

WHAT ARE THE REASONS MID-CAREER TEACHERS CONTINUE TEACHING?

BY

KIRSTEN MAYNARD

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Eunjung Grace Oh, Chair
Professor Wenhao David Huang
Associate Professor Hyun-Sook Kang
Assistant Professor Jennifer Nelson

ABSTRACT

The resignation of teachers during their mid-career teaching years is a loss for both schools and students. Turnover has a significant financial impact on school districts. High turnover negatively affects student achievement and the highest turnover tends to be in schools where poverty is prevalent and students of color attend. The cost of advertising, hiring, training and the necessary substitute costs to meet interim needs utilize funds that should be allocated to support students. Mid-career teachers leaving the classroom are often replaced with inexperienced or uncertified staff as the number of available and certified candidates dwindles.

In a review of teacher retention data, 70% of teachers remain teachers after five years, and 61% at 10 years. At 19 years, only 50% of teachers are still teaching. Mid-career teachers are ending their teaching careers and few studies address how to support their teaching careers. Teacher retention is a national concern, as 90% of open teaching positions are created by teachers who have left teaching. The profession of teaching, once designed to be a lifelong career, now has fewer teachers remaining until retirement. The purpose of the present qualitative study was to expand on teacher retention research by exploring mid-career teachers' reasons and intent for commitment to continue teaching.

The analysis was completed using job embeddedness theory in relation to teacher retention. Twelve mid-career teachers from two comparable city school districts participated in semi-structured interviews. Themes identified through analysis of interview data revealed that mid-career teachers consider their relationships with students, collaboration with coworkers, and opportunities to evolve as teachers are most important to their retention as teachers. Although identified in prior research as essential for teacher retention, supportive leadership did not

emerge as a factor for mid-career teacher retention. Understanding mid-career teachers' perceptions of links, fit, and sacrifice concerning teaching can help schools target ways to improve teacher retention. Results from this research can be utilized by schools and districts to improve teacher retention.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE	9
CHAPTER 3: METHODS	32
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS	56
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	103
REFERENCES	119
APPENDIX A: CITI CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION.....	136
APPENDIX B: IRB NOTICE OF EXEMPT DETERMINATION (IRB #24033)	137
APPENDIX C: LETTER TO SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT.....	138
APPENDIX D: NEWTON-CONOVER CITY SCHOOLS DISTRICT APPROVAL	139
APPENDIX E: HICKORY PUBLIC SCHOOLS DISTRICT APPROVAL	140
APPENDIX F: TEACHER RECRUITMENT EMAIL	141
APPENDIX G: SOCIAL BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH CONSENT FORM.....	142
APPENDIX H: TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTION MATRIX	145
APPENDIX I: TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	148
APPENDIX J: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH STAFF	150
APPENDIX K: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN COLLABORATION WITH COWORKERS AND SHARED DECISION-MAKING	151
APPENDIX L: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP AND TEACHER APPRECIATION	152

APPENDIX M: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN SHARED DECISION- MAKING AND FEELING VALUED	153
APPENDIX N: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN SHARED DECISION- MAKING AND TEACHER LEADERSHIP ROLES	154
APPENDIX O: EXAMPLES OF CHALLENGES CURRENTLY BEING NAVIGATED BY MID-CAREER TEACHERS	155

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background Information

Teachers are leaving the classroom in epidemic proportions, while higher education reports fewer education majors (House & Chatlani, 2018). The teacher shortage is a result of several factors creating a dwindling qualified candidate pool (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Perryman and Calvert (2019) found that most teachers understood the workload, emotional demands, and challenges of working in education before becoming teachers. Despite being aware of the professional challenges, teachers leaving or planning to leave the profession report not being able to manage the challenges of teaching. 30-50% of teachers leave the profession within the first five years of employment (Moser & McKim, 2020). Despite the continued teacher shortage, the teaching profession is growing, simultaneously becoming younger, older, and inexperienced (Ingersoll et. al., 2021). Concurrent with the teacher shortage and attrition rate are the changing mandates and initiatives. Initiatives and introduced mandates mean additional training and responsibilities for teachers.

Educators report becoming teachers because they want to make a difference. They chose teaching because they wanted to work with children and share their love of learning or favorite subject with students. (Perryman & Calvert, 2019, Booth, et al., 2021). University of Massachusetts Global (2020) reports that 8% of teachers leave the profession each year, and another 8% leave their school for another school. Combining the two is a 16% rate of turnover for classrooms across the United States (Wang, 2019). Of those leaving teaching, 30% indicate they are unhappy with their profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, Ingersoll 2002). Knowing the requirements and expectations of teaching before entering the profession has not fostered teacher retention.

Teachers who report planning to leave their profession, indicate work-life balance, heavy workload, low teacher morale due to changing mandates, and negative public perception of teaching as primary reasons for their job dissatisfaction. In the state of North Carolina, two-thirds of teachers are leaving the profession citing personal reasons. This is double the 30% national average of personal reasons for resignation (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). What could decrease the attrition rate among teachers and improve longevity in the classroom? What keeps teachers committed to a career in teaching through their mid-career years?

Teachers who are satisfied with teaching are more engaged in teaching students in their classrooms and are supportive of colleagues (Narayan, 2016). Satisfied teachers are more likely to be retained. To improve school district outcomes, it is essential to understand and increase the factors that retain teachers.

Statement of the Problem

Teacher retention is a national concern. Nearly 90% of open teaching positions are created by teachers who leave the teaching profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, Ingersoll, 2002). The profession of teaching, once designed to be a lifelong career, now has fewer teachers remaining until retirement (Banerjee et al., 2017). In a review of teacher retention data, Towers and Maguire (2017) found 70% of teachers remain teachers after five years, and 61% at 10 years. At 19 years, only 50% of teachers are still teaching. Mid-career teachers are ending their teaching careers and few studies address how to support longevity in their teaching careers (Booth et al., 2021; Reeves, 2021; Towers & Maguire, 2017). The resignation of teachers during their mid-career years is a loss for schools and students.

Turnover has a significant financial impact on school districts. The cost of advertising, hiring, training and the necessary substitute costs to meet interim needs utilize funds that should

be allocated to support students. When funding is diverted from students, learning further suffers (Ronfeldt et al, 2013, Ingersoll, 2001). High turnover negatively affects student achievement and the highest turnover tends to be in schools where poverty is prevalent and students of color attend (García & Weiss, 2019). Wronowski (2017) explains that hiring impactful teachers in high-poverty schools is not enough to benefit students. Teacher retention is essential in high-poverty schools to impact student learning. Teacher turnover undermines continued school quality as inexperienced teachers or unqualified persons fill the vacancies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, Ingersoll, 2001). When asked, resigning teachers reported they initially planned to teach their entire careers (Perryman & Calvert, 2019; Booth, et al., 2021; Banerjee et al., 2017). Concerns regarding salary, workload, years of publicly downplaying the importance of teachers, student behavior, and mental health issues combined with the continued additional mandates and policy changes at the state and federal level are a few reasons that impact teacher retention (García & Weiss, 2019). Internal and external factors were found to influence mid-career teachers' commitment to continued teaching. For many teachers, several factors influence their intentions to remain in teaching or resign. A combination of lack of administrative support, increased student behaviors, and personal family demands can lead a teacher to be overwhelmed (Lortie, 2002; García & Weiss, 2019; Richardson & Watt, 2016, Ingersoll, 2001) Teachers with confidence in classroom management, may not be influenced by lack of administrative support.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore mid-career teachers' reasons for continued teaching. Mid-career teachers are important to student education as they are competent to teach and have adapted to the culture and expectations of the teaching profession.

The findings of this study can benefit schools and school districts by providing the information necessary to maximize retention.

Communities, school districts, schools, teachers, and students are affected by the shortage of teachers. Teachers leaving the classroom are often replaced with inexperienced teachers or uncertified staff as the number of available and certified candidates dwindles (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This research seeks to better understand what teachers expect from working conditions to positively impact their careers in teaching. The intended outcome of the study is to identify retention factors that schools can improve or adapt with the intent to maintain teachers into and beyond their mid-career teaching years. Data from this research should be utilized to improve teacher retention.

Research Question(s)

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the reasons Western North Carolina mid-career teachers continue teaching?
2. How can teachers be retained beyond their mid-career teaching years?

Conceptual Framework

The researcher sought to understand the retention factors that support mid-career teachers' decision to continue to teach. Prior research has shown that teachers satisfied with their work are more likely to be retained. Teachers who report having positive experiences with working conditions, relationships, support, and work-related benefits are more likely to be retained. Positive teacher experiences are considered retention factors.

Integrating the Job Embeddedness theory into the study of mid-career teacher retention decisions can bring insights and understanding and improve teacher retention. Known as the theory of staying, Job Embeddedness theory provides a combination of factors that attach an

employee to their work (Watson, 2018; Watson & Olson-Buchanan, 2016). Using the Job Embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001) as an integral part of the conceptual framework for this study mediates the relationship between teacher retention and positive factors that support retention. Understanding mid-career teachers' perceptions of links, fit, and sacrifice concerning teacher retention provides useful information for schools to utilize in improving teacher retention.

Significance of the Study

In this study, the researcher examines teacher retention factors through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with teachers. The qualitative nature of this research provides a richer understanding of teacher perceptions of retention factors to identify common themes in mid-career teachers' commitment to teaching and school retention practices.

Studies using teacher participants conclude that teacher retention continues to be a critical issue (Booth, et al., 2021; Kamrath & Georgeford 2020; Cupit, 2019; Weeks, 2019). When teachers continue to teach, they build on their professional development with teaching experience. This experience develops confidence in teaching practice. Confident, experienced teachers are assets to the schools where they teach. The findings from this study can be utilized to prolong teacher retention, thereby minimizing teacher turnover.

Schools and school districts lose assets when mid-career teachers resign. Understanding the retention factors that current teachers consider important to their continued teaching career will create opportunities for schools and school districts to utilize the findings from this research to improve teacher retention. Teachers who stay through their mid-career teaching years are assets to the classrooms and schools they serve.

Knowing that teachers initially intended to teach as a career, yet the challenges of working in education erode their career commitment, further enforces the need to better understand how to retain teachers (Perryman & Calvert, 2019). The findings from this research will identify which factors influence retention for mid-career teachers, providing insight for use by schools and school districts to improve teacher retention efforts. This research can add to the body of knowledge regarding teacher retention and, most importantly the teaching commitment of mid-career teachers. Understanding teacher retention will foster opportunities for organizational development at the school district level to improve teacher retention through their mid-career teaching year.

Operational Definition of Terms

Key terms used throughout this study are defined below to facilitate understanding of this research:

Administrative support. School leadership supporting teachers in areas of student discipline, professional development, curriculum, and resolving mandates, initiatives, and parent concerns (Nelson, 2017).

Collective efficacy. “Collective efficacy refers to a shared belief that the school's staff can have a positive impact on student achievement” (Victoria State Government, 2019).

Commitment to teach. “A committed educator will have the passion and enthusiasm for teaching and learning, as well. As she or he develops himself or herself, this fact will have a direct result on the learners’ academic success and personal development” (Celik & Yildiz, 2017).

Learning environment. The space in which students feel safe and supported in their learning (Western Governors University, 2021).

Mid-career teacher. A teacher who has between five and fifteen years of consecutive teaching experience (Booth et al., 2021). A mid-career teacher has been defined as someone with more than five years of teaching experience and too few years of service to retire (Coulter & Lester, 2011; Hartsel, 2016; Taylor & Tyler, 2012).

Professional development. Professional development includes opportunities for professionals to learn, including graduate courses, in-service training, workshops and conferences, professional learning communities, and meetings to improve teaching and student learning (North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, 2023).

School leadership. “School leadership is the process of enlisting and guiding the talents and energies of teachers, pupils, and parents towards achieving common educational aims” (Brewer, 2012, p. 641).

School culture. School culture refers to what teachers and staff do, and how they behave (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, Lortie 2002).

School climate. School climate refers to how staff and teachers feel about the school culture (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

School factors. School factors include school culture, social relations, and professional support (Alexander et al., 2020)

Supportive leadership. Supportive leadership leads people by involving them. Supportive leaders understand that people are the most important things (Walters, 2005).

Teacher confidence. The ability to take responsibility for lessons, students, and development. Including answering student questions and accepting challenges from students (Davies, 2024).

Teacher job satisfaction. Teacher job satisfaction is the combination of teachers’ affective and cognitive reactions to their work and profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Liu et al., 2020).

Teacher retention. “A teacher who stays in the profession at the school, district, or state level for a given length of time” (Zugelder & Shelton, 2020).

Teacher self-efficacy. Teacher self-efficacy refers to teachers who see themselves as competent in their profession (Liu et al., 2020).

Working conditions. Working conditions encompass the physical learning environment, student behavior, leadership behavior, district expectations, and teacher feelings of support, collaboration, job resources, and personal safety (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020; Suriansyah & Aslamiah, 2018; Abraham & Prasetyo, 2021). Working conditions include salary, resource availability, and career advancement (Alexander et al., 2020).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore mid-career teachers' reasons for continued teaching. A careful literature review on teacher retention and job satisfaction in the United States revealed that most studies were conducted predominantly a decade or more ago. The sections of the literature review consider the common retention factors of working conditions and learning environment, relationships between teachers and students, and collegial relationships among teachers and school staff. Additional retention factors addressed in the review of literature include supportive leadership, shared decision-making, professional development opportunities, salary, benefits, and job security. Specifically, for mid-career teachers, literature was sought to determine their professional commitment to teaching and retention.

Mid-Career Teachers

Mid-career teachers are capable of teaching. They have achieved classroom successes, met goals, and developed a professional identity in teaching. Mid-career teachers impact school culture, the development of beginning teachers, and student achievement. Mid-career teachers know where they excel, understand where they need support, and know their limits. They understand the application of teaching and the content of the subjects and lessons (Lortie 2002). When mid-career teachers leave teaching, school culture, staff, and students suffer (Booth, et al., 2021; Heinz, 2015; Lortie, 2002). Mid-career teachers have a lower attrition rate than their beginning teacher colleagues (Shibiti, 2019; Booth et al., 2021; Towers & Maguire, 2017). Even so, few studies consider why mid-career teachers decide to resign from teaching.

Similarly, there is limited targeted professional development and work-related support for mid-career teachers (Booth, et al., 2021; Towers & Maguire, 2017). In comparison, research on support for pre-service and beginning teachers has led to mentoring and supportive programs at local and state levels to support the introduction and development of a teaching career (Cupit, 2019; Weeks, 2019; Towers & Maguire, 2017). This beginning teacher support has positively impacted early career teacher retention, but the support ends within the first five years of teaching experience (Ingersoll, 2002). One phenomenological study on the experiences of mid-career teachers identified four key concepts on how teachers persist in the field of teaching. Three of the identified themes were intrinsic to the teacher's evolution personally and professionally with an attitude of stick-to-itiveness. The fourth key concept identified by Lester and Coulter (2011) is extrinsic motivation for teachers: the receipt of rewards. That is, teachers who receive rewards for persistence to quality education despite challenges and initiatives, continue to teach (Lester & Coulter, 2011).

Mid-career teachers report wanting the autonomy to make professional decisions regarding teaching strategies or curricula (Booth, et al., 2021). Mid-career teachers often report autonomy in the classroom, as a lonely part of teaching (Booth et al., 2021; Perryman & Calvert, 2019). Kamrath & Georgeford (2020) found that beginning teachers left employment citing lack or inconsistency in discipline policies, while mid-career teachers hoped for more consistent policies but created processes in their classrooms so as not to rely on school administration. Lortie (2002) pictures an egg carton when presenting the autonomy of teaching, with the lack of interpersonal relationships and support from school administration. Mid-career teachers have the autonomy to teach well, similarly, teachers have little to no coaching or support to improve teaching skills. Mid-career teachers want to teach using their professional judgment. Imposed

curricula and standardized testing protocols can diminish opportunities for teacher autonomy causing teachers dissatisfaction (Glazer, 2018). Autonomy in the classroom has been defined as both a positive and negative factor for teachers. Moreover, schools with low student achievement have higher teacher turnover, and teachers in low-achieving schools report fewer opportunities for teaching autonomy (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). Increased mandates in low-achieving schools lead to increased curriculum initiatives. Glazer (2018) found through interviews with former teachers that resistance to curricula initiatives leads to job dissatisfaction. The self-efficacy of experienced teachers may wain with initiatives and changes in expectations (Booth et al., 2021; Day, 2013; Glazer, 2018; Reeves 2021; Tower & Maguire, 2017). These prior findings suggest that supporting mid-career teachers when and for what they need support could improve teacher retention.

Mid-career teachers have more skills and experience in the classroom than beginning teachers and these additional internal resources help them to require less administrative support (Kamrath & Georgeford, 2020; Booth et al., 2021). A decision point for mid-career teachers can occur when their personal life needs their attention as much or more as their professional role. This decision point can lead to resignation (Glazer, 2018). Mid-career teachers typically have more personal responsibilities than beginning teachers. The needs of their spouses, children, and aging parents can impact a teacher's intent to continue teaching (Lortie, 2002; Booth et al., 2021). Mid-career teachers' lack of meaningful support continues to provide a reason for resignation.

The mid-career teaching years are not concretely defined (Booth et al., 2021; Hartsel, 2016). Huberman's 5 phases of the career life cycle begin with the Exploration cycle of years 1-3. Huberman refers to the teaching years 4 through 6 as the Stabilization cycle. Career stage

three, according to Huberman (1989), is years 7 through 18. In this Experimentation stage, teachers may question their careers and reassess their teaching practices. The last two stages of Huberman's life cycle in the teaching profession are Serenity and Disengagement. The Serenity phase is years 19-30 and Disengagement follows beginning for a teacher in year 31 (Huberman, 1989).

Day (2013) further defined Huberman's 5 phases of the teaching career lifecycle into six career phases for teachers. Day identified career phases for teachers beginning with commitment. Commitment, years 1 through 3 is the beginning teacher. The identity and efficacy are in years 4-7 where a teacher develops a professional identity. Day (2013) indicates that years 8-15 are managing changes in teaching roles and identity. Years 16-23 are the years of work-life tensions, these years often have decreased motivation, and competing stressors. Years 24-30 challenges sustaining motivation, and 31 years and more, have declining motivation with struggles to cope with change. The mid-career teachers defined by Day (2013) are those years 4-15, where efficacy and identity are developed, strengthened, and tested with necessary changes and demands.

Mid-career teachers are a heterogeneous group (Booth, et al., 2021; Richardson & Watt, 2016; Ingersoll, 2001). Teachers have individualized needs and expectations for their careers. Glazer's (2018) study found that mid-career teachers had established a professional identity and successfully navigated the struggles and difficulties that beginning teachers encounter. Mid-career teachers report being competent in their teaching abilities. Understanding what makes mid-career teachers resign is complex (Towers & Maguire, 2017). Understanding what retains mid-career teachers is equally complex.

Teacher Retention

The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) assessed no change in the rate of teachers leaving the profession between the years of 2012 and 2021. 84% of public school teachers maintained their same school employment for the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. Nationally, statistics find that 8% of public school teachers left the teaching profession spring of 2021. This 8% remains unchanged since last measured in 2012 (NCES, 2023).

In the United States, teacher decisions for professional change between the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years were impacted by years of teaching experience. Professional change is often referred to as teacher mobility. With the consistent need for teachers, positions are often available to teachers considering a professional change. As teachers gain experience in teaching, they are less likely to change schools. NCES reports that beginning teachers, with three or fewer years of experience have the highest mobility and attrition rates.

North Carolina teachers report time to do their work to be a motivating factor for retention (North Carolina Teachers Working Conditions Survey, 2023). For appropriate time to be available for teaching and planning, teachers need support from the school administration in ensuring protected planning time. With the current teacher shortage, often, teachers are acting as substitutes during their planning periods or teaching classes with additional students, due to collapsed classes when another teacher is not available (Carl, 2023). Dividing students from classrooms without a teacher into other classrooms is disruptive to students and staff. Teachers asked to cover for classrooms left without a substitute lose work and planning time necessary to teach well.

Teachers who report job satisfaction use fewer leave days, report less work-related stress, and are more willing to utilize innovative teaching practices than their less satisfied counterparts

(Banerjee et al., 2017). When teachers are committed to their school, it creates an opportunity to further develop collaborative efforts. Teachers are imperative to student learning. To improve student learning outcomes, it is essential to understand and increase teacher retention (Williamfeldt et al., 2013). How a teacher feels about each aspect of their job affects work performance and job satisfaction. For this study, job satisfaction is a combination of emotions and attitudes teachers have about their jobs and the expectations they have for their work. Teachers' satisfied with their work are more likely to be retained.

Research has identified that teacher attrition is impacted by school factors, working conditions, and student factors (Alexander, et al., 2018). Teachers report the following factors create feelings of dissatisfaction leading to consideration of leaving teaching; workload, work-life balance, not feeling valued, target-driven culture, new initiatives, new mandates, and lack of support from management. (Perryman & Calvert, 2019; Ingersoll 2001). Possip (2021) analyzed comments from more than 4,000 school staff to identify important teacher retention concerns to bring consideration for changes in teacher working conditions. The analysis identified teacher workload, district-level topics, and teacher mental health as the top three reasons teachers are leaving classrooms. The Possip analysis recommended that districts find ways to minimize new initiatives and teacher workload to decrease work-related stress for teachers and improve retention.

When teachers resign, they take their skills and their value to the organization with them (Singh, 2019). During the 2021-2022 school year, 12.39% of North Carolina teachers indicated they intended to leave classroom teaching (North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, 2023). Districts, schools, teachers, and students are affected by the shortage of teachers. Inexperienced teachers or uncertified staff are not able to deliver the curriculum as well as

certified and experienced teachers. Student learning suffers with prolonged teacher vacancies, as substitutes are not able to provide rich instruction.

Teachers who merge their professional identity with student achievement often feel a lack of recognition for their efforts when students exhibit low achievement (Towers & Maguire, 2017). Because professional identities evolve, identity crises may arise when student achievement is low or a new initiative feels overwhelming. Supportive leadership can support teachers through professional identity struggles. Teachers left alone in professional identity conflict, often resign (Towers & Maguire, 2017). Periods of personal or professional vulnerability for teachers may be an opportunity to support them in growth or watch them resign.

Retention of teachers is important in keeping the experience, skills, and values of the organization. When employees resign, they take important skills and experience with them (Zhou & Chen, 2021). Teacher retention is a combination of factors that impact each teacher individually. Teacher retention will improve with compensation, teacher preparation, and school leadership (University of Massachusetts Global, 2020). Addressing reasons why teachers would consider leaving the position, through discussion of their reasons to stay, and what events or issues would cause them to consider leaving, can impact how new teachers are prepared for a commitment to teaching.

School factors can be implemented through school district personnel practices to improve working conditions and retain teachers. These school factors are designed to encourage teachers to remain committed to their profession (Shibiti, 2019; Singh, 2019). Extrinsic factors for teachers include salary, benefits, recognition, resources available to staff, and staff support (Lortie, 2002; Nelson, 2017). Alexander et al. (2020) found that extrinsic factors can be improved and more consistently implemented by schools to improve teacher retention.

Understanding mid-career teacher commitment to teaching will provide opportunities for organizational development in schools seeking to improve teacher retention. Teachers consistently report that working in schools where they experience personal and professional support further develops their resilience and their ability to cope with difficulty (Day, 2013). Higher teacher resiliency leads to decreased work-related stress, improved work engagement, and opportunities for job satisfaction, leading to retention (Reeves, 2021). Teachers with higher resiliency and increased coping skills are less likely to resign.

Working Conditions

Working conditions encompass the physical learning environment, student behavior, leadership behavior, district expectations, and teacher feelings of support, collaboration, job resources, and personal safety (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020; Suriansyah & Aslamiah, 2018; Abraham & Prasetyo, 2021). Improving teacher working conditions is essential in addressing improving teacher career commitment and teacher retention. (Teacher retention trends, 2021; Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Working conditions encompass the culture and the climate of the school.

