

## ABSTRACT

### Leaving Education: A Descriptive Single-Case Study Examining What Factors Drive Teachers from the Profession in Oklahoma

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Teacher attrition adversely impacts the academic future of the students in public schools. Each year, thousands of classrooms go without qualified teachers to provide instruction. Without qualified teachers to instruct students using college and career readiness standards, education agencies, including state departments of education, districts, and schools, remain ill-equipped to meet federal and state education policies. Thusly, teacher attrition remains concerning in the United States. As attrition remains steady, or in some states increases, teacher shortages increase, and student instruction suffers. The impetus of attrition for schools, especially those where attrition rates remain constant and high, call for further research and recommendations to remedy the situation.

This descriptive single-case study explored the factors influencing teachers to leave the profession, specifically in Oklahoma. The research focused on the lived experiences of teachers from one of the 15 school districts in Oklahoma County, Oklahoma. This study answered the following research questions: what are the lived experiences of former teachers that chose to leave the profession? And what factors

influenced teachers' decisions to leave the profession pre-retirement in Oklahoma? The associated literature review highlighted the state trends in attrition in Oklahoma and how those trends compared to national trends. Literature focused on teacher attrition provided further perspective and commentary on the influences of teacher attrition as examined through the Theory of Teacher Attrition framework.

This study identified the gap in the research as to what influenced attrition in Oklahoma. Emerging themes surrounding influences on teacher attrition included, low- to no-impact new teacher orientation, ineffective or non-existent mentorship, absentee or disconnected school administration, workload, and "bait and switch" experiences. The study also explored the implications of the data associated with attrition. Finally, the study brought together recommendations as to how targeted and specific attention to the influences of attrition may reduce the teacher shortage and increase teacher retention.

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Leaving Education: A Descriptive Single-Case Study Examining  
What Factors Drive Teachers from the Profession in Oklahoma

by

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A Dissertation

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## DEDICATION

To those who champion public education and revere the work of teachers, I dedicate this body of work to you. Let us continue to seek knowledge and utilize that knowledge to provide exceptional educational experiences to our children.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction to the Problem of Practice

#### *Introduction*

Teacher attrition makes the task of effectively educating students difficult for education agencies. The ripple effect of attrition goes beyond job vacancies. Attrition leads to issues such as larger class sizes, a reduction in high-quality educational opportunities, and a rise in educational expenditures allocated to hiring new teachers rather than to professional development and other resources that support students' academic needs. The hiring demand for teachers in 2017–18 reached 300,000 nationally, yet over 100,000 classrooms remained devoid of a certified teacher during that same time period (Sutcher et al., 2016). The continued sustainability of the United States workforce demands and depends on the continued stability of public education. The keystone of a stable public education system lies with a strong teacher workforce.

Educational institutions exist to meet the needs of society. Public schools in the United States take on the charge of developing the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that equip students to become contributing members of the global society in which they live (Sloan, 2012). College and career readiness represent the mission and vision of public education agencies. Thirty-seven percent of jobs in the United States require a high school diploma at minimum (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). A high teacher attrition rate means schools face greater obstacles in their efforts to educate students and potentially creates conditions for workforce endangerment. Instructional vacancies equate

to the loss of educational opportunities for students and a decrease in academic achievement.

The focus of this study centered in Oklahoma where teacher attrition exceeds the national average. Over 30,000 educators have left the education profession in Oklahoma since 2013 (Lazarte Alcala, 2018). This descriptive single-case study focused on the factors that influence teacher attrition and examined the lived experiences of former teachers who left the profession to pursue another career path. Chapter One of this study states the problem upon which the study focused, defines the purpose, introduces the a priori theoretical framework, and delineates the research design and methods.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Approximately 51 million children began school in the Fall of 2019. At the start of that school year over 100,000 teaching vacancies remained unfilled (U.S. Department of Education, 2019a). These vacancies negatively impact schools and students, especially when considering the number of students enrolled in public schools in the United States. This level of student enrollment in public schools indicates that the demand for highly qualified educators remains, yet the attrition rate holds steady at approximately 8% nationwide (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Nationally, nearly a quarter of new teachers leave the profession within the first three years of teaching endangering the educator workforce (Boyd et al., 2008). The problem of teacher attrition ultimately results in an adverse impact on the academic futures of students. While attrition impacts all students, the negative effects on certain groups of students is even greater. Teacher attrition proves “particularly harmful to the academic achievement of students [in schools] with large populations of low performing and Black students” (Ronfeldt et al.,

2013, p. 30). This national problem is further exacerbated when applied to schools serving other groups of at-risk students encountering difficulty with adequate academic performance. Without qualified teachers in classrooms receiving dedicated professional support, public education jeopardizes rather than enhances the future opportunities of children in the United States.

