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# A Phenomenological Exploration of Principals' Influence on Teacher Attrition

Kellie E. Gebhardt

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# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF PRINCIPALS' INFLUENCE ON TEACHER ATTRITION

by

KELLIE E. GEBHARDT

(Under the Direction of Teri Denlea Melton)

## ABSTRACT

Classroom teachers' decisions to leave the profession negatively affect the educational experience of the students, burden the remaining teachers, and drain school districts of funds that should go to students but instead are spent on recruiting and training. This phenomenological study examined the experiences of former classroom teachers to determine the role their school principals may have played in their decisions to leave the profession. Ten former elementary school teachers from South Carolina participated in the study. The researcher collected data using interviews; a semi-structured interview protocol was created from current literature and designed to align with the research question. Interviews were held virtually and transcribed by a private, third party company. Upon data analysis, three themes emerged: rules, norms, and security; teaching and learning; and, interpersonal relationships. This study suggests that the relationship between the teacher and his or her principal may be the driving force behind teacher attrition.

INDEX WORDS: Teacher attrition, Principals, Elementary teachers

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF PRINCIPALS' INFLUENCE ON TEACHER  
ATTRITION

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF PRINCIPALS' INFLUENCE ON TEACHER  
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## DEDICATION

With absolute gratitude and adoration, I dedicate this work to my husband. Without his steadfast confidence in me, I would have never persevered to the end.

To Rick: I thank you for giving our children so much love and attention during my many absences. I thank you for being my constant sanctuary. I thank you for wiping away my many tears of frustration, exhaustion, and guilt. But most of all, I thank you for always making my coffee and packing my lunch.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Classroom teachers are the cornerstone of student success; their role in a student's educational experience is paramount (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). When a teacher leaves the classroom, the effect is detrimental to all stakeholders in the educational system (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA) released a report stating 6,650 classroom teachers in South Carolina left their positions in 2015; only 18% of those teachers left because they retired (CERRA, 2019). Multiple studies and reports (e.g., Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2013; Walker, 2018) have indicated that one determining factor in a teacher's decision to remain in the profession is the principal. Undoubtedly, administrators can positively affect workplace conditions by providing teachers with adequate time to prepare, by respecting them as professionals, and by making them feel supported (Thibodeaux et al., 2015). By prioritizing teacher well-being and emphasizing positive reinforcement over criticism and judgment, principals set a positive tone and expectation (Walker, 2018).

The need for a principal to create a positive school climate and culture is imperative because there are many issues that teachers face daily that make teaching less than desirable. Multiple researchers have researched to solicit information on teachers' reasons for leaving the profession (e.g., McInerney et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2015). Chambers-Mack et al. (2019) shared that the two most frequently cited reasons teachers gave for leaving the profession are workplace conditions and the desire for a better career. Classroom teachers also frequently express their

frustrations with overpopulated classrooms, lack of resources, and a workload that intrudes on their personal time (Chambers-Mack et al., 2019).

When teachers have a high level of trust in their school's leader and believe they have a voice in school decisions, the retention rate is higher than in schools where trust between the teacher and the principal is minimal (Player et al., 2017). Principals who are more effective in retaining qualified teachers deliberately create a climate that supports and respects classroom teachers by displaying key traits, such as creating and communicating a vision, supporting teachers in management and instruction, and publicly recognizing their accomplishments (Player et al., 2017). Principals who demonstrate a commitment to their teachers create teachers who demonstrate a commitment to their schools (Dou et al., 2017).

When teachers leave the profession, students suffer (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The negative impact of teacher attrition is most significant in the areas of math and English Language Arts (ELA). It is particularly harmful to the success of students in schools with large populations of low-performing and minority students (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Alternatively, in schools with higher-rated school climates and lower attrition rates, students tend to make larger achievement gains (Hennessey, 2017). According to Shen et al. (2015), teacher satisfaction with the educational climate directly affects students.

They explained:

It is likely that teachers can influence students' motivation in education not only through instructional styles but also through their own outward emotions and motivation. Student inferences about their teachers' feelings about instruction signify an important but understudied source of influence on student motivation. (p. 530)

If principals cannot provide the support or build the trust their teachers need, the effects are broad and detrimental, and all members of the educational community are affected (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). School-level leaders must create a positive climate by implementing strategies that encourage teachers to remain in the classroom. To be able to do this, principals must know what experiences lead teachers to leave teaching and what might have helped encourage them to stay. As Will (2018) explained, principals must be creative and flexible to create a school community that can keep their teachers.

There is ample data to suggest that teacher attrition has a negative effect on student performance. Recent research has also shown that schools with lower attrition rates and higher rates of teacher satisfaction often report having a highly effective administrator (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The current need is to identify specific behaviors of principals that may decrease teacher attrition rates.

### **Background**

The nationwide problem of teacher attrition is likewise reflected in the state of South Carolina. In the 2016-2017 school year, 4,842 teachers left the teaching profession in South Carolina (SC). According to CERRA (2016), districts across S.C. reported a steady increase in vacant teaching positions. The 2015-2016 school year showed an increase of 33% vacant teaching positions compared to the 2014-2015 school year and a 66% increase compared to the 2013-2014 school year. More specifically, in Learning County, S.C. (pseudonym for the county used for the current study), there is a consistent 10% rate of teachers leaving the classroom annually since the 2015-16 school year (J. Rogers, personal communication, November 2017).

Multiple research studies (e.g., NAESP, 2013; Walker, 2018) have indicated that the school-level leader is the determining factor in a teachers' decision to remain in the classroom.

Traditionally, principals' leadership has been limited to the school's leader, holding him or her responsible for all leadership functions (Bagwell, 2019). However, as Pucella (2014) explained, effective leaders have realized that leadership responsibilities cannot be isolated to administrators; if a real transformation into a highly effective educational environment will happen, teacher leaders are a necessity. Pucella continued:

Numerous studies have found a relationship between burnout and attrition levels in teachers and teacher input in decision making, a function of leadership. When teachers have minimal input into the decisions that impact their ability to perform, such as disciplinary actions or curricular changes and implementation, there is a negative impact on their professional self-esteem and job satisfaction, which may eventually result in burnout and leaving the profession. (p. 87)

Schools that function under distributed leadership demonstrate a culture of collaboration, shared responsibility, and mutual support (Garcia Torres, 2019). In a culture of collaboration, teachers develop curriculum, share resources, observe peers, and provide them with feedback, participate in book discussions, and make decisions based on school data (Pucella, 2014).

By providing shared leadership responsibilities with teachers, teachers become more vested in the organization and increase their commitment. Distributed leadership and organizational commitment have a strong and positive relationship (Garcia Torres, 2019). Organizational commitment is defined as a teacher's commitment to a school or the teaching profession (Garcia Torres, 2019). Researchers have found that teachers' organizational commitment is directly related to their ability to participate in decision making, the amount of cooperation among principals, and the amount of support they received from principals (Player et al., 2017).

As teachers' organizational commitment and satisfaction increase, their retention rates increase as well (Garcia Torres, 2019). Consequently, as teacher satisfaction increases, a more positive work environment is created, and, ultimately, student performance increases (Garcia Torres, 2019). Teachers have the most significant impact on student learning (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Therefore, the retention of qualified educators is imperative to student success. Distributed leadership increases teachers' organizational commitment, which increases teacher retention and culminates in student success (Garcia Torres, 2019). Unfortunately, teacher attrition has reached alarming rates.

### **Teacher Attrition**

Teacher attrition refers to teachers leaving the profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The latest United States (U.S.) Department of Education survey stated that out of the 8% of educators who left the profession in the 2012-2013 school year, 53% reported better working conditions in their new profession than in education (CERRA, 2016). The report also stated that 7% of teachers with 1-3 years of experience left the profession (CERRA).

When teachers who left the education profession for a new career field were surveyed, 58.5% stated that they have more influence over workplace policies and practices in their new career field, 57.4% said that they have more autonomy or control over their own work than they did in education, and 51.2% shared that they can manage their new workload better than they were able to do in education (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Darling-Hammond further stated that teachers in the U.S. work harder than in any other industrialized parts of the world, yet they feel they are not valued by society.

While teachers frequently cite the determining factors of high-stakes assessments, autonomy, stress, or school climate as the reasons they left the profession, research has indicated

it is the type of administrative support they receive as they experience those factors that impacts the decision. Lack of administrative support has the most substantial relationship to teacher attrition (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

When teachers leave the classroom, it has a broad organizational influence that affects many stakeholders in the educational system, including the teachers who have remained in the school and the students. Often, schools that have a shortage of teachers hire inexperienced or unqualified teachers, increase class sizes, or cut class offerings, all of which are detrimental to students' educational experiences (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Further, teacher turnover has a substantial impact on the financial and human resources in districts and schools. The recruiting, hiring, and training of new teachers incur significant financial costs. These costs drain resources that might otherwise be spent on improving current programs or working conditions (Sutcher et al., 2019).

Principals, high-stakes assessments, lack of autonomy, stress, and school climate are frequently-cited reasons teachers provide when they are asked why they left the classroom (Phillips, 2015). Teacher stress is also frequently attributed to an overwhelming workload, along with difficult parents and students and a lack of support from administration (Klassen et al., 2010). Regarding autonomy, Strong and Yoshida (2014) explained that teachers want to be in charge of the day-to-day pedagogy within their classrooms, and they believe they are the best qualified to make decisions regarding all classroom procedures. Finally, high-stakes assessments have created an accountability system that negatively affects the school environment and climate (von der Embse et al., 2016).



## **Principals and Teacher Attrition**

High-stakes assessments, autonomy, stress, and school climate are inevitable and unavoidable realities in all schools, and they are factors that teachers cite as reasons for leaving the profession; however, it is the responsibility of the principal to provide continuous support to the classroom teacher that will determine the rate of attrition within the school (Player et al., 2017). Will (2018) explained that principals must be creative and flexible to create a school community where teachers stay. Because principals do not typically work directly with students, their work to produce positive student performance must be at the organizational level (Ni et al., 2018). The way that school-level leaders support teachers in these areas may be impactful in the retention of teachers.

Currently, most of the research is limited to the effects of principals' leadership on teacher retention, the effects of principals' leadership on school climate, and behaviors of principals that contribute to teacher retention. This applied research study, however, identified specific, adverse actions or leadership practices that contributed to teachers' decisions to leave the profession and provided former teachers' opinions of what could have been done by the school's leader that would have supported them in staying. The information from this study can be used to provide support to principals searching for strategies to support and retain their teachers.

### **Statement of the Problem**

High teacher attrition rates are an epidemic that is plaguing school districts across the U.S. As teachers leave the profession, they create a gap that is often filled by inexperienced or ineffective teachers. Unfortunately, this may lead to inadequate instruction for students, a heavier workload for remaining teachers, and a significant financial strain on the school and school

district. This situation creates difficult challenges for principals, as their role is critical in a teacher's decision to stay or leave the profession.

Many teachers do not remain in the profession beyond five years. Teachers enter the teaching profession and intend to stay for their entire career, but many do not remain; they leave for a variety of reasons—a prevalent one is leadership. Principals could benefit from identifying adverse leadership practices that contribute to teachers' decisions to leave the profession. This can only be determined by gaining insight into teachers' experiences in the classroom. Therefore, data on experiences from teachers who have decided to leave the profession were collected qualitatively. The results of this study may provide insight to principals regarding ways in which they may be able to decrease the number of teachers who leave the profession. While there are a myriad of factors impacting teachers' decisions to leave the profession, the possibility exists that principals can implement strategies that may prove useful in retaining teachers.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the experiences of classroom teachers who left the profession, specifically the actions of principals that contributed to the teachers' decisions to leave the profession. The exodus of many teachers has become a crisis across the country, including in South Carolina. With the assistance of former classroom teachers, specific reasons that the teachers left the profession were identified. This knowledge can help principals create a climate in their schools that will support them in increasing teacher retention. This information can not only help school leaders retain classroom teachers but improve their working conditions. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide insight that can be used by principals to support the teachers in their schools. All stakeholders vested in the schools benefit from teacher retention.

### **Significance of the Study**

With increased rates of teachers leaving the classroom, there is a decreased rate of instructional efficacy. Unhappy teachers may produce unsuccessful students. To contribute to the retention of skilled public school teachers, the significance of this study is to help provide insight on leadership practices that contributed to teacher attrition. Principals may be able to use the information from this study to reflect on their current leadership practices and analyze if they manage their school in a manner that promotes teacher retention.

As a current assistant principal and future principal, I want the findings of this study to guide my leadership style in a direction that will promote the retention of teachers and provide a climate that is positive for students and teachers. I want to provide all of my future students with a stable educational climate with experienced and effective classroom teachers. While this study is limited to former classroom teachers from one specific district, the issue of teacher retention is not limited to one district or even one state. If the study provides information that aids in retaining classroom teachers, then perhaps other districts across the nation could add it to their efforts to retain teachers.

### **Procedures**

The goal of this qualitative study was to investigate the experiences of former classroom teachers regarding their reasons for leaving the classroom and what school leaders could have done to support them better so that they may have stayed. This can only be learned by asking the right questions and allowing teachers to share their stories and hear their opinions. As Creswell (2014) explained, qualitative data focus on individual meaning and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation. This study's design was phenomenological because the results did not provide a solution, but an increased insight into the phenomenon of teacher attrition.

Phenomenological research takes the experiences of a group of individuals who have experienced a phenomenon and allows the researcher to describe their understanding of it (Creswell, 2014).

The researcher used purposive sampling to select 10 former general education teachers from the elementary level who taught in Learning County (pseudonym), SC. The researcher conducted one structured interview with each participant, using a researcher-created protocol based on current literature on teacher attrition and validated by a panel review and pilot study. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and participants were asked to member check the transcripts for accuracy (Edmonson & Irby, 2008). Data analysis involved descriptive coding, open coding, and theme development (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). Findings are presented in narrative form in Chapter Four, using direct quotes to substantiate emergent themes.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following key terms apply:

*Distributed Leadership:* Distributed leadership refers to a leadership style that involves several individuals taking leadership roles to accomplish shared goals within an organization (Garcia Torres, 2019). Bagwell (2019) explained that the practice of distributed leadership can be observed in three ways: (a) spontaneous collaboration, where leadership practice is a result of the collective interactions of individuals with different skills and expertise to accomplish a task; (b) shared roles, where leadership emerges between two or more individuals coordinating their efforts to accomplish a task; and (c) institutional structures, where formal organizational roles or structures dictate leadership practices.

*School Climate:* School climate refers to the quality and character of school life (Cohen et al., 2009).

*Teacher Attrition:* Attrition refers to the rate at which teachers leave the profession entirely and enter a different career field (Ryan et al., 2017). Although broad definitions of attrition include teachers that leave one particular school for another, for the purpose of this study, attrition refers only to those who leave teaching entirely.

*Teacher Autonomy:* Teacher autonomy refers to the teacher's freedom to control their classroom environment, instruction, and discourse, as determined by their training, philosophy, personality, or experience (Parker, 2015).

### **Chapter Summary**

Teachers are leaving the profession in record-breaking numbers. Teachers who leave the profession cite poor working conditions, lack of professional respect, and the inability to teach in the manner that they believe is most beneficial for students. The mass exodus of classroom teachers harms all stakeholders in the educational community, especially students and those teachers who remain. Principals can decrease the rate of teacher attrition by implementing distributed leadership practices and ensuring a positive school climate. Teachers who feel supported and heard are less likely to leave the profession and are more likely to provide a more positive educational experience for students. This study investigates specific experiences of former classroom teachers while identifying behaviors of principals, if any, which were deemed negative by classroom teachers and ultimately contributed to their decision to leave the classroom.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of former classroom teachers' decisions to leave the profession as it pertained to their school principal. The researcher interviewed former classroom teachers to identify any possible trends among the participants' responses. The results from this study will be shared with district office personnel to inform any efforts to retain teachers in Learning County, SC.