Teacher working conditions include relationships, supportive leadership, and intrinsic motivators of job satisfaction (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). Towers and Maguire (2017) found that teachers indicated the most important factors in their continued teaching were relationships with the children and the collegial environment of the school. Suriansyah and Aslamiah (2018) conducted a study of elementary school teacher job satisfaction relative to the learning environment. Results found the learning environment impacts teacher job satisfaction. Suriansyah and Aslamiah (2018) found no differences in teacher job satisfaction between schools with high student achievement and schools with low student achievement. The learning

environment differences were found to have an impact on teacher commitment and retention. The learning environment encompasses teacher working conditions, including collaboration, innovation opportunities, decision-making opportunities, resources available to teachers, and relationships within the school. Relationships include teacher-leadership, teacher-teacher, and teacher-student relationships.

Relationships with Staff and Students

Teachers are surrounded by people, yet only sometimes have or make time to connect with others (Harris, 2022). Teaching is a lonely profession. Feeling overworked and unsuccessful diminishes trusting relationships and can lead to burnout as explained by Akdemir (2019). Staff feeling overwhelmed with the number of assigned tasks may not have a school culture that supports them with a teaching mentor or success coach. When anxiety and feelings of insecurity regarding successful teaching arise, overwhelmed staff can withdraw from relationships with coworkers and reduce their commitment to continued teaching.

Teacher Relationships with Students

A positive relationship between teachers and students provides opportunities to be fully present in discussion and learning (Day, 2013). Teachers indicate meaningful relationships with their students as a top reason for job satisfaction. Teachers describe relationships with children as making a difference for children who need a caring adult. (Kamrath & Georgeford, 2020). Teachers describe feeling important to children who are happy to learn in their classroom (Booth et al., 2021). Both Kamrath and Georgeford (2020) and Booth et al. (2021) interviewed teachers who indicated that their relationships with students were the most important aspect of their teaching position. Former teachers explain that leaving the students was the most difficult part of the job to leave as they resigned (Perryman & Calvert, 2019). For some teachers, the

relationship with students was a reason they continued to teach. Teachers with higher emotional intelligence can connect with students and support students through learning and emotional growth better than teachers with lower emotional intelligence (Restoy, 2021). When teachers are engaged in teaching with students who are engaged in learning, there is an intrinsic motivation for teachers to continue and improve their teaching (Shim et al., 2021). The teacher-student relationship positively impacts the students' engagement in learning, teacher job satisfaction, and teacher retention.

Teacher Peer Relationships

Teachers who enjoy working together are more likely to have job satisfaction. Social support for co-workers contributes to retention (Kossivi et al., 2016). In North Carolina, 49.93% of teachers completing the 2022 Teacher Working Conditions Survey, agree they work in a school with an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect (2023). Support-oriented school culture leads to collaboration between teachers, staff, and principals through relationships of trust and professional collaboration (Friedman, 2011). Teachers who work in a culture of trust have higher job satisfaction and accept more personal responsibility for errors and learning. A culture of trust requires personal responsibility from each staff member. Personal responsibility is the practice of accepting responsibility for successes and errors and learning from mistakes (Reeves, 2021). School culture impacts teachers' continued commitment to teaching with investment in student achievement.

Schools that promote teacher collaboration and social relationships resolve issues easily and enhance teaching competence (Narayan, 2016; Erichsen & Reynolds, 2019). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2019) make the differentiation between a school's collective culture and teacher collaboration because teacher collaboration is often an assignment. Professional learning

communities (PLCs) are mandated by schools to create grade-level and subject teams. These regularly scheduled team meetings provide opportunities for teacher collaboration, shared decision-making regarding lessons, content pacing, and activity planning. PLC groups may be assigned grade level, or subject matter teams as defined by school administration (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). PLC meetings vary in frequency, quality, and intent. The structure, content, and effectiveness of PLC meetings depend on teacher participation, collaboration, and application of knowledge for cooperating teaching strategies and lessons.

Teacher collaboration does not require the collegial relationships that foster job satisfaction. A collaborative culture creates more committed and satisfied teachers. CPTC - collective pedagogical teacher culture, a term coined by Banerjee's research team (2017), describes the value of a strong professional community and a standard of collaboration among teachers to meet the needs of students. Shared goals, values, and supportive relationships among teaching staff create a collective culture of satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2021). Satisfied teachers are retained.

Supportive Leadership

Schools are led by individuals or teams of individuals. School leadership is in place to guide staff, teachers and students in meeting the goals. School culture, school safety, school scheduling, and accurate record keeping are responsibilities of school leadership. School leadership also provides the necessary resources and instructional materials necessary for student learning. It is the responsibility of school leadership to meet and manage budget expectations as well as oversee the maintenance of the school building (North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, 2023). Strong school leadership can establish a supportive learning

environment within the school. Strong leadership encourages supportive working conditions, leading to satisfied teachers.

Teacher job satisfaction is positively correlated with their satisfaction with their supervisor (Kossivi et al., 2016). Teachers who report being satisfied with their jobs more often also report having a positive and supportive relationship with leadership (Cupit, 2019; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In North Carolina, 33.42% of teachers indicate the most important retention factor is their school leadership (North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, 2023). School administrators with higher levels of emotional intelligence foster positive school cultures and have higher teacher retention rates (Reeves, 2021). Approachable school leaders, listen actively, demonstrate perseverance, and motivate staff into action developing a workplace culture of support (Zhou & Chen, 2021). Strong administrators provide supervision, mentoring, and leadership that enhance employee job satisfaction (Alshmemri et al., 2017; Kossivi et al., 2016).

Highly skilled administrators focus on both motivating factors to improve job satisfaction and neutral factors to minimize job dissatisfaction to ensure they have a skilled and satisfied teaching team. Teachers who report having their needs satisfied relative to belonging, autonomy, and competence report job satisfaction (Shim et al., 2021). Minimizing factors of job dissatisfaction can be as important to teacher retention as increasing the factors of job satisfaction.

In a case study conducted on teacher retention and turnover at one elementary school, former teachers who left employment in their first three years indicated that improved administrative relationships would have impacted their desire to remain in teaching. These former teachers were less positively impacted by beginning teacher mentoring and more negatively

impacted by a lack of support from school leadership. They identified support as encouragement, assistance, and backing-up decisions and opinions, especially concerning student discipline (Kamrath & Georgeford, 2020). Kamrath and Georgeford (2020) found that beginning teachers left employment citing lack or inconsistency in school discipline policies while mid-career teachers hoped for more consistent policies. During the 2021-2022 school year, 51.70% of North Carolina teachers report their school leadership supports classroom discipline. (North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, 2023). Mid-career teachers create processes within their classrooms to not rely on school administration for discipline concerns.

Grissom (2011) reports that disadvantaged school districts add coordinators, additional administrators, coaches, and mentors intending to support schools and increase student achievements. Many times, additional staff members are assigned to schools by district administration with the intent of supporting teachers. The unintended impact of additional staff members can be an increase in the bureaucracy and authoritarian nature of the district culture.

Teacher Appreciation

Individuals become teachers because they see the value in children and want to make a difference. They want to facilitate learning. Teachers want to be valued for their work, they want to make a difference (Perryman & Calvert, 2019; Shah et al., 2020; Abraham & Prasetyo, 2021; Booth et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2021). Being appreciated for their effort in working through behaviors, and teaching struggling students improves teachers' commitment. The ideals of moral commitment to students deemed difficult to teach, in low socio-economic neighborhoods can give teachers a feeling of value through intrinsic means. Teachers can feel valued in making a difference for students of challenging populations (Nelson, 2017; Santoro, 2018). Teachers report feeling underappreciated as a reason for resignation.

Shared Decision-Making

Schools with consistent policies, and some flexibility, coordinated through meetings with staff opinions are considered to support job satisfaction (Abraham & Prasetyo, 2021). Teachers reported dissatisfaction with initiatives and mandates imposed without flexibility or staff discussion (Booth et al., 2017). Kamrath and Georgeford (2020) found a “lack of shared leadership” to be an important factor in teacher resignation. 53.12% of North Carolina teachers agree they have a shared vision for their school and 56.61% of North Carolina teachers agree they are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles (North Carolina Working Conditions Survey, 2023).

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction recommends professional learning community (PLC) practices at all levels of public education. PLCs provide structured opportunities for teachers to learn from each other and further develop collaborative processes to enhance student learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1998). When PLC time is used effectively by teachers, they improve collaborative relationships.

Shared leadership, when utilized as a team approach to developing procedures and practices for school operations can decrease the work of administrators while providing opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively and develop relationships. This team approach to school administration provides teachers with opportunities for decision-making. With effective school policies and procedures made through shared decision-making, the psychological empowerment of teachers increases (Sun et al., 2022). Increased psychological empowerment through opportunities for shared decision-making, provides teachers the opportunity to have a voice in the implementation of school operations.

Recognition

Teachers who devote themselves to educating children want to be acknowledged. Offering professional development, with plans of recognition or promotion is a way to acknowledge mid-career teachers. Kamrath and Georgeford (2020) found recognition to be the number one factor that would have retained teachers. Teachers who report working hard and not feeling valued or receiving recognition for their efforts consider resignation (Abraham & Prasetyo, 2021; Booth et al., 2021). Teachers want to be recognized for their exemplary instruction, and teaching practices. Recognition matters more than salary (Georgeford, 2020).

Professional Development Opportunities

When organizations have effective induction processes that include orientation and provide ongoing professional development for professional growth, retention rates improve (Kossivi et al., 2016). Teachers who have no opportunity for professional development or training to hone their skills report dissatisfaction with teaching (Abraham & Prasetyo, 2021). Schools are learning organizations and learning should take place at all levels. Teachers value feedback and learning new ways to reach students and help students learn (Reeves, 2021).

Mid-career teachers report having few options for meaningful professional development. Mandated professional development is often not meaningful to mid-career teachers. Required training is often part of a response to correction or implementation of the new initiative and not what a mid-career teacher needs for professional growth (Booth et al., 2021). Sun et al. (2022) recommend that schools continue to develop and improve professional development opportunities for teachers to improve their psychological empowerment. Increasing teacher psychological resources will increase work engagement leading to improved job satisfaction and retention.

Salary, Benefits, and Job Security

Teachers report being dissatisfied with their pay and benefits. Generally, pay and benefits are controlled by the Department of Education (Shibiti, 2019; Adu-Baffoe, 2021). Kamrath and Georgeford (2020) found that only 28% of former teachers interviewed in their retention study indicated that a salary increase would have prevented their resignation. Salary and benefits can be an embedding factor of retention (Mitchell & Kappen, 2018). Although dissatisfied with pay and benefits, public school teachers indicated they remain employed for the benefits packages (Adu-Baffoe, 2021). Shah et al. (2020) found that monetary incentives do not impact retention. Teachers do not teach for the money.

Through interviews with former mid-career teachers, Glazer (2018) found that teachers cited a lack of job security as a reason for resignation. The annual pink slip for those without contracts and the tense summer months hoping to be rehired for the next school year created job-related stress and concern for job security. Reeves (2021) discusses the concern of job security as a fear of some teachers who have low-achieving students when the teacher has inappropriately prioritized student test scores to their professional identity. Erichsen and Reynolds (2020) conducted a review of national teacher working conditions surveys and found job security to have little impact on teacher job satisfaction. In today's teacher shortage and the current crisis of teacher retention, job security is less of a concern.

Job Embeddedness Theory

The Job Embeddedness theory, first developed by Mitchell and Lee (2001) considers the links, fit, and sacrifice an employee has relative to their job. Known as the staying theory, Job Embeddedness is effective at predicting employee retention. The culture of an organization that

retains employees provides a supportive culture of employees to balance work and life, work autonomy, and strengths-based assignments (Kossivi et al., 2016).

Job Embeddedness Theory has effectively measured early career teacher commitment and turnover intention. Through quantitative research, Watson (2018) found that applying the Job Embeddedness theory in studying the connectedness of early-career teachers to their schools and communities was effective in understanding teacher retention. Watson (2018) utilized a job embeddedness questionnaire with two groups of early career teachers, one group currently teaching, the second group resigned. The group of early-career teachers currently teaching reported higher job embeddedness, indicating that if schools can increase the fit and links for early-career teachers they will improve teacher retention for those teachers with less than five years of teaching experience.

Using the Job Embeddedness theory to investigate millennial employee organizational commitment, Hassan et al. (2014) found that employees had increased job embeddedness when compensation and rewards were perceived as being acceptable for their lifestyle and work effort. Additionally, Hassan et al. found that transformational leadership and diminished work stress positively impacted millennial employee job embeddedness. Transformational leadership and diminished work stress were found to support employee job embeddedness.

Shah et al. (2020) found the Job Embeddedness theory applicable only in with consideration of organizational and employee behavioral theory. Through a systematic review, Shah et al. (2020) identified that job embeddedness is a mediator between employee personal factors of burnout, employee attitude, and work-related stress as well as the organizational behaviors of recognition, employee value, decision-making, and intent to retain employees.

Teachers who experience job embeddedness through fit, links, and an understanding of sacrifice report less on job stress, and

Job embeddedness is not job satisfaction or organizational commitment. Job embeddedness is the network of relations inside the organization and through the community that comes with the job (Shibiti, 2019; Shah et al., 2020). The Job Embeddedness theory is effective in predicting organizational commitment through a review of factors related to employee fit with the organization and community, links to people, and the sacrifice of resignation. Satisfied and retained employees are more likely to meet job performance requirements.

Aspects of Job Embeddedness

Fit. Fit is how the job fits with their lives (Shibiti, 2019; Chatman, 1989). Hassan et al. (2021) found that employees fit within organizations that support employees living a life of reduced stress. The compatibility of the employee with the current organizational culture describes employee fit (Shah et al., 2020). When management prioritizes factors of employee stress reduction, employees have higher levels of job embeddedness.

Links. Links are the connections employees have to coworkers and others in the community as a result of employment (Shah et al., 2020). When an employee is linked to the activities of the job and the people associated with work, they are more likely to be embedded in their job (Sindhu et al., 2023). Employees who perceive and report relationships and connections to people through their work have a higher likelihood of job embeddedness.

Sacrifice. Sacrifice is the relationship that would be lost with employee resignation (Shibiti, 2019). Sacrifice is also a tangible factor, such as a benefits package or salary that may be diminished with resignation (Mitchell & Kappen, 2018). Employees connected to the organization and community can assess the sacrifices they would make if they chose to resign.

Hassan et al. (2104) found that employees were not willing to sacrifice the work culture created by the transformational leadership of the organization. Hassan et al. (2014) also found that employees were more likely to be retained when their employer diminished work-related stress. Those employees were not willing to sacrifice an environment focused on reduced work-related stress. For some employees who are considering resignation, their sacrifice would be greater than their desire to resign.

Beyond work-related factors for job satisfaction and retention, the Job Embeddedness theory incorporates personal social factors, that support retention (Shah et al., 2020, Sindhu et al., 2023). Factors that enhance retention include organizational culture, relationships, equity, opportunities for advancement, salary, benefits, and effective leadership. Additional factors for employee retention can include community and family connections and needs.

This study will focus on the original job embeddedness theory of fit, links, and sacrifice connecting mid-career teachers to their work as a teacher. The Job Embeddedness theory has been expanded to include three additional factors related to an individual's community. Fit, links and sacrifice related to each participant's community will not be specifically explored in this study. The mediating effect of Job Embeddedness for some of the teacher participants may be impacted by community factors. These community factors may be identified through the interview and data collection process.

Job Embeddedness Theory in Understanding Mid-Career Teachers

The Job Embeddedness Theory is an adequate predictor of employee organizational commitment (Shah et al., 2020). Alexander et al. (2020) found that current employment practices for teacher retention rely on the capacity of individual teachers to maintain personal intrinsic motivation to continue teaching. Research has found that schools that implement

motivating factors have more committed teachers. Schools that implement consistent extrinsic factors designed to decrease staff dissatisfaction or increase job satisfaction experience higher teacher retention (Andersson, 2017; Alshmemri et al., 2017). Mid-career teachers who experience a fit within their school and have effective relationships through work are more likely to continue teaching because the sacrifice of resignation is too great.

Fit, Links, and Sacrifice for Mid-Career Teachers

Fit. The quality of the relationship between the individual and their work environment has an important effect on the employee's well-being. Teachers who report a sense of belonging are more likely to report higher job satisfaction. The Person-Organizational fit (P-O), when reported as positive by the employee, develops self-esteem, and a sense of usefulness in supporting the organizational identity (Merecz & Andysz, 2014). Belonging is often characterized by a description of similar values shared by both the organization and the employee (Chatman, 1989). Feeling useful within the school is individualized for each mid-career teacher. Some mid-career teachers may take on leadership roles, and value shared decision-making, while others value the culture of the school as it fits with their beliefs in education (Chatman, 1989). Vekeman et al. (2017) conducted their research on P-O fit focusing on teacher-perceived organizational fit, rather than actual. According to Vekeman et al. (2017), previous research found a low correlation between P-O fit and turnover intention. A lack of P-O fit for an employee reduces job satisfaction, as it minimizes belonging within the school culture.

Fit within the community can also impact teacher retention. When a teacher fits within the community, they are more likely to stay and develop linkages further embedding them into the community. Teachers who relocate to new communities for teaching positions need to feel a fit within the community and their school environment to increase job embeddedness. Mid-

career teachers who have personal responsibilities that come with middle age, such as parenting or caring for parents may choose to resign (Glazer, 2018). Lee et al. (2014) found that family embeddedness is a strong predictor of voluntary employee turnover.

Links. Lee et al. (2014) found that job embeddedness can be impacted through collegial relationships and employee intent to turnover. Considered turnover contagion, teachers who begin searching for other employment can impact their coworkers to do the same. Teachers with strong collegial relationships may influence each other regarding job embeddedness or voluntary turnover.

Through a case study analysis, Kamrath and Georgeford (2020) learned that mid-career teachers who felt a lack of support from the current school administration were able to create a supportive teaching culture to overcome the lack of principal support. The links are created through teacher-peer relationships. Teachers with positive working relationships with coworkers and the students they teach are likely to have important links to their work, and report feeling linked to the people they work with. Teachers with strong links to their neighborhood and community through civic or religious organizations, or strong family ties to the community are embedded in the community. Teachers with strong community connections may have increased job retention, despite fewer professional links

Shim et al. (2022) found that teachers with met psychological needs report higher job satisfaction and are more likely to remain in their teaching positions. Leadership interested in improving teacher job satisfaction for mid-career teachers needs to assess the nature of the work, opportunities the work provides for achievement and recognition, and professional development for teachers to further develop professional identities. Leaders can minimize employee

dissatisfaction through active supervision with consistent accountability. Minimizing dissatisfaction will improve teacher job embeddedness, leading to retention.

Sacrifice. Teachers have reported that missing the relationships with students is a sacrifice when considering resignation (Day, 2013; Perryman & Calvert; 2019; Kamrath & Georgeford, 2020; Booth et al., 2021). Prior teachers explained the most difficult part of leaving teaching, was losing the relationship with students (Perryman & Calvert, 2019). Teachers committed to their relationship with students are less likely to sacrifice the relationship through resignation.

A sacrifice for mid-career teachers considering resignation may be a loss of salary and benefits. For public school and state-operated educational institutions, salary and benefits are contracted and controlled for all teaching staff often with a secure retirement plan (Shibiti, 2019; Adu-Baffoe, 2021) Mid-career teachers, those with five to fifteen years of experience in a school with an ample benefits package including retirement, may not be willing to sacrifice the benefits as easily as an early-career teacher would. The investment of being vested, and nearing completion of half of a 20 or 30-year career can be a staying factor for mid-career teachers.

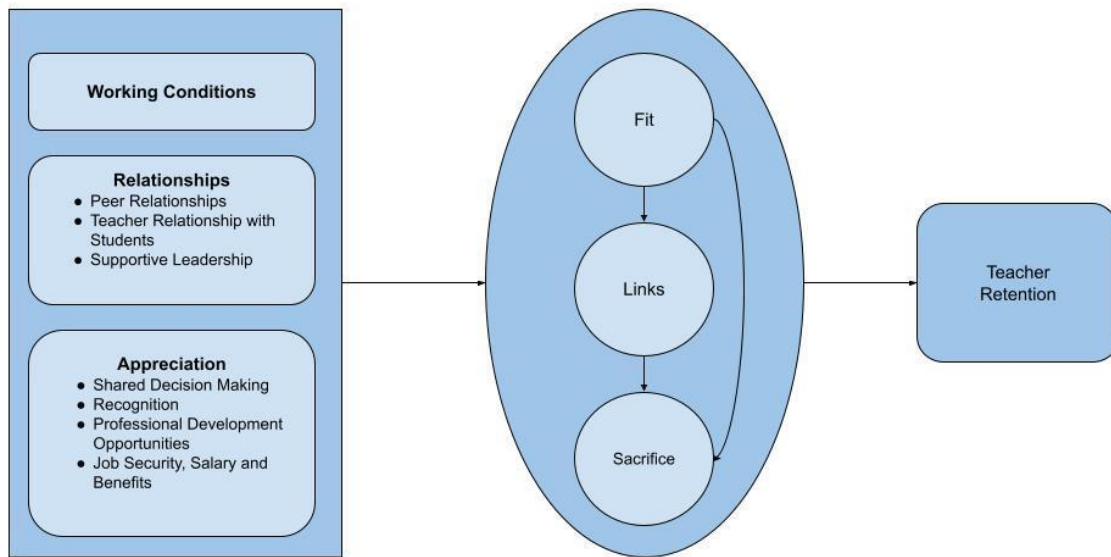
Lortie (2002) found that female teachers taught fewer years than male teachers and often formatted their teaching career around their childrearing and family needs. Research has found that teachers cite work-life balance, the ability to balance personal and professional life demands, as a reason for attrition (Hartsel, 2016). A decision point for mid-career teachers can occur when their personal life needs their attention as much or more as their professional role. This decision point can lead to resignation (Glazer, 2018). With demands from both the professional and personal areas of their lives, mid-career teachers may struggle with making sacrifices for work or family.

Framework

This study seeks to construct knowledge to answer the problem of mid-career teacher retention. What are the reasons mid-career teachers continue teaching? The conceptual framework for this study illustrates the factors described in the literature review that impact teacher retention (See Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Framework: Factors Impacting Mid-Career Teachers' Retention



CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore one group of Western North Carolina mid-career teachers' reasons and intent for commitment to a career as a teacher. What internal and external factors keep teachers in the classroom? Understanding those factors can benefit schools and school districts by providing the information necessary to maximize retention. The literature review of this current study has established that teacher job embeddedness is influenced by working conditions, relationships with staff and students, shared decision-making, available professional development, and recognition. This researcher examined retention factors, by interviewing one group of mid-career teachers' continued commitment to teaching in two identified school districts in the North Western Region of North Carolina.

Research Question(s)

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the reasons Western North Carolina mid-career teachers continue teaching?
2. How can teachers be retained beyond their mid-career teaching years?

Research Design

To appropriately investigate the research questions, the researcher used an exploratory qualitative approach through an interpretive framework. Qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of generally unstructured data through engaging in conversations with each research participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). Participants provided detailed data through interviews to construct a better understanding of one group of Western North Carolina mid-career teachers' retention decisions.

Through the perceptions and experiences of each participant, this research provides an opportunity for those collective experiences to expand the body of knowledge related to teacher retention (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). Knowledge has been constructed through the process of collecting participant experiences in teaching. The researcher compiled the details of participant experiences and through qualitative analysis constructed a general understanding of individual teachers' retention decisions.

Participant Recruitment

Mid-career teachers defined by this study are teachers who have begun teaching at least their fifth year but have not yet completed their 15th year of teaching. This criterion was selected based on Booth et al. (2021) study and definition of mid-career teachers as those with five to fifteen years of experience. Using a purposeful sampling strategy, participants were identified based on their status as mid-career teachers in two identified school districts in the North Western Region of North Carolina. Because of teacher shortage and ongoing teacher turnover, participants were sought from two small city school districts to recruit 10-15 available mid-career teachers for semi-structured interviews with the researcher.

Before recruitment, the study was presented for approval to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) IRB office for review and approval. A waiver of approval was provided regarding the study by UIUC's IRB office. Participation in this research is completely voluntary. While pseudonym were used, due to the qualitative nature of this research and the collection of personally identifiable information, there is a small possibility of loss of confidentiality. The small size of each district limits the number of available teaching positions per subject and grade level, making confidentiality more difficult when discussing teacher

demographics, and experiences. Teachers choosing to participate in this study were selected because they meet both of the following criteria:

1. A teacher with at least 5 years and fewer than 16 years of teaching experience
2. A teacher in one of two districts identified for the study.