When assessed more closely, teacher attrition encompasses more than just leaving the education profession. Attrition in education includes turnover such as leaving a school or district to go to another school or district, retirement, involuntary job loss or relocation, as well as leaving the profession for other career opportunities. All of these attrition contributors create a financial burden on schools and districts. One adverse impact of attrition corresponds to the cost of replacing a teacher. Research says that districts spend approximately 25% of the annual salary of the departing teacher to fill a vacancy (Shockley et al., 2006). Another adverse impact of attrition relates to school funding. Too frequently, education funding faces cuts when states look to improve budgets, which results in a further negative influence on students, teachers, schools, and districts. To date, the worst funding cuts took place during the Great Recession and many states still struggle to replace the money cut from education. In 2015, 29 states provided less per pupil funding than in 2008 (Leachman et al., 2017). These types of budget cuts lead to teacher layoffs and influence teachers to seek other professions. States must find ways to improve the financial funding of public schools. The appropriate allocation of funds helps to reduce class sizes, increases professional development and training, and improves the educational experiences of students to strengthen the future workforce (Leachman et al., 2017). The potential to reduce teacher attrition becomes more favorable

when legislators and education agencies intentionally and appropriately fund public education.

Teacher attrition proves to be an even more significant problem in Oklahoma. Prior to the teacher walkout in 2018, the overall Oklahoma teacher attrition rate stood at 23%, with 9% of those teachers leaving education completely (Lazarte Alcala, 2018). Despite the State Board of Education approving an annually increasing number of emergency teaching certificates to fill instructional vacancies across Oklahoma, teacher attrition persists (Eger, 2019b). Inconsistency in instruction due to workforce shortages proves detrimental to student academic performance in the state due to the increased number of novice teachers securing certification through alternative and non-traditional pathways with little to no training before beginning their career in education. This situation is further complicated by the fact that students in Oklahoma continue to fall below national academic performance levels indicating the need for quality teachers providing quality instruction. Based on results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Oklahoma's pre-k through 12 schools rank 41<sup>st</sup> in educational quality (Schlomach, 2019). High-quality and highly qualified teachers make a difference in the educational advancement of students and Oklahoma continues to operate at a deficit in the teacher workforce. This problem of practice study explored the causes of Oklahoma's teacher attrition crisis through researching the lived experiences of former Oklahoma teachers and the factors influencing them to leave the profession.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

This study explored the problem of teacher attrition specifically in a large urban district in Oklahoma County, Oklahoma in connection with broader trends on attrition

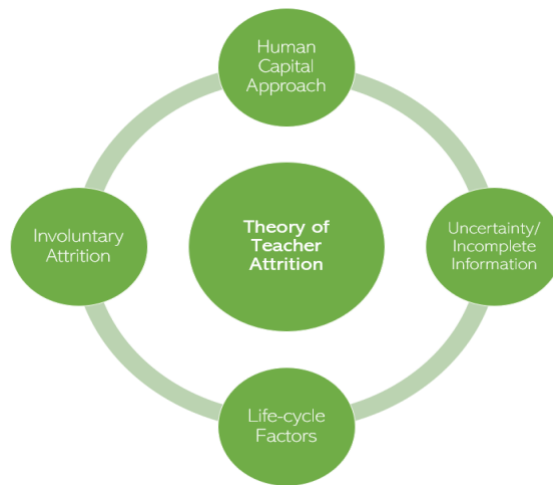
nationally. The study answered the primary research question: what are the lived experiences of former teachers that chose to leave the profession? Additionally, this study answered the secondary question: what factors influenced teachers' decisions to leave the profession pre-retirement in Oklahoma? Recently, Oklahoma experienced an increased attrition rate. The 9% of Oklahoma teachers that chose to leave the profession since 2013 exceeds the overall national attrition rate of 8% (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Lazarte Alcala, 2018). This study specifically focused on teachers leaving education from a district in Oklahoma County. Oklahoma County encompasses 15 public school districts situated in urban, suburban, and rural settings. The largest school district in Oklahoma County serves over 38,000 students, while the smallest district serves just over 300 students (U.S. Department of Education, 2019c). This descriptive single-case study examined attrition experienced in the second largest school district within Oklahoma County, which is also the fifth largest district in the state. The use of the theory of teacher attrition framework aided the examining this phenomenon.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Teacher attrition comes in three general forms: *movers*, *shiffters*, and *leavers*. The 23% attrition rate identified in the purpose for the study includes all three forms of attrition in Oklahoma. *Movers* make up the group of teachers that leave one school and go to another. *Shiffters* make up the group of teachers that leave the classroom but continue in the education profession in other roles. *Leavers* make up the group of teachers that leave the profession entirely. This study focused on teacher attrition in the form of *leavers*. In Oklahoma, the leavers represented 9% of the total attrition rate. To examine the potential motives of the *leavers* more specifically, this study applied the



theory of teacher attrition as shown graphically to represent the interconnected nature of the components of the theory (see Figure 1.1). The application of the theory allowed for the examination of the causes and the inevitability of attrition for the participants in the study while utilizing a broad, multi-lensed perspective of the factors influencing their decision to leave (Kirby & Grissmer, 1993).