The researcher's primary tool for locating scholarly articles was the Discover Search database provided by the library at Georgia Southern University; on rare occasions, she used Google Scholar. Initially, the researcher's most frequent keyword/phrase for the searches was teacher attrition. As the research progressed, keywords included *principals*, *high-stakes assessments*, *stress*, *autonomy*, and *distributed leadership*. Using the Discover Search database, the researcher refined the search results to articles published within the past five years and academic journals. Discover Search allowed for a folder in which relevant articles were stored.

Classroom teachers are the cornerstone of the success of all educational systems (Imran & Allil, 2016). There are approximately 3.5 million active elementary and secondary teachers in the United States, making them the epicenter of the educational system (Jimerson & Haddock, 2015). Ample research proclaims the importance of classroom teachers. For example, Jimerson and Haddock (2015) stated that teachers represent the most powerful force in promoting student success, as teachers are the determining factor in the efficacy of all school-level initiatives. Garcia Torres (2019) noted that teachers' academic abilities and qualifications are strongly correlated to student achievement; more experienced teachers and those with higher education levels create more growth in students' academic performance.

Duta et al. (2015) discussed the traits of an effective teacher from the students' perspectives. Nearly 1,000 students were surveyed, and results indicated that an effective teacher was well-prepared, had a positive attitude, held high expectations, was creative, was honest, developed a sense of belonging, was compassionate, had a sense of humor, had respect for the students, was forgiving, and admitted mistakes. Teachers who encompass these traits create relationships with students; these positive teacher-student relationships are what bind teacher effectiveness and student success (Jimerson & Haddock, 2015). "When a teacher offers ongoing support and encouragement, he or she conveys faith in a student's ability, which in turn increases the student's confidence and willingness to learn" (Pedota, 2015, p. 54).

The benefits of a strong classroom teacher are not limited to academics. When a classroom is based on encouragement, students' sense of belonging and connection is enhanced, increasing their academic self-image and success (Pedota, 2015). Classroom teachers provide invaluable insight into students' social, emotional, and behavioral well-being while teaching students to be productive citizens (Jimerson & Haddock, 2015). The importance of a strong relationship between teachers and students is indicated by a teacher's ability to articulate the social, emotional, and behavioral health of their students (Jimerson & Haddock, 2015). In 2014, Tennant et al. (2015) used Tardy's *Measure of Social Support* to investigate the level of impact that different types of teacher support had on academic and social-emotional outcomes. Tardy's measurement tool distinguishes four types of support teachers can provide their students – emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental. The results of the study by Tennant et al. indicated that there was a negative association between students' perception that their teachers supported them emotionally to inattention and hyperactivity. The results also showed that

teachers' emotional support was a key facilitator of students' social-emotional health (Tennant et al., 2015).

Because teachers are instrumental in a student's academic success, their decision to leave the profession impacts all stakeholders in the educational system, and, unfortunately, many teachers are making that decision. The National Center for Education Statistics' report (as cited in CERRA, 2016) on teacher attrition and mobility indicated that 8% of teachers across the nation left the profession in the 2012-2013 school year. The report also stated that 7% of teachers with one to three years of experience left the profession. High turnover rates are often viewed as the key impediment to high-quality instruction (Hanushek et al., 2016), and researchers have estimated that as many as 40% to 50% of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Ryan et al., 2017). When comparing the number of students entering teacher education programs in 2008 and those entering in 2014, there is a staggering difference of over 200,000 less in 2014 (Ryan et al., 2017). However, this is not a new problem. Scholarly articles from the mid-1930s describe the difficulties staffing classrooms after the Great Depression (Behrstock-Sherratt, 2016). In particular, math and science classrooms have had documented shortages since the 1950s (Sutcher et al., 2019). Additionally, the shortage of classroom teachers is predicted to plague the U.S. in the future as well. Darling-Hammond and Carver-Thomas provided research that indicated the school-aged population will increase by approximately 3 million students and teacher attrition rates will remain at 8% annually.

The shortage of classroom teachers creates a devastating impact on personnel and resources at the school level (Ryan et al., 2017). High rates of attrition have significant financial costs (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). According to Phillips (2015), teacher attrition costs the U.S. over \$2 billion annually. Individually, school districts estimate costs of



\$17,862 for each teacher who leaves the profession. Schools are using their valuable resources to rebuild their staff and fund substitute teachers instead of allocating them to students and classrooms (Ryan et al., 2017).

When teachers leave the classroom, students are often left with underqualified or novice teachers (Jimmerson & Haddock, 2015). The implications of teacher attrition are not limited to only one year of instruction; high instances of attrition adversely affect the quality of instruction in the subsequent school year, exacerbating this problem (Hanushek et al., 2016). Furthermore, higher instances of teacher attrition have been found to negatively affect the achievement of all students in a school, not just the students in a new teacher's classroom (Darling-Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019). Hanushek et al. (2016) elaborated:

Identifying the net effects of teacher turnover is difficult. First, unobserved shocks may affect both the probability of teacher transition and the quality of instruction. Second, schools may fill vacancies with a teacher new to the school or with a teacher from another grade, and any association between the fraction of teachers who switched grades and the fraction who are new to the school would likely introduce omitted variables bias given the evidence that switching grades adversely affects the quality of instruction. Finally, the decision to fill a vacancy with a teacher from another grade rather than a teacher new to the school is unlikely to be random. Rather the desirability of working with other teachers in a specific grade, perceptions of the incoming cohort of students, and principal discretion likely influence the allocation of incumbent teachers among grades. (p. 133)

The most egregious victims of teacher attrition are the students. As Jimerson and Haddock (2015) explained, the quality of a teacher has a vital influence on student success or failure.

Classroom teachers who have left the profession cite many reasons for leaving, including the principals' leadership, high-stakes assessments, lack of autonomy, stress, and school climate. However, these reasons are interrelated and often affect each other. Principals who cannot create a safe and trusting relationship with their teachers are unable to support them through high-stakes testing (Sutcher et al., 2017). The use of high-stakes testing increases the level of teacher stress (von der Embse et al., 2016). As teachers' levels of stress increase, the school culture becomes not conducive to learning. When teachers are working in a negative school culture, the possibility of attrition increases (Ryan et al., 2017).

### **Factors Leading to Teacher Attrition**

Because the instances of teachers leaving the profession continue to grow, ample research has been done to identify why teachers leave the classroom. Clear and common themes have emerged throughout multiple studies identifying principals' leadership, high-stakes assessments, lack of autonomy, stress, and school climate as the most frequently cited determining factors in teachers' decisions to leave the classroom (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2013; Walker, 2018).

Glazer (2018) examined the accounts of certified, experienced teachers who left teaching after making significant investments in their careers. This study focused on 25 certified teachers with master's degrees in education who left the profession after teaching for at least three years. Both men and women participated in the study, and they represented varying races and ethnicities (White, Asian-American, African-American, and Latina).

Glazer's (2018) interviews were semi-structured, focused on questions about how and why these people became teachers, reflections about their experiences as a classroom teacher, their decision to leave and the process of exit, and their subsequent experiences. The results from the interviews indicated three themes: (a) imposed curricula, (b) testing and accountability policies, and (c) job insecurity.

When teacher turnover is disruptive to the organization, all members of the school community are vulnerable (Sutcher et al., 2019). Sutcher et al. further elaborated that, contrary to many researchers who assume *stayers* (teachers who remain in the classroom) are unaffected by turnover, disruptive explanations indicate that stayers are often greatly affected. Teachers who stay in the classroom often bear the responsibility for mentoring new teachers about school expectations and programs, carry more of the instructional burden, and receive less professional development (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Also, teachers who have remained in the classroom often take on additional students and lose their preparation periods to cover other classes of students (Joseph et al., 2014). When the turnover is persistent, this eventually has a detrimental impact on the remaining teachers and affects their students. Principals may play a significant role in reducing the impact on teachers that remain and the students at the school.

### **Principal Leadership**

Principals are a crucial factor in students' academic success; this is second only to teachers (Sutcher et al., 2017). Principals also directly influence teachers' decisions to leave or remain in the classroom (Dahlkamp et al., 2017; Garcia Torres, 2019; Urick, 2016). If a principal is unable to create a positive school climate, the instances of teacher attrition increase (Dahlkamp et al., 2017). Teachers leave when principals exhibit absolute authority and fail to create a collegial environment (Dahlkamp et al., 2017). Garcia Torres (2019) explained that working

conditions are consistently listed as the strongest predictor of teacher attrition and principal leadership is the most relevant measure of working conditions. Multiple studies and reports have indicated that the critical determining factor in a teacher's decision to remain in the profession is the principal (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; NAESP, 2013; Walker, 2018). In a study by Garcia Torres, over 40% of both former and current classroom teachers identified dissatisfaction with the administration as the most crucial factor in their decision to leave.

The necessity for a principal to create a positive school climate and culture is imperative because there are many issues that teachers face daily that make teaching less than desirable. Multiple researchers have conducted studies to solicit information on teachers' reasons for leaving the profession (e.g., McInerney et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2015). Chambers-Mack et al. (2019) investigated factors that teachers reported as impacting their intention to leave teaching. To find a sample, they surveyed public schools from 46 systems in Texas. They asked the participants to use a scale of 1-10 to indicate how likely they were to leave teaching after the current school year. They included responses from teachers who indicated 1 (not likely,  $n = 949$ ) or 10 (likely,  $n = 198$ ).

Chambers-Mack et al. (2019) used a variety of instruments to examine: (a) demographic factors of the teacher and school; (b) occupational factors such as job control, job support, and school climate; and (c) health factors such as perceived stress and quality of life. The researchers used independent *t*-tests, chi-square tests, and logistic regression to analyze the data collected on the various measures. The main results of the study indicated that workplace conditions (specifically principals) and the desire for a better career were the main factors that affected teachers' decisions to consider leaving the profession.

Classroom teachers often express their frustrations with overpopulated classrooms, lack of resources, and a workload that intrudes on their personal time (Chambers-Mack et al., 2019). If principals cannot provide the support or build the trust that their teachers need, the effects are broad and detrimental (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). All members of the educational community are affected. As Will (2018) explained, principals must be creative and flexible to create a school community that can help keep their teachers. A strong and positive principal can promote teacher retention even in contexts where student and teacher characteristics predict attrition (Player et al., 2017). By focusing on leadership behaviors, schools can be more successful in teacher retention (Player et al., 2017)

School-level leaders bear a heavy load; there is an expectation for principals to understand the basic precepts of quality instruction and have adequate knowledge of the curriculum to ensure that the content delivered to students is appropriate (Badenhorst & Koalepe, 2014). Urick (2015) explained that as a result of instability in the staff, principals struggle to build capacity, instructional programs are interrupted, and student achievement suffers. Quinn (2002) detailed the many roles an effective leader must perform:

- A resource provider: The principal acts as an opportunist to gather all resources (materials, information, or opportunities) to meet the school's and district's visions and goals.
- An instructional resource: The principal provides professional development to promote continuous improvement in instruction.
- A communicator: The principal sets and follows clear performance expectations in instruction and teacher behavior. The principal models commitment to the school's goals and vision.

- A visible presence in the school: The principal is visible in the classrooms, attends grade-level meetings and has unscheduled conversations with the staff and students.

The management and retention of qualified classroom teachers determine the overall level of functioning in the school (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). There is a strong relationship between principal leadership and teacher performance and attitude (Dou et al., 2017). Administrators set the tone in their building for how teachers are perceived and supported; by prioritizing teacher well-being and publicly recognizing and praising teachers, the culture becomes more positive (Walker, 2018). Additionally, high-performing principals provide targeted feedback to support continuous growth in their school (Sutcher et al., 2017). Principal leadership is an essential antecedent to teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Dou et al., 2017). Garcia Torres (2019) explained that:

Administrators possess the authority to create structures and opportunities for other organizational members to participate in "shared meanings and values" of the organization, which in turn, become "shared commitments." Teachers respond to the culture and values promoted by administrators through their participation, or lack thereof, in directing actions. (p.113)

Dahlkamp et al. (2017) described a good principal as one who supports teachers, communicates school goals, and manages students effectively. Urick (2016) reiterated this by explaining that effective principals manage safety and order, communicate a mission, promote professional growth, and share instructional leadership with teachers. Other research suggests that there are specific behaviors of school-level leaders that have proven successful in the retention of classroom teachers: (a) clear communication and collaboration related to the school's vision, (b) supporting teachers through instruction, (c) publicly recognizing teachers, and (d)

enforcing rules pertaining to student behavior (Dahlkamp et al., 2017; Player et al., 2017). Player et al. (2017) further identified effective traits of principals: (a) communicating a vision, (b) working together to meet the vision, (c) providing instructional support, (d) providing support with student behavior and discipline, and (e) recognizing teacher performance.

Principals who demonstrate a commitment to their teachers create teachers who demonstrate a commitment to their schools (Dou et al., 2017). When teachers play a role in the decision-making process, participate in providing professional development, have classroom autonomy, and feel supported by their administrators, they perceive their school climate as positive, and their retention rates increase (Urlick, 2016). Lee and Nie (2014) added that there is an imperative need for principals to adopt a more empowering approach of management to facilitate teacher empowerment effectively. Additionally, Lee and Nie stated that principals' who empower their teachers create a higher level of teacher performance and satisfaction. Thibodeaux et al. (2015) explained that principals can positively affect workplace conditions by providing teachers with adequate time to prepare, by respecting them as professionals and making them feel supported. By prioritizing teacher well-being and emphasizing positive reinforcement over criticism and judgment, principals set a positive tone and expectation in their school (Walker, 2018). When teachers perceive their principals as authentic in their empowering behaviors, they develop a higher level of trust and respect for their leaders (Lee & Nie, 2014). Teachers' trust in their principal improves the tolerance level of high-stakes assessments and all that comes with it.

### **High-Stakes Assessments**

Another contributing factor to teachers' decisions to leave the classroom is high-stakes assessments (Wei et al., 2015). Stotsky (2016) defined high stakes assessments as:

any form of test that (1) requires all test takers to answer the same questions, or a selection of questions from a common bank of questions, in the same way, and that (2) is scored in a 'standard' or consistent manner, which makes it possible to compare the relative performance of individual students or groups of students. (p. 290)

High-stakes assessments have been used in schools for decades, but they have become much more predominant and widespread in schools since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was passed (Goldhaber & Ozek, 2019). The introduction of NCLB was the first time all students were legally mandated to be tested in every public school and have their scores used to evaluate the school's performance (Minarechova, 2016). With the adoption of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, the use of high-stakes assessments continued, but with a decreased role in the overall measure of accountability (Goldhaber & Ozek, 2019). ESSA provided states with more control over the decision-making process, yet still mandates testing in grades three through eight (Darling-Hammond, 2016). These assessments play a large role in federal and state education accountability systems (Wei et al., 2015).

High-stakes assessments have become the determinant in school and student performance, with both positive and negative consequences such as monetary rewards, public reporting, or a range of mandated interventions (Supovitz, 2018). Croft et al. (2015) explained that high-stakes testing policies "have caused a trickle-down effect in which politicians put pressure to increase standardized test scores on school boards and superintendents, superintendents put pressure on principals, principals on teachers, and teachers on students – all to little or no avail" (p. 73).

High-stakes assessments and their corresponding accountability are a direct result of the changes in educational accountability policies at both the federal and state level. These changes



contribute to increased stress and adverse outcomes for teachers (von der Embse et al., 2016). Using the results from students' standardized assessments to evaluate teachers, make tenure decisions, or decide their pay is considered a form of test-based accountability. Understandably, test-based accountability is frequently cited as a cause of high levels of stress among teachers (Ryan et al., 2017). However, school districts across the U.S. use high-stakes testing to measure school efficacy, teacher effectiveness, and student achievement. A consistent part of all state accountability programs is the expanded use of standardized testing to obtain information on student achievement and to evaluate the effectiveness of individual school systems.