Recruitment Phase I

In spring 2023, Personnel Directors from the two identified districts emailed the researcher-provided recruitment letter including a link to an interest form to teachers in their districts. The participant recruitment email is available in Appendix F. The interest form used to collect participant interest asked potential participants for their names, contact information such as phone number and email address, permission to text message, and included a link to the University Social Behavioral Research Consent form with a yes/no question to provide consent. Providing the consent form at initial recruitment with the interest survey and asking for a yes/no consent allowed potential participants to sign and return the consent form immediately. Additionally, the interest form asked for the current grade level and subject taught at which school district. A multiple-choice question with options of 5-10 years, 11-15 years, or ‘other’ was used to collect each interested participant’s years of teaching experience.

Six teachers completed the interest form in the spring of 2023 as a result of receipt of the recruitment email sent from their Personnel Departments. The six teachers who completed the initial interest survey were representative of one teacher from District B and five teachers from District A. Teachers from District A were representative of five schools within District A, two high schools and two elementary schools. The researcher used the district Personnel Departments to send a recruitment survey form, which made the recruitment effort superior to snowball recruitment. It is unlikely that the initial five respondents to the participant recruitment survey

from District A communicated with each other across schools regarding study participation. Participant responses from District A are date and time stamped. Four District A teachers completed the survey on June 7, 2023 during their workday, with the fifth mid-career teacher completing the survey on June 8, 2023 mid-day.

The pilot study was completed in July 2023, with two participants selected from this original solicitation. Of the other four interested participants, two interviews were conducted in the fall of 2023 when teachers returned to work. The last two teachers who expressed interest on the initial recruitment attempt, did not complete interviews.

Teachers are off for the summer months, and recruitment was paused until the fall semester of 2023 when teachers returned to work from summer break. At the request of the researcher, District B resent the recruitment email to staff in the fall, it is unknown if District A resent the email to teaching staff in the fall. The second request for participants using the same recruitment email from Spring 2023 in District B, yielded no additional interested volunteers.

Recruitment Phase II

With few identified participants, the researcher amended the recruitment protocol to include direct emails to teachers with publicly advertised email addresses. In November 2023, the researcher reviewed publicly available school and teacher webpages for each of the identified districts. The researcher sent individualized versions of the participant recruitment email to teachers from the districts whose websites indicated their years of teaching and to teachers with publicly available email addresses who may have met the criteria. From mid-November through mid-December, 2023, 88 recruitment emails were sent directly to teachers with publicly identified emails.

Recruitment for teacher participants in District B was supported by the superintendent who validated with teachers who received the recruitment email that participation was voluntary, but asked for consideration to participate because “the data from this study is extremely relevant as one of the Board of Education focuses is staff retention. This could help inform our practices as a system in the future.” December 1, 2023, the superintendent sent individual emails to 35 teachers meeting the research criteria to verify that the recruitment email was a valid opportunity to participate in the research. This support from the superintendent increased the number of volunteer participants from District B, by two participants.

After sending initial direct emails to teachers with publicly available emails, the researcher reached out to a Principal in District A, who had previously been an employee of District B to communicate an attempt to directly contact seven teachers through the school’s website. The researcher provided a list of teachers’ names from within the school who had received recruitment emails. The Principal agreed to send a follow-up email to those teachers validating the research. Two teachers were recruited for the study from this school. A second Principal in District A was contacted via email, with a list of teachers from that building who received direct communication for recruitment. The principal did not respond and no teachers volunteered to participate from that school.

Through direct communication with three teachers in District B, they ignored the email because they were not confident that the University of Illinois email of klm8@illinois.edu was a verified email. In District B, teachers are taught to not open any email from anyone they do not know. Two teachers confirmed with the District B Superintendent in December as a result of his email that they had received the original recruitment email from the University of Illinois email and thought it was phishing or spam.

Limitations in Participant Recruitment

A limitation identified by the researcher regarding participant recruitment, was the broad interpretation of teaching experience and years of teaching by potential participants. The participant recruitment letter (APPENDIX F) states participants must meet both of the following criteria:

1. You are a teacher with at least 5 years and fewer than 16 years of teaching experience
2. You are a teacher in one of two districts identified for the study

Clarifying information for question one may have improved participant recruitment. Question one's criteria of at least 5 years of teaching experience does not qualify whether starting or completing their fifth year of teaching indicates 5 years of experience. The type of teaching experience is not defined by research question one. The lack of definition of teaching experience, left room for interpretation by potential participants. A definition of the type of teaching experience may have improved participant recruitment.

The timing of initial recruitment in the Spring 2023 created limitations in participant recruitment because recruitment crossed school years. Recruiting participating teachers in the Spring of 2023 was difficult as teachers were completing their working year and leaving for the summer. School Districts and teachers consider years on the school calendar. Participating teachers reported years of experience as their current year of teaching, not necessarily how many years they had completed teaching. Table 1 provides a visual understanding of participant self-reporting teaching experience and public school teaching experience.

Participants

Data was compiled from semi-structured interviews completed with twelve teachers, teaching in eight schools from two comparable school districts. Teacher participants ranged in

age from 27 years to 61 years old. Six male and six female teachers make up a total of twelve participants. Participating teachers represent three high schools, two middle schools, and three elementary schools. Seven participating teachers were employed in District B, with the other five participants employed by District A.

Thirteen teachers completed semi-structured interviews with the researcher. One participant's (P05) interview data is not included in the study results. Although data interview data aligned with the themes of the other teacher participants, the participant had completed 16 years of teaching during the 2023-2024 school year and reported 17 years of teaching experience at the time of the interview.

Completed years of teaching experience ranged from 5 to 15 years as determined by each participant. At the time of the study, the average number of years of public school teaching for this group of teachers was 9.2. The average time teaching at their current school for group of mid-career teachers, is six years and ten months (6.84 years). Three teachers, have been rehired at schools where they previously taught. Omar, has 10 years of consecutive teaching experience at his current school. During the 2012 school year, he taught one semester at another high school, for a coaching opportunity. With nearly 16 years of teaching experience, Omar has taught 15.5 non-consecutive years at one high school. Similarly, George reports 10 years of public school experience, with seven non-consecutive years of teaching experience at the same high school. He taught honors students for two and one-half years in a neighboring district, before returning. Lastly, Dwight has taught in two states and four school districts, teaching four of his last five years at his current school. Two years ago, Dwight returned to his current school after a year in a neighboring district.

Nine participating teachers report Bachelor's level education, with one teacher reporting two Bachelor's degrees. Three male teachers report Master's degree completion, one of them with two Master's degrees. All three Master's level teachers report relocating their families south from the Northeast or Midwest making North Carolina their home.

Five teachers from three high schools, one teaching music, one science teacher, one teaching civics, and two art teachers, participated in the research. Because of the small size of the school districts. Four teacher participants currently teach middle school; three 8th-grade teachers, teaching; math, science, and social studies and one 7th-grade math teacher. Three elementary teaching participants are teaching through special programs; English as a second language (ESL) or special education classroom teachers in their district's exceptional children's departments (EC). Table 1 is a chart of participant demographics, for gender, education level, years of public school experience, and current teaching grade level.

Table 1.*Participant Demographics*

Participant Code	Name	Gender	Education Level	Self-Reported Completed Years of Teaching	Years of Public School Teaching**	Years of Teaching at Current School**	Grade Level Currently Teaching	School Identifier	Student Population 2022-2023
P01	Sarah	Female	BA	21	5	5	Middle School	MS1	390
P02	Alexander	Male	MA	12	11	3	Elementary	EL1	318
P03	Phillip	Male	MA	8	5	5	High School	HS1	1014
P04	George	Male	BA	10	10	3*	High School	HS2	229
P06	Omar	Male	BA	13	14	10*	High School	HS3	758
P08	Rachel	Female	BA	9	6	6	Elementary	EL2	350
P09	Leah	Female	BA	8	9	9	Middle School	MS1	390
P10	William	Male	BA	5	6	6	High School	HS3	758
P11	Abigail	Female	BA	14	15	15	High School	HS3	758
P12	Dwight	Male	MA	9	10	2*	Middle School	MS2	400
P13	Deborah	Female	BA	11	12	12	Elementary	EL3	86
P14	Rebecca	Female	BA	5	6	6	Middle School	MS2	400

* Consecutive time teaching at current school for current term of employment. These three teachers were previously employed at their current schools, resigned for work in another school district and have returned.

**Years of Teaching is self-reported from the teacher, as year currently teaching in, rather than teaching years completed.

Decision to Teach

Similar to previous research, this study's participating mid-career teachers are a heterogeneous group with varying backgrounds and reasons for entering the teaching profession (Booth et al., 2021; Richardson & Watt, 2016). Unfortunately, society often does not view teaching as a prestigious or desirable career path. While some may perceive teaching as an easy job with summers off and workday with fewer than 8 hours, others recognize the challenges of meeting government requirements, addressing student behavior, and balancing instructional autonomy (Richardson & Watt, 2016; Ingersoll, 2001). Many individuals choose to become teachers due to positive experiences and relationships with impactful adults during their K-12 education.

Participating teachers presented a range of teaching experiences inside and outside of public school. Six participating teachers reported previous instructional experience as a coach, adjunct professor, unlicensed English language teacher, and homeschool parent before becoming a public school teacher. Three participant teachers taught English language in foreign countries for at least one year and as long as six years. Two after completing their undergraduate studies and one before college enrollment. One participant (Phillip) reported 8 years of teaching experience. His experience includes three years of teaching English in Asia, two years of teaching art at the community college level, and currently teaching his fifth year of high school art.

Researcher Subjectivity

I sought this study as it relates to issues and experiences I observe in the public school system. As a parent of public school students and a third-generation public school employee, my

family has had many opportunities to observe the practices of public schools concerning teachers and teacher retention.

The plight of my co-workers and the school board, as they continue to think of ways to attract and retain teachers with minimal input from teachers, led me to consider this study. As I discuss past teaching experiences with the teachers in my family and friend groups it further inspired me to better understand teacher retention. Hearing my co-directors say they would never return to the classroom or those co-workers who discuss their best days at work are those days without students, makes me want to better understand why individuals choose to teach and the reasons they continue to teach.

Being a public school employee, I understand the value of the retirement and benefits package. Like some of my co-workers, I understand the reduced benefits available for retiring with fewer than the targeted 30 years. The information sought with constant changes in leadership, mandates, and initiatives is tiresome. I expect to find through this researcher, that relationships matter to the teachers who continue teaching. Additionally, I expect to better understand what parts of school culture mid-career teachers find valuable as they continue to teach.

Setting

School districts were identified by the convenience of the researcher's location. Within 15 miles of the researcher's available travel are two similar school districts, each identified as City Schools, rather than County School districts. Each of the identified school districts has similar student populations in diversity, income, and student outcomes. Because the two school districts are in close proximity, in the same North Carolina County, some teachers have considered working or have teaching experience in both districts.

District A reports approximately 3600 enrolled students with 60% of students qualifying as low-income as identified by free and reduced lunch. Similarly, District B has approximately 2600 enrolled students for 2023-2024 with 65% of students eligible for free and reduced lunches. Superintendents from the two neighboring and similar city school districts were approached for permission to recruit mid-career teachers as research participants. Each district superintendent provided written permission for the researcher to provide participant recruiting information to each District Personnel Department for dissemination to their employed teachers.

Qualitative research is conducted in a safe and comfortable environment identified for each participant. The natural setting of interviews permitted participants to feel at ease and answer research questions without influence from the researcher (Creswell, 2009; Murray, 2021). Interviews for this research were held via electronic conference using Zoom. Interviews were completed at dates and times convenient for each participant in an attempt to ensure participants did not feel rushed during the scheduled 60-minutes interviews. Information sharing by participants. The majority of District B participants chose to schedule their interview during their planning time or a teacher workday. Most District A teachers scheduled their interviews for times immediately after dismissal and remained in their classrooms for the Zoom meeting. Participating teachers with scheduled interviews over the summer chose locations comfortable to them that had adequate internet connectivity.

Data Collection

Data for this research was primarily collected through semi-structured interviews with participants. A semi-structured interview format was chosen with the intention of better understanding the personal experiences, perceptions, and beliefs of mid-career teacher retention

(DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants were interviewed individually, via Zoom electronic video conferencing tool.

Participants signed the University of Illinois Social Behavior Research Consent form provided to them by the researcher before their scheduled interview. An example of the Social Behavior Research Consent form is available in Appendix G. Participants were made aware and agreed to record interviews. The researcher informed each participant when the recording was started and when the recording was stopped. Interviews were recorded to assist the researcher with accurate information when compared to interview notes. Recording each interview provided opportunity for the researcher to become intimate with the data through later replay (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Each interview was scheduled for approximately 60 minutes, with the shortest lasting approximately 40 minutes, and the longest just over an hour.

The interview protocol ensures that every participant receives the same information during the interview. Fourteen identified questions were asked in each interview. A few of the questions had secondary components. For example; What do you like most about teaching? And dislike most? The questions were designed to elicit participant perceptions through discussion regarding their reasons for continued teaching and teacher retention factors. As participants answered questions, the questions often acted as prompts for additional and expanded information, examples, and ideas. The topics covered in each semi-structured interview include questions to learn about each participant's decision to become a teacher and why they chose to continue to teach. Questions are designed to gather data regarding teachers' perceived fit in their careers and current schools. The interview question matrix, available in APPENDIX H, provides a visual intent to measure Job Embeddedness. . Participants were asked to consider what links are important to their teaching profession, how they fit into their school, and what they would

sacrifice if they chose to leave teaching. The researcher used clarifying and probing questions to further understand each participant's perspective. Data collected from each interview was recorded and transcribed through Zoom cloud transcription to assist in identifying common themes.

Pilot Study

Questions for the interview were designed in a semi-structured format with open-ended questions. Open-ended questions are designed to elicit an expanded response from participants and encourage further discussion with the researcher (Parameswaran et al., 2019). A list of the 14 open-ended interview questions can be found in Appendix I. Before the pilot study, the interview questions were reviewed by a panel of expert researchers. The researcher implemented suggestions from the panel to further align questions with the intent of the research.

To ensure quality research, a field test of the interview questions was performed with 2 teachers who meet the criteria for the study. The purpose of the pilot study was to ensure the interview questions elicited responses from participants generating data relevant to this study. Additionally, the pilot study provided the researcher an opportunity to practice interview skills of asking questions, pausing for answers, listening attentively to responses, and probing when necessary to elicit additional depth in response (Ismail et al., 2017). Pilot study interviews were conducted via Zoom web conferencing, using Zoom transcription to transcribe the recorded data.

The pilot study was conducted with two teachers, one male and one female. One teacher from each of the targeted school districts. Pilot study participants included different education and experience levels with one having a bachelor's degree and the other a master's degree. One taught middle school while the other was an elementary school teacher. Teaching experience differed between the pilot study participants with one reporting 5 years of public-school teaching

experience, in one school . The other reported 10 years of public school teaching, with experience in three states.

Pilot study participants were provided via email with both the video recording and the written transcription of their interview with a request to return any changes to the researcher within 72 hours of receipt. Neither participating teacher in the pilot study requested edits to their transcribed interview. With no changes made or requested to be made by participants, participant experiences were considered transcribed accurately. No requests for edits or changes to either interview transcription in the pilot study, providing reassurance to researcher that both participants and the researcher perceived the questions similarly.

In addition to the interview experience and review of their interview transcript, pilot study participants were asked to describe each question's ease of answering and effectiveness in eliciting meaningful data. Pilot study participants expanded on questions throughout the interview process. The semi-formal structure of the interview permitted for detailed explanations and additional thoughts from participants. Pilot participants were asked to suggest any additional questions that could generate improved data. Neither participant recommended any additional questions and reported the interview to be thorough. With no recommendations for changes through results from the two pilot interviews, no changes were made to the interview questions.

Data Analysis

Throughout each Zoom interview, the researcher took notes to help clarify important points as they were discussed. The researcher downloaded a copy of each interview audio recording and interview transcription. Both are saved as files with the participant's (P01-P14) assigned number, in a password-protected file. Each recorded interview was deleted within 30 days of completion. NVivo14 software for qualitative research was used to analyze the data.

Each participating teacher's data was initially coded with a participant number, P01 through P14 until all participating teachers were coded. Coding participants with a number supported the researcher's intent of preserving participant confidentiality while analyzing data. To maintain humanness to the qualitative data collected, participant numbers were assigned pseudonyms in the reporting of the data process. Pseudonyms were chosen and assigned by the researcher, participants had no input (Itzik & Walsh, 2023; Allen & Wiles, 2015).

Identifying data for participants, such as name, current school and school district, have not been published or presented as part of this study. The qualitative data collected for this research has been consistently analyzed through the six steps of thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021) and Clarke & Braun (2013). The steps are as follows: (1) Becoming Familiar with the Data, (2) Generate Initial Codes, (3) Searching for Themes, (4) Reviewing Themes, (5) Defining and Naming Themes and (6) Reporting the Data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of qualitative analysis were followed for analysis of the data and are described within the sections of: compiling data, disassembling data, reassembling data, interpreting data, and drawing conclusions regarding the data. Concluding with reporting the data (Castle & Nolen, 2018).

Compiling Data

The researcher used the Zoom platform to record and transcribe interviews into a Word document and submit it for participant member check. No participants returned corrections or clarifications from their interview transcriptions. The transcription of each interview after review by the participant was saved to a secure, password-protected file in preparation for data analysis.

Before uploading transcriptions to NVivo14, the researcher reviewed and cleaned up much of the transcriptions by removing the Zoom timestamps. Zoom transcribed fairly well, and

errors in transcriptions were noted and corrected through review by the researcher. Transcription errors, occurred when the interviewee and researcher exchanged words quickly. Zoom was not able to determine who had made the statement for certain quickly spoken phrases. In some interviews, interviewee speech patterns, accents, and background noise created errors in the Zoom transcription. For example; “I teach art” was transcribed as “I teach our.” A few errors occurred in the Zoom transcription as duplicated statements, when the internet buffered.

Becoming Familiar with the Data

The researcher had opportunity to become familiar with the data in Compiling Data process. Reviewing transcripts for necessary corrections provided opportunity for the researcher to compare written notes to each transcription, and make corrections to the transcription, completing each participant’s voice. Familiarization with the compiled data occurred through listening to the interview recordings, reading and re-reading the transcriptions (Parameswaran et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Experts in qualitative research emphasize the closeness the researcher must have to the data to enrich the organization of data with an understanding of the phrases and meanings used by participants and how they relate to the whole of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Saved files were easily keyword searched for continued researcher review when reviewing transcriptions for details.

Disassembling Data

Interpretation-focused coding was used to identify and interpret data collected through in-depth interviews with mid-career teachers. Separating the compiled data to create meaningful groupings is the process of disassembling data (Braun & Clarke 2021; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Disassembling the data is the process of taking the transcriptions apart, grouping

information as it relates to the research questions. Transcripts were reviewed in both Word and NVivo14 files, and excerpts were coded.

Generating Initial Codes

NVivo14 software was used to disassemble the data into meaningful codes. The researcher grouped Initial codes as they related to the research questions. The research questions are labeled as follows:

1. What are the reasons Western North Carolina mid-career teachers continue teaching?

(Retention Reasons)

2. How can teachers be retained beyond their mid-career teaching years?

(Retention Factors)

Inductive analysis is the process of reviewing qualitative data for codes and themes. Data was investigated and coded by considering practices of teacher retention, who supports teacher retention, where is teacher retention occurring, how teacher retention is occurring, and what impacts teacher retention. NVivo14 software was utilized to manually code transcribed responses for similarities and create groupings of matched words and phrases across participant responses. Comparing each piece of data with all others, the researcher sought to understand each detail and considered possible data overlaps across codes. When overlaps were identified, the researcher further refined the categories to adjust groups or regroup data into categories or created subcategories. From this reassessment process, new themes emerged. The researcher continued to assess and re-assess the data until no new themes emerged, reaching data saturation. Repeating codes become themes. (Byrne, 2021; Hartsel, 2016; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Reassembling Data

Analyzing codes was the first step in reassembling the data. Themes capture the importance of the data as it relates to the research questions. The themes provide meaning to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). A separate project was created in NVivo14 to reassemble coded data into meaningful groups

Searching for Themes

The coding scheme emerged from the data groupings, creating themes (Adu, 2019; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Recommended by Adu (2010), the second project provided a fresh starting point to further organize codes in the search for themes. Data was reassembled by reviewing codes, assigning them to groups, and creating higher-order codes. The researcher's interpretation of data through observations and experience influenced how codes were combined in the search for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Data was found to have a hierarchy and was assembled into a thematic matrix.

Reviewing Themes

The conceptual map of the thematic hierarchy provides a visual of how the themes relate to and impact one another (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). A thematic hierarchy identified through this research identified themes as interrelated when considering mid-career teacher retention. Characteristics of the data emerged as themes were identified (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2021). A thematic matrix is a table with rows and columns for codes, themes and variables within the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Table 1 provides general demographics of participants. Tables 2, 3, and 4 give a visual depiction of similarities of mid-career teachers in their decisions and desires to teach. Tables 5 and 7, each provide a matrix

arranging codes into themes as they relate to the what and how of teacher retention provides a structure for the data.

Concepts are mapped through patterns created by themes. Interpreting the data collected through participant interviews provided the researcher with an opportunity to develop a thematic map. The thematic map visually depicts the relationships between themes: Figure 2 is a thematic map of categories and themes related to question 1, Figure 3 provides a map of categories related to question 2 (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Interpreting Data

Qualitative data is the experiences, perceptions, and histories of participants (Creswell, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2021; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Through analysis of the relationship of themes, the researcher considered how the data answers the research questions.

Defining and Naming Themes

Groups of codes became themes. The themes were defined through the interpretation of their content. For example, participating teachers spoke of the importance of their relationships with students. The impact of effective collaboration with coworkers, and desires and expectations from school administration. Each relationship focused data point became the defined theme of relationships. Similarly, excerpts from the data coded into labels such as job satisfaction, self-efficacy and confidence, and identity and purpose define a theme the researcher named Desire to Teach.

Concluding Data

The researcher has drawn conclusions from the data to respond to the research questions:

1. What are the reasons Western North Carolina mid-career teachers continue teaching?
2. How can teachers be retained beyond their mid-career teaching years?

Reporting the Data

Conclusions drawn from the analysis of the qualitative data were limited to the experiences of the participants purposefully selected from two identified school districts in the North Western Region of North Carolina. However, conclusion from the analysis of the collected data are transferable to other situations of teacher retention. Chapter 4 reports the results of collected data and further explores defined themes.

Trustworthiness of Data

Credibility

The findings of this research are based on the perceptions and experiences of one group of mid-career teachers. The researcher believes that qualitative research is the perceptions of the participants interpreted through the experience of the researcher (Braun & Clark, 2021; Willis, 2027). Member checking was used to ensure the trustworthiness of data.

Member-checking processes were utilized by the researcher both during and after each participant interview. Through hearing the researcher's understanding of their response, the reflective listening process used early in the interview can encourage the participant to answer additional questions with more clarity (Katz & McNulty, 1994). Through the process of reflective listening, participants were given the opportunity to hear a summary of what the researcher understood from an answer to a question (Creswell, 2009). Reflective listening is a checking-out process to help the participant and researcher both understand what the participant is relaying in responses to questions (Katz & McNulty, 1994). Throughout and after the interview, the researcher reflected to the participant regarding the content of the response heard by the researcher. This reflection process makes the participant feel heard and provides opportunities for the participant to correct and clarify the researcher's understanding. Checking

out the participant's answers with them confirms the researcher's accuracy in listening and understanding what was said.

In addition to member checking through the interview-based reflective listening process, each participant interview was transcribed immediately following the interview via Zoom Cloud transcription. Participants received a transcript of their interview as well as a link to their recorded video interview within 24 hours of completing their interview. Transcripts were sent to participants via email. Participants were asked to email any feedback, edits, corrections or clarifications in response to their interview within 72 hours of receiving the transcription and recording (Schuttler, 2022).

Providing participants with the opportunity to edit their transcripts improved the quality of the data by ensuring that the collected data has been transcribed and interpreted by the researcher as intended by participants (Schuttler, 2022). Qualitative research is the culmination of perceptions and experiences of individuals, and member checking ensures accuracy in the perceptions and experiences of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017).

