. The collaborative relationship between teachers and administrators, when supported by consistent and transparent communication, is a factor fully within a leader's control and, according to the narratives of both educators, may play a direct role in enhancing teacher satisfaction.

As site leaders and administrators, it is also important that you provide the time and space for teachers and staff to create meaningful connections and camaraderie across the building. Having and sustaining a teacher community was foundational to both James and Paige, and without this, both would have been missing key aspects of their support systems. As leaders, it is crucial that you provide the space for your staff to connect before discussing their content as well as devoted time to discuss their content. In other words, educational leaders must intentionally provide opportunities for staff to connect on a human level - learning who their colleagues are beyond their professional roles. Equally important is ensuring that teachers have dedicated time within their contractual hours to collaborate with content-area teams on instructional strategies that support student learning. While these two forms of interaction differ in purpose, both are essential for fostering a healthy professional culture and must be prioritized by school leaders. Both James and Paige emphasized the value of time spent with colleagues, both as individuals and as professionals engaging in meaningful content-based collaboration. Providing opportunities for only one type of connection, or expecting teachers to engage in either outside of contract hours, is insufficient and may ultimately be unsustainable for building teacher satisfaction and resilience.

A third factor directly within the power of all educational leaders and administrators is the expectation that all adults in any building are expected to adhere to the collective commitments of that building. Those agreements may be related to school policies, student behavior, or teacher expectations. Regardless of personal agreement, when an adult in the building fails to uphold shared commitments, it is the administrator's responsibility to address the issue promptly and directly. Both James and Paige expressed frustration with colleagues who did not adhere to collectively established agreements, noting that such actions created friction and

tension within their schools. Effective collaboration requires that all staff members operate as part of a unified team, sharing a common commitment to goals and expectations. It is the administrator's role to ensure that this alignment exists and to intervene when it does not. Failure to address these issues in a timely and consistent manner can lead to increased stress, frustration, and a decline in morale among staff members, ultimately affecting the overall school climate.

The final implication for Oklahoma educational leaders and public school administrators is to, above all else, invest in your teachers. Based on this study, teacher resilience is strengthened by factors that increase one's satisfaction in education. For James and Paige, this included factors such as teacher community, administrative support, parent and student relationships, content and instructional support, fitness, and positive physical space. By investing in teachers, administrators provide the space for teachers to cultivate, grow, and harvest reserves of teacher resilience. This form of resilience enables teachers to endure periods of stress and struggle while remaining present and effective for their students throughout those challenges. This is vital. Students need educators who possess both a strong reserve of resilience and a sustained sense of satisfaction in their work; not merely because such teachers remain in the classroom, but because they are able to see, support, and nurture every student as an individual. Teachers with high resilience and satisfaction are more likely to recognize each student's unique strengths, meet their needs with empathy, and help them uncover their own passions. These are the teachers who can inspire a student who has never particularly engaged in mathematics, to see it in a new light, or even to imagine themselves majoring in it, leading to a career as a future teacher. They are the teachers who notice a student explaining a problem to peers and whisper, "That's the characteristic of a teacher." When administrators invest in supporting and sustaining

teachers like these, those teachers, in turn, can invest deeply in their students - modeling the very transformation that defines the enduring impact of education.

In Oklahoma public education, there are many facets of life that we cannot control. However, as we reflect on the experiences and stories of James and Paige as novice teachers, it is also important that we recognize that, for all the things we cannot control, there are many we can. Public school administrators and Oklahoma educational leaders, let this be your call to action: The work is hard, but you can do hard things. Everybody deserves to be seen as a somebody, and only you can choose to be that somebody for your teachers and students every day.

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Appendix

Appendix A

James Smith Interview Questions

Table A1

James Smith Anticipation Interview Questions

Tell me about your journey to education
Why did you choose to teach mathematics?
Why did you decide to teach in Oklahoma?
Tell me about your school site.
Why did you choose this site?
What will your schedule look like this year?
Did you have any input regarding your schedule?
What are you most excited about?
What are you most anxious about?
Who do you think you will be working most closely with?