Proponents of high-stakes assessments believe that the use of annual state testing programs plays a vital role in diagnosing gaps in teaching and learning and can be used for improving student outcomes (Wei et al., 2015). Additionally, proponents of high-stakes assessment feel that states should "delineate what students should know and be able to do, teachers should match instruction to those standards, and state tests should measure how well students meet those expectations" (Stotsky, 2016, p. 285). Proponents of high-stakes assessments agree that the use of a multiple-choice assessment may not be the most advantageous for students, but that with a few changes in the formatting of the assessments, the accountability system of high-stakes testing is useful in providing information to support continuous growth for students (Wei et al., 2015).

A high-stakes accountability system, according to Supovits (2018), is established when tests are used to hold teachers, schools, school districts, states, and institutions responsible for performance and to reward achievement. Supovits detailed the four major theories used to explain the reliance of the current educational system on high-stakes assessments: motivational theory, the theory of alignment, information theory, and symbolism theory.

Motivational theory is the predominant theory that exemplifies test based-accountability. Under the motivational theory, monetary or other extrinsic rewards and sanctions act as motivators for teachers to improve their performance. The motivational theory assumes that educators require pressure from outside of the classroom to enhance their performance (Supovits, 2018).

The theory of alignment is based on the concept that schools within a particular system need to be closely aligned with each other for reinforcement purposes. The alignment includes standards, curriculum, and assessments. The theory of alignment calls for a synchronized system of schools (Supovits, 2018).

The informational theory maintains that student performance data should be the primary tool for schools and districts to use when making decisions regarding students and programs. Much like the motivational theory, the informational theory implies that providing incentives to teachers will improve their performance in the classroom (Supovits, 2018).

The symbolism theory contributes to the use of high-stakes testing as an accountability measure. The symbolism theory implies that the public has a right to expect its resources to be used appropriately. The symbolism theory uses high-stakes assessments to hold public education responsible for a symbol of a successful system (Supovits, 2018).

Opponents of high-stakes assessments have shared that students feel the effects of the pressure from high-stakes assessments, noting that elementary-aged students have shown symptoms of stress as a direct result of testing (Watson et al., 2014). The emphasis on testing affects students as young as kindergarten because educators are replacing valuable playtime with testing lessons (Croft et al., 2015). Croft et al. explained that the increased emphasis on testing makes students as young as Pre-K feel like academic failures.

Strauss (2014) listed 13 ways standardized testing harms students: (a) lost learning time, (b) reduced content knowledge, (c) narrowed curriculum, (d) shut out programs, (e) diverted resources, (f) school closures, (g) loss of curiosity and love of learning, (h) blocked access to facilities, (i) harmful stress, (j) internalized failure, (k) grades, (l) graduation requirements, and (m) altered school culture. According to Stotsky (2016), critics of high-stakes assessments claim it reduces instruction to a limited range of skills, ignores the importance of comprehension, and neglects subjects that are not tested. Croft et al. (2015) expressed their concern for the "low performing" schools because those schools often allocate more than a quarter of the school year's instruction to test preparation. Jackson (2018) explained that high-stakes assessments do not fully capture every skill a teacher has taught their students, specifically, the necessary skills to be an adult.

High-stakes assessments in public schools and the accountability they bring with them continue to be a controversial issue across the nation (Watson et al., 2014). As Watson et al. explained, holding educators accountable for their instructional efficacy is appropriate; however, many factors exist that call into question the fairness, accuracy, and usefulness of this structure of assessment and the corresponding accountability. Principals are charged with closing achievement gaps and retaining highly-qualified teachers (Thibodeaux et al., 2015). Therefore, developing the ability to support classroom teachers while enforcing mandated testing and the autonomy they reduce is challenging.

### **Lack of Autonomy**

An effect of high-stakes assessments is the increased control over a teacher's ability to make decisions that pertain to his or her classroom of students, otherwise known as *autonomy* (Strong & Yoshida, 2014; Watson et al., 2014). Federal and state demands have created a trickle-

down effect on local district policies and procedures (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Strong and Yoshida explained, "American education has faced tremendous change during the past several decades that, most likely, has significantly affected teacher autonomy. Standardized testing and the accountability surrounding results have made teacher autonomy nearly irrelevant in today's educational climate" (p. 126). Parker (2015) explained that an essential component of the teaching profession is the ability to make judgment calls in uncertain situations.

Additionally, Vangrieken et al. (2017) added, "Autonomy seems to be a central construct in education; teachers strongly value autonomy as a desired workplace condition, and it is perceived to affect their professional status and job satisfaction" (p. 302). To many teachers, professionalism refers to having the authority to act, influence, make decisions and choices, and take stances related to their work and professional identities (Vangrieken et al., 2017). The impact of decreased autonomy is cited as a contributing factor to the deprofessionalization of teachers (Parker, 2015). Autonomy is a teacher's personal sense of freedom, without interference from an outside entity (Vangrieken et al., 2017).

For classroom teachers, their autonomy affects their perception of their professional status and job satisfaction (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Walker (2018) stated that research continues to list classroom autonomy as a significant factor in determining job satisfaction. Additionally, Parker (2015) explained that disengaged, demotivated teachers are expensive because of their absences and in terms of the impact they have as poor role models. While the lack of viewing teachers as professionals has been a long-standing problem, it seems to be getting worse. In the 2003-2004 school year, 18% of teachers perceived low autonomy, in the 2007-2008 school year, 23% of teachers perceived low autonomy, and in the 2011-2012 school year, 26% of teachers perceived low autonomy (Sparks et al., 2015). Lundstrom (2015)

explained that as the trend of decreased teacher autonomy increases, the teaching profession has been degraded.

Federal and state mandates have increased accountability measures, and these measures have decreased classroom autonomy (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Many schools have increased instructional time on tested subjects, at the expense of other, non-tested subjects (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Studies have shown that classroom autonomy is a significant factor in determining the level of job satisfaction (Walker, 2018). Conversely, research also indicated that increased teacher autonomy is positively associated with teachers' job satisfaction and retention (Sparks et al., 2015). Parker (2015) added that granting autonomy and empowering teachers is an appropriate starting point for solving school problems.

The professional authority of a teacher derives its integrity from the care given to each student in their charge. That care cannot be provided by treating students in identical ways, but it means giving each student what they need as an individual (Campbell, 2017). Teachers believe they are the best qualified to make decisions on classroom procedures, and therefore, should have a considerable say in the decision-making process when it pertains to their students (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). "Teachers are micromanaged. They have been saying for a long time that one size does not fit all; all students are different. But they're told to stick to the scripted curriculum" (Walker, 2016, p. 2). The adjustment of the curriculum in an effort to produce positive testing scores removes teachers' sense of autonomy and has made teacher autonomy irrelevant in today's educational climate (Strong & Yoshida, 2014).

While it is understood that school-level leaders must enforce district and state mandates, the simple recognition of the challenges of teacher autonomy is the first step toward supporting teachers (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Lee and Nie (2014) added:

When principals encourage teachers to be innovative in their daily work practices and frequently provide rewards and recognition to enable teachers to feel that their efforts and good performance are appreciated, this could positively influence teachers' sense of meaning, competence, autonomy, and impact. (p. 77)

Principals must recognize the problems associated with autonomy and engage in a continuous assessment of teacher autonomy in their school because they, as principals, possess a considerable influence on teacher autonomy (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Strong and Yoshida reported that principals who provided freedom to classroom teachers in making critical decisions regarding the whole school had a higher rate of satisfied teachers. Positive teacher attitudes and performance are also prominent workplace conditions associated with teacher autonomy (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Principals who provide autonomy in areas outside of the classroom create an opportunity for teacher leadership, which increases a teacher's commitment to the school, improving teacher retention (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Strong and Yoshida added that "greater autonomy granted to teachers, along with administrative support, was found to directly correlate to lower levels of teacher migration" (p. 125). Principals and policymakers must consider teacher autonomy when making efforts to improve teacher satisfaction and reduce teacher attrition (Sparks et al., 2015). The increase in teacher satisfaction decreases their level of stress.

### **Stress**

Teaching is one of the most stressful occupations in the U.S. (Greenberg et al., 2016). Ryan et al. (2017) defined stress as "a physiological and psychological response to a situation perceived as threatening to one's resources" (p. 3). More specifically, von der Embse (2016) defined teacher stress as a negative affective experience correlated to one's ability to deal with

job-related stressors. Suh (2013) clarified that teacher stress can be classified into two categories: role conflict and role ambiguity.

Role conflict occurs when demands of the position conflict. For example, a teacher may feel one course of action is necessary for helping a student who is behind, but they are not at liberty to make this decision. Role ambiguity occurs when a teacher does not understand expectations or does not have the resources necessary to carry out the tasks. (Suh, 2018, p. 4)

According to Greenberg et al. (2014), four primary sources of teacher stress exist:

- School organization: weak leadership, poor school climate, and a lack of collegial support;
- Job demands: increasing demands as a result of high-stakes assessments, student management, and demanding parents;
- Work resources: limit of autonomy and the power to make decisions; and
- Teacher social and emotional competence: management of stress and ability to appropriately nurture a healthy classroom (Greenberg et al., 2016)

Teachers' health and well-being are also affected by high levels of stress, causing teacher burnout, lack of engagement, job dissatisfaction, poor performance, and high turnover rates (Greenberg et al., 2016). Ryan et al. (2017) added that teacher stress has been linked to adverse professional outcomes, including burnout, absenteeism, and attrition. Von der Embse (2016) indicated that as a teacher's level of stress increases, he or she feels less satisfaction in the job, directly impacting his or her decision to leave the profession.

Classroom teachers must be a jack-of-all-trades to meet all of the varying domains in education (McInerney et al., 2018). As Lambert (2019) wrote, "Teachers are bombarded with

numerous potential stressors, including large class sizes, low salaries, and students with challenging behaviors and special needs" (p. 14). Lauermaun and Konig (2016) explained that a teacher's success is profoundly affected by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization of students, and perceived lack of accomplishments. Shen et al. (2015) defined depersonalization as the "development of negative, callous, and cynical attitudes towards the recipients of one's service. It is an attempt to distance oneself emotionally and cognitively from recipients by ignoring the qualities that make them unique and engaging people" (p. 519). Rumschlag (2017) added that as teachers begin to feel depersonalized from their students, they start to think that students cannot be helped and are deserving of their difficulties.

Teacher stress comes from a variety of sources. Teachers' stress can be a result of inadequate time to prepare for high-stakes assessments, decreased personal interaction with students, unfamiliarity with the curriculum, and a reduced sense of professionalism (von der Embse et al., 2015). According to Ryan et al. (2017), evaluating teacher efficacy through high-stakes assessments has become standard across the United States, and this practice has dramatically affected the current educational climate. The practice of using assessments to measure a teacher's quality has a direct link to the increasing rate of teachers reporting that they are stressed (Ryan et al., 2017). Rumschlag (2017) shared that 72% of teachers feel moderate to extreme pressure to improve their students' assessment scores and are stressed because they are unaware of how to do that. Rumschlag added that teachers are unable to feel that they have successfully met the challenges of their job. Given the ever-changing standards, textbooks, manipulatives, technology, and assessments, misperceptions and exasperations are inevitable, and with the constant change, it is difficult for teachers ever to feel accomplished (Rumschlag, 2017).



Unlike other professions, when teachers are feeling stressed, they are unable to step out of the room and take a break. von der Embse et al. (2015) explained that:

teacher stress may be a result of inadequate time required to prepare for high-stakes testing, decreased personal interaction with students, lack of familiarity with the curriculum and inappropriate or developmentally inadequate test instruction, and eroding sense of professionalism for teachers. (p. 224)

This stress contributes to the teacher's feeling of being overwhelmed (Nierenberg, 2015). A recent study found that teachers who display signs of stress and depression directly affect student performance, and teachers who are burnt out have weaker classroom management skills (Greenberg et al., 2016). Burnout has been defined as symptoms of cynicism and reduced professional accomplishments (Ju et al., 2015). Additionally, Wong et al. (2017) described burnout as a consequence of chronic work-related stress. Lauermaann and Konig (2016) added that burnout has also been linked to job attrition, absenteeism, turnover, deficient job performance, depression, and other psychological and somatic problems. Wong et al. identified qualities of burnout, including the interaction among task qualities, social support, organizational characteristics, teachers' personal qualities, and political and economic contexts. Through extensive research, Leiter and Maslach (2016) identified the three basic dimensions of burnout – exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Chronic negative stress in teachers affects their personal lives too. Some teachers with chronic stress have been found to engage in adverse behaviors such as alcoholism, drug addiction, obesity, divorce, and personal life conflicts (Suh, 2018).

According to Wong et al. (2017), as many as 40% of teachers may experience burnout and are at high risk for leaving the profession. Depression in teachers is another result of teacher stress and can be displayed by poor appetite, restless sleep, crying spells, and the feeling of being

a failure. These symptoms make teachers less likely to create and maintain a high-quality classroom for their students than teachers without these symptoms (Nierenberg, 2015).

McInerney et al. (2018) explained that "teacher wellbeing also affects their students" (p.146). Students of classroom teachers who are highly stressed show lower levels of social adjustment and academic performance. Students of satisfied teachers and teachers who are psychologically well are more likely to achieve than students whose teachers are dissatisfied or emotionally exhausted. Shen et al. (2015) explained that:

It is likely that teachers can influence students' motivation in education not only through instructional styles but also through their own outward emotions and motivations. Student inferences about their teachers' feelings about instruction signify an important but understudied source of influence on student motivation. (p. 530)

As teacher stress increases, the vigilance of classroom preparation and the participation in classroom activities decline while student criticism increases (Shen et al., 2015). Shen et al. also added that teacher stress diminishes student learning and engagement. Elementary school teachers who have greater levels of stress and display more symptoms of depression create "classroom environments that are less conducive to learning, which leads to poor academic performance among students" (Greenberg et al., 2016, p. 5).

Teacher stress and burnout have been linked to lower quality instruction, meaning that when teachers feel stress, their students are affected (Lauermann & Konig, 2016). Ju et al. (2015) added that an immediate solution is needed to reduce teacher stress, as their stress not only has significant implications for teachers' effectiveness, motivation, and job satisfaction but also for the students' educational experience and personal development.

Teacher stress also increases the rate of teacher absenteeism (Rumschlag, 2017; von der Embse et al., 2015). When teachers are absent for as many as 10 days, there is a significant effect on student performance. The effect is equivalent to the difference of a first-year teacher versus a teacher with two or three years of experience (Joseph et al., 2014). Multiple parties are affected by a teacher's absence. The absence can disrupt the regular operation of the school day and place additional burdens on other teachers. Students are sometimes divided into other classrooms, or other teachers lose their preparation period to cover the class (Joseph et al., 2014).

The relationship between the principal and the teacher also plays a role in teacher stress. Rumschlag (2017) stated that there is a correlation between teacher stress and negative contact with principals. Rumschlag added that teachers who have a negative relationship with their principal or feel as though their principal limits their instructional autonomy have more reported instances of job stress. Suh (2018) explained that often principals make decisions "from the top down, with little or no teacher input. These decisions may be enforced through means that teachers may not understand or have any power to change" (p. 4). When teachers believe that their educational leader supports them, their stress is significantly reduced (Saeki et al., 2017). Additionally, Suh explained that schools considered low in teacher stress had teachers who believed their school's leader to be accessible and that their principal valued their input and experiences. High teacher trust in their leadership is related to a lower teacher stress level (Greenberg et al., 2016).