Participants who wanted to make corrections to their transcribed interviews were asked to make the changes and return the document to the researcher via email within 72 hours of receiving it. Participants who chose not to review the transcription or reviewed it and did not need to make corrections did not need to communicate further with the researcher (Schuttler, 2022). With no communication from a participant after 72 hours, the researcher considered the transcript approved for use in the study.

Transferability

Through research using a purposeful sampling strategy, the researcher gained an in-depth understanding of the reasons one group of mid-career teachers continue to teach. A rich

description of the participant perceptions and experiences from a group of mid-career teachers of varying ages, genders, experiences, grade levels, schools, districts, and individuality has constructed transferable knowledge concerning mid-career teachers and teacher retention.

Dependability

Intra-coder reliability and detailed documentation of the processes of the research, ensured dependability of the data. Intra-coder reliability assesses consistency in the coding of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The two pilot interviews were transcribed and immediately reviewed for content, details, and themes. Using the pilot study as sample data confirmed the dependability of the data. The pilot study practice was replicated for the research, each interview transcription has been reviewed for content in relationship to the interview questions and themes. Transcribed data was edited to reach a clean verbatim transcription before coding. When necessary, the researcher listened to the recorded interviews to ensure correct transcription of participant discussion and interview details. Once coded, the coded data from each transcribed interview was reviewed and re-coded to ensure consistency in coding.

Audit Trail

An audit trail is an account of the methods, procedures, and decision points carried out throughout the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). NVivo14 software maintains a ledger of inputs and changes. The description of how data is coded and how the assessment of each code led to a determination of themes supports the dependability of the research (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Following the recommendation of Adu (2019), separate projects were created in NVivo14 to better document the processes of coding and recoding the data for thematic analysis. Initial coding was conducted, then copied to create NVivo14 project two, where codes were further

defined into themes. The audit trail was created within each NVivo14 project by the project event log. The steps of thematic analysis are separated into NVivo14 projects, one and two, with individual event logs, showing the processes that led to key concepts and central themes that can be interpreted for a replication in future research.

Timeline

Application for a new social behavioral study was submitted to IRB for review and approval, in Spring 2023. IRB's request for revision to the application and attachments was completed in Spring 2023. The Letter to the School Superintendent (APPENDIX C) was sent to the Superintendents of two school districts in the Spring of 2023 for consideration and approval. With the Superintendents' approval (APPENDIX D and APPENDIX E), the IRB review committee provided final approval (APPENDIX B).

Interview questions were drafted in the Spring of 2023 and submitted to the researcher's dissertation committee for initial review. The researcher made changes to the interview questions as recommended by the dissertation review committee. The amended questions were submitted to IRB, Spring semester 2023 for review and approval.

Testing and feedback of the interview questions took place during the Summer of 2023. Through semi-structured interviews with two mid-career teachers. The pilot study interviews, conducted with two mid-career teachers, provided data fitting to the research. No additional changes were made to the interview questions. Teacher recruitment took place in the Spring and Fall of 2023, while simultaneously completing participant interviews and analyzing data. All necessary semi-structured interviews were completed during the Fall semester of 2023.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore one group of Western North Carolina mid-career teachers' reasons and intent for commitment to a career as a teacher. The internal and external factors related to keeping teachers in the classroom are important when considering teacher commitment. Understanding those factors can benefit schools and school districts by providing the information necessary to maximize retention. Qualitative data was analyzed for themes related to two research questions.

The research questions are labeled as follows:

1. What are the reasons Western North Carolina mid-career teachers continue teaching?
(Retention Reasons)
2. How can teachers be retained beyond their mid-career teaching years? (Retention Factors)

Data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews with 12 mid-career teacher participants. Each participant met via Zoom electronic conferencing with the researcher to answer and discuss 14 interview questions. The 14 interview questions are included in APPENDIX H. Clarifying questions were asked during the interview for the researcher to further understand question answers and develop richer details related to the collected information.

A thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the data. This chapter presents results and emergent themes through the process of data analysis. The first section of this chapter presents participant characteristics. The next sections address findings as they relate to the research questions.

Emergent Themes in Participant Experiences Leading to Teaching

Similar characteristics across participants were identified. These mid-career teachers attribute their desire to become and continue teaching to prior experiences. Passion for a specific content area made teaching an attractive career for three participating mid-career teachers. Seven participants had positive unlicensed teaching experiences. Eight of the twelve participants became teachers after military service or as a second career.

Positive Prior Teaching and Learning

Individuals often choose to become teachers because of the influence of a teacher sometime in their education (Fray & Gore, 2018; Heinz, 2015). Three participating teachers described meaningful interactions they experienced as high school students that impacted their decisions to become teachers. A caring and committed teacher influenced Alexander to become a teacher. Alexander decided to be a teacher in 10th grade because one teacher made a difference in his student experience. Two participants experienced teaching opportunities as North Carolina high school students. Leah was a high-achieving high school student asked to tutor other high school students struggling in core subjects. As a high school student, Deborah identified teaching as a target career. Through an internship experience at a local elementary school, Deborah had the opportunity to work with students while learning from the teacher. This high school internship experience solidified Deborah's decision to become a teacher. Leah and Deborah decided to pursue teaching as a career because of the success and enjoyment they experienced as high school students, leading other students to academic success.

Unlicensed teaching experience led Sarah and Phillip to enroll in undergraduate education programs. Sarah, a homeschool parent for nearly 17 years, experienced success and confidence in educating children from elementary through high school graduation. She

committed to a teaching career with confidence from her prior teaching experience. Phillip wanted to travel to Korea, and teaching English was the perfect avenue to live and work there. After three years of teaching English in Korea, Phillip returned to the United States and obtained a degree to teach High School English.

Supportive Relationships

Heinz (2015) further suggests that positive experiences in education and supportive family or friends can also contribute to an individual's decision to pursue a career in teaching. A discussion with their mom led Rebecca to change her undergraduate major to education. Coming from a family of teachers, Rebecca intended on a different career, but nursing studies were not as rewarding as her vision of becoming a nurse. The core pathway from nursing major to education major was one class different. Rebecca made the change to education, becoming a third-generation teacher in her family. The family support to continue as a teacher through mid-career years until retirement remains consistent for Rebecca. Abigail's mom worked for a school district in a non-teaching role. Abigail learned to value the 10-month working schedule from her family experiences.

Three participating mid-career teachers currently teach in the school district where they attended and graduated from high school. Being a graduate gives opportunity to continue long-standing relationships. Leah experienced success in tutoring while attending a District B high school, upon finishing college, District B called and offered her a classroom teaching position. Rebecca graduated from the high school in District A, where she teaches and coaches middle school. Omar teaches and coaches in the school district he graduated from high school. One other participating teacher, Abigail, although not a graduate of the district, was a prior student

who was mentored as a beginning teacher by their favorite former elementary art teacher. Her former teacher became her coworker and mentor.

George reports becoming a teacher “by chance” as an employee of a partner agency he was invited by the school principal to teach at the school. George’s prior professional role was to provide training and support to the school and students in specific social-emotional programming. Comfortable presenting and training to children and adults, George felt confident in their teaching abilities. Already a college graduate, he was able to complete the necessary additional coursework for teaching and learning before transitioning employers to become a teacher. This invitation from a Principal enabled George to seamlessly transition into teaching.

Passion for Content

William and Abigail have a passion for the arts. They chose to become teachers as a way to continue their passion for art and music while earning an income. Teaching was an avenue to continue their art while sharing it with others. For William, becoming a licensed teacher was secondary to the passion. Abigail learned to love art from an amazing art teacher in elementary school, who later became her coworker. With a passion for art and positive experiences with art teachers in high school and college, Abigail intended to teach and left college with two art degrees. The passion for art and the teaching of art provide Abigail with a stable income, job security, and the summer months to create personal art. Teaching in the arts provides William and Abigail everyday opportunities to share their passions with others. They have daily opportunities to ignite a similar passion in their students.

Following serving six years in the military, Dwight wanted to share the excitement of travel and the world with people. Teaching was the best opportunity to share the passion for geography and the history and societies of the world with others. Wanting to continue to study

the world and its communities led Dwight to a degree in secondary education. Table 2 provides insight into the motivations and support systems that influenced teachers' decisions to pursue a career in education.

Table 2.

Decision to Teach

Decision to Teach	
Motivation to Teach	Teacher
Positive Prior Teaching and Learning	Sarah, Alexander, Phillip, George, Omar, Leah, Deborah
Family Support for Teaching	George, Abigail, Rebecca
Non-Family Supportive Relationships for Teaching	George, Omar, Leah, Abigail, Rebecca
Passion for Content	Dwight, William, Abigail

Teaching as a Second Career

Teaching has long been marketed as a second career or late career opportunity, as an approach to lessen the teacher shortage (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll, 2022). Several of the participating teachers came to the teaching profession after working in other careers for varying lengths of time. The small sample size, familiar community, and small size of the participating school districts make it difficult to adequately present the theme of Teaching as a Second Career while maintaining participant confidentiality. Three participating teachers report having full careers of 17 to 30 working years, before becoming teachers. Two participants completed their undergraduate teaching degrees and chose to work outside of public school teaching, each for a decade before stepping into a public school classroom as a teacher. Prior military service led two participating teachers to complete their degrees in education.

An invitation from the school Principal set a plan in motion for George's second career as a teacher. After 30 years in law enforcement, including professional development for officers,

leading the DARE program, and working as a School Resource Officer assigned through the City Police Department, George retired from police work. George has 10 years of public school teaching experience, with a plan to retire from a second career of teaching after 20 or 25 years.

Sarah's dream was to be a "wife, mother, and teacher." When the children were old enough, Sarah entered college to study for a career in teaching, having homeschooled multiple children, Sarah had experienced success in teaching. With their biological children older, Sarah enrolled in an undergraduate education program and accepted a part-time position with the school district. Sarah transitioned into a teaching role with the same district upon graduation.

Having succeeded in another career without a degree, Rachel wanted to pursue a degree for personal and professional development. In considering degrees and what to do, Rachel decided to teach with the desire to make a difference for children. Originally intending to teach regular education elementary, Rachel entered teaching in an exceptional child (EC) resource teaching position. Table 3 provides information regarding participant non-traditional college enrollment and teaching as a second career.

Table 3.

Participant Experience Prior to Becoming a Licensed Teacher

Non-Traditional College Student	Military Service 3 to 6 Years	First Career 4-15 Years of Experience	First Career 17 to 30 Years of Experience
Sarah, Phillip, George, Rachel, Dwight	Phillip, Dwight	Phillip, Omar, William	Sarah, George, Rachel

Content and Grade Levels

Four of the 12 participating teachers attended a traditional undergraduate education program with the intent to become teachers. Of those four, two have never taught in the grade or subject they were originally licensed to teach. This finding aligns with a prior research finding,

that teachers do have skills transferable to careers outside of teaching (Nelson, 2017). Alexander and Rachel completed their education degrees and chose to teach abroad before accepting public school teaching positions. Alexander taught English to kindergarteners in Korea for one year, while Rachel taught elementary students in Dubai for six years. Alexander decided to teach elementary students after teaching kindergarten in Korea.

Participating teachers chose to teach outside of their intended content when offered available positions. Dwight was part of a middle school where teaching two subjects was expected. For one year Dwight added English through an emergency license to teach three subjects because the school had a need. Rachel and Leah were offered different positions than they applied for and accepted them for employment. Rachel said, “When I returned from Dubai, there wasn’t an elementary job, but there was an EC resource position. I don’t want to teach anything but EC now.” Similarly, Leah shared, “I graduated early in December, and got a call from [District B]. They didn’t have a social studies position, but did have a math position, I was down for it.” Table 4 gives a visual representation of the participating teachers intent to teach by degree sought, teaching experience and what they are currently teaching.

Table 4.*Content and Grade Levels*

	Intended to Teach	Other subject or grade Teaching Experience	Currently Teaching
Sarah	7-12 Social Studies	none	Social Studies 8
Alexander	7-12 th grade Spanish	2 nd and 4 th Grade ESL	3 rd Grade Dual Immersion
Phillip	9-12 English	9-12 English	9-12 Art
George	9-12 Social Studies	none	9-12 Science
Omar	9-12 Social Studies	9-12 Social Studies 9-12 Civics	9-12 Civics
Rachel	Elementary	none	Exceptional Children (Special Education) Elementary Resource
Leah	Social Studies 7-12	none	Math 8th and Math 1
William	Music	none	Music 9-12
Abigail	Art	Elementary Art 6-8 Art	Art 9-12
Dwight	Social Studies 9-12	6-8 Science 6-8 Social Studies 6-8 ELA	Social Studies 8
Deborah	Special Education k-12	none	Special Education Elementary
Rebecca	Math 6-8	none	Math 7

Findings of Research Question 1

Results from the thematic analysis identified relatability across themes. Themes identified regarding research question 1 include three themes: Relationships with Staff and Students, Desire to Teach, and Teacher Appreciation, each containing codes relative to one another.

Relationships with students are the reason most given for mid-career teachers' intention to keep teaching. Teachers want to make a difference in students' lives. Teachers want to see students engaged in learning. Effective relationships with students bring a sense of value for

teachers as well as appreciation from other teachers and administration. APPENDIX J: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH STAFF provides a visual of the frequency and decisions of relationships through codes. Positive relationships with students are a path toward teacher job satisfaction. Job satisfaction leads to retention.

Teacher peer relationships were reported as less important than teacher student relationships. The low morale and high turnover of teachers creates fewer opportunities for mid-career teachers to develop positive, reliable and consistent relationships with peer teachers. Teaching can be a lonely profession, with high expectations for student outcomes, making joint planning and collaboration attractive to lessen teacher workload. Collaboration with other teachers can be assigned as part of school committees and teams where shared decision-making is expected. Collaboration can also be spontaneous and informal. APPENDIX K: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN COLLABORATION WITH COWORKERS AND SHARED DECISION-MAKING provides a visual diagram of the relationship between the two codes of Shared Decision-Making and Collaborating with Coworkers.

Supportive leadership takes the form of opportunities to collaborate and be involved in shared decision-making, and administrative support in addressing parent and student concerns or supporting school operating expectations. APPENDIX L: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP AND TEACHER APPRECIATION provides a visual comparison of relationships between the supportive leadership and teacher appreciation codes. Teacher appreciation occurs when collaboration and shared decision-making are successful. Teachers feel appreciated by the administration, other teachers, parents, and students. APPENDIX M: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN SHARED

DECISION-MAKING AND FEELING VALUED provides a visual of the inter-relatedness of the codes. Feeling valued as a teacher comes from opportunities in shared decision-making, teacher leader roles, and confirmation of student data.

Mid-career teachers committed to continued teaching are satisfied with their jobs. They are happy teaching. The most satisfying part of teaching is relationships with students, as students engage in learning. When students apply new knowledge, teachers are positively reinforced for the workday.

Identity – I am a teacher, and purpose – I teach to make a difference were prominent perspectives for this group of mid-career teachers. These teachers are invested in the classroom, engaging students to promote student learning. They are confident in content delivery. Teacher turnover, administrative changes, new demands and initiatives can overwhelm teachers. Successful mid-career teachers have supportive relationships inside and outside of school, identified collaborative peer teachers, and confidence in their abilities to adapt to necessary changes.

Opportunities to develop professionally are made available through shared decision-making. Teams and committees are led by teachers and influenced by teacher leaders. Participating teachers reported being committee facilitators and teams leads for subjects and grade levels. Mid-career teachers evolve as teachers by accepting teacher leader responsibilities, initiating collaboration, and leading decision-making discussions with their administrators and peer teachers. APPENDIX N: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN SHARED DECISION-MAKING AND TEACHER LEADERSHIP ROLES, provides a visual diagram of codes in relationship to the themes. Facilitating committees through a model of shared decision-

making instills a feeling of appreciation and value in teachers seeking additional opportunities to make a difference and develop professionally.

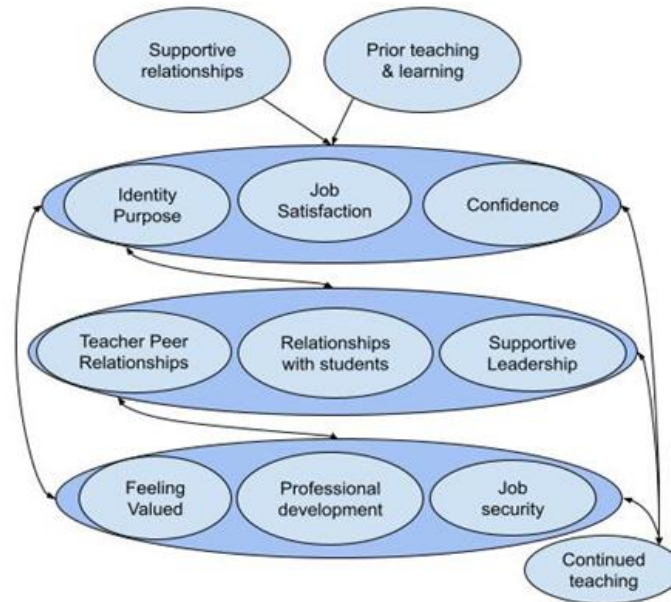
A secure job with a retirement pension is something mid-career teachers consider on difficult days. The school calendar, 215-workday schedule of North Carolina teachers is an attractive schedule for mid-career teachers with strong family commitment. Summers provide an opportunity to focus on home and family, while the promise of lifetime benefits at retirement influences a commitment beyond mid-career years. The emergent categories and themes for Research Question 1 are identified in Table 5.

Table 5.*Themes for Research Question 1*

Code	Theme	Description
Teacher relationships with students • Exposing students to new things • Connecting with students	Relationships with Staff and Students	Teachers are intentional about building relationships with students for the benefit of student engagement and academic growth
Teacher Peer Relationships • Collaboration with coworkers • Supportive community		Collaborating and supporting coworkers formally and informally
Supportive Leadership • Administrative Support • Shared decision-making		Leadership involving others in shared decision-making and providing administrative support to resolve conflicts and identify solutions for problems.
Identity and Purpose	Desire to Teach	Being a teacher, making a difference in the lives of others.
Job Satisfaction		Teachers enjoy teaching.
Confidence		Teachers believe they are good at their work
Feeling Valued	Teacher Appreciation	Teachers report feeling appreciated through their teaching.
Opportunities for professional development • Teacher leader roles		Opportunities to evolve as teachers.
Job security and benefits • Retirement benefits • Schedule and summer		State benefit and retirement package for working 215 days a year.

Figure 2.

Thematic map for Research Question 1



Relationships with Staff and Students

Teacher Relationships with Students

Whether asked what aspects of teaching they enjoy most (question 6) or what they would lose if they left teaching (question 13a), 12 of 12 participating mid-career teachers agree that relationships with students are the most enjoyable and important aspect of being a teacher. Leaving teaching would mean giving up impactful relationships with students, opportunities to make a difference in the lives of students, and leaving a little bit of themselves behind because teaching gives them purpose. “I do feel fortunate as a teacher to see what life is like for them. I don’t always understand, but I can see what life is like for them.” Said Omar when asked what he would lose if he left teaching.

Relationships with students is the number one retention reason for 12 of 12 participating teachers. The aspect of teaching Sarah enjoys most is variety, every day is different, “The kids behave differently each day. It’s a variety, so it’s a lot of fun. You never know what you’re going to walk into. It keeps you on your toes.”

Forming relationships with students is a benefit to both students and teachers. Abigail explained that she enjoys forming relationships with students because “working with the kids, that’s the best thing. A lot of them are really cool individuals’ and to see how they see the world and be able to interact with them.”

Before teaching art, Phillip previously taught English. He explained what he enjoys most about teaching. “I get excitement from seeing what the students can do. I enjoyed when I was teaching English, I really enjoyed working with students on their essays and helping them to be better communicators.”

Successful teacher-student relationships build confidence in both teacher and student. Omar and George both explained their skills and talents are utilized well in the classroom (question 7), through positive relationships with students. George returned to teach at a city high school after 3.5 years of teaching at a public high school in a neighboring county in an area of higher socio-economic status, where George was teaching more honors courses. George missed the challenge and excitement of connecting with low-socioeconomic, higher-need students. “My goal and what they use me for is, I build very positive relationships with difficult children, which is a talent. It seems easy to me” explained George. Relationships with students make work enjoyable.

When asked what he enjoyed most about teaching, Omar spoke of connections. “I really enjoy having mature kids, ones you can have adult conversations with. Connecting with students is my favorite thing, being able to relate to them, the interactions back and forth.”

Connecting with Students

Mid-career teachers continually assess ways to build trusting relationships with students. Connecting with students allows teachers to learn who students are as individuals and what they need for learning. Once teachers understand their students, planning for learning can be personalized.

The types of relationships teachers form with students are different, but students can count on consistency from each participating teacher. Sarah wants to be strict, consistent, and fun when building relationships with students. With a structured schedule, she connects with students through one-on-one meetings. Sarah explained that should would lose a little bit of herself if she left teaching because connecting with her students has become part of who she is.

I meet with each student at progress report time, and we look at what’s going on for them, and how many more weeks they have to work to get their grades up. I don’t give you grades, you make grades. You’re responsible for your learning.

Deborah’s favorite aspect of teaching is learning who her students are. “I like the hands-on part of the job just literally being with the kids, getting to know their personalities, and trying to figure them out.” The aspect of teaching that Leah enjoys most is identifying ways to bond with students over problem solving, and how to use math in everyday life. “I love math, but the kids don’t and that’s okay. We can bond over ways to problem solve and build relationships. I think relationships [are] really what I’m in it for at the end of the day.”

Successful relationships between teachers and their students diminish unwanted behaviors in the classroom and improve student engagement. When discussing what she would do if she left teaching (question 5), Rebecca could only speak of connecting with inner-city youth. Not teaching, she may want to be a principal, in an urban middle school. “I love and gravitate toward the inner-city kid because I know that is the child that needs the most loving and the most nurturing and the most guidance to be successful in life.”

Leah and Rebecca believe that supporting students in personal growth is as important as math. When students need a better understanding of what and how math will be used, Leah wants her students to ask questions.

Because I think they need to see adults modeling what it's like to struggle. And if you don't know something, how do you appropriately handle that? I mean, what a great way to build personal growth in math where people think I like numbers, not people.

Rebecca lets students know who they are as a person and who they choose to be as an adult is much more important than math. For her, the aspect of teaching she enjoys most is “being able to form relationships with students and lasting impacts that go far beyond the classroom.” Rebecca wants her students feel cared about as individuals. She explains, “I want them to just understand that I care about them and I want them to succeed. So, the relationship piece and just the impact that I can make.”

Participating teachers understand that connecting with students in ways other than classroom content develops a stronger relationship with students. Despite the stress of worrying about students, Dwight looks for ways to relate and build relationships with students. Through discussion on what he would gain if he left teaching, Dwight shared his commitment to

connecting with students. He is committed to building relationships with students, but sometimes finds it taxing on his introverted nature.

I have tools here, I'm fixing jewelry, I [am] doing all kinds of stuff like this, you know, anything they come and ask you to do. I mean, I believe in building relationships so [if] somebody comes in, [and says] oh this is broken, can you fix it? Well, if I can fix it, I've won those points and I'm building a relationship. So, I just feel like you're always giving in ways that aren't necessarily teaching.

When Omar stops enjoying his work, he has a process of self-assessment, evaluating where the stressors are in his work day. Through discussions during his interview, Omar explained that generally when he is not happy with teaching, the discontent comes from lack of relationships. On Sunday evenings (question 8), when Omar thinks about the upcoming week, connecting with struggling students comes to mind. He explained. "Once I have that relational piece, I really enjoy it." Through intentional relationship building with students, Omar renews his love for teaching.

Exposing Students to New Things

Exposing students to new things is an opportunity for teachers to develop and refine relationships with students. As students engage in learning and demonstrate knowledge, the relationship between student and teacher solidifies. The lightbulb moments, when students gain new understanding, those moments start from relationships between teachers and their students. The aspect of teaching that William enjoys most is the moment when "what we've worked on for the semester has clicked and they have a sense of pride about what they have learned and what they're able to do, that they weren't able to do before."

These teachers believe every student is their responsibility both educationally and in their future personhood. If they left teaching, these teachers would lose opportunities to engage students in learning. Sarah enjoys connecting and encouraging students “I am your biggest cheerleader, but I need to see some growth. You can grow. Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t.”

George has a personal goal to engage students with marginal academic engagement to consider higher education, many would-be first-generation college students. Through discussion of question 5: If you weren’t teaching, what would you choose for work? George circled back to his “purpose driven life,” making a difference for others.