*Figure 1.1.* Theory of teacher attrition.

Generally applied, the term teacher attrition accounts for the number of teachers that leave a classroom position on an annual basis. However, when assessed through the lens of this theory, the complexity of the term resulted in a multilayered review of the phenomenon. When analyzing teacher attrition from a national vantage point, the term takes on a specific application. Using a singularly focused perspective, the application of the term in this study omitted the movement of teachers from one school, district, or state to another since those teachers continued employment as educators just in a new location. The study also excluded attrition associated with retirement, and those who remained in education but not in classroom instruction. When examining teacher attrition at the state

or local district level, the definition of attrition broadens to include any loss of teachers. As the exploration of teacher attrition took place in this study, the application of the four components of the theory of teacher attrition at the district level aimed to tell the lived experiences of those who left and provide greater clarity as to the factors contributing to phenomenon.

This study applied the four components of the theory of teacher attrition to the research. The four components which are explained in greater detail in chapter two include the human capital approach, uncertain or incomplete information, life-cycle factors, and involuntary attrition factors (Kirby & Grissmer, 1993). The human capital approach relates to the systemic assessments of the benefits and costs of entering and staying in the profession. Uncertainty or incomplete information indicates how nuances in expectations on the part of the educator remain unmet and how added information once the job begins can lead to attrition. Life-cycle factors refer to changes in status in an educator's life requiring a reevaluation of the decision to teach. Involuntary attrition primarily relates to conditions beyond the control of the teacher resulting in a severance from the profession. Through the components of this theory, this study examined segments of the loss of over 30,000 educators in the last six years in Oklahoma (Strauss, 2019). As a state, total teacher attrition amounted to 23%, with 9% of that total coming from teachers choosing to leave the profession entirely (Lazarte Alcala, 2018). With the application of each aspect of this theory coupled with an examination of salary and funding, this study explained more specifically what factors contributed to teacher attrition in Oklahoma with a focus on teachers from a large urban district within Oklahoma County.

### *Research Design and Methods*

This study applied the processes of the qualitative research methodology in a single-case study. The single-case study design allowed for a holistic examination of the factors influencing teachers to leave the profession before retirement in the selected school district. More specifically, the study aligned with the descriptive case study design. This design method facilitated the examination of the phenomenon under study and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2018). This descriptive single-case study occurred in a large, urban school district in Oklahoma County, Oklahoma. The target district is the second largest in the county and the fifth largest in the state. The study examined and described the lived experiences of certified k–12 public school teachers that taught more than three years but less than ten years.

The study began with purposeful site and participant selection. Participant recruitment initiated through my connection with educators in the selected district. Data collection began with a general questionnaire to collect demographic data and moved into semi-structured interviews. Data analysis incorporated the use of in vivo coding to aid in the categorization of data and the identification of themes related to participants' experiences in correlation with the components of the theory of teacher attrition. The study identified and adhered to the ethical considerations of the research process. The triangulation of the data through member checking and rich, descriptive details in this study created credibility and dependability which increased the trustworthiness of the results.

### *Definition of Key Terms*

*Education agency*: an entity that oversees the instruction and educational services of students including national, state, and local educational organizations.

*Highly qualified teacher*: a teacher that possesses “a bachelor's degree, full state certification or licensure, and proves that they know the subject they teach” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, para. 14).

*Permanent attrition*: adjusts annual temporary attrition measures to factor in those who do not return to teaching (Kirby & Grissmer, 1993).

*Probationary teacher*: a teacher employed by an Oklahoma school district that has completed fewer than three consecutive school years as a teacher in one school district (Oklahoma State School Boards Association, 2016).

*Teacher attrition*: the annual loss of teachers in the education workforce (Kirby & Grissmer, 1993).

*Teacher turnover*: the loss of teachers in the education workforce either permanently or through movement from one school, district, or state to another.

*Temporary attrition*: a traditional measure of attrition that is the proportion of teachers who leave annually and those who later return to teaching (Kirby & Grissmer, 1993).