Ryan et al. (2017) explained that a positive school culture can mitigate the effects of accountability pressures and stress. Ju et al. (2015) noted that a supportive school climate can be an essential tool in preventing teacher stress and possibly reducing attrition. Rumschlag (2017) added that once society supports teachers, students will be able to reach their full academic

ability. Suh (2018) exclaimed that teachers have the weighty responsibility of ensuring that today's children are prepared for and can contribute to society. Teacher stress contributes to a severe deterioration in the quality of instruction; therefore, principals must recognize their schools' conditions and develop policies that will create a school climate that will keep teachers committed to the success of their students (Suh, 2013).

### **School Climate**

Smith et al. (2014) defined school climate as:

The quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.

A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing, and satisfying life in a democratic society. (p. 1)

School climate is the conglomeration of leadership, expectations, collaboration, and safety (Hennessey, 2017). Teachers' perceptions of their school's climate are highly predictive of their leaving intentions; when teachers are satisfied with their school's climate, they are less likely to leave (Garcia Torres, 2019). Hennessey noted five decades of research list school climate as a critical factor in teacher and student outcomes.

Smith et al. (2014) explained that a positive school culture is an essential requirement for student achievement. In a study on school climate by Smith et al. (2014), seven overarching themes were identified:

- *Principal as Leader*: All stakeholders in an educational system see the principal as the agent of change. The principal is intentional in promoting a positive school culture.

- *Systematic and Individual Practices*: There exist systematic frameworks that support interpersonal engagement.
- *Relationships Matter*: Relationships between students and teachers and teachers and principals are seen as cohesive and positive.
- *Welcoming*: Intentional welcoming of guests, students, and staff to promote positive starts exists.
- *High Expectations*: Students and teachers are held to high expectations and have an intrinsic desire to be pushed to grow.
- *Importance of Consistency and Sense of Fairness*: Deliberately fair and equal treatment to all parties exists.
- *Communication and Messaging*: Intentional approaches to communicate with all members of an educational system are implanted.

Positive school culture is quite dependent on the principal. Principals are instrumental in defining, promoting, and maintaining a positive school culture (Smith et al., 2014). Principals that are accessible, supportive, and communicative with their teachers are more successful in creating a positive school culture (Smith et al., 2014). Smith et al. noted that principals can change their school's climate positively by developing an intentional strategy and following through. Often, schools are perceived to be factories of test scores, and interaction between teachers and principal leadership is limited to test goals; however, for a positive school culture, principals need focus on human connections and relationships (Smith et al., 2014).

Principals are critical components in a positive school environment, but they are not the only stakeholders that contribute to a school's climate. Both teachers and students can contribute to the school's climate. Classroom teachers can promote a positive school climate by investing

their time and effort in creating an encouraging environment (Smith et al., 2014). Students can contribute to the school's climate by participating fully in developing policies and practices that directly affect them. Students can also make a conscious effort to be a positive role model for their peers, hold themselves to high expectations, demonstrate good sportsmanship, ask for help, and attend school regularly and arrive on time (Smith et al., 2014).

Smith et al. (2014) explained that collaboration among all stakeholders, best practice techniques, effective evaluations, and useful resources is necessary to achieve a positive school climate. When the school climate is deemed positive by classroom teachers, the results are often more robust academic performance, higher graduation rates, decreased incidences of violence, and increased teacher retention (Reaves & Cozzens, 2018). Hennessey (2017) added that schools with positive school cultures report greater achievement gains by their students.

A positive school climate leads to less stress in teachers, and conversely, a negative school climate contributes to adverse outcomes such as stress, burnout, and attrition (Ryan et al., 2017). Hennessey (2017) explained that school climate is flexible and that as school climate increases, teacher attrition decreases. Dahlkamp et al. (2017) added that "teachers' satisfaction with their school climate is a large contributing factor to a decision to stay or leave along with the variable of personal teaching efficacy, working conditions, and job satisfaction" (p. 362).

Kraft et al. (2016) investigated the effect of strengthening organizational contexts in schools to determine whether there would be a decrease in teacher turnover and increased student achievement. Kraft et al. used data from the New York City Department of Education's (NYCDOE) school survey from 2007. The NYC School Survey is administered to teachers, students, and parents to collect data on academic expectations, communication, engagement, and safety and respect. The researchers used four sources of data provided by the NYCDOE:

1. Teacher responses to the NYC School Survey to measure school context;
2. NYC human resources data to provide information for teacher turnover data and teacher-level covariates;
3. NYC student assessment data to serve as the basis for the achievement outcome data and student-level covariates;
4. NYC school administrative data to identify the analysis sample and provide school-level covariates.

The results of Kraft et al. 's (2016) analysis of the NYCDOE's survey revealed four key findings: (a) previous research findings aligned with their data and reinforced that schools with higher-quality school contexts have students who experience greater achievement gains; (b) improvements in the school context within a school over time were associated with corresponding increases in student achievement gains; (c) there was a relationship between the school context and student achievement gains at a school was stronger in mathematics than in ELA; and (d) the relationship between the school context and student achievement gains varied considerably across dimensions. Kraft et al. explained:

Our analyses suggest that when schools strengthen the organizational contexts in which teachers work, teachers are more likely to remain in these schools, and student achievement on standardized tests increases at a faster rate – findings that are robust to a range of potential threats. School administrators' leadership skills emerge as particularly salient for whether teachers decide to remain in their schools. (p. 1439)

Three dimensions contribute to an effective school environment: (a) formal collaboration, (b) decision-making participation, and (c) innovation (Dou et al., 2017). Thus, school climate

directly influences teachers' organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Dou et al., 2017). As Ryan et al. (2017) indicated:

School climate may be an important mediator of the relationship between accountability pressures, stress, and attrition and migration in teachers. If school climate explains a portion of the variance in teacher test stress, it may be that positive school climate may reduce the development of test stress symptoms and attrition/migration in the school setting. (p. 4)

A climate of a school directly contributes to the retention of teachers and the academic success of students (Dahlkamp et al., 2017). Principals play an essential role in the school's climate; however, teachers and students contribute as well (Smith et al., 2014). Principals that empower their teachers and allow them to have a voice in school-level decisions improve the climate positively; therefore, principals must be deliberate in their policies and leadership strategies (Smith et al., 2014).

### **Distributed Leadership**

The role a school-level leader plays in the functioning of a school is undeniably paramount (Garcia Torres, 2019; Ni et al. 2018; Thibodeaux et al., 2015). Principals who support their teachers through the challenges of high-stakes assessments, allow them to have a voice in the school, guide them through the many stressors they experience daily, and still provide a positive school climate, must use a leadership style to navigate through all of these challenges.

Distributed leadership refers to a leadership style that involves several individuals taking leadership roles to accomplish shared goals within an organization (Garcia Torres, 2019). Bagwell (2019) explained that the practice of distributed leadership can be observed in three ways: (a) spontaneous collaboration, where leadership practice is a result of the collective



interactions of individuals with different skills and expertise to accomplish a task; (b) shared roles, where leadership emerges between two or more individuals coordinating their efforts to accomplish a task; and (c) institutional structures, where formal organizational roles or structures dictate leadership practices.

Garcia Torres (2019) investigated the relationship between distributed leadership and teachers' job satisfaction utilizing data collected by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) of 2013. To find a sample, TALIS surveyed a total of 98 schools and 1,507 teachers. The survey used with teachers consisted of three Likert scale items: (a) This school provides staff with opportunities to participate in school decisions actively; (b) This school has a culture of shared responsibility for school issues; and (c) There is a collaborative school culture which is characterized by mutual support. The survey for principals also consisted of three Likert scale items: (a) This school provides staff with opportunities to participate in school decisions actively; (b) I (principal) make the important decisions on my own; and (c) There is a collaborative culture which is characterized by mutual support.

The results indicated that individual teacher perceptions of distributed leadership were positively associated with job satisfaction (Garcia Torres, 2019). Conversely, the measures for principal perception of distributed leadership at the school level were not significant for teachers' job satisfaction, suggesting principal reports of school culture may not accurately reflect what teachers actually experience.

Distributed leadership frameworks provide a new mindset when examining how teachers and principals interact while collaborating to improve instructional practices (Bagwell, 2019). Schools that are structured in a manner that encourages teacher leadership have great potential in

providing a positive school culture that cultivates student success (Garcia Torres, 2019). Multiple studies have indicated that principals who practice a distributed leadership style are more successful at creating a work environment in which teachers choose to stay in the classrooms (Garcia Torres, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2017).

Bagwell (2019) explained that principals are often tasked with improving instruction and increasing student achievement; however, meeting this daunting task is almost impossible to do alone. Therefore, principals must practice a distributed leadership style. Principals who practice a distributed leadership style provide an environment where multiple stakeholders work together to provide a positive educational experience for students (Bagwell, 2019). Schools that function under distributed leadership demonstrate a culture of collaboration, shared responsibility, and mutual support (Garcia Torres, 2019). In a culture of collaboration, teachers develop curriculum, share resources, observe peers, and provide them with feedback, participate in book discussions, and make decisions based on school data (Pucella, 2014). Badenhorst and Koalepe (2014) elaborated:

Leadership works best when it is shared (distributed) in the school community, and leadership only succeeds if the leader shares his/her vision with subordinates in an environment of collaboration and trust. The idea behind distributed or shared leadership is that not only top executives lead, but that leadership can also be exercised throughout an organization. Distributed leadership can be conceived less as an asset of personal attributes or style and more as a practice enacted by people at many levels. (p. 246)

By including stakeholders in the decision-making process, there is potential for an increased sense of ownership, a higher level of job satisfaction and morale, and increased responsiveness to the needs of students (Ni et al., 2018). When educational leaders provide

shared leadership responsibilities with teachers, teachers become more vested in the organization and increase their commitment.

Distributed leadership and organizational commitment have a strong and positive relationship. Organizational commitment is defined as a teacher's commitment to a school or the teaching profession (Garcia Torres, 2019). Researchers have found that teachers' organizational commitment is directly related to their ability to participate in decision-making, the amount of cooperation among principals, and the amount of support they receive from principals (Player et al., 2017). As teachers' organizational commitment and satisfaction increase, their retention rates increase as well (Garcia Torres, 2019). Consequently, as teacher satisfaction increases, a more positive work environment is created, and ultimately, student performance increases (Garcia Torres, 2019). A consequence of distributed leadership is more autonomous and confident teachers who coordinate collaborative activities with colleagues (Garcia Torres, 2019).

“Teachers with less control over their schedules may not have time for collaborative meetings, and teachers with less control over instructional practice may not be able to alter their curricula or classrooms” (Garcia Torres, 2019, p. 120).

Teachers have the most significant impact on student learning (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Therefore, the retention of qualified educators is imperative to student success. Distributed leadership increases teachers' organizational commitment, which increases teacher retention and culminates in student success (Garcia Torres, 2019). Schools that implement a distributed leadership model can change traditional operational practices and provide an improved educational experience that creates twenty-first-century learners (Pucella, 2014).

With the clear understanding that teachers are the key to students' success, every effort must be made to promote their retention in the classroom. Educational leaders can increase the retention of classroom teachers in their building by leading with distributive practices.

### **Chapter Summary**

Multiple studies have shown the effect a strong classroom teacher has on his or her students. In fact, classroom teachers are paramount to the success of any educational system. Effective classroom teachers not only provide rigorous instruction that creates critical thinking, but they also contribute to the social and emotional well-being of their students. Unfortunately, the current educational system does not always encourage the retention of effective classroom teachers. The use of high-stakes assessments as an accountability tool decreases the ability of a teacher to meet the needs of his or her diverse needs because the curriculum is narrowed and controlled. When classroom teachers feel that they do not have a voice in the running of their classroom, their stress level increases to the point that is detrimental to their performance and sometimes to their personal health. As more and more teachers are plagued with this stress, they often make the ultimate decision to leave the teaching profession. The attrition of classroom teachers is ever-growing and takes a toll on all stakeholders within and the educational system.

Fortunately, research has shown that teachers who are satisfied with their principals and the school climate are more likely to remain and thrive in the classroom. The principal can provide an environment that is conducive to the retention of teachers. Principals who practice a distributed leadership style increase the satisfaction of the classroom teacher because they are a genuine part of the decision-making process. Distributed leadership does not remove the adversities of teaching, but it makes it tolerable and keeps the teachers where they belong, in the classroom.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Classroom teachers leaving the profession is continuing to plague schools across the nation. As these teachers leave, empty classrooms are filled too frequently with inexperienced or ineffective teachers. The effect is not limited to students; remaining teachers are commonly burdened with an increased workload, and schools and districts are placed in financial strain in their efforts to recruit and train new applicants. Ultimately, the responsibility of providing a positive educational experience for students, while navigating through these difficult times, is placed on the principals. Multiple researchers (e.g., Hughes et al., 2015; Redding, et al., 2018; Thibodeaux et al., 2015) have found that principals play a pivotal role in a classroom teacher's decision to stay or leave the profession. With this increased responsibility, principals are no longer able to use traditional leadership methods to meet the needs of schools today.

Due to the influence principals have over teachers' decisions to remain in the profession or leave it, examining the experiences and realities of classroom teachers who have decided to leave the profession is essential. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the experiences of classroom teachers who left the profession, specifically focusing on the actions of principals that contributed to the teachers' decisions to leave the profession. While there are many factors impacting teachers' decisions, there is the potential that principals may be able to create a school climate that demonstrates effectiveness in retaining teachers.

This study aimed to investigate the experiences of former classroom teachers to identify whether there were any specific actions or leadership qualities of their former principals that acted as catalysts to their decisions to leave the profession. This study was qualitative in order to gain information from the participants about their lived experiences in the classroom and how leadership practices influenced those experiences. The population studied was teachers who have

left the profession, and their experiences were chronicled. By interviewing multiple participants who once held teaching positions in Learning County, SC, the researcher was able to identify common themes. This study provides insight that can be used by principals to support the teachers in their schools and decrease teacher attrition. All stakeholders vested in the schools benefit from teacher retention.

Chapter 1 detailed the latest statistics on attrition and the effects that teacher attrition has on all stakeholders within an educational system while also emphasizing the importance of the school level leader's ability to practice a leadership style that encourages teacher retention. Chapter 2 contained a review of the current literature and research relevant to this study's topic. This chapter provides the methodology for the study, including the research question, the population, sample, and sampling procedures, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, and the reporting process.

### **Research Question**

This study employed a qualitative methodology using a phenomenological design. Phenomenology involves the understanding of the lived experiences of the participants and disclosing the phenomenon in their consciousness (Willis et al., 2016). The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to investigate the experiences of classroom teachers who left the profession, specifically the actions of principals that participants perceived as contributing to the teachers' decisions to leave. Therefore, the overarching research question that guided this study was: How do former elementary school teachers describe the experiences with the principals that contributed to their decisions to leave the profession?

## Research Design

Creswell (2014) defined qualitative research as “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Creswell further explained that qualitative research focuses on individual meaning and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation. Qualitative research is “a systematic scientific inquiry which seeks to build a holistic, largely narrative, description to inform the researcher’s understanding of a social or cultural phenomenon” (Astalin, 2013, p. 118). This current study captured the experiences of former elementary school teachers to identify trends in their responses and present those trends to principals so they can reflect on their current practices and avoid contributing to the attrition of classroom teachers.

There are several types of qualitative designs, and the preferred approach in any study is dependent on the research in practice (Lewis, 2015). The four most commonly used qualitative research designs are phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and case study (Astalin, 2013). This study employed a phenomenological design because the result did not provide a solution, but instead increased insight into the phenomenon (Patton, 2015) of teacher attrition. Phenomenological research takes the experiences of a group of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon and allows the researcher to describe the participants’ understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Willis et al. (2016) explained that the lived experience of participants is a fundamental piece of phenomenological research. Flynn and Korcuska (2018) further elaborated that, “researchers using phenomenological research methodology endeavor to discern the essence of participants' lived experiences and to lay aside their prevailing understandings of a phenomenon to authentically explore the participants' experiences” (p. 35). Ultimately, the purpose of phenomenological research is to share the lived

experiences from individuals who experienced the actual phenomenon and share their experiences with the outside world (Mapp, 2008).