I really like when students expect not to like this class or that class and then walk out feeling very confident in their science abilities. And feeling good about it, not beaten up about it. So, I really like physical student success. The light bulb moment when they switch their mindsets. Honestly, I love when they say ‘this is easy.’

Mid-career teachers individualize education for each of their students. Rachel and Phillip shared their abilities to individualize assignments, tailored to push each student enough for academic growth, but not enough to cause frustration and failure.

When asked about himself and his day during the interview, Phillip described himself and his dedication to his students as individuals. “I like to think of myself as the art coach. Everyone comes in different. Everyone [is] going to leave different.” They meet the student where they are and build support where needed for their educational success.

Seeing the enjoyment sometimes there are a lot of frustrations. There are many days that are not the happiest, but when you can see some things with the students. It’s clicking. It’s getting there. And you know you’re making improvements.

As Leah identifies ways to bond with students over problem-solving and Omar enjoys the back-and-forth discussion of Civics with students. Through teaching art Abigail and Phillip connect with their students through creativity. Abigail said “I am creating to see them learn, like oh I did that, you know. It’s usually painting, is the big one when they start mixing colors and they’re like, I got purple. They get so excited about it.” One of the most important aspects of teaching for Phillip when teaching are is coaching individuals to be creative. “Teaching art, I like to see what the kids come up with.” Table 6 identifies the types of teacher relationships with students, identified as predominate codes.

Table 6.

Theme: Teacher Relationships with Staff and Students

Subtheme	Codes	Number of Participants	Mid-career references
Teacher Relationships with Students	Connecting with students	12	26
	Exposing students to new things	9	20
Teacher Relationships with Staff	Teacher peer relationships • Informal chats • Outside of work	9	30
	Collaboration	10	27
	Supportive community	11	24
	Supportive leadership	8	34
	Negative leadership	8	26

Teacher Peer Relationships

Participating mid-career teachers are impacted by teacher turnover and low teacher morale. Through discussion of what she would lose if she left teaching (question13a), Deborah commented, “relationships with adults come and go.” Alexander said, “I love working with the students. It’s the interactions with adults that sours the job.”

Mid-career teachers do not want to maintain relationships with adults who speak negatively about students. On Sunday evenings (question 8), Rebecca gets ready for her week, thinking “I love it.” Rebecca further discussed her relationships with students and the challenges of teaching. When discussing adults, Rebecca said, “the biggest downfall in my opinion are the adults in the profession. I think the adults are worse than the kids.” Rebecca continued to explain that adults should be expected to behave in professional manners while working at school.

Similarly, Dwight has observed peer teachers behaving in ways not conducive to effective student learning. Dwight discussed teacher retention in question 14. He expressed the following: “the teachers here that leave, that don’t want to be here, I feel like the kids deserve more than that.” The churn created by teacher turnover makes forming trusting coworker relationships difficult. “The teacher turnover has been difficult. In the English department in 3 years’ time, everyone changed” explained Phillip. When discussing her recommendations for improved teacher retention (question 14), Rebecca said, “People say, wait until you’re 20 years in. If I’m like you in 20 years I don’t want to be doing this. You’re not fine, you make it look miserable, it’s not miserable.”

Capable of teaching, mid-career teachers adapt when schools are short-staffed and can plan alone but they would rather collaborate with like-minded peer teachers. Through discussion of question 4a: How long at your current school? Alexander said, “I like the other teachers in third grade. We have a good connection.” Alexander taught a combined classroom in 2023 when a third-grade teacher vacancy was not filled.

Collaboration

When teachers collaborate, they have the opportunity to share ideas and workload.

Question 10: Could you tell me about the opportunities to collaborate with others at work? Ten of the teachers appreciate each opportunity to collaborate and support other teachers to solve problems.

Leah said, “We have every opportunity to collaborate if people are in the right head space to do so.” Similarly, at a different school, Rebecca reports opportunities to collaborate, “There are plenty of opportunities to collaborate if people want to.” Throughout the year, Sarah’s team meets weekly to discuss and make decisions. “If a specific student or students are giving issues, are they only doing it in my class or are they only doing it in another person’s class?”

Alexander’s third-grade team readily shares resources in person, or via email. “[T]his worked really well for me, my class loved this, at the copy machine sometimes we just leave one copy of it there. If we find something online we’ll email it around to everybody.” Discussions of new information are important to Alexander, in a dual-language school, the curriculum needs to be in two languages.

Collaboration across subjects provides opportunities for students to experience cross-curriculum learning, furthering teacher collaboration. Sarah collaborates “almost daily, my [English language arts] ELA teacher, we worked closely. [Regarding] what unit are you on in social studies so that she could, come up with a novel study that would go with it.” Deborah seeks out information from other departments and service providers to improve student learning.

I’m always looking for insight anything they [Related Service Providers] tell me is going to be beneficial, like what can I do in my classroom to help support the student's handwriting or what can I do to support his speech? How can I use this device better?

Alexander's school is implementing a new curriculum, throughout the training teachers increased their conversations and collaborative discussions. Alexander explained that his team

had a lot of conversations during training. A lot of students need a lot of phonics skills.

We sometimes took the time to talk and collaborate at training, but a lot of times like lunch we'll talk and at recess, we will do it informally as well.

Planned Learning Communities (PLCs) are District expectations for school operations. School schedules include assigned PLC time for all teachers. All of the teachers interviewed for this study, discussed committee and team meetings. Monthly team meetings at William's school provide structured opportunities for teams to collaborate. "I think we are given a lot of opportunity to collaborate, especially meeting in departments monthly" said William.

George was excited for the challenge when assigned to teach three courses requiring three preps. "Who are my PLCs" he asked. and was disappointed to hear other teachers did not value PLC meetings at joint planning time. "[I]n my work group here, you do a subject-specific PLC work group and pacing and common assessments. And I think that is a great aspect of my job. I really like that."

Supportive Community

Interviewees discussed their supportive communities, through their answers to question 10, 10a and 10b, addressing collaboration, the frequency and examples. Although each school represented in this study has an expectation of collaboration through team meetings and PLCs, the researcher found that most teachers have created communities of collaboration and support among other like-minded educators.

Mid-career teachers form relationships and group texts and chats with those teachers of like minds. Leah explained her team has "definitely a group text pretty much every night, and

school-based “potluck every month or so. Likewise, Rebecca’s seventh grade teaching team stays connected via texts. “[M]y team, we have a group chat, and we always communicate with one another whether it’s about our personal lives or the kids, just to make sure we’re doing what we can to support the students.”

Dwight’s team does not have a group chat this year, but “[they] are on Snapchat with a lot of different teachers and text a lot.” Deborah said “I will text my teacher assistant a lot of back and forth. You live every day with them 7.5 hours so it’s good to have the camaraderie and closeness.”

Alexander likes to check in with peer teachers, “if I get everything done during my planning, that’s when I could have a few minutes to hang out with some of the other teachers.” Throughout the school day, Deborah has opportunities to collaborate throughout the school day. “It’s a mix of intentional and specific to the school and some of it’s just good comradery that you [want to] have with your coworkers and general care. Omar’s team meets formally once a month, but he makes time between classes in the hallway to collaborate informally with teachers on his subject team. Omar explained that hallway collaboration is generally quick questions for comparison on content delivery.

What do you have that’s working? Have you done [this]? Have you gone over this unit yet? Or what did you do to teach this specific thing? So that’s kind of an informal thing but it’s kina organically happens quite a bit where we are collaborating, talking, and going back and forth.

Supportive Leadership

Supportive leadership encompasses shared decision-making, and instilling a sense of appreciation and value in the work that teachers do. Administrative support provides

intervention to resolve conflicts is expected by leadership when support is requested by teachers. Teachers in this study discussed supportive leadership through answers to question 12: How could your school/school district make teachers feel like they belong.

Sarah's school administration and district administration are both visible.

"[Administration is] not sit in my office and if you need me call me, even central office staff come and walk around the school and the kids see them. I like that feeling." Sarah explained that visibility demonstrates support and availability, at any time a teacher can call for support and someone will respond. Conversely from the same school district, Deborah said, "A lot of times, people walk through, do walkthroughs and that just doesn't even encompass what it's like to work here."

Mid-career teachers love teaching and see the role of the principal as a manager, not an educator. They are not always happy with the politics and policies brought by mandates and initiatives and want to rely on their school and district administration to mediate and mitigate problems. Abigail said, "If school administration changed, and the sense of community, the sense of family was gone, they would consider changing schools." Abigail feels a sense of belonging and valued at her school.

When asked how the school makes teachers feel like they belong, three District B participants, from the same school, spoke highly of the support of their principal. The principal provides lunch for all staff once a month, providing the opportunity to socialize. Omar believes teachers feel belonging in his school. Omar said, "Our principal does a fantastic job. He's a teachers' principal. He looks out for us, he supports us and backs us." The principal regularly walks through the building and checks on teachers. All three teachers indicated they have the freedom to make decisions regarding students within their classroom. Abigail feels supported

and valued by school leadership. An example provided of administrative support by Abigail was, “[Principal] will come and make kids apologize.”

Alexander has taught three years at their current school, “I’ve had two Principals in those three years, they trust us to do what’s best. They trust us, they look over lesson plans, they pay attention.” Mid-career teacher autonomy due to administrator turnover is not always the trust of supportive school leadership. Phillip is the only art teacher at his school, with no team he stated; “In the classroom, I’m just ignored. So, they don’t care about art. They don’t care whatsoever what I do in here. I got pretty much all the autonomy I want in the classroom.”

Mid-career teachers desire supportive leadership to help develop a positive school culture and set high standards for teaching and learning. High-functioning mid-career teachers want to support their co-teachers to grow with consistent accountability measures set by the administration. Without support from administrators, the collaboration remains optional, and pacing and content can be misaligned. Middle school teachers from both Districts would like to be treated like professionals, rules change for the entire staff as a result of the behaviors of one or two.

Sarah, Rebecca and Leah provided examples of reactive rules or mandatory training not fitting mid-career teachers or education professional. Sarah suggested that leadership could be more supportive by addressing issues individually with offending teachers rather than implementing reactive rule changes for all faculty. Similarly, Rebecca and Leah would feel more supported by leadership if administration addressed their high achieving results with praise and individualized professional development, rather than expecting mandatory attendance to training designed to train teachers to achieve what they already do.

Alexander shared a situation where their Principal supported the decision made in the classroom when a parent had a complaint. Although Alexander was grateful the Principal “backed me [them] up,” Alexander appeared to hope a future issue could be more effectively mediated by the Principal, or addressed by the Principal directly to protect the teacher from the hostility of a parent with partial information. Sarah believes that supportive leadership should individualize accountability and support to teachers:

there are sometimes and I don’t think it’s meant this way, but sometimes, we as teachers are treated like kids instead of adults and the authority figures that we are. Being valued is a big thing. Bring treats around, but really listening to what we have to say, we’re the ones in the classrooms.”

Answering question 14: Do you have any other comments or ideas that you believe contribute to teacher retention, George had the following thoughts about school administration. “You have a lot of addition by attrition with administration. I think administration shifts more than teachers.” High administrative turnover creates continued change in school culture and impacts trusting coworker relationships. George discussed the need for improved administrator training. “I don’t think that admin courses and programs give them enough management training, true management, you supervise things and you manage people. I don’t think they come out of it with skills to deal with retention. I don’t think it’s their fault.”

Participating teachers from District A reported principal and superintendent turnover, but did indicate a consistent district emphasis on student outcomes. Three participating teachers from District A in this study asked the interviewer more than once throughout the interview if their answers would be kept confidential, indicating a questionable trusting relationship with

leadership. George indicated that the current district administration is visible in school buildings and appreciative of teachers while maintaining high expectations of teaching and learning.

Desire to Teach

The motivations behind a person's decision to pursue a career in teaching are diverse and unique to each individual. Previous research has identified three broad categories of reasons that individuals become teachers. Some teachers report an inner desire and passion for teaching, while others are driven by a selfless desire to make a positive impact on others. Additionally, job security and favorable working conditions can also attract individuals to the teaching profession. These internal and external factors not only influence a person's decision to become a teacher, but they also play a crucial role in their retention in the profession (Wang & Wang, 2023; Javornik Krečič & Ivanuš Grmek, 2005; Heinz, 2015). Table 10 provides a visual table of the category of desire to teach.

Table 7.

Desire to Teach

Theme	Code	Number of Participants	Number of References
Decision and Desire to Teach	Identity and Purpose	10	29
	Job Satisfaction	10	26
	Confidence	9	34

Identity and Purpose

Ten participating teachers found their purpose in teaching or they would lose a part of themselves if they resigned from teaching. When asked about her future career goals (question 11), Sarah told the researcher that becoming a teacher made her dreams come true. “I want to teach. I want to stay in teaching. There [are] 3 things that I’ve always ever wanted to be, a wife,

a mom, and a teacher.” Dwight said, “Right now, I’m just happy teaching and being a dad. I have a really good job here.” As an invested father, he has a good schedule to meet his toddler’s needs.

Question number 3 asked, what led you to become a teacher? Since her youth, Abigail planned to be a teacher. “I knew I wanted to be a teacher because of the nurturing, and I knew I wanted to be a parent. Having the same schedules as my kids would be a bonus. I always wanted to work with kids.” Teaching gives individuals purpose. For others, teaching is part of their identity. Alexander defines himself as a teacher. Teaching is more than what he does, it’s who he is.

The decision to teach and the desire to make a difference drives these teachers to continue teaching. Even on difficult days, these mid-career teachers enjoy teaching. If George left teaching, (question 13a) he would lose enjoyment in life. He said, “I’ve always enjoyed making people’s lives better, where I’m solving their terrible problems or preparing them to face problems and aspects of life.”

Teaching requires a lot of time and effort. “This job can live rent-free in your head,” said George, who also said “It’s the reason I get out of bed in the morning” when asked about connections with students. Teaching has a moral purpose, to make a difference. Phillip is committed to teaching, for the opportunity to “potentially change lives, improve someone’s chances. “The do-gooder in me likes to think that I could be helping someone.”

Job Satisfaction

When asked question 11, about their future career goals. 10 of 12 participating teachers indicated they were satisfied with teaching, their current teaching role and their current school district. The other two indicated they intend to remain in education. One of the two, Phillip said,

“I don’t have any plans to leave education.” George, a second career teacher, has no desire to leave the classroom. “[D]o they want to be in that room for 30 years? Yeah, I do! I have only just wanted to teach” explained George when asked about his future career goals (question 11).

Leah has experienced seasons of high turnover in her teaching team. Committed to District B, Leah enjoys teaching at the school even on difficult days. Through discussion of future career goals in question 11, relocation for work in question 11b, Leah explained that there are “plenty of opportunities in the community around us. So, I don’t believe the grass is always greener.” Leah is committed to continued teaching, with her current district. She stated, “you have to stick through the good times and the hard times. If something [is] going on that you don’t like, you have to be a problem solver to figure out how to make it better.”

Individuals choose to teach because they want to make a difference in the lives of students. Alexander had this to say about the aspects of teaching he enjoys most (question 6), “I love working with the students. If I didn’t have to do anything else besides teach my students, I think many, many, many teachers would enjoy the profession much more.” When asked what he would do if he left teaching (question 5), Dwight explained, “I can’t imagine doing anything else, and every time I think about it, I don’t know what I would be happy doing, because I do love the kids, it’s tough, I love it.”

Phillip discussed the process of planning for lessons as an example of an aspect of teaching he enjoyed the most (question 6). He explained, “Constantly tweaking. Coming up with different ways to teach the same concept. your process of constantly tweaking things, I do enjoy.” Deborah, a teacher for exceptional children, takes pride in the paperwork as an aspect of teaching she enjoys the most. She understands the importance of charting to ensure documentation for the student is accurate.

I know the file's not everything but I really like the file to encompass what the student can do and have relevant data. So, if somebody didn't know him they might if they read the information and could really understand all the layers of the child. That motivates me to want to make it a good solid piece.

Often, those teachers realize the difference the students make for them. Sarah considered what she would lose if she left teaching (question 13a) and explained what she learns from students, "They teach me patience, they teach me how to be a better me." Phillip was asked what led him to become a teacher (question 3), he explained it was a job opportunity that he learned to like, stating "I like the energy of the classroom. It seems like sometimes teachers are afraid to admit it, but you do, at least I do. I catch that excited energy from the students". Phillip enjoys his relationship with students. Their excitement brings him joy. Employees who are satisfied with their work are more likely to be retained.

Teacher Confidence

The positive teaching and learning experiences that influenced these individuals to choose teaching as a profession built the foundation of personal confidence in a profession known for being stressful. Leah introduced herself in question two, confidently explaining her ability in achieving student outcomes, "I grow high kids and I also bond with them because I was the higher kid, so I have a little bit more of an understanding of what their needs are."

In what ways are your skills and talents utilized (question 7) was an opportunity for participating teachers to provide insight into their professional confidence as teachers. Omar shared his style of intentional relationship building to connect with students, "My skills and talents are being in front of students and I do a good job being in front of them in a classroom setting." Phillip said this about the skills and talents utilized by his school, "I certainly do think I

bring things to the classroom. Whether those things are known or acknowledged or noticed, you don't know."

Question 7b asked teachers which skills and talents they wished the school would utilize more. Rebecca explained her ability to grow students. She always received the teacher bonus for student growth on test scores. "I know that everything is not about scores, but every single year my kids perform so well. They're always in the top percentage of the state. They always give me that extra little bonus. It makes our overall school look well." Rebecca would like her school to extend some leadership opportunities for her to share her teaching strategies so other teachers can experience the student growth she has a talent for achieving.

Similarly, Leah wishes her peer teachers had more confidence. Leah's response to question 7b, regarding her skills that could be utilized more, Leah mentioned teachers in their middle school are often "so sensitive" when staff are discussing student data. "When your scores are lower than someone else's, they don't realize that I'm cheering you on saying I know you did the best you can with the group you have. It's a lack of confidence and then it's just them being stressed." Leah expressed a desire to share strategies with other teachers.

Feeling a sense of accomplishment builds confidence in mid-career teachers. One of the aspects of teaching (question 6) Leah enjoys most is using student data to self-assess. "I love the data that comes along with their learning. That's something that excited me because I feel like I can see the change that I'm making." Teachers with confidence enjoy the engagement of students as they learn. School administration "rely on me because I rarely call the office for any assists. Individuals are good, they work ok in my room, even if they're difficult," said George.

Good teachers grow students academically. Great teachers grow difficult students academically. George, Dwight and Rebecca similarly explained the difference they enjoy and the

confidence they have in teaching high poverty and academically struggling students. “I feel like I am more impactful to the students who don’t expect to be successful in a science class,” said George. Dwight reconnected with a former high school teacher while substitute teaching who reminded him that teaching somewhere where kids needed him would be more fulfilling. He did. Dwight explained “I feel like I’m in the spot where I’m helping kids and building relationships for the lower [socio-economic] state, inner-city poverty.”

Rebecca he said this about her classes “with my advanced class, everybody comes in and sit[s] down and they’re ready to work. Anybody can teach those kids. It doesn’t test a person. Test me as an educator.” Rebecca is a confident teacher. Rebecca teaches all levels of seventh grade math at her school. Teachers can get a sense of accomplishment from teaching multiple subjects, more than one grade level, or levels. In elementary, Alexander was challenged to teach both languages to two classes in the school’s dual immersion program. “Last year, they just combined the 2 classes because of teacher shortage, so I taught both classes all day. I taught the English and the Spanish. Reading and math, I got to do all of that” explained Alexander.

Confident teachers are willing to let students learn through trial and error, they welcome questions from students. Confident teachers value discussions with students about the content and life. Conversely, teachers with wavering confidence may take things people say personally. Rebecca explained when making comments or ideas for improved teacher retention (question 14), that individuals with fragile egos may not make great teachers, “they’re 12, so when they say something crazy, don’t take it personal.”

Teacher Appreciation

Teacher appreciation at school is often in the form of school-provided meals, days to wear jeans, or celebrations for the holiday. Participating teachers explained aspects of teacher

appreciation when they discussed interview question 13: How could your school/district make teachers feel like they belong? Leah shared, “our school and district [are] actively trying to honor staff and their family. Honoring the staff in the classroom, but also their family outside of that. Admin is enforcing no Individual Education Plan team (IEP) meetings after 4:00 pm, to support staff time.”

Omar indicated his school was good at appreciating staff, “[the principal] goes out of his way to feed us and when he can [get us] shirts or sweatshirts” Abigail admitted, “we’re a little bit spoiled, we get fed lunch once a month. If I didn’t feel valued, I’d branch out.” Teacher appreciation is different for Sarah. She explained “being valued is a big thing. And not just with, bring around treats and that kind of stuff but really listening to [what] we have to say since we’re the ones in the classrooms.” Abigail feels supported and respected by the school administration who value teacher time. She explained “they respect our time as much as they can. We’ve never done something that we felt was frivolous, or like a hoop.”

School and District Administration walkthroughs, have mixed reviews from teachers. Some like Sarah view the walkthroughs and visibility as supportive, while Deborah shared a feeling of disconnect and lack of operational understanding from the district when administration conducts walkthrough in her building George has experienced several superintendent changes in his teaching career. He explained, “in my 10 years we’ve had 3 superintendents. [The past superintendent] was demanding but not appreciative of a dedicated life, of a teacher, of a public servant.” For George, “It feels good” that the current Superintendent is visible once or twice a month at school and is appreciative of the work teachers do. “Have high expectations but treat people like you value them as professionals, this year we really have that. Feels good” said George.

Rachel had an opposite example, expressing that District Administration in their buildings makes people worry. “Usually when anyone from upper management from the Admin office, you know, [Superintendent] or anyone comes around you almost feel worried that something’s wrong, instead of being excited to see other staff members.”

Feeling Valued

Teachers feel valued by their school communities when talents and preferred skills are utilized in their work. Question 10, asking teachers about their opportunities to collaborate provided insight into how they feel valued as teaching professionals. Omar explained that he feels valued when peer teachers ask him questions. He explained, “I’ve been there longer, some of the newer teachers [ask] where are you? Have you gone over this yet? What chapter are you on? What unit are you on? We definitely use some common assessments.” Participating teachers emphasized their skills in developing relationships with students, their talents for making a difference in the lives of students and how those skills make teachers feel valued.

Leah discussed her skills with students (question 7) saying “The most impactful feelings of value for teachers comes from relationships with students.” Leah explained,

Teaching is something I love. I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t have these kids to love on or annoy me, or to get to see them grow and come back to say hello. I absolutely love it if they remember me, hopefully they remember good things that impact them.

Dwight and Rebecca love to see their former students doing well in high school. “I have old students reach out to me and that makes it all worth it. You always love it when you see kids doing good,” said Dwight. Rebecca’s first-year seventh graders are now seniors. Rebecca pays attention to what they are doing, and how they choose their futures. She said this about teaching, “just feeling valued, feeling important. Feeling like you are making a difference. Those are [the]

things. I stay because I love it. I love teaching.” Dwight explained that seeing a post on Facebook, that says, “You were my child’s favorite teacher.” Being remember for making a difference, being liked, or just a Thank you means the world to a teacher.

Teachers who do not feel valued consider resignation. Abigail shared that she would consider “branching out” if administration changed in her building and she no longer felt valued. Administrative turnover creates opportunities for new relationships but requires trust to be developed. Administrators who implement change without the support of their staff can create mistrust and make teachers feel devalued or unsupported. Dwight agreed to teach two subjects to three grade levels for one year due to a teacher vacancy, with the change of principal the handshake agreement was not honored by the next principal. “They had me teaching science and social studies for 6th, 7th, and 8th so it was six preps a day. I told them I would do it for one year, that was the year during COVID-19, [I said] if you make me do it again I will quit.” Dwight chose to resign and teach in a neighboring district, where he currently feels valued.

Shared Decision-Making

Through discussion of question 10 regarding opportunities to collaborate and Question 10b regarding an example of decisions at work with colleges, eleven participating teachers indicated they belong and are members of at least one decision-making team. Grade level teams, and Professional Learning Committees are expected by school administration at every school in both participating Districts. The frequency of team and committee meetings varies by school. At least four participating teachers belong to a school-wide decision making committee in addition to their grade level and teaching team committee.