Table A2

James Smith Survival Interview Questions

Tell me about your teaching experience so far this year.
Describe your daily schedule.
Tell me about a typical lesson or day in your classroom.
Who do you work most closely with? Describe them to me.
**Ask specifically about Yellow Squad, department head if not already mentioned
Tell me about a lesson you taught since we last talked that you were proud of or that went well
Tell me about a lesson you taught since we last talked that didn't go the way you thought it was going to
What haven't we discussed that you feel stands out since the last time we talked?
Think about your school as a whole. Is there anything that stands out that has affected your overall satisfaction? What about larger, think the state as a whole?

Table A3

James Smith Disillusionment Interview Questions

Tell me about how the year has been going since we last met.
Tell me a success from the past week
Who do you work most closely with at this time? Describe them to me.
Follow up on Yellow Squad, Assistant Principal, Department Head, if not already discussed
What factors, if any, have provided you support during this semester?

What factors have impacted your satisfaction in teaching this year
Tell me about a lesson you taught since we last talked that has gone well
Tell me about a lesson you taught since we last talked that you wished had gone better
What within your school and state should I know about has impacted your satisfaction since we last spoke?

Table A4

James Smith Rejuvenation Interview Questions

Tell me about how the year has been going since we last met.
Who do you work most closely with? Describe them to me.
Did you make any changes to your classroom for the 2nd semester?
Ask about how they handled illnesses and weather closures in their classrooms.
What factors, if any, have provided you support during this semester?
What factors have impacted your satisfaction in teaching this year
Ask about impact of state and national policies and impacts on satisfaction

Table A5

James Smith Reflection Interview Questions

Tell me about how the year has been going since we last met.
Who do you work most closely with? Describe them to me.
State testing occurred since we last spoke. How did that go?
What factors, if any, have provided you support during this year as a whole?
What factors have impacted your satisfaction in teaching this year as a whole?
What are you most proud of from this year as a whole?
What changes, if any, are you hoping to make for next year?
If you were given the choice to remain in your current position next school year, would you choose to remain in this position? Tell me more about this.
If you were given the opportunity to change positions, where would you choose to go?
Are you choosing to remain in Oklahoma public education next year? Why?

Appendix B

Paige Woods Interview Questions

Table B1

Paige Woods Anticipation Interview Questions

Tell me about your journey to education
Why did you choose to teach mathematics?
Why did you decide to teach in Oklahoma?
Tell me about your school site.
Why did you choose this site?
What will your schedule look like this year?
Did you have any input regarding your schedule?
What are you most excited about?
What are you most anxious about?
Who do you think you will be working most closely with?

Table B2

Paige Woods Survival Interview Questions

Tell me about your teaching experience so far this year.
Describe your daily schedule.
Tell me about a typical lesson or day in your classroom.
Who do you work most closely with? Describe them to me.
**Ask specifically about Assistant Principal, Instructional Coach, Mentor/Cooperating Teacher, other 8th grade teacher if not already addressed
**Follow up on concerns about classroom management and behavior
Tell me about a lesson you taught since we last talked that you were proud of or that went well
Tell me about a lesson you taught since we last talked that didn't go the way you thought it was going to
What haven't we discussed that you feel stands out since the last time we talked?
Think about your school as a whole. Is there anything that stands out that has affected your overall satisfaction? What about larger, think the state as a whole?

Table B3

Paige Woods Disillusionment Interview Questions

Tell me about how the year has been going since we last met.
Tell me a success from the past week
Who do you work most closely with at this time? Describe them to me.
Follow up on 7th grade teammate (Mentor Teacher), 8th grade teammate, head principal, Instructional Coach if not already discussed
What factors, if any, have provided you support during this semester?

What factors have impacted your satisfaction in teaching this year
Tell me about a lesson you taught since we last talked that has gone well
Tell me about a lesson you taught since we last talked that you wished had gone better
What within your school and state should I know about has impacted your satisfaction since we last spoke?