After the research proposal was approved by the dissertation committee, the researcher completed an application to the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval to conduct the study (see Appendix A). Approval was granted, and the researcher began the recruitment and selection of participants.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

In qualitative research, the study's research questions and conceptual framework guide the initial decision regarding the recruitment approach. Farrugia (2019) explained:

While quantitative studies often aim to maximize statistical power through the use of as large a sample size as feasible, qualitative studies usually work with a small number of cases that are feasible to study in depth. While subjects/cases in quantitative studies are stripped of their context, the smaller numbers involved in qualitative research allows exploration and richness of the data collected. (p. 69)

While it is clear that qualitative research has fewer participants than quantitative research, the actual number of appropriate participants varies. Flynn and Korcuska (2018) and Creswell (2014) recommended a sample size of three to ten for a phenomenological study, while Farrugia (2019) stated that an appropriate size for a qualitative study is any number that answers the research questions. For this study, the researcher adopted the guidelines by Flynn and Korcuska, and the current study had 10 participants.

The sampling for this study was purposive. Purposive or judgment sampling allows the researcher to deliberately and purposefully select the sample that he or she believes will be the most fruitful in answering the research question (Farrugia, 2019). Willis et al. (2016) reiterated



this by explaining that purposive sampling helps the researcher select participants who have had similar experiences. Palinkas et al. (2015) noted that purposeful sampling is used frequently in qualitative research to select participants who meet the same criteria and are or have been engaged in the same phenomenon being studied so that they can best address the topic under investigation. The researcher intentionally selected participants who met the following criteria:

- Individuals who were no longer in the teaching profession;
- Former general education teachers from the elementary school level who taught in Learning County, SC;
- Former teachers who had more than five years of teaching experience;
- Former teachers who worked with the same principal for at least three years; and,
- Former teachers who left the profession within the last five years, as their leaving would be recent enough for them to recall clearly.

This study involved investigating the experiences of former classroom teachers, specifically regarding their interactions with their principals and whether those principals influenced their decision to leave the profession. Because the participants were not currently employed teachers, district approval was not needed.

When all approvals were granted, the researcher posted a recruitment flyer on the *SC for Ed* Facebook page. This Facebook group is composed of current and former teachers in the state of South Carolina. The mission of this group is “educational empowerment through community and advocacy in SC.” The researcher’s post explained that she would recruit 20 potential participants in a two-week period. Ten applicants who represented different schools and school leaders and indicated their availability during the data collection period were interviewed in an effort to chronicle their experiences in the classroom and to identify any actions by their

principal that influenced their decision to leave the classroom. The researcher contacted the 10 participants who were not selected and thanked them for their willingness to participate, but that at this time, she would not include them in her study.

### **Developing the Interview Protocol**

In qualitative research, there are several ways to collect data. Jacob et al. (2012) explained that the four most frequently used tools for collecting qualitative data are observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials. Using an interview provides the researcher with a rich understanding of the participants' lived experiences, and through these experiences meaning is made (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

The interview questions are different from the research questions, but they are designed to support the research questions. Research questions are written and created in a theoretical language, whereas the interview questions are expressed in the everyday language of the participants (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). An interview protocol, based on current literature on teacher attrition, was developed by the researcher to investigate the research question. The researcher used the Interview Protocol Refinement Framework [IPR] to guide the development of the interview protocol. The IRP framework consists of four phases: (a) drafting interview questions and ensuring that they align with the research question, (b) constructing an inquiry, (c) receiving feedback on interview protocols, and (d) piloting the interview protocol. The IRP framework may be followed loosely or strictly, depending on the needs or means of the researcher (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

The first phase was drafting interview questions and ensuring they aligned with the research question. A researcher must be deliberate and reflective when developing or selecting research questions because the participants' lives are complex and need to be approached with

sensitivity (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The interview protocol used in this study contained nine open-ended questions related to the teachers' decision to leave teaching (see Appendix B).

The second phase was constructing an inquiry-based conversation. Castillo-Montoya (2016) explained that the researcher must develop an inquiry-based conversation through the interview protocol by ensuring the interview questions are written differently than the research questions, organizing the protocol so that it follows the social norms within ordinary conversations, using a variety of questions, and have a script that includes question prompts. Patton (2002) classified interview questions into six categories: (a) experience/behavior, (b) opinion and values, (c) feelings, (d) knowledge, (e) sensory, and (f) background/demographic. Developing questions that address these categories served to promote an inquiry-based conversation.

The third phase was receiving feedback on the interview protocol. The purpose of receiving feedback is to increase the level of reliability or trustworthiness (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Feedback provided information to the researcher on how well the participants understood the questions and if that understanding was close to the researcher's intentions (Patton, 2015). The researcher shared her protocol with a teacher, a former teacher, and a principal. The researcher asked the panel if the questions were feasible, appropriate, and clear (Hurst et al., 2015). The feedback was positive and participants provided no suggestions for modification or changes.

The final phase was piloting the interview protocol. The researcher piloted the interview protocol with two former teachers who had left the profession. The pilot allowed the researcher to identify if any additional changes needed to be made and to practice interviewing techniques. Overall the feedback was positive, however, the participants indicated that a few of the sentences

were a little wordy and that some of the vocabulary used would be unfamiliar to participants. The researcher streamlined her questions to be more precise and edited her vocabulary so participants would be more comfortable answering the interview protocol.

### **Data Collection**

In qualitative studies, there are multiple ways to gather data. Creswell (2014) indicated that interviewing is the most commonly used means of data collection in qualitative research. Creswell also added that a qualitative interview is a direct dialogue between the researcher and the participant(s). Several steps were followed in this study to collect qualitative data using interviews.

### ***Obtaining Consent***

After interested participants responded and agreed to participate, the researcher scheduled a time to telephone each potential participant to establish rapport, review ethical considerations, and explain that the consent form would be emailed to the participants after the phone call. During the phone call, a date and time were scheduled for the virtual interview. Participants were made aware that the virtual interview would be audio-recorded. The researcher also shared the topic of the study with the participants so that they would be able to reflect on their experiences before the actual interview. During this initial phone conversation, the researcher reviewed the Informed Consent Form and verified that the participants met the inclusion criteria. These phone calls lasted approximately 15 minutes each. Once the initial phone call with each participant was completed, the researcher emailed the Informed Consent Form as an attachment and requested that the participant sign the form and return it to her within 24 hours. Before the interview, the participants were emailed a reminder of the upcoming interview and a link that would be used for the virtual interview.

### *Conducting the Interview*

The researcher employed the use of virtual interviews conducted through Google Meet. Eliciting a discussion of participants' experiences takes patience and careful listening (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). "A successful researcher interviews people to find out things that are not easily discernible, such as feelings, thoughts, intentions, and previous behaviors. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful" (Brayda & Boyce, 2014, p. 319). Patton (2015) simplified the purpose of interviewing as, "[y]ou're hoping to elicit relevant answers that are meaningful and useful in understanding the interviewee's perspective. That's basically what interviewing is all about" (p. 471).

At the scheduled time, the virtual interview took place through a Google Meet videoconferencing session. One hour was allotted for the interview for each participant, and the interviews were audio-recorded through Google Meet. While a structured interview protocol was used, the researcher was prepared to ask clarifying or probing questions as needed. During each virtual interview, the researcher made notes to indicate body language and other non-verbal cues. The researcher ended the interview by thanking the participants for their time and indicated that she would be sending them a \$10 Amazon gift card as a token of her appreciation.

Following the interviews, the recorded files were uploaded into NVivo Transcription Services for transcribing. Once transcripts had been returned to the researcher, she verified the accuracy of each by comparing the recording to the transcript. She shared two completed transcripts with two of the participants to do member checking. The researcher asked the two randomly-selected participants to read over their transcripts and verify that what they read was a correct representation of what they said. Additionally, once the researcher had identified common themes among all of the transcripts, she shared her findings with all participants and

asked them to verify that they agreed with the themes. Participants agreed with the themes that were presented.

### **Data Analysis**

Creswell (2014) explained that the purpose of qualitative data analysis is to find meaning in the text. To find the meaning of the information provided by participants, the researcher completed specific procedures to ensure data were used appropriately to answer the research question. The researcher used a step-by-step analysis procedure that entailed organizing the data, finding and organizing ideas and concepts, building overarching themes from the data, ensuring trustworthiness and rigor in the data analysis and the findings, and determining possible and plausible explanations of the results (O'Connor & Gibson, 2003).

The first step, organizing the data, entailed the deliberate arrangement of text in a spreadsheet, which allowed the researcher to identify concepts and themes. The second step, finding and organizing ideas and concepts, involved identifying various responses for a particular question. This step was as specific as giving deliberate attention to the language or words a participant used and how frequently they used them when compared to other participants. After identifying keywords or phrases and identifying those that occurred often, the information was organized by codes into categories. Flynn and Korcuska (2018) explained that phenomenological researchers use coding and data reduction methods such as descriptive coding, open coding, and theming. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) simplified coding as “nothing more than assigning some sort of short-hand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (p. 199).

The third step, building overarching themes in data, occurred when the researcher reviewed the coded and categorized data and identified several themes. The fourth step, ensuring

trustworthiness and rigor in data analysis and the findings, was achieved by selecting direct quotes of participants to substantiate emergent themes, which provided trustworthiness to the truth value of the study. The fifth and final step, finding possible and plausible explanations of the findings, required the researcher to reflect on and summarize the results. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasized, the ultimate goal is to answer the research question. In addition, it is essential that the reflective summary included differences and similarities to the current literature. The findings are presented according to the research question, and direct quotes are used to support each emergent theme, as recommended by Elo et al. (2014).

### **Reporting the Data**

The findings from this study are reported in Chapter 4. Since qualitative data are descriptive, results are reported in a narrative format, according to each theme that emerged. Select quotes of participants are provided to ensure the confirmability of the findings and to add richness to the descriptions (Creswell, 2014).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Creswell (2014) stressed the importance of ethical issues in qualitative research. Throughout the process of data collection, the researcher maintained transparency with participants. When each participant had their initial conversation with the researcher, she shared and reviewed the informed consent letter with them. If the participants indicated their willingness to participate, the researcher asked that they sign the informed consent letter and email it back within 24 hours.

The researcher completed training on research ethics through the Georgia Southern University's Institutional Review Board and earned certification stating that she had successfully completed the training. The researcher shared her informed consent paperwork and all of her

appendices for transparency throughout the recruiting process with Georgia Southern University's Institutional Review Board and earned their approval.

Because the nature of a qualitative study is personal, special attention was given to ethical issues. Due to past atrocities and unethical human experimentation, the Belmont Report was established to protect human subjects (Adashi et al., 2018). The Belmont Report consists of three principles: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The first principle, respect for persons, protects diminished autonomy, and ensures that participants be treated as autonomous agents (Adashi et al., 2018). Creswell (2014) explained respect for persons when stressing the importance of providing participants with detailed and informed consent information, then receiving permission from the participants. Participants in this study were made aware that their virtual interviews were audio-recorded and that those recordings would be transcribed and analyzed to identify themes present in the participants' interviews.

The second principle, beneficence, maximizes the benefits of the research while minimizing the harm that it causes. This principle ensures there is a careful assessment of the risks and benefits (Adashi et al., 2018). Creswell (2014) described the avoidance of harm as ensuring the confidentiality of participants and avoiding any deception and exploitation of participants. In this study, the researcher did not include any of the participants' names or identifying information; instead, participants were assigned a pseudonym. The names of the schools in which each participant worked and the principal with whom each worked were not used. Once transcripts of audio recordings had been created and verified, the audio-recordings were destroyed. Documents containing participants' identities were maintained separately from data files. The researcher stored all materials in a locked filing cabinet in her home office where they will remain for three years, at which time she will shred all documents. The audio



recordings were saved on a password-protected flash drive, stored with the other materials in the filing cabinet in her home office, and will be destroyed at the end of three years.

The final principle is justice. The justice principle ensures an equal distribution of research costs and benefits (Adashi et al., 2018). In this study, justice was applied by having no cost and minimal risk to participants and that the benefit of the results was shared widely within the district.

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, the researcher is considered the instrument, and care had to be taken not to infuse bias in the study (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, procedures were implemented to ensure that the study was trustworthy. Guba and Lincoln (1981) explained that trustworthiness in qualitative research is obtained by identifying truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality.

Truth value, also known as credibility, can be established in several ways. In this study, the researcher implemented member checks to verify the truth value of the study. Edmonson and Irby (2008) defined member checking as “testing the data with the informants” (p. 80). Two randomly selected participants were sent individual emails with their transcripts attached. The researcher requested that participants review their transcript and confirm that they were accurately represented. Participants only reviewed their own transcript; participants did not see the transcripts of other participants. After the researcher identified themes in the research, she shared them with all participants so they had the opportunity to confirm that they agreed and their transcript was interpreted correctly.

Edmonson and Irby (2008) explained applicability, also known as generalizability or transferability, as the ability of the data to be applied to other contexts. They also defined

consistency, also known as dependability, as the ability to find similar findings if the study was repeated with the same or a similar sample. A strategy for ensuring applicability and consistency used in this study was to provide a dense description of the participants and the context. This description offers the readers more insight to the participants, allowing opportunities to determine applicability and consistency.

Neutrality, also known as confirmability, is proof that findings are free from the researcher's biases (Edmonson & Irby, 2008). To decrease personal bias in this study, the researcher used the reflexivity strategy. Krefling (1991) explained the reflexivity strategy as a deliberate reflection of the researchers' own influence in the research and that the researcher should openly share his or her perceptions, when appropriate. Included in the data analysis is a reflection from the researcher that detailed her experiences, perspectives, values, and beliefs. The researcher engaged in reflexivity by making notes of her thoughts throughout the study on the paper version of each participant's transcript. The researcher made notes that she was personally affected by teacher attrition. She is a product, parent, and employee of Learning County, and regrettably, she has hired less-than-desirable candidates due to a low number of applicants. As a parent, she has experienced her children's teachers leaving mid-year on multiple occasions. The researcher was deliberate in sharing realities, experiences, and beliefs in the data analysis chapter.

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions**

There are limitations to this study based upon decisions made by the researcher, most of which were beyond the control of the researcher. "Limitations are particular features of a study that may negatively affect the results or the ability to generalize" (Roberts, 2010, p. 162). The main limitation of this study was that the researcher's professional role may have affected the

participants' responses. Because the researcher is an assistant principal, participants may have been wary of providing truthful responses because they were related to a principal's leadership. To address this limitation, the researcher read a confidentiality statement to each participant.

As Roberts (2010) explained, the delimitation section clarifies the boundaries of the study. A delimitation of this study was that those surveyed consisted of only former elementary school teachers who were employed in one school district in South Carolina and who met the selection criteria set forth by the researcher. As a result, the findings are most relevant to that particular district. Further, as this was a Dissertation of Practice, the results were intended to improve educational practice in educational leadership. Because the geographical area was limited, the results would inform leadership practice in that particular school system.

Statements that are assumed to be true are referred to as assumptions (Wargo, 2015). Several assumptions were made in this study, including that the participants answered all of the interview questions honestly and that participants participated for the sole purpose of providing information for the research and with no other intention.

### **Chapter Summary**

The goal of the researcher was to collect the experiences of former teachers and identify whether any behaviors of their former principals contributed to their decision to leave the classroom. To do so, 10 purposefully selected former general education teachers were interviewed virtually, utilizing a structured questionnaire. While the interview was structured, the researcher allowed for additional probing and clarification questions as needed. Themes that emerged from the collected data identified a variety of factors that associated with their decision; however, the researcher was most interested in investigating the factors that involved the practices of the principal at their school. The findings of this study could provide principals and

district office personnel with specific leadership practices to avoid in order to lessen teacher attrition.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate and identify specific practices of school principals in Learning County, SC, that contributed to teachers' decisions to leave the profession. When teachers leave the profession, a ripple effect occurs that affects many other people, not just the former teacher. Districts must designate more funds for recruiting and professional development; remaining teachers are burdened with larger class sizes and an increase in their workload; and, students do not receive an optimal educational experience because they may be taught by low-performing or novice teachers.