Three teachers, either coach a sport or lead an afterschool club. Giving them opportunities for decision-making, as they use their talents to coach or lead club topics. Leah and

Deborah report being available for other teachers or staff to use as a resource. Leah, Abigail, Omar, and Rebecca are Department or Grade Level Chairs. Abigail represents the district on a Statewide committee for the arts.

Teachers want to feel heard and valued for their opinions and ideas when making decisions for the school. Sarah shared that her grade level meetings allow her team to make decisions. In August, Sarah explained that her team plans to following, “field trips, during the beginning of the school year. What discipline matrix, what kind of thing we are going to use on our specific grade level? What are the bathroom break times?”

Leah and Sarah’s school has a climate team. According to Leah, the climate team looks for “ways to get staff engaged” and implements engagement processes and activities for the entire school. Rebecca and Leah, both middle school math teachers sit on school-wide teams designed to improve student learning in core subjects, math, and English language arts. The School Improvement Team, (SIT) and Goal Team are generally teams of teachers assigned to make decisions regarding teaching and learning improvements (NC DPI, 2016). Sarah a social studies teacher and her grade level team make decisions on how to implement assignments received from SIT.

Abigail explained her consultation with the Exceptional Children’s Department to make joint decisions regarding children with special needs. “I work with them [EC department] a lot just because of all the students that I have from them. I’m always in IEP meetings trying to figure out what is the best path for a student or how they’re doing.” Rachel, an Exception Child (EC) resource teacher said, “Every decision is a[n] [EC] team decision.”

Shared decision-making involved staff from the school for their expertise. Deborah said, “I think people that make decisions for the school should know what it’s like to be here for 7.5

hours because I think that would impact the decision-making.” A lack of shared decision-making can cause teachers to feel devalued.

Phillip’s discussion of question 14: what comments or ideas do that you believe contribute to teacher retention, he provided an example from his school, where the school administration chose not to use shared decision-making. Phillip brought up a good point, when he described frustration he said, “I can see how teachers feel done to, in some ways. Is there a suggestion box? Can we collaborate a little bit?”

Opportunities for Professional Development

Committed to teaching and not interested in becoming an administrator. “I don’t want to be the final decision maker, administration isn’t for me” Rachel said when discussing question 11, her future career goals. Mid-career teachers want to evolve as teachers. Professional development opportunities are available through higher education, training, and experience. Many times, the teachers develop professionally when challenges arise. Some of the current challenges mid-career teachers are currently learning through are large class sizes, post COVID-19 student learning needs, and the North Carolina Parents' Rights bill. APPENDIX O: EXAMPLES OF CHALLENGES CURRENTLY BEING NAVIGATED BY MID-CAREER TEACHERS contains the example challenges described by the participating teachers.

Mid-career teachers value professional development, collaborative engagement, and projects resulting in professional growth. Teachers do not like full staff meetings where they feel their professional time was not valued. These mid-career teachers, are interested in professional development to improve their teaching. They do not find value in full-staff mandatory training better suited for less experienced or less productive teachers. They understand that professional development should not be one-size-fits-all. Mid-career teachers individualize lessons for their

students and wish administration did the same for teachers. They develop relationships with their students, knowing who they are and what they need to be successful, and they wish their school administrators acted similarly. Rebecca expressed frustration over mandatory training,

when it's something valuable then it does matter. Some people need guidance, but that's not me. If I'm doing something wrong, please let's fix it, let's figure out a way to professionally address the situation so we can grow myself and grow my students.

Exchanging information and collaborating with other teachers is important to mid-career teachers. They look for ways to improve content delivery and further engage students in learning. Leah was offered and accepted an opportunity to complete a certification in Advanced and Intellectually Gifted (AIG) and has a plan to utilize the regional certification. She said yes and completed the certificate program over the summer say, "I just wanted to take the course to really look into, you know, your twice-exceptional kids."

Professional development was discussed by several participating mid-career teachers as they continue to hone their teaching craft. Abigail is committed to learning ways to improve teaching art and individualizing lessons for her students. She said, "I want to continue to evolve as a teacher" when asked about her future career plans (question 11).

Where mid-career teachers have become Team Leads, Grade Level Chairs, or been appointed to school and district level committees, those teachers are provided the opportunity to develop professionally while furthering the development of practices of the professional communities and honing leadership skills. As mentioned in the section, Shared Decision-Making four of the 12 participating teachers reported they are grade-level chairs or team leads in their schools.

Teacher Leadership Roles

These mid-career teachers have opportunities to evolve as teachers and develop professionally through teacher-leader roles. Shared decision-making models of school leadership require committees, often these mid-career teachers are committee facilitators, due to experience and tenure. Throughout her interview, Leah discussed how the school and her peer teachers use her skills and talents for developing relationships with students and assessing data for school improvement. When asked how long she had been at her current school (question 4a), Leah said, “I’m year 9 teaching and there’s less than five people in this building who have worked here longer than I.” Leah is the grade-level chair and sits on other school decision-making committees. “I really am a how can I help girl?” said Leah. Having longevity makes Leah an operational historian for teachers and school administration.

Although a small team, Abigail is the department chair for the art department at the high school. Abigail is a member of the School Improvement Team (SIT) and also the School District appointed representative for the Arts at the state level. Omar is the department head for the high school, coaches, and is faculty lead for the school’s faith-based club. Dwight, although currently teaching social studies, manages an after-school Lego robotics club. Rebecca is the grade level chair, a SIT team member, a Goal team member to support math instruction school-wide, and coaches for the school. Rachel has been offered an opportunity to support students through a specialist role and will be leaving the classroom. These mid-career teachers continue to evolve as teachers, accepting new challenges with an interest in supporting peer teachers for the benefit of student success.

Teacher-leader opportunities provide avenues for experienced teachers to further develop professionally. Phillip provided an opposing example of teacher-leader opportunities.

Under the current administration [school], there's a real reticence to give teachers leadership positions, it seems like it's a lack of trust or lack of confidence in us, that I think is holding us back from letting teachers really flower.

Job Security and Retirement

12 of 12 participating mid-career teachers believe they could and would make more money if they left teaching. They were also clearly explained, that they do not teach for the money. Dwight has considered leaving teaching, but the thought of starting over in a new career at age 42, seems daunting.

Before teaching English at a public high school, Phillip worked in construction for 10 years. "I would make more, but it wasn't always consistent, and this, the consistency of the pay, when everyone brings this [making more] up. I'm more financially stable." Phillip explained. Financial stability decreases household stress for Phillip "Even though, I've made more, this year and made more that year, the financial stability, that has been really nice."

Making a move from the classroom to another curriculum and instruction position is attractive to most of the mid-career teachers interviewed. Omar, Rachel, Dwight, Rebecca, and Lea all discussed having skills and talents they would like share with struggling teachers. If there were positions on the same state benefit system, to mentor or teach teachers, they would consider making the change from teaching children.

Only one participating teacher, Rebecca plans to be a School Principal. Several others considered setting a goal for an administration position but over the years have changed their minds. George pointed out that for every 20-50 teaching positions, there is one school administrative position available, and teaching for 30 years is a good job. Abigail's shared her

future plan, “my end goal is to be able to retire at 30 years, which goodness I hope I can do it. I’m only at 15, so I have got 15 more years,”

Second-career teachers look at job security and retirement differently than traditional college-to-classroom teachers. William explained, “since I started late, I don’t think I could do 30 years, but I think I would like to [teach] 20 or 25 years.” Rebecca, the youngest teacher interviewed is the only participant who indicated she would leave State employment if she lost the passion for teaching.

The North Carolina State Retirement System is a retention factor for eight of twelve participating mid-career teachers. The few teachers interviewed who discussed moving out of the classroom before retirement age indicated they would prefer to remain in education. In explanation of what he would lose if he left teaching (question 13a) and in discussion of additional comments for retention factors (question 14), Omar mentioned the State retirement system. He said, “I think we have a decent retirement set up and obviously you can retire after 30 years.” He suggested that schools could improve their education regarding pensions and lifetime benefits to young people entering teaching as a way to improve teacher retention.

Findings of Research Question 2

The question was addressed through thematic analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 participating mid-career teachers. When considering factors related to how teachers can be retained, results indicated two emergent themes: feeling valued, and respect for teacher time and talent.

Feeling valued, as in Question 1, is a culture of community and comradery among staff in the school building. Teachers feel valued through interactions with students, peer teachers,

administration, and parents. Teacher appreciation can be the smallest compliment, a free lunch, the opportunity to collaborate, or a leadership role. When teachers feel valued, they belong.

The second emergent theme identified through analysis of the data related to teacher retention factors for mid-career teachers is respect for teacher time and talent. Teachers need time to plan and prepare to teach. Often mid-career teachers are teaching content at levels of inclusion, general education, honors or AIG, and some advanced placement (AP). Experience teachers understand teaching and learning practices. They understand the content. They need the time to prep the lessons on many levels and further accommodate individualized student levels. Respecting time and talent for mid-career teachers can lead to improving teacher retention.

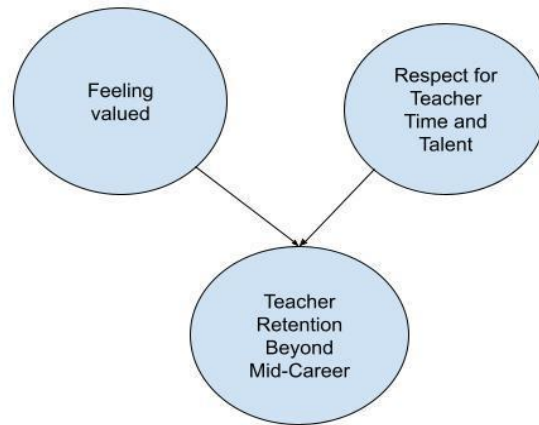
Table 8.

Themes Related to Teacher Retention Factors

Theme	Description
Feeling valued	Teachers report feeling appreciated through their teaching
Respect for teacher time and talent	Respectful of time and inclusive of teacher personalities

Figure 3.

Thematic Map for Research Question 2



Feeling Valued

Feeling valued was addressed in Question 1. Teachers need to know they are making a difference. Feeling valued includes feeling appreciated. Collaboration with co-workers, shared decision-making, relationships with students, and administrative support bring feelings of value to teachers.

Abigail stated that mutual respect between the school and teachers was important for improving teacher retention. She said, “respect, as long as there is a community of mutual respect as an individual and as an educator. I think it’s a really good way to hold on to people.” Similar to mutual respect, Phillip wishes that principals were more collaborative in decision-making over the summer months:

Principals have a lot of power over the teachers and over what’s done in the school. I think a lot of it, at least what I’ve seen here, is that it’s not usually the students that [are] causing teachers to leave, it’s the admin that’s causing teachers to leave.

The opportunity for teachers to have a voice, feel a sense of belonging, and have their time honored by school administration, in Phillip's observation are factors that can improve retention (question 14). Phillip used metaphor relating teachers and school operations to a game of Dominoes. How decisions are made determines how many Dominoes fall.

Feeling done-to was a description Phillip used when discussing question 10, regarding opportunities to collaborate. He brought up an important point when school administration makes decision for school operations over the summer months when discussing additional comments for teacher retention.

It's the principal and the secretary maybe one or 2 other admin people and they've got all these great ideas, they're coming up with all these great things that they want to see and there's nothing wrong with all that. But then we come in on day one and you know okay this is different that is different and hold on. We had, we had a system. Why, are we changing this thing? They kind of operate in that vacuum.

Phillip's story aligns with Abigail's expectation of feeling valued through mutual respect between school administration and teachers. Phillip explains the lack of a collaboration or opportunity for input for operational changes impact teacher morale and effect teacher retention.

When the teachers come in on day one, it can be there's all these new mandates and now we have to change these big things or it can be as little as I moved your room. Go on pack over there, right? I mean, any of that kind of shakes up. How you process to get ready to come back to work. Or what you thought worked when you left in May or June. It's not always. big changes. Small changes can affect somebody.

A sense of belonging within a school community allows teachers to connect for collaboration and initiate ways to feel valued. Abigail shared a story of beginning teaching and

learning to belong, where no one wants to feel like an extra. She said, “nobody likes to feel like you're just an extra. They want to feel like they're part of the team, part of the community.”

Mid-career teachers have observed the decisions and politics delivered and mediated by Principals. These teachers do not want to be administrators. They want to feel valued administrators in their buildings. Rebecca makes an interesting point for school administrators to consider when valuing teachers. Sometimes valuing teachers becomes what she explains as performance punishment. Rebecca explains performance punishment as “when you're good at what you do. You have more work, to put on your plate. and that's not fun, but it is what it is. That happens If you're good at what you do. We'll expect more work.” Over valuing some teachers can become a burden rather than an appreciation for the teacher's time and talent.

Respect for Time and Talent

Through Phillip's discussion of how his skills and talents are utilized by his school/district (question 7), he explained his school makes decision in crisis mode only later to consider teacher time and talent. Phillip had his to say:

there are a lot of times we're just in crisis mode. We're short on teachers and we can't get subs. I think Maslow's hierarchy of teacher importance. There's a warm body with a certification there and only later can you get to the point to [consider] are we utilizing this person, in an effective way?

Abigail told a story of struggling to do well in teaching while feeling overworked and unsupported as an itinerant teacher. Moving from school to school each day trying to meet the needs of every student and the demands of every administrator, Abigail gives this recommendation:

if ever you have an art teacher, just please be understanding, and please look at their schedule and look at the whole schedule. Not just the schedule at that one school. You have to make sure that you're to keep them. I feel like it's really hard, everybody just wants a home. I did not like being an itinerant teacher just because I felt like I was being divided.

At Leah's school, the administration rearranges grade-level groups, moving classrooms each year. The teachers are tired, Leah worries for her peer teachers stating, "they're very overwhelmed, and they don't want one more thing. They've moved positions and they've moved classrooms and they're just very overwhelmed."

Summary

Emergent themes of Relationships, Desire to Teach, and Teacher Appreciation are intertwined. As relationships improve and have positive impacts on teaches and students, teachers increase their Desire to Teach. Students engaged in learning exhibit higher Teacher Appreciation. Codes cross themes. For example, positive teacher-peer relationships lend to effective coworker collaboration.

Teachers view committee work as opportunities for shared decision-making at the individual student level and school grade level. School-wide committees have shared decision-making opportunities that provides information to disseminate at grade level and department meetings. Schoolwide decisions made through teacher led committees give rise to teacher leaders. Mid-career teachers often lead and facilitate team and committee meetings. Team leadership is an opportunity for professional development, as teachers learn and practice the skills of committee facilitation, agenda planning and documentation of meetings through meeting

minutes. Committee facilitators also gain insight into navigating personalities and opinions of coworkers.

True supportive leadership involves others (Walters, 2005). When others are involved through supportive leadership, both collaboration and shared decision-making exist. Mid-career teachers value available school leadership for administrative support. Administration members who come when called, mediate conflicts, and resolve problems, but do not create competition among peer teachers or additional work for teachers deemed unnecessary or redundant are appreciated by mid-career teachers.

Former teachers, friends, and family of these mid-career teachers appreciate the work they do with students. Because these teachers have a supportive network of friends, family, and coworkers, they can focus on student learning while at school, and family at home. When overwhelmed or disengaged they can self-assess and rely on their support system.

By becoming part of a supportive network for each of their students by championing student success and celebrating student achievements, these teachers and their students develop relationships and appreciation for each other. Teachers feel valued when students are engaged in learning. With positive teacher relationships with students and feelings of appreciation by teachers, comes an increased desire to continue teaching.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The following section discusses retention reasons for keeping mid-career teachers in the classroom and the factors that mid-career teachers believe support teacher. This research study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the reasons Western North Carolina mid-career teachers continue teaching?

(Retention Reasons)

2. How can teachers be retained beyond their mid-career teaching years?

(Retention Factors)

Summary

This research study aimed to better understand what reasons mid-career teachers have for continuing to teach, and to use that understanding to generate recommendations to improve teacher retention beyond mid-career teaching years. Considering Job Embeddedness theory, a thematic analysis was conducted to explore retention factors impacting mid-career teachers' teaching career decisions. The study involved a thorough review of previous research on teacher turnover and retention, and integrating findings from the literature on teaching, teacher retention, and turnover with data collected from mid-career teachers in Western North Carolina. Intending to answer the research questions, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 mid-career years, currently teaching in one of two similar public school districts in one Western North Carolina county.

Research Question 1. What are the reasons Western North Carolina mid-career teachers continue teaching?

The first research question of this study and the findings resulting from the question provided relevant information on the reasons mid-career teachers continue to teach. Participating mid-career teachers, reported successful teaching experiences, and provided insight into their reasons for continued teaching. Participating teachers shared the decisions that led them to become teachers and the reasons they continue to teach.

Findings from this study indicate that mid-career teachers are satisfied with their work as teachers. They feel valued by their school teams and are confident in their abilities as teachers. Above all else, they find building relationships with students essential and invaluable for both teacher and student success. Less important than relationships with the students, are peer relationships with other teachers. The high turnover and varying sense of professional confidence in teachers makes forming staying adult coworker relationships difficult. However, collaboration across subjects and grade levels diminishes the workload, lessens the loneliness of teaching, and ensures consistency in operations that students and others can rely on, making collaborative relationships important.

Administrative support to mediate conflict and resolve issues is important to mid-career teachers. Effective administrative support can occur amid high administrative turnover. School leadership using collaborative models of committees designed to foster shared decision-making creates a feeling of value in teachers. Teachers who feel appreciated their work will continue to teach.

Research Question 2. How can teachers be retained beyond their mid-career teaching years?

The second research question of this study and the findings resulting from the question provided additional knowledge of the perceptions of mid-career teachers relating to retention factors, and how retention can be improved for teachers. Teachers participating in the study provided insight into retention factors to improve teacher retention beyond the mid-career teaching years. Findings suggest that mid-career teachers will continue to teach when their time and talent are respected. Furthermore, a sense of belonging through feeling valued facilitates teacher retention. Feeling valued is addressed as a repeating theme from Question 1.

Discussion of Findings

The study found three impactful themes that influence mid-career teacher continued teaching, relationships, desire to teach, and teacher appreciation. First, the theme of Relationships includes teacher relationships with students, teacher-peer relationships, and supportive leadership. Second, the Desire to Teach theme includes the importance of teacher professional identity and purpose, job satisfaction, and teacher confidence. Lastly, Teacher Appreciation includes feeling valued, shared decision-making, and job security. Findings indicate that districts and schools can further improve teacher retention by creating a culture of belonging for teachers while respecting teachers' time and talents as professionals.

Relationships with Students

Beyond any other work relationships, mid-career teachers find their relationships with students invaluable. When teaching becomes difficult, these mid-career teachers re-evaluate their connectedness with students. Being intentional in knowing their students creates a more positive learning environment (Narayan, 2016). Satisfied mid-career teachers have classrooms without

student behavior disruptions. Mid-career teachers emphasize the importance of developing trusting relationships with their students to accomplish more teaching, reduce teacher stress, to improve student engagement and learning.

Understanding their students facilitates ways for teachers to continue to connect with them, support them academically, and emotionally when needed, and celebrate successes with them. Teachers who can connect student learning to everyday and future lives impact the students' willingness to learn and their relationships with teachers. For these teachers, understanding their students' abilities, achievements, and struggles fosters points for individualized attention and instruction for academic success. Individually, knowing each student is important to these teachers.

Participating mid-career teachers believe that they make a difference in the future of their students. They create relationships to make a difference in the classroom today, knowing they may not see the difference they make. They teach with a moral investment and belief in personal responsibility to help make the lives of students better (Nelson, 2017, Santoro, 2018).

Identifying ways to connect with students outside of the course content is important to teachers who seek relationships with students. These mid-career teachers create opportunities to see current and former students at school events. "They don't know how much you know until they know how much you care" (Summit, 2014; Pierson, 2013; Roosevelt, n.d.) embodies the beliefs of these mid-career teachers.

Teacher Peer Relationships

Mid-career teachers of this study have developed systems and processes, utilizing their classroom and planning times effectively. They want to collaborate with other teachers to share the workload and cross-curriculum when possible. Participating teachers value planning and

committee meetings to discuss student needs, behaviors, and engagement strategies. Team meetings for grade level and subjects are valued for shared-decision making for planning, pacing and content collaboration. The more teaching teams collaborate, the more consistency is experienced by students. Consistency breeds trust in expectations. Prior research suggests and this study confirms that positive and effective peer-teacher relationships improve job satisfaction and teacher retention (Kossivi et al, 2006; Freedman, 2011; Narayan, 2016). Collaboration decreases the workload and improves comradery, decreasing the loneliness of teaching (Booth et al, 2021; Perryman & Calvert, 2019).

These mid-career teachers develop relationships with like-minded teachers, teachers who champion students. Important to teacher resiliency discussed by Reeves (2021), content mid-career teachers will not connect with unsatisfied teachers. Satisfied teachers are not interested in thinking negatively about students or the school landscape. Negativity is contagious. These mid-career teachers believe that unhappy teachers create unhappy students. They strive to be positive and engaging for their students.

Collaboration supports productivity for these mid-career teachers. As designed by Dufour & Eaker (1998), effective Professional Learning Committees (PLC) provide time and opportunity for meaningful discussion and joint planning. With effective PLC meetings, participating secondary education mid-career teachers are capable of teaching multiple grade levels and additional courses without feeling the weight of over-teaching. PLC time is assigned and expected in District A and District B for grades K-12 at varying frequencies determined by school administration. Designated time for collaboration with teaching teams, grade level teams or content teams, provides an opportunity for each teacher to further develop professionally, and evolve their art of teaching. Shared positive experiences in teaching and learning from each

other, build confidence in teachers. Confidence leads to accepting additional responsibility and challenges.

Mid-career teachers want to be challenged as teachers and they want the support of other teachers to do that. “If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together” (McCormick, 1917; African Proverb, n.d). When these teachers accept opportunities that extend their abilities, creating opportunities for professional development, they want a strong collaborative group of collaborating teachers to lessen the burden of planning alone.

Supportive Leadership

Prior research suggests that supportive leadership is essential for teacher retention (Towers & Maguire, 2017; Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). Supportive leadership is the ability of administrators to inspire a vision (Walters, 2005). Mid-career teachers utilize school administration for support less than their inexperienced peers (Kamrath & Georgeford, 2020; Booth et al, 2021). Eight participating teachers provided 34 thematic examples of supportive leadership. Equally, eight participating mid-career teachers provided 26 thematic examples of negative leadership, focusing on frustrations with leadership or recommendations for improvement in leadership and school operations. Five of the 12 participating teachers spoke of high turnover in administration. High administrative turnover may appear to impact teacher autonomy positively, as mid-career teachers continue their work with students regardless of who is leading the school or district.

Administrative turnover creates autonomy for mid-career teachers. Kamrath and Georgeford (2020) conducted a case study and found that mid-career teachers do not rely on administration for work processes, classroom management, or student behavior. Similar to the results found by Kamrath and Georgeford (2020) this research confirmed that mid-career

teachers are confident in classroom management and do not rely on school administration to assist with student discipline. As discussed by Kamrath and Georgeford (2020), and confirmed through findings in this study, mid-career teachers have created a peer support system where confident and experienced teachers support other teachers and substitutes with classroom behavior.

Desire to Teach

Participating mid-career teachers predominately chose the teaching profession because of positive prior teaching or learning experiences. The feeling of success in teaching, through tutoring, unlicensed teaching, and training adults through first-career experiences gave these mid-career teachers a foundation for success in teaching (Williamfeldt et al., 2013). Whether they have a passion for their content, in art, music, or foreign language, or were willing to teach requested subjects for employment, these mid-career teachers are building on their prior success as tutors and trainers as they continue to evolve as teachers

Aligned with the findings from prior research (Booth, et al., 2021; Heinz, 2015; Lortie, 2002), these mid-career teachers know their content and they understand content delivery. As found in prior research (Ingersoll, 2001; Glazer 2018), The mid-career teachers interviewed for this study are confident in their ability to convey content for the benefit of student learning. Mid-career teachers have decided to remain in the classroom and they want to teach well. These teachers understand student academic growth is the goal and use student data as a tool for improving teaching and learning.