### *Conclusion*

The far-reaching impact of teacher attrition makes the charge of educating students in the United States a significant challenge for schools. Thousands of students enter classrooms without qualified teachers each year and the number of classroom vacancies continues to increase. This study examined teacher attrition in a large urban district in Oklahoma County, Oklahoma. This study investigated the influences on

teacher attrition in the state and its multifaceted impact, utilizing the theory of teacher attrition as an a priori framework. The following review of the literature provides further insight into the increasingly chronic issue of teacher attrition in the United States and Oklahoma. Due to the large gap in the literature related to teacher attrition in Oklahoma, the review also reflects anecdotal commentary from published sources on attrition in Oklahoma as it parallels national attrition. The literature review examined the problem of teacher attrition, its causal factors, and the effects on education agencies and students across the nation and the state.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### *Introduction*

Teacher attrition impedes the academic mission of schools in the United States. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with nearly 51 million students enrolled in public schools, a significant burden on schools exists when teaching positions remain vacant (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The national average cost of recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers amounts to over two billion dollars each year (Borman & Dowling, 2008). States and districts spend approximately a quarter of a departing teacher's salary plus benefits to fill a teaching vacancy (Shockley et al., 2006). Ultimately, teacher attrition inhibits learning, contributes to instructional shortages, costs money, and indicates other adverse conditions exist in schools and districts (Esdal, 2019). The effects of attrition impede students from receiving the instruction they should when classrooms remain absent of qualified teachers. Filling pre-retirement teaching vacancies remains a costly, detrimental, and persistent issue for schools across the country.

The following literature review unfolds in two parts. The first part of the review explores the contributing factors of teacher attrition in the United States as viewed through the components of the theory of teacher attrition, which include the human capital approach, uncertain or incomplete information, life-cycle factors, and involuntary influences on attrition. The second part of the review then moves to focus on teacher attrition more specifically in Oklahoma again using the components of the theory of teacher attrition. The second portion of the literature review also exposes a significant

gap in the scholarly literature on the subject: teacher attrition in Oklahoma. This gap in the literature supported and propelled the purpose of this study, which investigated why teachers leave the education profession to pursue other careers in Oklahoma.

### *Contributing Factors to Teacher Attrition in the United States*

Employment attrition happens in all career fields and not all attrition results from displeased or disgruntled employees. As with any business entity, employees come and go over time for assorted reasons. From a broad perspective, teachers leave the profession for general reasons applicable in all career fields such as retirement or life events, professional reasons such as poor salary and job dissatisfaction, and school-level reasons such as subpar support, unfavorable culture and climate, and the inability to effectively influence change (Esdal, 2019). While attrition remains an inevitability in any profession, comparatively, teacher attrition exceeds the attrition rate of other degree-requiring career fields. Teachers leaving the profession within five years of starting their career surpasses that of other degree requiring careers to include pharmacists, engineers, nurses, and lawyers (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Unfortunately, attrition in public education disproportionately reflects negative reasons for leaving teaching. Researchers, policymakers, politicians, and many others cite a multitude of reasons as to what factors contribute to teacher attrition in the United States. In many cases, teachers who exit the profession early earned lower salaries, possessed fewer years of instructional experience, held probationary contracts, and worked in buildings with larger numbers of students who performed poorly on standardized tests (Krieg, 2006). To retain effective and experienced teachers, stakeholders must further examine these attrition influences and devise solutions to increase retention.

The persisting problem with retention lies in the inability to retain these professionals due to a plethora of influences. As expected, the literature on the topic revealed that salary and funding continue to contribute to attrition. Additionally, research indicated that increased student enrollment, coupled with increased teacher retirement, play a part in staffing shortages experienced in schools across the country (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Over half of the teachers that left education in 2013 cite better work conditions and a more manageable workload in their post-teaching careers (Goldring et al., 2014). The scene of education on the national level faces a multitude of challenges that leave an unsteady academic pathway for many students in schools across the United States. Teacher experience and teacher effectiveness complement one another and remain invaluable attributes that schools need to successfully educate students. Retaining experienced and effective teachers requires examination of these adverse influences and an intentional plan to address and reverse the effects.

The following discussion explores the scholarship on national teacher attrition through the category of “salary and funding” as well as the four components of the theory of teacher attrition: the human capital approach, uncertainty or incomplete information, life-cycle factors, and involuntary attrition as introduced in chapter one (Kirby & Grissmer, 1993). The components making up the theory of teacher attrition provided a focused context for the examination of attrition in education. Identifying the contributing factors of teacher attrition lays the groundwork for analysis and synthesis of the problem and creates an opportunity to devise introspective recommendations to improve teacher retention. Moving toward action-based solutions remains as the linchpin of improving teacher attrition. Study and research must continue to bring attention to this problem as



study of this phenomenon holds tremendous potential to change the course of the adverse impact teacher attrition imposes on the academic careers of students in the United States. The following discussion demonstrates that teacher attrition consists of complexities that elude general public knowledge and understanding. The exploration of these complex attributes of attrition further supported the rationale for study on this topic.