This study was qualitative in design because the researcher's goal was to solicit the lived experiences of teachers who left the profession. The intent was to analyze the data to identify any common practices of principals that led to a teachers' decisions to leave the profession altogether. Data collection involved interviews with former general education, elementary teachers in Learning County who each had worked for the same principal for at least three years. The researcher used an interview protocol comprised of nine open-ended questions developed from her extensive review of current literature.

The interviews were held virtually through Google Meets and were recorded once the participants gave their permission. Data from the transcripts of the interviews were sorted and categorized to identify common experiences or themes related to the teachers' experiences with their former principals. The researcher's goal was to share overall findings with leadership in Learning County in hopes of decreasing teacher attrition.

### **Research Question**

The research question that guided this study was: How do former elementary school teachers describe their experiences with school principals that contributed to their decision to leave the profession?

### **Research Design**

The researcher elected to gather research qualitatively because the intent was to learn about specific experiences each participant had with her principal. The type of information needed to gather specific and detailed lived experiences of the former teachers could not have been attained through a quantitative measure. The goal was to document the participants' demeanors, emotions, and responses as the interviews proceeded. The development of the researcher's structured interview protocol was guided by current literature specific to teacher attrition.

This study employed a phenomenological design because the goal of the study was not to provide a solution, but to provide increased insight into the phenomenon (Patton, 2015) of teacher attrition. Phenomenological research takes the experiences of a group of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon and allows the researcher to describe the participants' understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

### **Description of Participants**

Ten former classroom teachers were interviewed for this study. All of the participants taught general education in Learning County, SC, and had the same principal at their school for at least three years they were employed as teachers. All participants taught at more than one school, except for Participant 1 (P1), who taught at the same school for 33 years. The demographics of the interview participants are provided in Table 1.

*Table 1: Participant Demographics*

Participant	Race	Gender	Total Years in Education	Total Number of Schools
P1	Caucasian	Female	33	1
P2	Caucasian	Female	6	2
P3	Caucasian	Female	7	2
P4	Caucasian	Female	16	2
P5	Caucasian	Female	6	2
P6	Caucasian	Female	5	2
P7	Caucasian	Female	6	2
P8	Caucasian	Female	9	2
P9	African-American	Female	30	3
P10	Caucasian	Female	5	1

### **Findings**

The researcher collected data for this qualitative study through a structured interview protocol. The interview protocol was consisted of nine open-ended questions. The researcher did ask additional follow-up questions during all interviews to probe for more in-depth responses.

After all of the interviews had been transcribed, the researcher read each transcript multiple times; as each transcript was read, the researcher recorded her thoughts on the margins of each page. The continuous reading of the transcripts allowed the researcher to identify common words, phrases, and ideas. The researcher created a spreadsheet where she organized her identified commonalities. The major commonalities or themes were identified as: (a) rules, norms, and security; (b) teaching and learning; and (c) interpersonal relationships. After the spreadsheet was complete, the researcher noted that within each theme, there were several subthemes. The organization of the data into themes and subthemes made the information much

easier for the researcher to read and identify many common threads between all ten participants.

Table 2 shows the themes and sub-themes that were identified.

*Table 2: Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subtheme 1	Subtheme 2	Subtheme 3	Subtheme 4
Rules, Norms, and Security	Office Repercussions	Parents/Parent Conferences		
Teaching and Learning	Classroom Reality	Transition Support	Student Advocacy	Autonomy
Interpersonal Relationships	Disrespect	Peer Relationship		

### **Theme 1: Rules, Norms, and Security**

The first theme to emerge was what the researcher designated as Rules, Norms, and Security. Participants noted a positive and safe school climate is free of physical violence, verbal abuse, and exclusionary practices. To achieve this secure climate, the school principal must have clearly communicated rules and norms. These rules and norms must be shared with all stakeholders within an educational environment so that there are parameters to prevent volatile parent conferences and to prevent teacher frustration when they send a student to the office. Participants in this study indicated that adherence to rules, norms, and a secure environment were absent in their schools. P8 explained “Because of the way discipline was handled, it [the school] didn’t feel like a safe environment. It was very centered on the kids, which it should be, but not to the point where teachers are pushed to the side and their safety was overlooked.” This theme contained two sub-themes: Office Repercussions and Parents/Parent Conferences.



### *Office Repercussions*

Office repercussions, which the researcher defined as the consequences students' received as a result of their behavior in the classroom based on the analysis of her findings, was the most frequently-cited sub-theme within the rules, norms, and security theme. All participants expressed the lack of support their principal provided regarding discipline. All participants indicated that the lack of repercussions when students were sent to the office clearly undermined the teachers' authority. P1, P2, P5, P6, and P8 specifically cited instances of a student sent to the office for behavior problems, but who then returned to the classroom with a pencil or a sticker.

P1 explained:

I would go through all of the steps in our behavior chart, and when the behavior reached the point of going to the office, I would send them, and they'd come back with a piece of candy. I was so angry about it. She (principal) just reinforced those bad behaviors, and now all the other kids will think: *All I have to do is be bad and I'll get a piece of candy.*

P6 said that sending a student to the office was pointless, as "they just come on back and pick up where they left off." P1 indicated that the frustration was common among all of the teachers:

Me and my teammates got angry because he (principal) was useless. We just figured out ways to help each other out, like making them go to another classroom or one of us taking all of the students that misbehaved to a different table at lunch for silent lunch. We just quit going to him (principal).

Participants indicated that they did not want to continue to work in a school setting in which rules and norms were not observed.

### *Parents/Parent Conferences*

For the purpose of this student, the theme Parents/Parent Conferences, refers to the interaction between a teacher and a parent regarding the student. Participants felt as though the parents did not treat them with respect. P2 shared that she felt like she was at the parents' beck and call at all times. P2 explained, "I felt like I had to answer every text and email; some parents were messaging me at 10:30 at night." P6 shared that, many times, parents were disrespectful of her time:

My planning time would get taken away to have meetings with parents who were often late to the meetings, or you would schedule a time after school, and you would stay later because you had to wait for that parent to get off work, and then they would never show up.

Many participants shared examples of parent conferences that were hostile and offensive, yet the principal sat there and allowed it to continue. P1 shared a time when a stepfather came to the school and was very angry about what his stepson shared with him the previous night. The principal called the teacher to join him in his office and provided no more information. P1 explained that she was immediately scolded by her principal and was told to apologize to the stepfather for her actions the previous day. P1 refused to apologize and then shared what had happened. P1 felt disrespected by her principal:

My principal sat there the whole time, never apologized, never asked the parent to speak with the teacher before going to the office. I left, and the principal never said anything.

He never apologized to me; there was no excuse for that.

P7 had a very similar experience:

He [a student's dad] screamed at me from across the table. I mean, he screamed at me, and I had to just sit there and take it because I knew the minute .....I tried to say something to him....he would just hammer down even harder. I knew I wasn't getting anywhere with this parent, so I just sat there. She (principal) just sat there and let him scream at me; she took his side and said that we would find resolution. He left, and she walked him out the doors. Then she came back into the conference room and said, *I'm so sorry that was not fair how he was speaking to you, he is not right, you are right...* Why would, as an administrator, why would you not stick up and say: *Sir, your daughter is in the wrong in this?* You know, it was just that moment where I realized that I was expendable to her, and I knew that was my last year in a school.

P5 simply explained that the principal will always take the parent's side, and teachers just had to deal with it. The teachers felt that their role in parent-teacher-principal conferences was irrelevant even though they worked with the students daily. Several participants felt that they were required to keep intensive data on every student, but ultimately the parents were the decision-makers.

These teachers were vocal in their concern with student discipline and parent conferences; they wanted to be treated with respect, and that respect begins with the safe school climate created by the principal.

## **Theme 2: Teaching and Learning**

Classroom teachers will be the first to explain that teaching is more than reading, writing, and arithmetic, and the participants in this study made that clear leading to the second emergent theme: Teaching and Learning. The researcher defined Teaching and Learning as the specific actions in the school that encourage high-quality instruction and provide a climate that is

conducive to student success Throughout the interviews, participants used terms such as whole child, individualized instruction, emotional well-being, and relationships. The participants in this study considered themselves advocates for their students. Many participants felt as though their principal had lost touch with the reality of teaching, which made them inadequate to make one-size-fits-all instructional decisions. This theme consisted of four sub-themes: Classroom Reality, Transition Support, Student Advocacy, and, Autonomy.

### *Classroom Reality*

Classroom reality is the full experience of being a teacher in a classroom; the tasks, the stress and the students all combined together. Participants made frequent remarks about their principals having unrealistic expectations because they had simply forgotten what it is like to be a teacher. P7 said, “The person (principal) making the decision is just too far out of touch with a classroom and needs a refresher.” P6 suggested, “I just wish that sometimes administration was also a bit more in tune with what is going on, and I think if they remembered that would be a solution to a lot of problems.” P1 stated, “Sometimes, I feel that they (principals) tend to forget what it’s like to be in the classroom.” P5 said, “It’s frustrating that the principals quickly forget what it’s like in the classroom.” The participants’ comments indicated that if the principals remembered the realities of teaching, they would be more considerate of classroom teachers and place a higher value on teachers’ opinions and insight. The participants noted school principals are responsible for promoting a school climate that listens to the teachers and respects their professional authority. If principals demonstrate value and respect for classroom teachers, they set a tone that makes teachers feel empowered.

From the perspective of the participants, as their principal forgot about the realities of working in a classroom, they forgot about the unrealistic workload expectations placed on

teachers. P2, P6, and P7 explained that their inability to complete each of the daily demands of a classroom teacher led them to such a high-level of anxiety, they had to begin taking medicine to help them get through the day. P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, and P9 all explained that their workload was so high, they would bring work home with them and it would still never be finished. The emotional toll the workload placed on the participants was amplified when the participants recounted the amount of time their work took them away from their own children.

The participants stated they felt a disconnect with their principals. Participants collectively agreed that if their principal experienced their daily reality, they would have been more understanding to their experiences. Participants felt that with understanding from their principal the teaching and learning in their school would be one that made both the students and teachers successful.

### ***Transition Support***

Included in the researcher's interview protocol were two questions about principals' support during times of change, so it is not unusual that some form of support or lack thereof would emerge from the data. For the sake of this study, the theme Transition Support refers to a principals presence and empathy during any school-wide change. The researcher asked participants to recall their principals' actions during a transition that made them feel supported and, conversely, what their principal did to make them feel unsupported.

When participants were asked to recall a transitional time when they felt supported by their principals, only two participants provided examples. In both accounts, participants explained that their principal addressed the entire staff to introduce a new and additional assessment program. They appreciated that their principal empathized with them and that they recognized this new assessment program was just one more addition to their already full plate.

Both participants understood that nothing would change; but, seeing their principals' frustration made the transition more tolerable.

All participants were able to provide examples of times they felt unsupported by their principals as they presented them with yet another change. P8 shared that each year she and her teammates would be required to learn and implement some new instructional programs. She recalled explaining to her principal that she did not think the new program was what her students needed and that an existing program was perfect for her students. P8 felt that she was more competent to implement the former program with fidelity and that it would meet the needs of her students; unfortunately, this made her principal angry, and she was forced to drop a program that she knew would work for one that she did not fully understand. P8's frustration grew with the frequency of the new, best practices, "My administration would be like, 'oh, I heard about this; let's all read this book and implement this'; it was like they would say, 'oh, this is cool, let's do this'". P4 recalled an experience when her principal stated at the beginning of a training session that her hands were tied and that the staff would be learning and using a new program. She said her principal told the entire faculty that the district was making them use it, and because it was costly, there was no need to complain because nothing would change.

These former teachers were all aware that change is constant in the educational system. Sometimes changes were welcomed, and other times they created frustration and resentment for each participant. Participants felt that the teaching and learning within their school was affected by the disregard of their current instructional practices and the constant implementation of new ideas and programs.

### *Student Advocacy*

The third sub-theme expressed in the theme of Teaching and Learning was Student Advocacy, which the researcher defined as teachers' ability to support their students and ensure that students are afforded all that they are entitled to. The majority of the participants in this study were proud of their ability to form relationships with their students and often expressed that they alone knew what was best for their students. Participants agreed that it is impossible to meet the needs of each student if they did not take the time to get to know them, and they believed that their relationship with and knowledge of their students made them the rightful decision-makers in their classrooms as it related to the needs of their students.

Participants became very emotional and were brought to tears when they spoke of their former students. P5 explained, "It's like you're the kids' mom." Each participant felt it was vital to note that the students played no role in their decision to leave the classroom. P6 cried when she stated, "The hardest part was leaving the kids." Participants felt responsible for meeting the individual needs in their classroom, so when they were given mandates and restrictions on their instruction, they thought they were doing a disservice to the students. P3 explained that she could not tolerate that she was forced only to teach the materials that would be on the state test, and she was very vocal with her principal that her students' natural creativity was being stifled. P3 also felt the need to defend the seating arrangement in her classroom; she explained:

He (principal) walked into my classroom and said that he wanted to make sure all of my students could see the board. He told me to visit another teacher's classroom and fix my organization to match hers. I said OK, but you do realize my desks are placed the way they are because I have to follow ADA guidelines. I told him that I have a student confined to a wheelchair who had Spina Bifida, and he needs three feet of space in order

to move around the classroom. At that point, I was like, you don't know me, and you don't know this child. I'm glad that I was able to stand up for myself and my student; I usually cry.

Participants became emotional when discussing their relationships with students.

Participants repeatedly stated that students were not the reason they left. In fact, participants listed the students as the reason they even came to their schools each day. According to P3, teaching and learning are not possible without a relationship between the teacher and the student.

### *Autonomy*

In Learning County, teachers from Kindergarten to 8th grade are required to be on the same pacing and teaching the same content. There are currently 26 elementary schools in Learning County, and it covers a large geographic area, which includes vastly different student demographics.

Teachers in Learning County have been vocal in their displeasure regarding common pacing and curriculum; therefore, it was of no surprise that Autonomy, which is defined as the teacher's right to make decisions in real-time for the betterment of their students, emerged as the final theme in Teaching and Learning. Participants interpreted lack of autonomy as an indication that they were not trusted. P2 explained "I just felt like I was being watched all the time; like I was never trusted to do best practices or the teaching I needed to do." P2 explained how protective she became of her English Language Learners (ELLs). She shared that she had many ELLs in her class, and their English was very limited. P2 said that her principal told her that having ELL students did not give her the right to fall behind the grade level pacing. P2 continued moving at a slower pace; she just did her best to hide it from the principal. P2 explained "I



initially followed the pacing like it was the Bible, but when I realized that everyone was doing what they wanted, just secretly, I decided to also do what I needed to... in secret.”

P8 echoed the sentiment of P2. She recalled a time that her principal introduced a new reading program to the entire staff during a faculty meeting. She liked what was being presented but felt that her students would not be successful in such a program; she knew her students needed small group instruction because of their learning style and behaviors, but she was forced to implement a program that was not developed for the students she served.

P3 explained the effect high-stakes assessment had on her ability to teach her students. With visible frustration, P3 recalled that her principal’s priority on test scores made effective instruction impossible. She was not allowed to provide engaging lessons because her instruction was limited to test-taking skills and memorization of facts and algorithms. P3 explained “You feel like you’re not thinking, you are just following direction and there is no creativity. I felt discouraged because I couldn’t make the kids get engaged.”