The desire to teach does not mean these teachers will not consider changing schools. These mid-career teachers have confidence as teachers and want to feel appreciated by their employing schools. Three of the 12 participating teachers have changed school districts when

they felt undervalued or unappreciated. Another two of the 12 teachers expressed their intent to seek other employment if they ever felt undervalued for their professional teaching skills. At the time of this study, all participating teachers intended to continue teaching at their current schools. Two of the 12 discussed their commitment to remain in their current schools regardless of the highs and lows of culture changes. The desire to teach does not address turnover intention for this group of teachers. With the current teacher shortage, this group of teachers understand moving to another school is always an option.

Teacher Appreciation

In agreement with previous research, this study concurs that teacher appreciation is important for teacher retention. Teachers who are valued at work want to continue teaching (Perryman & Calvert, 2019; Shah et al., 2020; Abraham & Prasetyo, 2021; Booth et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2021). Successful and happy mid-career teachers are those who prioritize relationships with students and who collaborate well with peer teachers and coworkers. Teachers feel valued when others notice their dedication to the success of others.

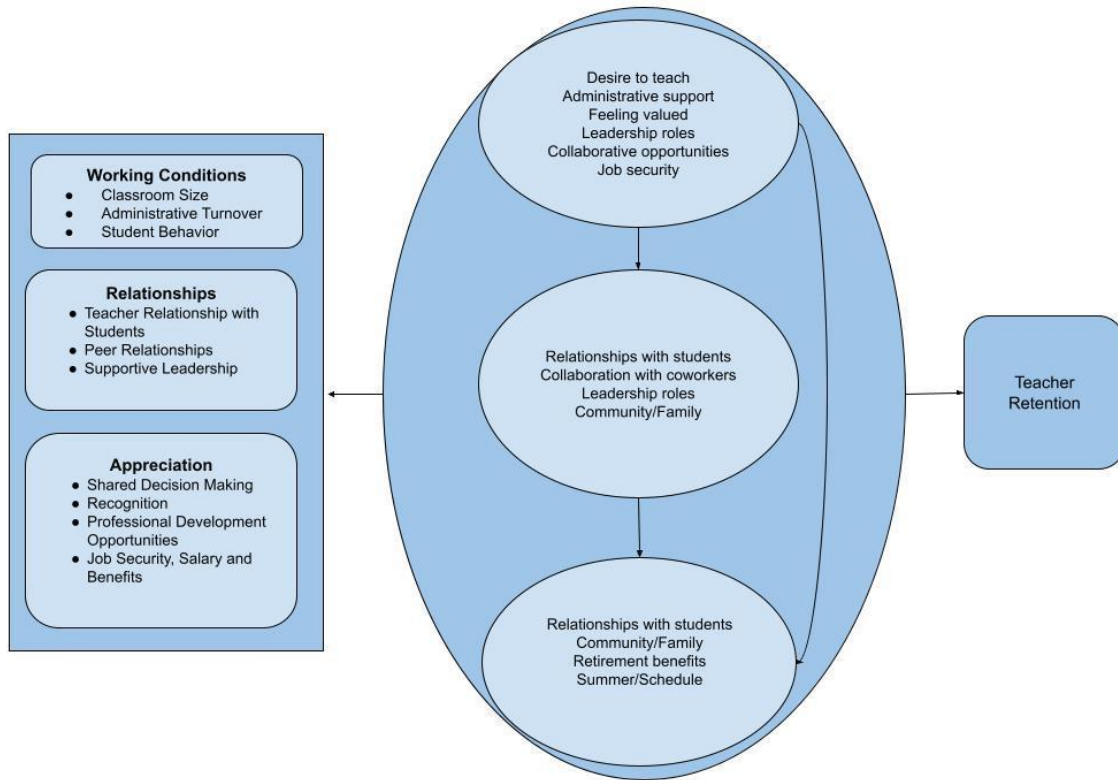
Shim et al. (2021) found that teachers who developed relationships with students and encouraged student learning were motivated to teach more through the engagement of their students. Yes, teachers are motivated to teach when students are motivated to learn. When teachers are effective in engaging students, teachers challenge themselves to become more effective as teachers. Their dedication to making a difference in the lives of others, when appreciated by others drives them to do more. Lester and Coulter (2011) found that mid-career teachers indicated predominately instinctual motivation for teaching. This research found the same stick-to-itiveness in Western North Carolina teachers. Lester and Coulter (2011) additionally indicated that extrinsic rewards such as bonuses and awards improved retention.

This research cannot corroborate any extrinsic rewards. No teacher interviewed mentioned awards, despite interviewing a couple who have received teacher of the year awards. One teacher, Rebecca did mention the annual bonus for student achievement, to convey confidence in content delivery and the lack of need for mandatory professional development.

Collaboration and shared decision-making increase teacher commitment and retention. Supportive leadership involves staff and teachers in making decisions (Walters, 2005). When new administrators want to implement ideas without seeking teacher input, teachers are omitted from decision-making process. Without the opportunity for shared decision-making, teachers are left feeling devalued (Sun et al., 2022). Teachers appreciate coworkers willing to collaborate, because teachers working together make a bigger impact on student engagement and academic growth (Kamrath & Georgeford, 2020). Teacher confidence provides opportunities for shared decision-making and autonomy. This study found that mid-career teachers maintain a social network of coworkers, they stay connected through hallway conversations, committee meetings, and group text.

Figure 4.

Conceptual Framework Augmented by Data



Implications for Practice

Findings suggest that identified reasons for retention are interrelated and therefore, they affect one another. These mid-career teachers are satisfied with teaching. They enjoy teaching and seek ways to improve teaching and learning for their students. Relationships with students are the strongest indicator of job satisfaction, the type of teacher-student relationships described by the participating teachers was one of connection and understanding. Positive teacher-student relationships influence student academic growth and development. Teachers value each other in collaboration and shared decision-making. Sharing the workload develops comradery and comradery fosters a community of belonging. Teachers confidently debate with students in back-

and-forth discussions, show students they care about them as individuals, and admit their humanness to connect to and teach students interpersonal skills necessary to be successful adults.

This research contributes to the body of knowledge related to the field of Human Resources Development through investigation of mid-career teachers' experiences in relationship to continued teaching. Employee retention is crucial for performance and development of organizations. Understanding the reasons and factors contributing to teachers' decisions to continue to teach provide pertinent information for schools to utilize in improving their teacher retention factors.

Relationships Matter, Understanding Effective Relationships

Teaching requires effective interpersonal skills on the part of teachers and school administration. Teachers who champion their students, challenge them with inspiration and feed their curiosity for learning report job satisfaction. Similarly, teachers who collaborate, and experience a positive working relationship with other teachers, despite difficult days, work together to find solutions, share the workload, and make decisions when asked. Teachers who collaborate with teachers are appreciated by their teaching teammates, and administration, feel valued for their effort in teaching and learning implementation.

Targeting support for teachers who could benefit from improved interpersonal skills may improve teacher retention. Initially, feeling a sense of belonging could encourage teachers who struggle with a fragile ego to initiate relationships, and develop confidence. A small sense of accomplishment with supported risk-taking can help teachers improve confidence and establish trust in themselves and others.

Targeted Professional Development

Much of today's professional development for teachers is focused on beginning and inexperienced teachers (Day, 2013). Mid-career teachers want to evolve as teachers. They want to develop professionally. An implication for practice in improving mid-career teacher retention is targeted professional development.

Mid-career teachers can use initiatives, mandates, and culture changes as opportunities to evolve as teachers. They have opportunities to choose how they respond to the demands of change. The COVID-19 pandemic and the continued need to assess and address the gap in student learning have proven important in mid-career teachers feeling valued and developing professionally. Teaching combined classes and more students provides a challenge to mid-career teachers. The experience does develop them professionally.

Mid-career teachers have options for additional certifications and graduate school, National Board certification and a few trainings designed. Much professional development for mid-career teachers comes through committee involvement and where available beginning teacher mentoring. Improving options and opportunities for mid-career teachers would be meaningful to them and increase their feelings of value.

Teachers Connecting Electronically for Collaboration

Collaborating teachers choose to connect electronically. They have group texts or chats with like-minded teachers or their teaching teams. Teachers choose who they connect with and when they connect. The value of staying electronically connected is allowing teachers to engage in electronic in real-time or on their own time. Teachers report their group texts or chats address personal and professional topics. They support each other, mentor each other, and make team decisions and changes. Increasing electronic communication methods across schools and districts could positively impact teacher awareness of information or engagement.

Fits

Mid-career teachers want to make a difference in the lives of their students, they are satisfied with their jobs, confident in their abilities to teach, and feel valued for their work. School leadership has provided these teachers with opportunities to evolve as teachers, through shared decision-making and teacher-leader roles. In today's teacher shortage, mid-career teachers feel secure in their jobs. These mid-career teachers have a guaranteed paycheck, with a benefit package that includes a lifetime pension. The financial security increases comfort for mid-career teachers and their families.

Mid-career teachers have made teaching a good fit for their families. Participating teachers prioritize their families outside school hours and throughout the summer months. They work in schools that share the importance of family values. These teachers have learned to make the work of planning and teaching fit into the school day, to maximize their work week, evenings at home, and weekends.

Links

Mid-career teachers understand the value of their relationships with their students. The teacher-student relationships have benefits for both the teacher and students. Relationships with coworkers are positive, proactive, and collaborative. Family and other supportive relationships consistently encourage these teachers to teach. Family is a priority for eight participating teachers. With growing children, aging parents, and extended family moving to North Carolina, familial relationships are involved and important.

Sacrifices

These mid-career teachers are not willing to sacrifice their relationships with students. Mid-career teachers have developed systems and processes in teaching, making the

day-to-day work less stressful. Comfortable in their teaching practice, these mid-career teachers have families with children and are caring for aging family members. Eleven of twelve participating teachers said they would not relocate for a job. These mid-career teachers are rooted in the local community. Three of the teachers interviewed are alumni of the districts where they teach. The four participating teachers who relocated to North Carolina are committed to the area with extended family joining them in North Carolina. Participating teachers value the 10-month work calendar with summers off, and well-planned three-day weekends throughout the school year, giving teachers purposeful family time.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on a small group of teachers in Western North Carolina. The findings represent a population of teachers in one North Carolina county, from two similar city school districts, not more than 15 miles apart. Extending this research outside of Western North Carolina to other settings, regions, and states would expand the depth of knowledge related to mid-career teacher retention.

Additional research could be conducted by reviewing the student data related to these mid-career teachers. Participating teachers presented as confident in content delivery and relationships with students. Research could be expanded to include discipline data from the classrooms of mid-career teachers to support their confidence in the importance of teacher-student relationships for student academic engagement.

This research could be reviewed further to expand the depth of knowledge of the similarities and differences between school district cultures. For example, teachers from District A spoke of district expectations for student academic growth and the importance of student data. Unlike District A, District B teachers may not have a clearly defined district expectation towards

student achievement. District B teachers spoke of the entire district being limited in abilities because of its small size. District A, comparable in size, did not mention district size being a hindrance in student service and academics.

These mid-career teachers see beginning teachers and other teachers overwhelmed with teaching. They would like opportunities to be explored that would permit them to mentor and support struggling teachers. Additional research on job roles for teachers and teacher leaders on the effectiveness of teacher-mentor relationships for struggling teachers could provide districts with opportunities to retain struggling teachers.

Teachers have recommended that principals receive additional training in change management and people management, although much research is available on Principal leadership styles, further research on school operational changes is relative to administrative changes. A better understanding of the reasons for school operational changes could help school personnel balance response to change.

Limitations

With any research, there are limitations. This study is limited to a small group of teachers in Western North Carolina. The findings represent a population of teachers in one North Carolina county, from two similar city school districts, not more than 15 miles apart. Information from this study may not be fully transferable to other regions or representative of mid-career teachers in different school settings. The availability of mid-career teachers in two small school districts may further limit the study, as participating teachers may be highly engaged and responsive teachers who volunteer for many or all additional opportunities. The participating teachers may represent a population of highly engaged teachers, and are not be representative of all teachers.

Much of the research speaks of the importance of supportive leadership in schools for teacher retention. The semi-structured interviews did not directly ask questions about administrative support, few teachers directly discussed relationships with the administration. How supportive leadership directly impacts mid-career teachers was not identified in the results of this research.

Through interviews, mid-career teachers discussed their planning and teaching practices. They gave examples of teaching strategies, ways of engaging students, and their expectations for PLCs. The mid-career teachers interviewed for this research feel confident in their roles as teachers, some indicated the importance of data reviews to self-assess teaching strategies and review content delivery. However, student data for each participating teacher was not reviewed or included in this research.

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APPENDIX A: CITI CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION

		Completion Date 04-Apr-2023 Expiration Date 04-Apr-2026 Record ID 55257834
This is to certify that:		
Kirsten Maynard		
Has completed the following CITI Program course:		
Course in the Protection of Human Subjects (Curriculum Group) Core IRB Training (Course Learner Group) 1 - Basic course (Stage)		
Under requirements set by:		
University of Illinois at Urbana - Champaign		
Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w040751e5-0f90-44e4-953b-7fa8262a05b9-55257834		
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative  101 NE 3rd Avenue, Suite 320 Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301 US www.citiprogram.org		
Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.		

APPENDIX B: IRB NOTICE OF EXEMPT DETERMINATION (IRB #24033)



Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research & Innovation

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
805 W. Pennsylvania Ave., MC-095
Urbana, IL 61801-4822

Notice of Exempt Determination

May 3, 2023

Principal Investigator	Eunjung Oh
Protocol Title	WHAT ARE THE REASONS MID-CAREER TEACHERS CONTINUE TEACHING?
Protocol Number	24033
Funding Source	Unfunded
Review Category	Exempt 2(ii)
Amendment Approved	May 2, 2023
Expiration Date	May 1, 2028

This letter authorizes the use of human subjects in the above protocol. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) has reviewed your application and determined the criteria for exemption have been met.

The Principal Investigator of this study is responsible for:

- Conducting research in a manner consistent with the requirements of the University and federal regulations found at 45 CFR 46.
- Requesting approval from the IRB prior to implementing major modifications.
- Notifying OPRS of any problems involving human subjects, including unanticipated events, participant complaints, or protocol deviations.
- Notifying OPRS of the completion of the study.

Changes to an **exempt** protocol are only required if substantive modifications are requested and/or the changes requested may affect the exempt status.

APPENDIX C: LETTER TO SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT

Dear Superintendent of Schools

I am Kirsten Maynard a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in Education, Policy, Organization and Leadership. For completion of my degree through the Human Resources Development Program, I am working under the supervision of Dr. Eunjung Oh. I would like to invite your teachers to participate in a research study to investigate teacher retention through their mid-career teaching years titled; WHAT ARE THE REASONS MID-CAREER TEACHERS CONTINUE TEACHING?

A review of teacher retention data found 70% of teachers remain teachers after five years, and 61% at 10 years. At 19 years, only 50% of teachers are still teaching. The resignation of teachers during their mid-career years is a loss for schools and students. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore mid-career teachers' reasons and intent for commitment to a career as a teacher. What internal and external factors keep teachers in the classroom? Understanding those factors can benefit schools and school districts by providing the information necessary to maximize retention.

We request your support to conduct this study within your school district. The researcher seeks to interview mid-career teachers, teachers with 5-15 years of teaching experience. Interviews will be conducted outside of school hours, face-to-face or virtually. The data collected from this study may help identify factors essential to increasing teacher retention. Additionally, data from this study may provide information on potential professional development opportunities for teachers and schools within your district.

All information obtained from this study will be kept confidential. Please contact us with any questions you may have regarding this study. We can be contacted via email at klm8@illinois.edu or by phone at (727) 641-3997.

Thank you in advance for your consideration

Respectfully,

Kirsten L. Maynard MA
Graduate Student
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Dr. Eunjung Oh
Associate Professor
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

APPENDIX D: NEWTON-CONOVER CITY SCHOOLS DISTRICT APPROVAL

School District Approval Form

Dear Superintendent of Schools

Thank you for your agreement and support of Kirsten L. Maynard in the completion of her doctoral degree in Education, Policy, Organization and Leadership, with a concentration in Human Resource Development.

Please sign below providing official approval for Ms. Maynard to collect and analyze all collected data for the study; **WHAT ARE THE REASONS MID-CAREER TEACHERS CONTINUE TEACHING?** The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore mid-career teachers' reasons and intent for commitment to a career as a teacher. What internal and external factors keep teachers in the classroom? Understanding those factors can benefit schools and school districts by providing the information necessary to maximize retention.

Thank you for your support and approval of this research.

Kirsten L. Maynard MA
Graduate Student
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Dr. [Eunjung Oh](#)
Associate Professor
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



Dr. Aron Gabriel, Superintendent
Newton-Conover City Schools

APPENDIX E: HICKORY PUBLIC SCHOOLS DISTRICT APPROVAL

School District Approval Form

Dear Superintendent of Schools

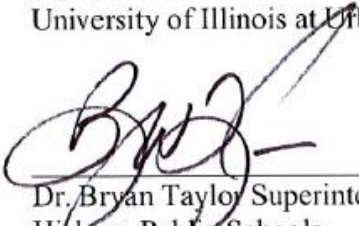
Thank you for your agreement and support of Kirsten L. Maynard in the completion of her doctoral degree in Education, Policy, Organization and Leadership, with a concentration in Human Resource Development.

Please sign below providing official approval for Ms. Maynard to collect and analyze all collected data for the study; WHAT ARE THE REASONS MID-CAREER TEACHERS CONTINUE TEACHING? The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore mid-career teachers' reasons and intent for commitment to a career as a teacher. What internal and external factors keep teachers in the classroom? Understanding those factors can benefit schools and school districts by providing the information necessary to maximize retention.

Thank you for your support and approval of this research.

Kirsten L. Maynard MA
Graduate Student
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Dr. [Eunjung Oh](#)
Associate Professor
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



Dr. Bryan Taylor Superintendent
Hickory Public Schools

APPENDIX F: TEACHER RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Subject: Research investigation of the reasons mid-career teachers continue teaching? Interview

Good afternoon

My name is Kirsten Maynard, a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in Education, Policy, Organization, and Leadership. For completion of my degree through the Human Resources Development Program, I am working under the supervision of Dr. Eunjung Oh. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study to investigate teacher retention through their mid-career teaching years titled; WHAT ARE THE REASONS MID-CAREER TEACHERS CONTINUE TEACHING?

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore mid-career teachers' reasons and intent for commitment to a career as a teacher. What internal and external factors keep teachers in the classroom? Understanding those factors can benefit schools and school districts by providing the information necessary to maximize retention.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose not to participate in this study, it will not have any adverse effects on your employment with the school district. The results of this study will be used to meet the requirements for the researcher's dissertation.

Participants must meet both of the following criteria:

1. You are a teacher with at least 5 years and fewer than 16 years of teaching experience
2. You are a teacher in one of two districts identified for the study

It is my hope that you will agree to participate in a 60-minute interview with Kirsten Maynard. Interviews will be conducted outside of school hours, face-to-face or virtually.

Procedures have been implemented to maintain the confidentiality of each participant, name and personal identifiers of participants will not be presented or published. Please click the link below to agree to participate and schedule an interview date and time. You may also reply to this email with questions you may have about the study.

[GoogleForm](#)

At the conclusion of the study, I will be happy to share the results of the study with you. If you have any questions or need additional information about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you for taking the time to assist me with this research project.

Kirsten Maynard
Doctoral Candidate
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

APPENDIX G: SOCIAL BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH CONSENT FORM



Social Behavioral Research Consent Form

WHAT ARE THE REASONS MID-CAREER TEACHERS CONTINUE TEACHING?

You are being asked to participate in a voluntary research study. The purpose of this study is to explore mid-career teachers' reasons and intent for commitment to a career as a teacher. Participating in this study will involve an interview with Kirsten Maynard and your participation will last approximately 60 minutes. There are minimal risks to participants in this study. Participant may risk feelings of uneasiness or anxiety related to interview question responses. There is a small risk for a potential breach in confidentiality. There are no direct benefits for study participants. Benefits related to this research include the opportunity to share your commitment to teaching as a profession and your insights to the field regarding teacher retention.

Principal Investigator Name and Title: Dr. Eunjung Grace Oh, Associate Professor
Researcher: Kirsten Maynard, doctoral candidate
Department and Institution: Education, Policy, Organization, and Leadership

Why am I being asked?

You are being asked to be a participant in a research study about teacher retention. The purpose of this research is to understand which retention factors support teacher retention. You have been asked to participate in this research because you are a teacher with teaching experience of 5 to 15 years. Up to 20 participants will be involved in this research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future dealings with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.

What procedures are involved?

The study primary procedure is to complete an interview with the researcher. Your Participation will involve one interview with the researcher, which can be either virtual or face-to-face at the convenience of the participant. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes

Depending on your location and preference, an interview can be complete via online conferencing tool, phone or in-person. Upon your consent, your interviews will be recorded for the research purpose. Upon completion of transcription.

After your interview is completed, the researcher will transcribe the interview and return the transcription to you for review and validation. The transcript will be emailed to you within 72 hours after completing your interview. You will have 72 hours to review and return the transcript with any edits you wish to make. If you chose not to return the transcription, the researcher will assume there are no edits or changes.

What are the potential risks and discomforts?

There are minimal risks to participants in this study. Participant may risk feelings of uneasiness or anxiety related to interview question responses. There is a small risk for a potential breach in confidentiality.

Are there benefits to participating in the research?

There are no direct benefits for study participants. Your participation will add depth to the current research and knowledge on the topic of teacher retention.

What other options are there?

You have the option to not participate in this study.

Will my study-related information be kept confidential?

Faculty, staff, students, and others with permission or authority to see your study information will maintain its confidentiality to the extent permitted and required by laws and university policies. The names or personal identifiers of participants will not be published or presented.

Will I be reimbursed for any expenses or paid for my participation in this research?

You will not be offered payment for being in this study.

Can I withdraw or be removed from the study?

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time. The researchers also have the right to stop your participation in this study without your consent if they believe it is in your best interests, you were to object to any future changes that may be made in the study plan.

Will data collected from me be used for any other research?

Your interview data will not be used or distributed for future use, even if identifiers are removed.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

Contact the researchers Kirsten Maynard, doctoral candidate at 727-641-3997 or klm8@illinois.edu or Dr. Eunjung Grace Oh, Associate Professor at 217-244-4458 or egraceoh@illinois.edu. If you have any questions about this study or your part in it, or if you have concerns or complaints about the research.

What are my rights as a research subject?

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, including concerns, complaints, or to offer input, you may call the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) at 217-333-2670 or e-mail OPRS at irb@illinois.edu. If you would like to complete a brief survey to provide OPRS feedback about your experiences as a research participant, please follow the link [here](#) or through a link on the OPRS website: <https://oprs.research.illinois.edu/>. You will have the option to provide feedback or concerns anonymously or you may provide your name and contact information for follow-up purposes.

I have read the above information. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research. I will be given a copy of this signed and dated form.

Signature

Date

Printed Name

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date (must be same as subject's)

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

APPENDIX H: TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTION MATRIX

Teacher Interview Question Matrix

Background and Ice-Breaker Questions				
1. How is your day?				
2. Can you introduce yourself briefly?				