### *Salary and Funding*

When the public hears of teachers leaving the profession, many immediately attribute the loss to salary and funding. Salary and funding continue as some of the most widely believed reasons teachers quit the profession, but deeper analysis indicates the reasons tend to be less simplistic. Teachers operate at a substantive pay deficit in comparison to many career fields requiring a college degree and they frequently must find ways to do more with less. Salary and funding represent just one of many reasons teachers leave the profession.

Individuals that choose to start a career in education do so knowing that the pay falls short of many other career fields. Salary impacts the attractiveness and prestige of many careers yet teachers choose to work in education because of a passion for the work they do (Koseleci, 2015). A trade-off exists between meaning and money when entering the teaching field (Haque, 2012). When low salary and funding cuts create the necessity for teachers to work multiple jobs to meet their needs and the needs of their families, the decision to remain in education or change career fields weighs heavily. Nationally, the average annual teacher salary decreased by more than \$1,500 from 1990–2016 (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The perpetual disparity between the average teacher

salary and that of other career fields makes teacher attrition a challenging and constant problem.

While the average annual teaching salary decreased, student enrollment increased by 32% from 1985–2017. The increase in student enrollment led to an increase in teacher-student ratios over the last 30 years. Although per-pupil spending varies from state-to-state, disparities in funds invested in students' academic needs remains widespread (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). In 2016, 19 states reported less per-pupil spending as compared to eight years previous. A decline in per-pupil spending, while not directly correlated, unfortunately, corresponds with a decrease in teaching experience. The collective frustration these challenges pose leads to teachers choosing to walk out or strike in an effort to initiate change. In 2018, six states experienced teacher walkouts. The collective rally prompted conversations between teachers, education supporters, legislators, and the community in efforts to create change for public education (Henig et al., 2019). Education agencies still face, at times, an insurmountable task in educating students. The successful education of students starts with effectively taking care of those who choose to teach them and that in part comes from appropriate funding.

In summation, salary and funding remain significant influences on teacher attrition. The influence of inadequate funding on attrition only stands a chance of diminishing if the stakeholders responsible for designating funding allocations collectively agree to make U.S. schools and teachers a priority. Providing adequate funding to schools and those who take up the charge as educators must move to the forefront of education budget conversations at the national, state, and local levels.

### *Human Capital*

The human capital approach to teacher attrition refers to how individuals weigh the cost and benefits of entering and staying in the profession. Teachers stay in schools or districts that they believe care about them as people and invest in their professional success. Districts with high retention rates attribute this to “strong and supported teacher induction and mentoring programs” (Shockley et al., 2006, p. 109). When teachers feel undervalued, they look for other schools or leave the profession altogether. Best (2010) states that human capital development derives from three dimensions: preparation, recruitment, and retention. These domains impact human capital and the efforts to hire and retain educators with the talents, competencies, and knowledge of highly effective teachers and school leaders (Best, 2010). When the talent, competence, and knowledge of teachers receive appropriate support, growth, and acknowledgement, longevity in the profession abounds.

Teachers possess natural talents and abilities that evolve with proper nurturing. The teaching practice combines both the art and the science of teaching to create conditions for optimal learning experiences. The art of teaching incorporates a teacher’s natural tenacity and propensity to be an effective educator. Teaching, when viewed as a science, relates to the instructional strategies that produce a high probability of effectiveness with students in the teaching and learning cycle. Working in tandem, the art and science of teaching taps into an educator’s talents to create a “dynamic mixture of expertise” and instructional strategies that produce a deep understanding of students and their academic needs (Marzano, 2007, p. 5). As a component of human capital, talent stands as an invaluable asset for effective educators.

To possess competence as an educator encompasses more than just content knowledge. Competence broadly defined not only refers to a teacher's understanding of the content, but also includes knowledge of student learning and development, effective lesson planning, and reflecting on instructional strategies. Teacher competence emanates from the idea of learning-centered instruction and a stable relationship between teaching and learning. According to Marzano (1992), "effective teaching mirrors effective learning" (p. 1). The relationship between teaching and learning must be one that functions harmoniously in the classroom to maximize student learning. Teachers who develop instruction through the lens of the five dimensions of learning, foster the conditions necessary for complex academic interactions, and critical thinking increases. The dimensions of learning involve five types of thinking: positive attitudes and perceptions about learning, acquiring and integrating knowledge, extending and refining knowledge, using knowledge meaningfully, and productive habits of mind (Marzano, 1992). Teachers that operate from this competency base provide more intentional and academically rigorous instruction.