Participants understood the value of communication and collaboration, however, they also understood that no two classrooms were identical. Participants explained that if principals want effective teaching and learning within their school, they must allow the teacher to teach autonomously when necessary.

### **Theme 3: Interpersonal Relationships**

Relationships, which the researcher defined as the connection between two people or a group of people that serves some sort of purpose, are essential in every facet of a school, and the 10 participants made it clear that the relationships within a school setting must be respectful and considerate. Two areas of Interpersonal Relationships that were frequently recalled were the sub-themes of Disrespect and Peer Relationships.

### *Disrespect*

The participants' views on disrespect, which was defined as the inappropriate way classroom teachers are treated which make them feel embarrassed, inadequate, and isolated, were varied; some spoke of teachers' time, some spoke of public humiliation, others spoke of instances where they were yelled at and insulted. These examples of disrespect often were referred to as *the final straw*. P6, the participant who quit just six weeks before the school year ended, shared an experience when her principal referenced her negatively in a social setting. "I was told by some of my students that she [the principal] was friends with their parents. They would come to school and tell me about conversations she [the principal] and their parents had. I know the students did not make this up; how else would they know that I had recently been put on anxiety medicine?"

Participants shared examples of how they felt disrespected when their former principal observed or evaluated them. Participants collectively understood that receiving evaluations was a part of their job; additionally, they knew that conducting teacher evaluation is a part of the principals' job, but they felt that the sole purpose of evaluations was to find errors in their work. P3 explained:

When he [the principal] came in, it wasn't... I didn't get the feeling it was to observe the kids or to observe the learning. It was just, it honestly just truly felt like you were being judged as an educator every time. He would come in, and he would almost give you ... these faces, and you just felt uncomfortable the entire time. It was a frequent amount; [it] just kind of makes you feel uncomfortable."

P3 later added that her principal had all classroom doors removed until he was forced by the district to put them on for safety measures.

Several participants discussed that their principals' behaviors were a result of their hyper-focus on testing. P3 said her principal publicly posted their benchmark data on individual charts, then had teachers do a gallery walk and make notes on each other's chart about what they were doing wrong and what they could have done to improve their scores. She said that you could watch the teachers put their heads down in shame as soon as the faculty meetings started and brace themselves for more bad news about their teaching abilities. P7 said on several occasions, the principal "lost her mind and yelled at us during faculty meetings and occasionally [did the same] in grade-level meetings." Concerning yelling, P6 similarly shared, "She (principal) liked drama, and if she heard rumors, she would come to our grade level PLC and publicly yell at the teachers she had heard about."

Participants also indicated that they felt that their principals' disregard for their time was disrespectful. P8 explained, "I felt like when I came to school, I was in a meeting, and then when I was on my break, I was in a meeting, and I mean, the meetings are all the same." P2 expressed the same frustration that the frequent meetings were pointless:

It wouldn't have caused so much resentment if the frequent meetings .....had some structure. No one found any value in the meetings, so people would blurt out, play on their phones, and we would be there for hours and accomplish nothing.

P6 also felt like the meetings were a waste of her time because "She (principal) had her favorites, and they were always getting recognized at the faculty meetings. We just gave up any effort to get recognition because she wasn't going to acknowledge us anyway." P7 spoke of favoritism also, saying that "it was very clear that there was favoritism among the staff."

While participants' definitions of a disrespectful school climate varied, they all had a common thread: participants found the disrespect from their principals as a clear indicator that

they were not perceived as professionals. When participants recalled times their former principal behaved in a disrespectful manner or was insensitive to the participants' time, their relationship was damaged.

### ***Peer Relationships***

Participants had varying opinions on the second sub-theme of Interpersonal Relationships: Peer Relationships; however, the common thread in all interviews was the principals' paramount role in creating, or not creating an environment that promoted strong relationships

P2 had worked at two schools in the same district. She explained that her first principal was disorganized and scattered and that this created unorganized teams of teachers; meetings were chaotic, and the teachers were very hostile with each other. When she spoke of her second school, she said that the principal set very clear boundaries and agendas. Teachers knew what was expected of them, and they were very respectful of each other. She felt that the strong teams were a result of her principal's strong leadership.

Both P6 and P7 explained that their principals' tendency to have favorites directly affected the perceived relationships among the teachers. P7 explained "It was the same small group of teachers being recognized and rewarded, it was very clear to everyone who the principal liked." The teachers who were not considered *a favorite* became resentful. Competition among the teachers was a frequently-used term by all participants. P3 explained that her principal's focus on data made her become a person of whom she is not proud. She and her fellow teachers stopped collaborating, as they wanted to keep the effective instructional techniques to themselves because they each wanted to have the highest scores. P3 shared:

You don't want to be that teacher at the bottom, so that means you want someone else to be below you... when that is not even your philosophy. I do not want anyone to do worse than me, but I also do not want to be the worst. The climate was very competitive.

Principals who created an environment that was competitive or punitive had schools where teachers frequently left. Often participants mentioned classroom teachers who left the classroom before the school year ended. P7 and P10 were both hired in the middle of the school year because their schools needed to replace the teachers that had quit mid-year. P7 explained how the students responded when their teacher quit mid-year, "They were in kind of a disastrous state, academically." When P6 announced to her team that she would be leaving before the school year ended, they responded with support and encouragement. Some even said they wished it were them. P7 said she has no regrets about her decision to leave except that she did not want to leave the children, and "some of them were really hurt emotionally because I just got up and left them with no warning." P6 explained that her reason for leaving was how her principal did not support her and because she felt ignored every time she went to her principal for help; ironically, when she turned in her resignation, her principal said, "Well, I never knew that you weren't happy."

P1, P3, P5, P6, and P5 all revealed the effect that turnover had on the relationships between the teachers. P5 stated, "The constant turnover made relationships impossible to build." P1 reiterated:

Teachers aren't staying in the profession as long as they used to...or...they are moving on. They (teachers) may just not like the school; they wanted something closer to home, or, you know, they're tired of the politics, the mandates.

The participants were clear in labeling the principal as the key person responsible for creating a climate that is respectful and collaborative, and that the encouragement of positive interpersonal relationships is crucial to the retention of classroom teachers.

### **Response to Research Question**

This study had one research question. The researcher gathered data by interviewing 10 former elementary classroom teachers with a structured interview protocol consisting of nine open-ended questions. The research question that guided this study was: *How do former elementary school teachers describe their experiences with their principals that contributed to their decisions to leave the profession?* The participants provided examples of multiple experiences with their principals that contributed to their decision to leave the classroom. The relationships between the participants and their principals were not portrayed positively, as there was a consistent undertone of frustration among all participants.

Three major themes with eight sub-themes emerged from the data to support participants' beliefs that their principals contributed to their decision to leave teaching through the following:

- The principals' role in failing to establish a climate that operates within a clear set of rules, norms, and security measures by ignoring teachers' discipline referrals and dismissing the students' infractions then allowing the students to return to class consequence-free. These principals also failed to support and protect their teachers from parents who behave in an inappropriate manner
- The principals' role in failing to create a climate that respects the teaching and learning process. These principals do not consider the realities of a classroom, provide support to their teachers during times of transition, allow their teachers to

advocate for their students' needs, or allow teachers autonomy within in their own classrooms

- The principals' role in failing to establish and maintain a climate that encourages positive interpersonal relationships. These principals allowed disrespect to abound and did not encourage positive peer relationships in their school's climate

Through the participants' transcripts, data revealed that principals who cannot lead their schools by creating a safe environment, promoting strong teaching and learning practices, and encouraging positive interpersonal relationships, increase their chances of experiencing teacher attrition in their school. Based on the findings in the current study, teachers want a climate that is positive, compassionate, and respectful. Teachers need their principals to be an ever-present support in the many components of their job, and they want to be trusted as professionals to make the decisions they feel will meet the needs of their individual students.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 presented the phenomenon of the teacher-principal relationships, as perceived by the participants, and to identify if there was any connection with a teacher's decision to leave the profession. The 10 former S.C. teachers who participated in this study identified their former principals as the catalyst or reason they left the profession Findings indicated that, according to the participants, these principals failed to establish and maintain rules, norms, and security; that they did not support teachers' expertise in the areas of teaching and learning; and, that they did not encourage peer relationships, all of which contributed to these experienced and compassionate teachers leaving the profession.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This research study identified specific behaviors of principals that may have acted as a catalyst for classroom teachers to leave the profession. The problem addressed in this study was that too many teachers are leaving the profession. Teacher attrition is a national, state, and district problem. When teachers leave the classroom, many are affected: districts are forced to spend their limited funds to recruit and train new teachers; teachers who remain in the classroom experience an increased workload and larger class sizes; and most importantly, students are not provided with optimal educational experiences because their classrooms may be filled with inadequate or novice teachers who are not prepared to meet the needs of all students. The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of former classroom teachers who left the profession, specifically looking the actions of principals that contributed to the teachers' decisions to leave the profession. This study was influenced by the prior research of Bagwell (2019), Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017), Dahlkamps et al. (2015), Dou et al. (2017), Hanushek et al. (2016), Lee and Nie (2014), Player et al. (2017), and Sutchter et al. (2017). This study employed the principles of distributed leadership as its theoretical framework. As principals practice distributed leadership, classroom teachers are given the opportunity to contribute their insight and opinions on issues that have school-wide effects. As classroom teachers are allowed to participate in the decision-making process at their school, their organizational commitment increases (Garcia Torres, 2019).

This study employed a qualitative methodology using a phenomenological design. The overarching research question that guided this study was: How do former elementary school



teachers describe the experiences with the principals that contributed to their decisions to leave the profession?

The researcher used current research on teacher attrition to create the interview protocol. This study's structured interview protocol consisted of nine open-ended questions. The participants in the study were 10 former elementary classroom teachers from the same school district, Learning County, in South Carolina. The researcher recruited participants through the *SC for Ed* Facebook page. The researcher used the transcript of each interview to identify common themes.

The analysis revealed three themes: (a) rules, norms, and security, (b) teaching and learning, and (c) interpersonal relationships. These themes were consistently cited when participants spoke about specific events that led them to leave the classroom. The themes were quite broad but were very easily organized into specific sub-themes as follows: within rules, norms, and security: office repercussions and parent/parent conferences; within teaching and learning: classroom reality, transition support, student advocacy, and within interpersonal relationships: disrespect and peer relationships.

This chapter provides the analysis of the research findings and discusses those findings thoroughly. This chapter concludes with the implications, an impact statement, recommendations, and the researcher's plan on disseminating the results.

### **Analysis of Research Findings**

The results of this qualitative study were identified through a thorough analysis of the data retrieved from interview transcripts. The researcher coded these data by identifying frequently used words and similar statements to make the initial organization of data. The

researcher classified her findings into the themes that emerged. The researcher continued this process and identified subcategories for each theme.

Through the analysis, the researcher was able to identify specific behaviors or actions of school principals that influenced the participants' decision to leave the teaching profession. All 10 participants attributed their principals' inability to provide a safe environment in which rules and norms are regarded, to respect teachers' knowledge of teaching and learning, and to encourage interpersonal relationships as the ultimate reasons they left the profession. The participants understood that there are many challenges for all teachers; however, it was the way their principals responded to those challenges that made continuing in the profession impossible for them.

*Rules, norms, and security* was the strongest theme that emerged from the data analysis. From the perspective of the participants, their principal's failure to provide a safe and secure environment containing norms and rules made remaining in the classroom difficult impossible. All participants felt that their principal's tolerance of students' behavior infractions and their tolerance of parents addressing teachers in an aggressive manner was a clear indication that they were not valued or respected as professionals.

The *teaching and learning* processes at each participant's school were perceived to be unrealistic and impossible. Participants expressed that their principals were not supportive and not respectful of their professional authority by discouraging any autonomous classroom decisions.

Participants discussed the importance of *interpersonal relationships*, specifically those which are built on respect and collaboration. If the principal chooses to disregard a teacher's personal time by creating a workload that spills over to their family time or wastes a teacher's

limited free time during the day, they are showing disrespect. As the principal continues to disrespect his or her teachers, he or she is damaging their relationship.

### **Discussion of Research Findings**

The results of this study align with the findings of current literature and reports: the inability of school principals to create high-functioning and positive school climates can result in the exodus of classroom teachers from their school (Dahlkamp et al., 2017; Garcia Torres, 2019; Urick, 2016). Conversely, school principals who are effective in creating a climate that is safe, focused on the teaching and learning, and encouraging of intrapersonal relationships are more likely to retain their classroom teachers (Will, 2018). The 10 participants in this study were very detailed in recalling negative interactions with their principals. The responses of the participants exposed similarities and contradictions to information reported in the review of literature.

#### **Climate**

Participants in this study understood that school climate was a large contributor in their decision to leave the classroom. They understood that their schools' climate consisted of the students', parents', and school personnel's behaviors and expectations in their schools. This aligns with Smith (2014), who indicated that a school climate is made by the stakeholders' collective experiences with the school's norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. One participant defined school climate as the school's mood. When discussing climate, participants explained the effect their principals' priorities and expectations had on their schools' climate. Smith et al., (2017) uncovered similar findings and indicated that principals are instrumental in defining, promoting, and maintaining a positive school culture.

Participants were very clear about specific behaviors and actions of their principal that set the entire tone of their building. One participant stated that her principal's data driven personality made her a person she was ashamed of being. P3 explained "You're wanting somebody else to be below you, you don't want to be the bottom teacher." Another participant shared that because her principal had favorites among the teachers, she no longer gave effort to any task, as she did not feel the need to extend herself because whatever she did would go unrecognized. These results aligned with Garcia Torres (2019) who asserted that the climate of a school can be a clear indicator of a teacher's intention to stay or leave.

Participants spoke of the effect their principal's personality had on their entire school, including visiting parents. This supports the research by Smith et al. (2014), who indicated that when principals allow their teachers to be disrespected by parents and students, they are creating a climate that allows teachers to be disrespected. P6 explained "I asked my principal to intervene [with parents] and just tell them that they need to support her teachers but I don't think she ever did, because it [disrespect from parents] continued."

### ***Rules, Norms, and Security***

A principal's ability to ensure the safety and security for everyone in the building is a key component of a positive school climate (Hennessey, 2017; Urick, 2016). Because of prior experiences with parents, many of the participants were hesitant to meet with parents because they knew there was a high probability that they would be attacked or humiliated. These experiences supported research by Walker (2018), in that when principals do not address the negative behavior of the parents or the students, they are creating a climate that allows the disrespect of teachers.

An unsafe school climate is likely a factor in some teachers' decisions to leave. One participant explained that she was being hit by students on a daily basis and her principal continually ignored her requests for assistance. This caused her dedication to the school to steadily decrease to the point of her making the decision to leave the classroom permanently. Her decreasing enthusiasm and commitment were reflected in her students' academic performance. This finding supports the work of Rumschlag (2017) who found that as teachers begin to feel depersonalized by their students, they start to think that students cannot be helped and are deserving of their difficulties.

### ***Teaching and Learning***

As findings pertained to teaching and learning, the participants indicated that their principals' lack of trust and support indicated that they were not respected as professionals. This professional disrespect directly affected participants' decisions to leave the profession. These experiences support research by Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) who found that principals who were unable to provide the support or build the trust that their teachers needed, created broad and detrimental effects on the teaching and learning in their schools. Principal behaviors are crucial in a teacher's decision to leave the profession; therefore, principals must be diligent in providing a school climate that encourages the retention of classroom teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; NAESP, 2013; Ryan et al., 2017; Walker, 2018).

When recalling examples of times the participants felt unsupported by their principals, several participants described the decreasing efficacy in their instruction because they were not trusted enough to make instructional decisions. These experiences are mirrored in research by Suh (2013), who reported that if an educational environment is to promote effective teaching and learning practices, principals must allow for open dialogue and the empowerment of their

teachers. As principals demonstrate trust and respect in their teachers, the level of teacher performance and satisfaction increases (Lee & Nie, 2014).