	Fit	Links	Sacrifice	Factors
3. What led you to become a teacher?		Prior teacher, family relationships		Job security, salary, and benefits, relationships with students, professional opportunities
4. How long have you been teaching? a. How long at your current school? a. At your current district?	Length of time with an employer, length of time as a teacher	Relationships: students and staff	Loss of relationships, loss of benefits	Relationships, shared-decision-making, recognition
5. If you weren't teaching, what would you choose for work?	Another fit	Other relationships	Loss of relationships, loss of benefits, loss of use of education	Relationships
6. What aspects of teaching do you enjoy the most? a. Dislike the most?	Culture, Accentuates skills, and talents	Relationships with students and staff	Loss of 10-month schedule	Working conditions, relationships, shared decision-making, professional development, salary, and benefits
7. In what ways are your skills and talents utilized by your	Culture, skills, and talents, decision-	Relationships with students and staff,	Loss of opportunities, loss of	Working conditions, relationships, shared decision-making,

school/school district? a. What talents do you wish you could utilize?	making, relationships	shared decision-making	relationships, loss of benefits.	professional development, salary, and benefits
8. Tell me about your feelings on Sunday evenings when you're thinking about work on Monday	Culture, skills, and talents,	Relationships with students and staff	professional fit, family time,	Professional development, shared decision-making, recognition, working conditions, relationships
9. Do you interact outside of school with co-workers? a. How often do you interact with your co-workers outside of the school?	Decision-making, culture, skills, talents, supportive leadership	Relationships with students and staff	Loss of belonging	Relationships, shared decision-making, recognition
10. Could you tell me about the opportunities to collaborate with others at work? a. How often do you collaborate with colleagues? b. Could you give me an example of decisions you make at work with colleagues?	Decision-making, skills, talents, culture, supportive leadership	Relationships with students and staff	Loss of relationships, individual decisions, control	Relationships, shared-decision-making, professional development
11. What are your future career goals? a. How long would you consider an acceptable commute? b. Would you consider relocating for a job?	Shared decision-making, skills, talents, culture, supportive leadership		Relationships, security, opportunities	Shared decision-making, relationships, professional development, working conditions

12. How could your school/school district make teachers feel like they belong?	Shared decision-making, culture, ability to use talents, supportive leadership, relationships	Relationships with students and staff		Professional development, shared decision-making, recognition, working conditions, relationships
13. How could your school/district make teachers feel like they belong? a. What would you lose if you left teaching? b. What would you gain if you left teaching	Culture, relationships, value, collaboration	Relationships, collaboration, shared decision-making	Relationships, working conditions, security, shared decision-making,	Working conditions, relationships, shared decision-making, professional development, salary, benefits
14. Do you have any other comments or ideas that you believe contribute to teacher retention?				Working conditions, relationships, shared decision-making, professional development, salary, and benefits

APPENDIX I: TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

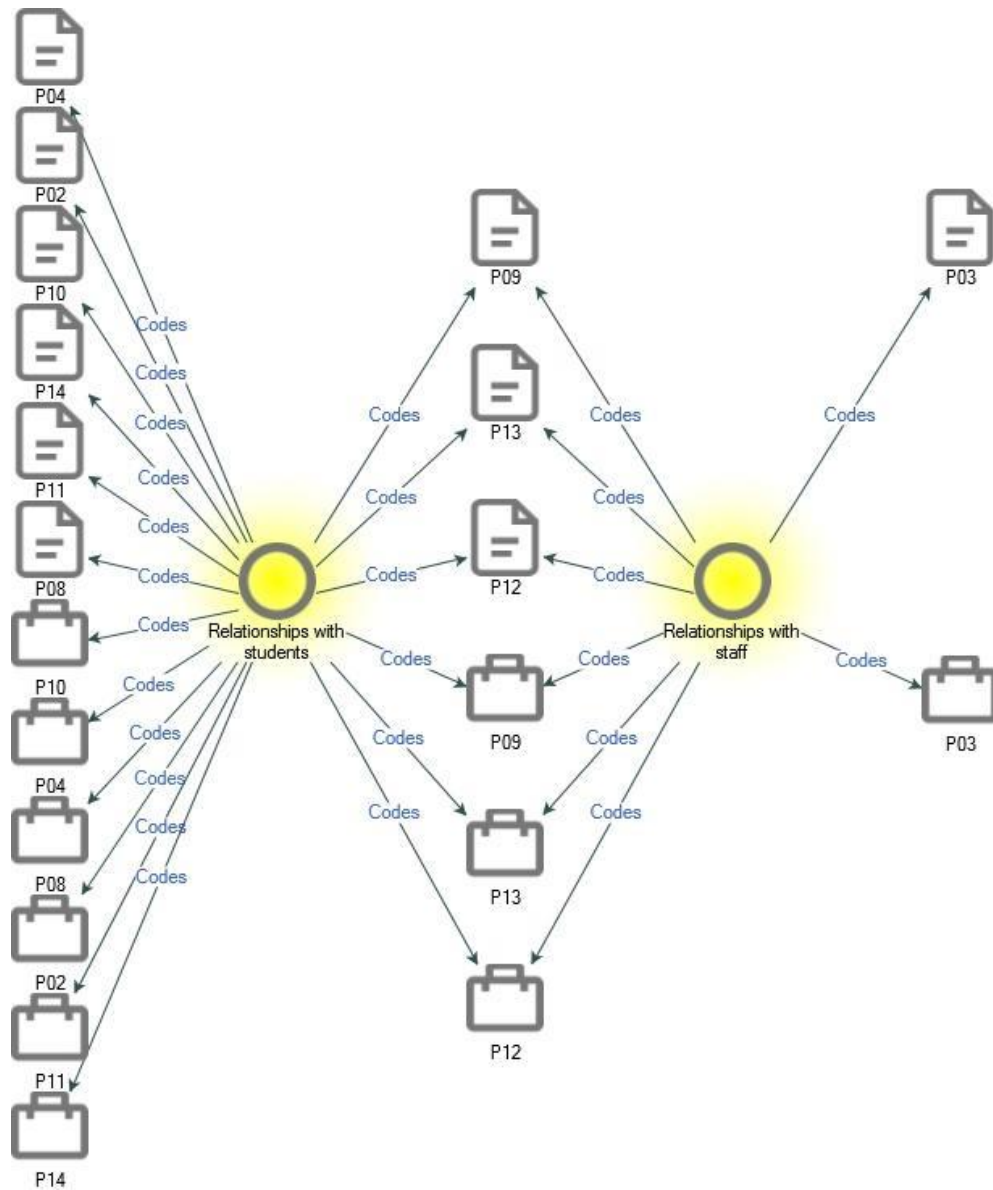
Teacher Interview Questions

Teacher semi-formal interview questions relevant to the research question

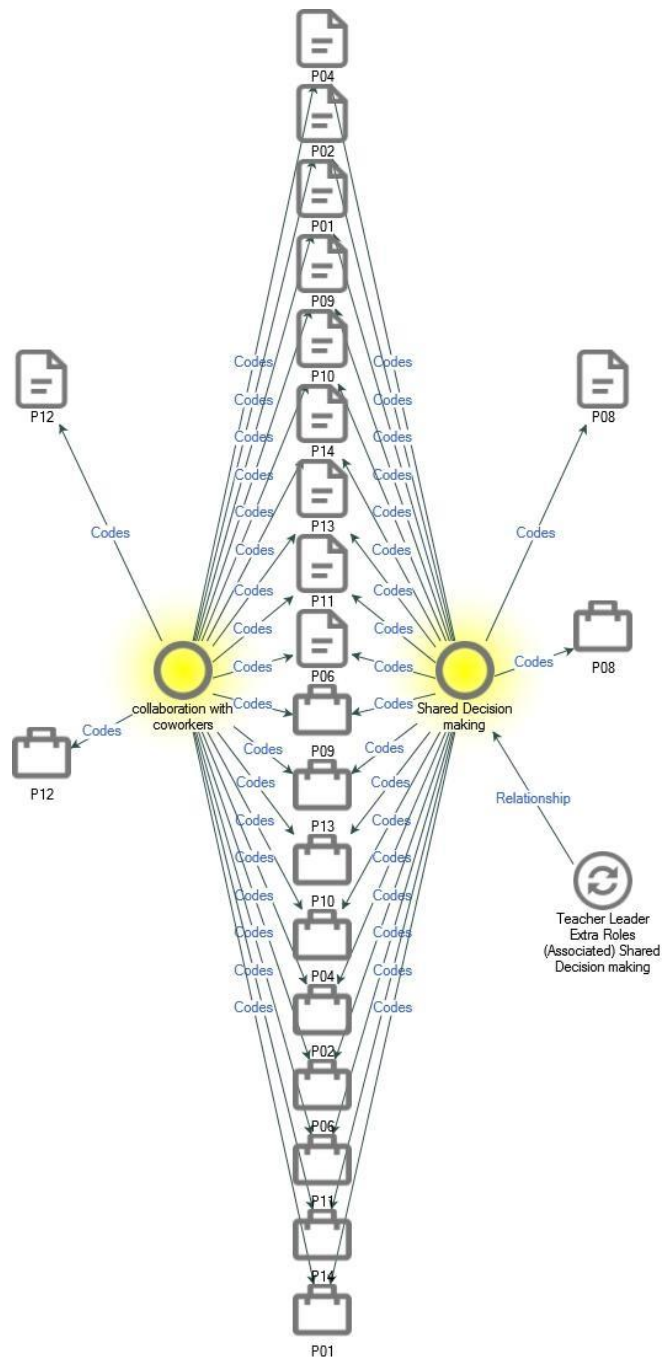
1. How is your day?
2. Could you tell me a little about yourself?
3. What led you to become a teacher?
4. How long have you been teaching?
 - a. How long at your current school?
 - b. At your current district?
5. If you weren't teaching, what would you do for work?
6. What aspects of teaching do you enjoy the most?
 - a. Dislike the most?
7. In what ways are your skills and talents utilized by your school/school district?
 - a. What talents do you wish you could utilize more?
8. Tell me about your feelings on Sunday evenings when you're thinking about work on Monday.
9. Do you interact outside of school with co-workers?
 - a. How often do you interact with your co-workers outside of the school?
10. Could you tell me about the opportunities to collaborate with others at work?
 - a. How often do you collaborate with colleagues?
 - b. Could you give me an example of decisions you make at work with colleagues?
11. What are your future career goals?
 - a. How long would you consider an acceptable commute?

- b. Would you consider relocating for a job?
- 12. How could your school/school district make teachers feel like they belong?
- 13. What do you believe people lose by leaving teaching? What do they gain by leaving teaching?
 - a. What would you lose if you left teaching?
 - b. What would you gain if you left teaching?
- 14. Do you have any other comments or ideas that you believe contribute to teacher retention?

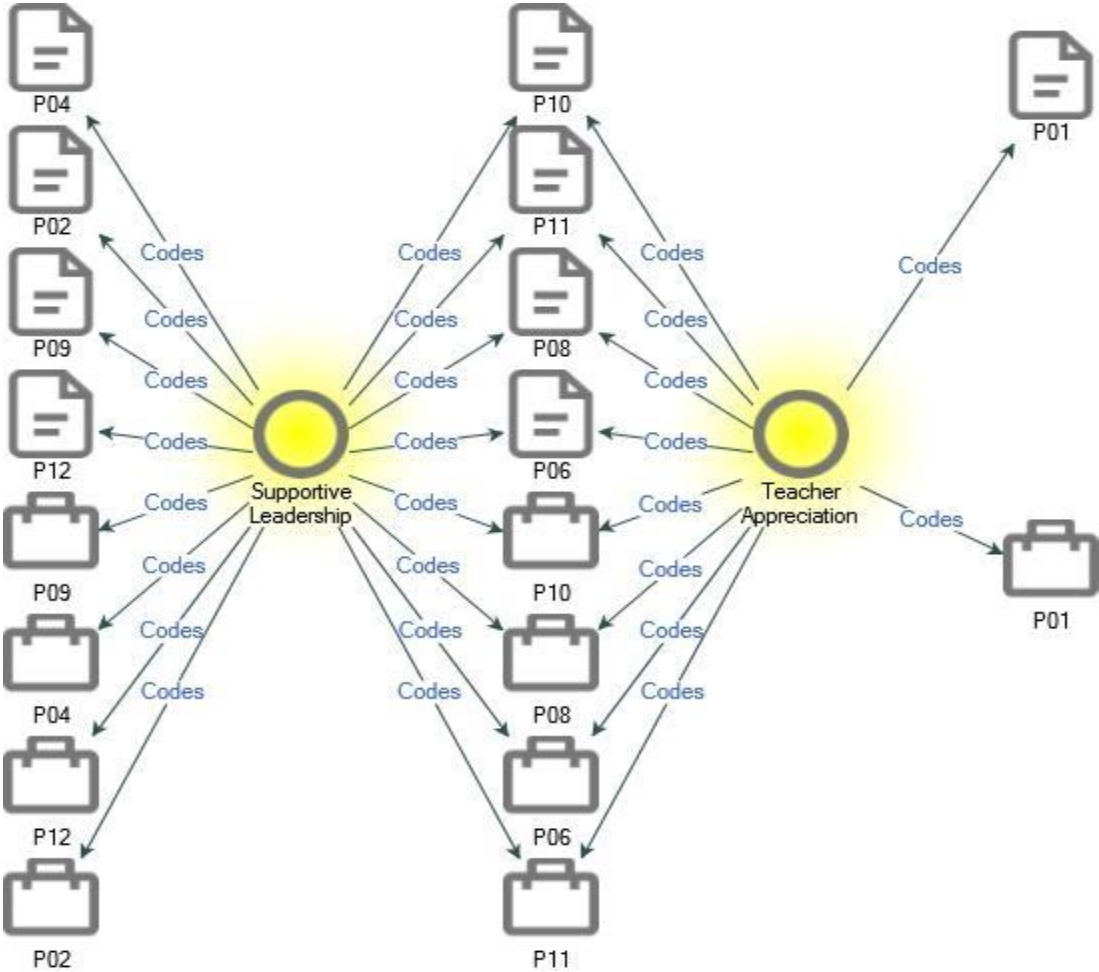
APPENDIX J: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH STAFF



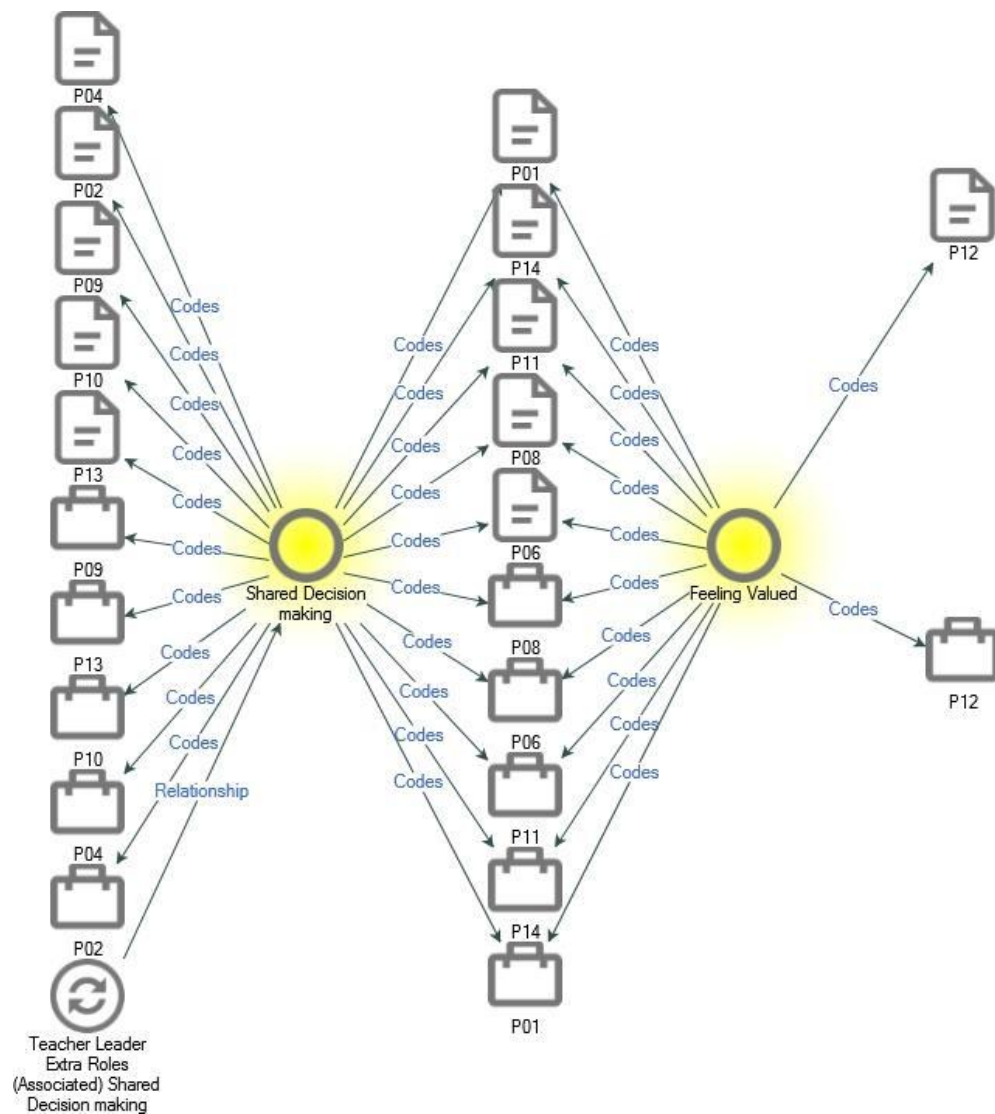
APPENDIX K: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN COLLABORATION WITH COWORKERS AND SHARED DECISION-MAKING



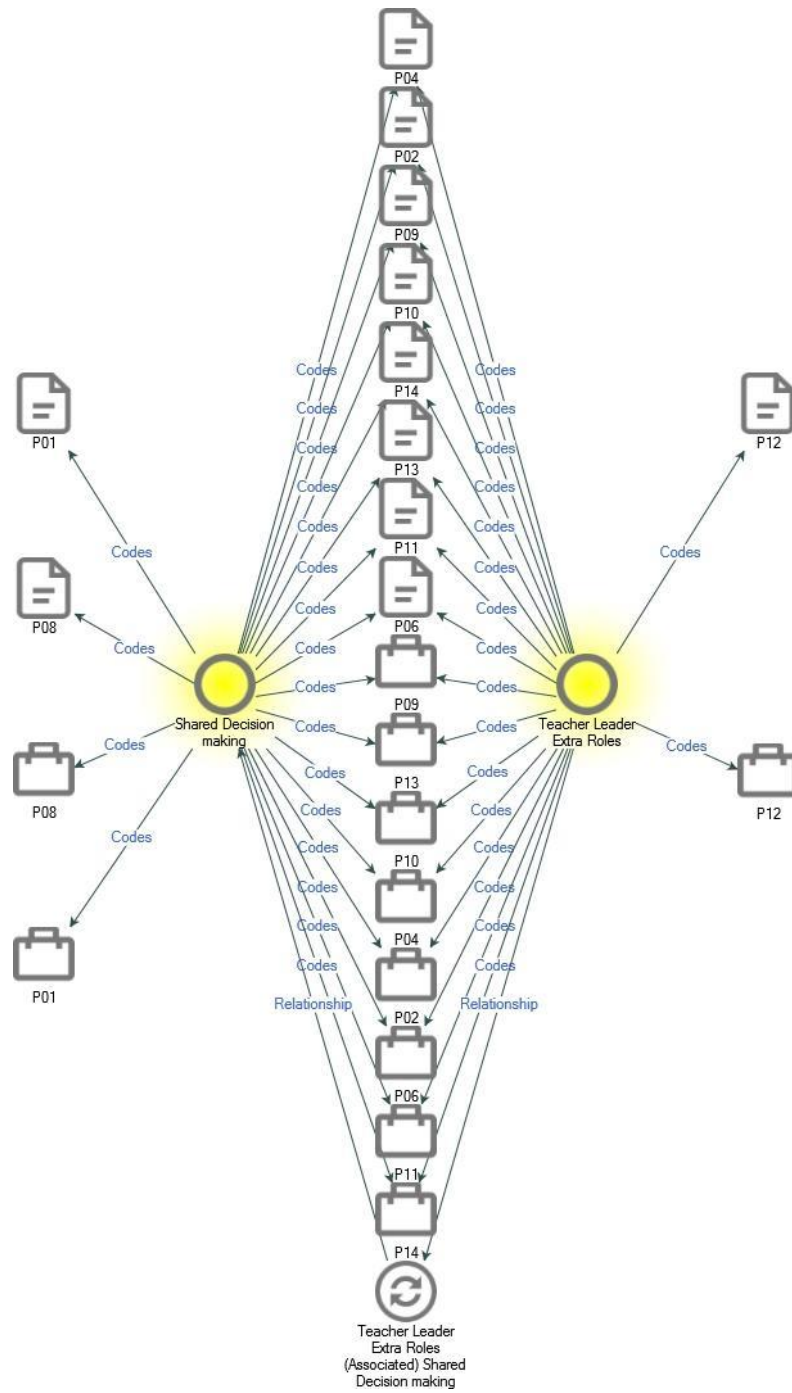
**APPENDIX L: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN SUPPORTIVE
LEADERSHIP AND TEACHER APPRECIATION**



APPENDIX M: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN SHARED DECISION- MAKING AND FEELING VALUED



APPENDIX N: CODE COMPARISON DIAGRAM BETWEEN SHARED DECISION-- MAKING AND TEACHER LEADERSHIP ROLES



APPENDIX O: EXAMPLES OF CHALLENGES CURRENTLY BEING NAVIGATED BY MID-CAREER TEACHERS

Mid-career teachers desire to evolve as teachers. Professional development opportunities are available through education, training, and experience. Many times, teachers experience the most professional growth opportunities when challenges arise. Some of the current challenges being addressed by mid-career teachers are discussed below:

Class Size

Rachel loves the intimacy of working in her elementary exceptional children's classroom where class sizes range from five to seven students. Individualized lessons and more one-to-one time give Rachel time to develop connecting relationships with students. A participating music teacher thinks differently about class sizes than other teachers. William enjoys classes with many students. "[S]ome teachers pray for small classes, and I want as many as I can get in here so that we can have as big as I can get in here. A big sound."

When a teacher resigned last year, the vacancy continued and the class was combined with Alexander's students. Alexander taught more third graders than recommended for English and Spanish rotations of his dual immersion program. A smaller class size and larger budget would have allowed for more interactive learning. Dwight has similar interactive learning desires, a larger budget and 22 assigned students to a class would give him more opportunities for hands-on projects, experiments, and interactive lessons. Currently, Dwight is teaching 38 students per middle school class. Dwight said, "any more than 30 students feel more like babysitting than teaching." Abigail's classes continue to grow each semester. "Transfer students often get assigned to art because they need a place to be. According to Abigail, there is not time to demonstrate to a class of 30 students.

Post COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic created changes in working conditions, both positive and negative. Rebecca found the virtual learning and recorded lessons to be a positive aspect of COVID-19. Now when students are absent from class they miss the lesson. During COVID-19, lessons were recorded and the students could watch the lesson. Several teachers discussed the change in students' behavior and effort due to loss of learning and decreased effort in schoolwork since the COVID-19 pandemic. Rachel discussed the balance of when to push and how far to push students to learn to avoid student negative behaviors.

Since COVID-19, the kids are so far behind and their reading levels are low and their writing is even worse. I just had my advanced class write essays and I was pulling my hair out because it's like they aren't trying or thinking, no creativity. They write one sentence and ask is this good? (Dwight, direct communication, 2023).

Abigail finds the students needier than pre-COVID-19. The students want constant reassurance and that takes away from demonstration time.

Field trips, mid-career teachers are missing field trips. Deborah and Rebecca both shared how field trips are a good way to connect with other teachers while working. Alexander and Dwight shared how experiential learning can take lessons deeper for students and help teachers feel like they're doing more than teaching for test results.

Parents Right Bill

Relationships with parents since the COVID-19 pandemic or related to the North Carolina Parents Right Alexander, enacted for the 2023-2024 school year (*Senate Alexander 49-ratified Alexander 2023*) have changed for teachers. Like mid-career teachers, parents are a heterogeneous group, from uninvolved to over-involved. The Parents Rights Bill, recent to

North Carolina, still new to both teachers and parents has created anxiety. The bill is an example of new mandates and expectations for education that require consideration and change of practice.

Elementary teachers interviewed for this research discussed the increased demand by parents. Exceptional Education (special education) teachers have additional responsibilities in parent communication through Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings held at least annually. Rachel explained that “Parents assume teachers have done something wrong. [It] used to be parents working more with the teachers and now it seems it’s against the teachers more than it used to be. It makes it frustrating at times.” Alexander discussed being “screamed at” by a mother who was not interested in hearing both sides of the story regarding her child’s behavior. Rachel and Deborah, both teachers of exceptional children had different perspectives regarding parents. Parents are different, Deborah shared, “some are not involved and others teach us things.” Rachel explained that parents are recently less likely to “go along with” the recommendations of the IEP team without additional information or questions. According to Rachel, when teachers call home more parents “assume the teacher [has] done something wrong” than in years past. Rachel, Alexander, and Phillip expressed a negative change in parent responses to teacher communication regarding student concerns and behaviors.

Two high school teachers discussed parent involvement. Phillip expressed frustration with the family of a chronically absent student, who is requesting the teacher find a resolution to the student’s success. Phillip stated, “the kids are ok, it’s the parents who should know better.” George used a metaphor about parents. “Parents are like porcupines, if you know that going in you’ll get along fine.” George expressed concern regarding the Parents' Rights and how his perception of the Bill hinders teachers’ ability check in with student well-being.