Knowledge in education applies in a multiplicity of ways. Educator knowledge encapsulates experiences in pedagogy as it relates to the global society in which students live. Knowledge in the content area must transform into relevance in life for the learner to create a real-world application. Real-world application speaks to the relevance of the content knowledge for students. Relevant learning connects content contextually and in an interdisciplinary fashion (Daggett, 2009). The pursuit of knowledge and relevant learning generates an obligation to utilize transformational teaching strategies. Transformational pedagogy applies a student-centered learning model. This learning

model strives to push students to higher achievement through teaching designed to evoke a deep understanding of the content and how it applies to the learner in the context of the world in which they live (Rosebrough & Leverett, 2011). Educators that position knowledge within the context of the rapidly growing and complexly interconnected global society strive to make learning more than about the content.

Human capital in public education focuses on harnessing the talents, competencies, and knowledge of teachers. Education agencies must devise ways to strengthen the education workforce. One way to strengthen the education workforce is through the investment in the professional growth of teachers which fortifies instructional practices. Capel et al. (2015) reminds us that “high-achieving nations provide sustained and extensive opportunities to develop [teaching] practices that go well beyond the traditional one-shot workshop” (p. 29). Gimmicks such as signing bonuses serve as a temporary fix to teacher attrition and show no long-term positive impact on the problem. Tactics such as merit-based pay show no truly productive or positive systemic influences on teaching and adversely impacts the spirit of community and collaboration among teachers (Leigh, 2013). Investment in people and their success in the education profession remains the best and most cost-effective way to reduce attrition. Purposeful effort and investment in human capital yield high-quality, confident educators and increases longevity and retention in the profession.

Given the circumstances, human capital factors play an influential part in teacher attrition. Dedication to improved human capital approaches creates the potential to decrease teacher attrition. States, schools, and districts must devise strategic courses of

action to prepare, recruit, and retain teachers that possess the talent, competence, and knowledge necessary to support students on their academic journeys.

### *Uncertain or Incomplete Information*

Uncertain or incomplete information refers to aspects of the job not meeting preconceived expectations in the teaching profession. The unknown and unmet expectations that teachers enter the profession with at times become the catalysts compelling them to leave the profession. Extra duties, lesson preparation, managing student behavior, demands of standardized testing, and a vast array of other unexpected obligations prove overwhelming to new and experienced teachers. All of these factors give teachers pause in which they begin to weigh the costs and benefits of remaining in the profession as opposed to trying a different career (Kirby & Grissmer, 1993). Because of these circumstances, the decision to continue as a teacher gives way to a decision to seek other career opportunities. Entering the teaching profession as with most any job, comes with a level of ambiguity as to what the job entails on a day-to-day basis. The sensation of disequilibria poses challenges that inspire educators to persevere and rise above or succumb and leave. If not properly equipped to overcome both the expected and unexpected obstacles of the profession, teachers face insurmountable roadblocks that make teaching less appealing.

Teaching requires an unexpected exercise of innate skills that people often believe they possess naturally and question once they start teaching. Teaching requires skills such as patience, intrapersonal skills, stress-management, time-management, and relational capacity. When lacking, teachers encounter unexpected challenges in the classroom. The workload of being a teacher, coupled with the demands of meeting the needs (academic,

emotional, and social) of students, takes a toll on teachers. Stark (2019) stated in his Education Post blog that limited support and guidance on the emotional and mental impact of teaching and how to handle the associated feelings due to the demands of the job make remaining in the teaching profession difficult and undesirable. Unfortunately, these unforeseen demands influence teachers to seek other employment opportunities.

To illustrate the influences of uncertain or incomplete information on teacher attrition, the following discussion highlights three major areas that commonly impact the decision to quit teaching. These areas include managing the classroom, limited support and feedback, and poverty, race, and standardized testing. While numerous teachers find success in these areas of education, improved retention requires increased training for teachers in these areas as well.

The first type of uncertain or incomplete information contributing to teacher attrition relates to managing the classroom. When the idea of managing the classroom comes up, most people immediately direct their thinking to the management of student behavior. While student behavior management holds a place in the management of the classroom, it takes up just a portion of what a teacher needs to know to effectively manage and prepare for instruction in a broader sense. Teaching comes with many hours of preparation not always considered or adequately planned for at the onset of taking on an instructional position. Classroom management continues as a skill set that evolves with experience and encompasses more than student discipline. Various aspects of classroom management including instructional management, people management, and behavior management all converge in the classroom posing challenges that require training, support, and experience for success (Martin et al., 2006). Instructional

management not only requires teachers to provide instruction but to also assess the students' academic needs accurately. Monitoring and tracking students' proficiency in academic standards require training and time. As if teaching and managing a classroom were not enough, states further increase the challenges teachers face by adding the demands of standardized testing. From national reforms in education, reaching back to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, grew unintended adverse effects on teachers and students in the realm of standardized testing (Berryhill et al., 2009). The scrutiny associated with data from standardized testing leaves teachers stressed and, in some situations, fearful of termination. Teachers that lack strong self-efficacy struggle to stay in schools where low test scores persist leaving them with a sense of futility and defeat (Berryhill et al., 2009). Classroom management represents a crucial component of teacher success in schools which requires dedicated time, training, and support for success and ultimately retention.