Table B4

Paige Woods Rejuvenation Interview Questions

Tell me about how the year has been going since we last met.
Who do you work most closely with? Describe them to me.
**Last time, you mentioned you had moved into a new classroom. How is that going?
Did you make any changes to your classroom for the 2nd semester?
**Last time, you mentioned your students seemed to have a more positive attitude in class. Is that still what you're seeing?
Ask about how they handled illnesses and weather closures in their classrooms.
What factors, if any, have provided you support during this semester?
What factors have impacted your satisfaction in teaching this year
Ask about impact of state and national policies and impacts on satisfaction

Table B5

Paige Smith Reflection Interview Questions

Tell me about how the year has been going since we last met.
Who do you work most closely with? Describe them to me.
State testing occurred since we last spoke. How did that go?
What factors, if any, have provided you support during this year as a whole?
What factors have impacted your satisfaction in teaching this year as a whole?
What are you most proud of from this year as a whole?
What changes, if any, are you hoping to make for next year?
If you were given the choice to remain in your current position next school year, would you choose to remain in this position? Tell me more about this.
If you were given the opportunity to change positions, where would you choose to go?
Are you choosing to remain in Oklahoma public education next year? Why?

Appendix C

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: May 16, 2024 **IRB#:** 17198

Principal Investigator: Julia A Prise

Approval Date: 05/16/2024

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: Teaching in Oklahoma: The Tale of Four Teachers

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,

Lara Mayeux

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix D

Recruitment Letter

Good Afternoon,

My name is Julia Prise, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma, majoring in Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum with an emphasis in Mathematics Education. For my dissertation study, I aim to better understand the lived experiences of current secondary mathematics teachers in the state of Oklahoma and the factors that impact their satisfaction, including teacher self-efficacy. I am currently looking for participants for my study, which is outlined below.

Purpose of Study:
The teacher shortage and its impact on Oklahoma public education prompted this study. If one could understand the factors that influence a novice teacher's satisfaction in Oklahoma public education throughout an academic school year, these findings might shed light on the facets of public education that are impactful for teachers. This study is focused on novice mathematics teachers in Oklahoma, and the immediate impact of its findings will relate directly to Oklahoma public education. However, the hope is that the findings from this study will add to the larger narrative of education in the United States as a whole, as Oklahoma is not the only state currently experiencing a teacher shortage.

Participant Parameters:
- Novice Secondary Math Teacher (less than 5 years experience)
- Teach in an Oklahoma public school
- Completed a traditional teacher prep program for teacher certification

Participant Responsibilities:
- Complete 5 one-hour in-person or virtual interviews (August, October, December, March, May)

If you are interested in participating in my study or have any questions, please email me at juliakinchen@ou.edu.

I appreciate your consideration and all you do for Oklahoma's students!
Julia Prise

Appendix E

Participant Signed Consent Form

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

My name is Julia Prise, and I am a doctoral student in the University of Oklahoma's Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum department. You are invited to participate in research about novice mathematics teachers' experience in Oklahoma public education. You have been chosen to participate in this study because of your status as a novice mathematics teacher in Oklahoma who completed a traditional teacher preparation program prior to teaching. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research.

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

What is the purpose of this research?

The teacher shortage and its impact on Oklahoma public education prompted this study. If one could understand the factors that influence a novice teacher's satisfaction in Oklahoma public education throughout an academic school year, these findings might shed light on the facets of public education that are impactful for teachers. This study is focused on novice mathematics teachers in Oklahoma, and the immediate impact of its findings will relate directly to Oklahoma public education. However, the hope is that the findings from this study will add to the larger narrative of education in the United States as a whole, as Oklahoma is not the only state currently experiencing a teacher shortage.

How many participants will be in this research?

About four people will take part in this research.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to be in this research, you will be asked to participate in five one-hour interviews over the course of an academic school year. They will take place in approximately the following months: August, October, December, March, and May. During these interviews, you will be asked about factors that affect your satisfaction in teaching, questions about your teacher self-efficacy, and your decision to remain in Oklahoma public education at the conclusion of the school year. The audio of each interview will be recorded so that it can be transcribed and used for the findings of this study. The interviews will ideally be in person, but a virtual option is available as well if that is preferred.

How long will this take?

Your participation will include five hours of interviews over the course of an academic school year.

What are the risks if I participate?

To assist with accurate recording of your responses, interviews will be recorded on an audio recording device. This recording will be uploaded to OtterAI, a transcription platform, that will assist with the transcribing and coding of each recording. There is a risk of accidental data

release if we collect your data using audio recordings. If this occurred, your identity and statements you made would become known to people who are not on the research team.