Participants in this study frequently reiterated their disdain for the generalization of the educational instruction in their classroom. The former teachers in this study understood the importance of forming relationships with their students, and they knew that proper instruction was impossible when you did not know who you were teaching. The participants' comments aligned with Jimmerson and Hammock's (2015) research which stressed the importance of the relationship between students and teachers, as it allows teachers to articulate the social, emotional, and behavioral health of their students.

Participants' beliefs that they were the most qualified to make the decisions regarding their students aligns with the work of Strong and Yoshida (2014), who found that when principals provide classroom teachers the freedom to make critical decisions, the overall rate of teachers' satisfaction increases. When asked to recall a time they considered leaving the profession, participants shared instances when their principals acted as dictators or as an omniscient leader. The participants' examples align with research by Dahlkamp et al. (2017), who indicated that the desire to leave because of a principal who practices a totalitarianism leadership style is common.

When discussing mandates, one participant's tone and body language completely changed as she recalled a time when she was forced to use an instructional strategy that she knew was inappropriate for her students. Participants' frustration grew with the ever-increasing restrictions placed on their instruction by their principals during times of high-stakes assessments. Participants' already limited autonomy was completely removed during testing season. When recalling times of assessments, participants explained that they felt extremely

micromanaged and controlled; all of their instruction was forced to directly align with the assessments, regardless of whether it was appropriate for a student or not. These findings support research by Vangrieken et al. (2017) who explained that as teachers' ability to influence, make decisions, or act as an advocate for their students is removed, they are left feeling as though they are not regarded as professionals.

Participants in this study understood the challenges of being a classroom teacher; they knew they would be forced to test their students frequently, that student behaviors were going to be a challenge, and that the workload would be heavy and affect their personal lives. The participants' understanding of the regular challenges in the classroom align with Lambert's (2019) findings that teachers know they will be bombarded with many stressors, including large class sizes, low salary, and students with challenging behaviors and special needs. However, when the participants spoke about the challenges inside of a classroom, they all explained that their principals' responses to their struggles was vital to their ability to remain in the classroom, which aligns with the Chambers-Mack et al. (2019) research that indicated that principals' behavior toward the teachers as they deal with the less than desirable factors of teaching adversely affects teachers' level of tolerance

Participants felt that their principals' leadership skills directly affected their ability to remain classroom teachers. They wanted their professional authority to be considered when decisions about their students are made. When participants felt excluded and were not asked to participate in the decisions regarding their students, they felt angry and frustrated. These negative feelings acted as a catalyst in their decision to leave, which aligns with research that explains that as the anger and frustrations continue, the chances of a teacher leaving the profession increase (Dahlkamp et al., 2017; Garcia Torres, 2019; Urick, 2016).

### ***Interpersonal Relationships***

Participants in this study understood the importance that interpersonal relationships had on their former schools' climate. Participants recalled negative and positive aspects of the relationships they had experienced in the past. Their experiences with relationships were divided into two categories: relationships that made their jobs tolerable, and relationships that contributed to their decision to leave. Participants who spoke of positive experiences cited specific organizational structures, such as professional learning communities, that their principals had put in place to create collaborative, supportive, and empathetic relationships with fellow teachers. Participants who shared negative experiences recalled instances where their principals' actions contributed to dysfunctional and ineffective relationships with their peers. For example, participants who had principals who were hyper-focused on test scores often felt as though their principal was deliberately creating a competitive environment to improve scores. Participants disliked it when the behaviors of their principals created animosity among the teachers. These reported negative experiences align with Dahlkamp et al.'s (2017) research, which found that when principals fail to create a positive, collaborative, and collegial climate, teachers will leave.

### ***Distributed Leadership***

Distributed leadership is defined as a leadership style that involves several individuals taking leadership roles to accomplish shared goals within an organization (Garcia Torres, 2019). The theoretical framework of this study maintained that principals who practice distributed leadership increase the retention of teachers in their schools. This framework only partially aligned with the findings of this study.

Participants recognized the importance of a school-wide goal. The importance of a school-wide vision is echoed in Player et al.'s (2017) finding that principals who communicate



their school's vision and work with their teachers to meet the goal are more likely to retain classroom teachers. Participants also saw the benefits of collaboration and discussion, both of which are found in schools with distributed leadership, aligning with Garcia Torres' (2019) finding that schools with a climate of collaboration create confident classroom teachers.

The literature review revealed that principals must practice distributed leadership in order to increase teachers' organizational commitment (Garcia Torres, 2019; Ni et al., 2018). However, at no time did any participant indicate any interest in a school-wide leadership role. In fact, when discussing school leadership, participants indicated that those decisions and responsibilities should be limited to school administration. One participant explained that she did not care to be part of any conversation regarding school-wide practices or decisions as they pertained to the running of the school. Participants clearly explained that their concerns and interests were limited to their classroom, conflicting with research by Pucella (2014) which noted that students' educational experiences are only improved when teachers are involved in school-wide leadership roles.

Additionally, current literature indicates that traditional operational practices need to evolve into a distributed leadership framework in order for students to be successful (Pucella, 2014). Conversely, results from this study did not indicate any relationship between operational practices and student success. The results from this study indicated that student success is determined by the classroom teacher's ability to make instructional decisions that meet the individual needs of their students. Further, many researchers claim that distributed leadership is necessary for teachers to work collaboratively (Garcia Torres, 2019). The results from this study directly contrast with this idea and imply that teachers' ability to work collaboratively is determined by the climate created by the school principal.

## Conclusions

The researcher and participants from this study all understand that the teaching profession is challenging. The challenges of a classroom can only be understood by those who have experienced teaching firsthand. Understandably, teacher attrition is a concern not limited to Learning County, but it is a concern across the nation.

Current literature often cites school climate, high-stakes assessments, lack of autonomy, and stress as the root causes of teacher attrition. However, findings from the study indicated that the well-known challenges in teaching were not the reasons participants left the profession. The participants from this study left the teaching profession because of their principals' inability to create and maintain a climate conducive to safety, teaching and learning, and interpersonal relationships. Each participant's former principal was unable to create a respectable, safe, student-centered climate that encouraged positive peer relationships. Participants were unhappy with the lack of support in discipline and dealing with parents, the unrealistic expectations, and disrespectful or dismissive attitude presented from their principal.

If school principals want to keep teachers in the classrooms, they must address negative and disrespectful student behaviors and support teachers as they interact with parents; they must demonstrate an understanding of a teacher's daily reality, support their teachers in times of transition, encourage student advocacy, and allow autonomy; and, require respectful interactions that encourage strong relationships.

## Implications

Teacher attrition is not a new problem in education, and, unfortunately, no indications of improvement have been found in the literature. The departure of classroom teachers is now noticeable in all areas of the country, especially in Learning County, South Carolina. Classrooms are filled with novice or inadequate teachers, creating a burden on the remaining classroom teachers and decreasing the chances of student success. Principals bear the responsibility of teacher retention, as their leadership directly impacts the number of teachers who will remain in their school and the number of teachers who will leave the profession.

Principals know that their teachers do much more than provide academic instruction. They see the wealth of knowledge each teacher possesses about every one of their students. Therefore, principals must be deliberate in their interactions with classroom teachers to ensure that they continue to be respectful of teachers as professionals and create a relationship of open communication. Principals must also remember that the typical classroom teacher's knowledge of school matters is limited to his or her classroom experiences. Because the principal is most often the messenger of new mandates or new programs, they receive the bulk of the blame and resentment. Principals must use their soft skills and present the information in a way that is more tolerable for teachers. This would also be a good time to explain the hierarchy in the educational system and help teachers see the *bigger picture*.

There are direct implications for leadership practices for school principals from this study. Principals must prioritize their schools to reflect what is most important in providing quality instruction to the whole child; this prioritization must include input from classroom teachers. Principals must be aware that teachers expect their principals to support them as they handle the everyday stressors of the profession; such as discipline and parents. This awareness is

key in creating a school climate that encourages teacher retention by fostering a school climate in which teachers are respected and positive peer relationships are encouraged.

Previous educational administration programs limited the instruction of leadership to theory. Just like classroom management courses based in theory do little to provide support for new classroom teachers, programs that limited educational administration to leadership theories are ineffective in preparing new school principals to the realities of school leadership. As with new classroom teachers, novice principals are often unaware of that which they are unaware. Fortunately, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration has released new Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (2015). These new standards stress the importance of relationships in leadership, teaching, and student learning. School districts must mirror their teacher mentor programs for new principals. Current principals who practice the new standards fluently could work as a constant support and a go-to for any experience the new teacher may encounter. A principal mentor should be able to encourage the mentee to be reflective of his or her own leadership philosophy and ensure that they continue to have a growth mindset to meet the varying needs of their classroom teachers.

### **Impact Statement**

Teacher attrition continues to plague school districts across the U.S. Schools administrators are being forced to fill classrooms with novice or ineffective teachers or to split classrooms up and distribute students among the remaining teachers who are already overburdened. School districts are spending their limited funds on recruitment, selection, and training of new teachers instead of using these funds as a resource to benefit students. Learning County, SC, is representative of many districts across the country. The devastating effects of teacher attrition are visible in the schools and it is clear that students are suffering.

Researchers in the field of education know there are a multitude of reasons that increase the chances of a teacher leaving the profession. Both literature and results from this study detail the negative effect testing has on teachers, and both sources also list lack of autonomy and climate as significant contributors to a teacher's decision to leave the profession. However, the goal of this study was to answer the overarching research question, how do former elementary school teachers describe their experiences with their principals that contributed to their decision to leave the profession? By asking former teachers questions about their experiences in the classroom, this study provides specific events that teachers across the district, state, and nation may be experiencing. The identification of these experiences will allow educational leaders to implement measures to prevent the exodus of any further teachers. The identification of specific leadership behaviors will help school districts across the nation develop plans to train current and future principals in leadership behaviors that will assist them as they create strong, positive school climates in which rules, norms, and security measures are followed, that are respectful to teachers as professionals, and conducive to creating strong peer relationships.

The results of this study will be shared with the cabinet members in the Learning County school district. Pending approval from the district's cabinet members, this study will be used as a supplement to the current principal orientation program. As this study is presented to the cabinet members, they will be provided with specific leadership behaviors that are currently happening in their district. This study will not only assist Learning County in the identification of adverse leadership behaviors, but also provide insight to behaviors that encourage teacher retention.

### **Recommendations**

This qualitative, phenomenological study was limited to the experiences of 10 former classroom teachers. The participants in this study were all employed at one time in the same

school district. They were limited to elementary, general education teaching positions to generate data specific to Learning County, SC. Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

1. Conduct this study with a larger number of participants. The increased number of participants could improve the trustworthiness of this research.
2. Conduct this study in other school districts. This would allow for comparison among districts and determine whether the results from this study are limited to Learning County.
3. Adjust this study to include interviews with school principals and identify their perspectives about why teachers in their school left the profession. This will allow multiple perspectives and allow the interpretations of principals and former teachers to be compared.
4. Use the findings from this study to create a survey to gather input from a large number of former teachers to ascertain whether or not these findings hold true across a wider audience.
5. Share information from this study with Learning County's office of Leadership and Development and pilot a mentor program to improve leadership practices of current principals.

### **Dissemination**

The researcher plans to disseminate the findings of this study to other student researchers by providing access to her research through ProQuest Dissertations. Fellow student researchers could use the results from this study to contribute to their own research.

The researcher will seek the approval of her superintendent to share the results with fellow administrators during one of the bi-annual open-forum meetings for school principals. The researcher will also offer her data to assist the district office when reviewing the current induction program for first-year principals. The researcher will share her study with her district's South Carolina Association of School Administrators representative and volunteer to present her results at any upcoming conferences.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The researcher chose the topic of teacher attrition because she has personally been affected. She has started school years without enough teachers to fill her classrooms, and she has supported her children when their teacher left before the school year ended. As an assistant principal, the researcher wanted to use the findings from this research to improve or change her own behaviors to decrease the turnover at her school.

While conducting this study, the researcher was careful to document her own biases and opinions to prevent contamination in her data analysis. Because of her position, the researcher often had insight into the principals' behaviors during the participants sharing their negative experiences. She knew that the participants were unaware of the many restrictions and expectations placed on school principals. Therefore, the researcher was deliberate in remaining silent while the participants explained their viewpoints. Not only was the researcher intentional in her attempts to prevent her personal biases, experiences, and opinions from tainting the data collection process, she was also deliberate in sharing only the findings that answered the research question.

When the researcher began this study, she expected to find specific components of teaching (high-stakes assessments, autonomy, etc.) as the root of the attrition problem. The

researcher did know the importance of a principal in a teacher's job satisfaction, but she kept it at a superficial level—whether the teacher liked their principal or not. Before the research began on this study, the researcher believed that a good principal was one that made teachers feel valued by treats or words of appreciation. She thought that teachers wanted to feel empowered and involved in areas outside of their classroom. Often, her staff would mention that they would like more words of affirmation or a pat on the back, and she often pondered why—as when she praised teachers publicly or surprised them with muffins—the results were only temporary. Both the researcher and her teachers believed an extrinsic reward controlled that teacher satisfaction.

During the literature search, the researcher found ample research that indicated teachers wanted leadership roles outside of their classrooms. After much review, the researcher recognized distributed leadership as her theoretical framework. However, after listening to the participants and reviewing their transcripts multiple times, she was able to see that her interpretation of current literature did not match the needs and desires of the participants. The participants wanted to be supported by their principal and allowed to teach their children in the way they felt was appropriate. They wanted their principal to work with them in a partnership while disciplining students, they wanted protection from angry parents, and they wanted to be treated as professionals and to be trusted in their professional opinions. The researcher will use the results from her study in her school, and she looks forward to sharing the results with others in an effort to keep teachers in the classroom.



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APPENDIX A  
IRB APPROVAL

Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs		
<b>Institutional Review Board (IRB)</b>		
Phone: 912-478-5465		Veazey Hall 3000
		PO Box 8005
Fax: 912-478-0719	IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu	Statesboro, GA 30460

**To:** Gebhardt, Kellie

**From:** Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs  
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees  
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

**Approval Date:** May 19, 2020

**Subject:** Institutional Review Board Exemption Determination - Limited Review

Your proposed research project numbered **H20430**, and titled **"The Relationship Between School Leadership and Teacher Attrition."** involves activities that do not require full approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) according to federal guidelines. **<In this research project research data will be collected anonymously>**.

According to the Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46, your research protocol is determined to be exempt from full review under the following exemption category(s):

Exemption 2     Research involving only the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, if: Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human participants cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to them. Please visit our FAQ's for more information on anonymous survey platforms; Any disclosure of the human participant's responses outside the research could not reasonably place the participant at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the participant's financial standing, employ-ability or reputation; Survey or interview research does not involve children; The research project does not include any form of intervention.

*Any alteration in the terms or conditions of your involvement may alter this approval. Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that your research, as submitted, is exempt from IRB Review. No further action or IRB oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. If you alter the project, it is your responsibility to notify the IRB and acquire a new determination of exemption. Because this project was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, this project does not require an expiration date.*

Sincerely,

Eleanor Haynes  
Compliance Officer

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me about your background as a teacher; what did you like about being a teacher?
2. Thinking about the last principal that you worked with, what were some things your principal did that made you feel supported?
3. Thinking about the last principal that you worked with, what were some things your principal did that made you feel unsupported?
4. Tell me about your decision to leave teaching.
5. What were the school factors that impacted your decision to leave?
6. As a public school teacher, many of the requirements you had were not mandated from the school level leader, such as state testing, common pacing, and common assessments. When district or state requirements were implemented, how did your principal support the staff?
7. How would you describe the climate at your former school?
8. Please tell me about any experiences with your principal that may have contributed to your decision to leave the profession. Provide examples.
9. Is there anything about your decision to leave the teaching profession that I have not asked that you would like to add?