The second type of uncertain or incomplete information that contributes to teacher attrition surrounds limited support and feedback. As teachers provide instruction to students, they also provide support and feedback concerning academic progress. Unfortunately, all too often teachers get the keys to the classroom, a textbook, and extraordinarily little feedback on their performance or support with best practices. These teachers also enter these classrooms with numerous demands awaiting them. New teachers often come to the profession not understanding that "teaching is hard. Teachers have limited time, resources, and public support for ensuring that students with a wide variety of academic and behavioral needs meet increasingly rigorous learning expectations" ("Mentoring New Teachers," 2018, p. 1). When left to their own devices



with no support to speak of, teachers frequently choose to leave the profession. Increased teacher attrition in part results from the lack of administrator support (Headden, 2014). Inexperienced teachers trying to learn expectations of the profession, the school, and the district while attempting to educate classrooms full of students proves to be an insurmountable task for some. A task of this magnitude coupled with minimal support from administration results in teachers seeking other schools to work in or leaving the profession entirely. To combat this issue, Goldrick (2014) states school administrators must understand that they play a key role in teachers' success and growth. The role of a school administrator no longer singularly means the manager of people and student discipline. To be a school administrator in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires the evolution and transformation into an instructional leader. Teachers need instructional support and mentorship to establish themselves in the profession and continue a path towards becoming a highly effective educator. School administrators hold the key to assuring effective teacher support and mentorship.

A final aspect of uncertain or incomplete information contributing to teacher attrition relates to poverty, race, and standardized testing. Educating students that come from less affluent homes with high academic needs requires an intense commitment on the part of teachers. Urban schools with considerable numbers of students coming from low-income households, higher populations of non-white students, and lower-achieving students find it more difficult to retain teachers (Boyd et al., 2008). These schools often employ more than double the number of inexperienced teachers than suburban or rural schools indicating a high teacher attrition rate (Kwok, 2019). These extraneous factors

influencing the classroom make teaching environments like this challenging and intimidating for teachers.

In conclusion, uncertainty and incomplete information negatively affect teacher attrition in public schools. Unforeseen challenges with classroom management, takes a toll on teachers' resolve. The cultural and social class differences create a divide between teachers and students that, without appropriate support and training, cause teachers to reconsider staying in schools that require elevated levels of skill and emotional fortitude. Pressures from standardized testing dehumanize teachers and students, leaving a sense of helplessness and hopelessness behind. The curtailment of teacher attrition calls for stakeholders to devise ways to adequately prepare and support teachers.

#### *Life-cycle Factors*

Life-cycle factors refer to the external factors that impact a teacher's employment. The National Center for Education Statistics reported 77% of public-school teachers as females in the 2015–2016 school year. Female teachers more commonly serve as a secondary income for their families and are more likely to be impacted by life changes, such as child birth (Krieg, 2006). At times, a change in life contributes to teacher attrition. "Quit decisions" stem from a variety of life experiences (Brewer, 1996). Marital status, birth and death, relocation, retirement, and other life factors all play a role in teachers deciding to leave a school or the profession entirely. A substantial percentage of starting teachers are both young and female. Consequently, change in marital status or birth of a child most commonly results in female teachers leaving the profession (Stinebrickner, 2002). Schools and districts hold no influence in the life-cycle factors impacting attrition, but innovative solutions could reduce some of the effects.

Competition for highly qualified, effective teachers persists, and thoughtful solutions to support life-cycle attrition factors warrant consideration. Schools and districts offering childcare for employees promote a sense of community and caring for teachers (Schimke, 2018). As school districts across the nation evaluate teacher attrition, analysis of quit decisions associated with life-cycle changes could reveal innovative ways to increase retention. Offering support to educators that positively impacts their lives beyond the classroom presents a potential solution to attrition due to life-cycle factors related to family needs such as childcare.

In essence, while life-cycle factors impact teacher attrition, states, districts, and schools hold little control in this area. If the potential to reduce teacher attrition due to life-cycle factors exists, stakeholders must look to create ways that make staying in the profession worth altering life plans. When the decision to leave due to life-cycle factors does not come easily for the teacher, stakeholders take confidence in the possibility that the teacher may return to education in the future.