When considering the privacy of OtterAI, its website states that "Otter uses a proprietary method to de-identify user data before training our models so that an individual user cannot be identified. This training method is automatic and as such audio recordings and transcripts are not manually reviewed by a human. Additionally our training data is encrypted."

Additionally, the website states that "Otter requires explicit consent from the customer prior to Otter employees and customer support team accessing your transcript and/or audio recording to troubleshoot a product issue. Before audio recordings are ever reviewed manually by a human (Otter personnel or its third parties), we require explicit consent from customers."

You must consent to audio recording to participate in this study.

I consent to audio recording. ___Yes ___ No

Will I be compensated for participating?

You will not be reimbursed for your time or participation in this research

Who will see my information?

There will be no information in research reports that will make it possible to identify you. The final publication of my study will describe how long you have been teaching, a general overview of your school district without identifying factors, your teaching schedule, and that you are a secondary math teacher in an Oklahoma public school. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional 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 access this information until the entire research has finished and you consent to this temporary restriction.

Do I have to participate?

No. If you decide to participate, you don't have to answer any questions and can stop participating at any time.

Will my identity be anonymous or confidential?

Your name will not be retained or linked with your responses.

What will happen to my data in the future?

I will not share your data or use it in future research.

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 juliakinchen@ou.edu or Dr. Stacy Reeder at reeder@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).

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

Participant Signature	Print Name	Date
Signature of Researcher Obtaining Consent	Print Name	Date

Appendix F

Participant Verbal Consent Form

My name is Julia Prise, and I am a doctoral student in the University of Oklahoma's Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum department. You are invited to participate in research about novice mathematics teachers' experience in Oklahoma public education. You have been chosen to participate in this study because of your status as a novice mathematics teacher in Oklahoma who completed a traditional teacher preparation program prior to teaching. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research.

The teacher shortage and its impact on Oklahoma public education prompted this study. If one could understand the factors that influence a novice teacher's satisfaction in Oklahoma public education throughout an academic school year, these findings might shed light on the facets of public education that are impactful for teachers. This study is focused on novice mathematics teachers in Oklahoma, and the immediate impact of its findings will relate directly to Oklahoma public education. However, the hope is that the findings from this study will add to the larger narrative of education in the United States as a whole, as Oklahoma is not the only state currently experiencing a teacher shortage. About four people will take part in this research.

If you agree to be in this research, you will be asked to participate in five one-hour interviews over the course of an academic school year. They will take place in the following months: August, October, December, March, and May. During these interviews, you will be asked about factors that affect your satisfaction in teaching, questions about your teacher self-efficacy, and your decision to remain in Oklahoma public education at the conclusion of the school year. The audio will be recorded for each interview, so that it can be transcribed and used for the findings of this study.

Your participation will include five hours of interviews over the course of an academic school year.

There are no benefits from being in this research. You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this research

There will be no information in research reports that will make it possible to identify you. The final publication of my study will describe how long you have been teaching, a general overview of your school district without identifying factors, your teaching schedule, and that you are a secondary math teacher in an Oklahoma public school. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional 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 access this information until the entire research has finished and you consent to this temporary restriction.

You do not have to participate. If you decide to participate, you don't have to answer any questions and can stop participating at any time. Your name will not be retained or linked with your responses. I will not share your data or use it in future research.

To assist with accurate recording of your responses, interviews will be recorded on an audio recording device. This recording will be uploaded to OtterAI, a transcription platform, that will assist with the transcribing and coding of each recording. There is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using audio recordings. If this occurred, your identity and statements you made would become known to people who are not on the research team.

When considering the privacy of OtterAI, its website states that "Otter uses a proprietary method to de-identify user data before training our models so that an individual user cannot be identified. This training method is automatic and as such audio recordings and transcripts are not manually reviewed by a human. Additionally our training data is encrypted."

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You must consent to audio recording to participate in this study.

I consent to audio recording. **___Yes** **___ No**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research or have experienced a research-related injury, contact me at juliakinchen@ou.edu or Dr. Stacy Reeder at reeder@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).

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

Participant Signature	Print Name	Date
Signature of Researcher Obtaining Consent	Print Name	Date