### *Involuntary Attrition*

Involuntary attrition relates to circumstances in which the teacher does not choose to leave the profession. Involuntary attrition comes in many forms. Budget cuts, poor work performance, illness, mandatory retirement, and a variety of factors beyond the control of the teacher contribute to involuntary attrition. Approximately 30% of teachers changed schools involuntarily in the 2012–13 school year (Goldring et al., 2014). No matter the cause, involuntary attrition still makes an impact on education.

At times, involuntary attrition stems from fiscal deficits. A sizable portion of public-school funding comes from state and local revenue. The financial deficits

experienced during the Great Recession resulted in nearly 300,000 educators losing their jobs (Evans et al., 2019). More than ten years later, public education still endures difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers due to residual fears. National trends in education regarding the appropriation of funds leave educators in a state of trepidation (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Specialized instructional positions often receive first consideration for elimination when budget cuts occur. Elective studies programs that include the fine arts, performing arts, and physical education are often removed from schools before core content courses when districts struggle to make up budget shortfalls (Long, 2017). Dissolving these elective course programs means teachers in these specialized instructional areas face the decision to move into another teaching content area or leave the profession altogether. The loss of electives course teachers leaves physical education and other arts influenced curriculum to be taught by teachers with little to no background or training in the content area.

Involuntary attrition for some educators results from performance related concerns. Historically, dismissing a teacher who possesses tenure within a district comes as a near-impossible feat. Barring an infraction of moral turpitude, removing an ineffective, tenured teacher takes an insurmountable amount of time and documentation that administrators cannot or do not dedicate to the task due to the many other obligations in their purview. As a result, the best option for removing ineffective teachers requires administrators to focus on terminating them before acquiring tenured status. To do this, administrators in many districts across the nation exercise the option to dismiss teachers on probationary contracts who have not achieved tenured status when their performance on the job does not meet expectations (Jacob, 2011). This option takes less work but

ultimately costs more in the loss of onboarding, professional development, and other expenditures.

In summary, involuntary attrition results from a combination of many things. Poor work performance and budgetary cuts most frequently bring about circumstances in which teachers leave the profession. At times attrition happens for the improvement of the profession and at other times attrition happens due to things far beyond the control of the teacher. While not always comfortable or unavoidable, involuntary attrition still adversely impacts education agencies.

*Conclusion: Impact on Schools in the United States*

The big-picture problem with high teacher attrition rates in public schools revolves around the negative impact made on students. The effect of teaching experience varies depending on the degree area of the educator and subject area (King Rice, 2010). Schools operate under the charge of making students college and career ready. An intricately, interconnected global society awaits students in 21<sup>st</sup>-century classrooms for which they cannot prepare on their own. The U.S. Department of Education held the belief that rigorous goals for students did not exist, which led to the creation and implementation of college and career readiness standards (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) signed in to law in 2015 replaced and updated the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This shift in policy encouraged states to improve and raise expectations for students' academic performance by revising academic standards and standardized assessment practices. Classrooms continue to lack certified teachers to provide the

instruction necessary for students to meet the expectations of college and career readiness standards. Unfortunately, the fact remains that high teacher attrition holds steady.

United States federal policy creates expectations that states develop more rigorous standards, yet schools across the nation begin each year with instructional vacancies making the task of educating students more difficult. Teacher shortages lead to states seeking other means by which to attract people to teaching jobs. Nearly all 50 states provide an alternative pathway to teaching in attempts to alleviate teacher shortages. Private sector businesses such as Teach for America, American Board, and The New Teacher Project offer incentives and support to people seeking to move into education with degrees from other fields. The two-fold challenge remains as to the effectiveness and retention of these teachers.

The great debate continues concerning the link between teacher experience and student achievement. The discussion surrounding teacher qualifications and effectiveness in the classroom continues. In 2016, only 22% of public school teachers possessed more than 20 years of teaching experience, while 28% of teachers possessed three to nine years of experience (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Approximately 90% of teacher workforce demand comes from teacher attrition. Those who leave teaching pre-retirement makes up two-thirds of that group (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Teacher effectiveness grows throughout their careers. The debate continues as to the effect high attrition has on student achievement, especially in schools filled with low-income, high-minority students. The push to utilize assessment data to drive instruction requires experience and training on the part of the teacher. Seeing assessment data and knowing

how to utilize that data to impact student learning comes with experience with curriculum and instruction.

Student academic gains connect to teaching experience. Teachers make the most gains in instructional effectiveness within the first few years of teaching and continue to grow with more experience (Kini & Podolsky, 2016). Studies show that teachers with over 25 years of experience provide between two and a half and nine months of additional academic growth for students when compared to teachers with no experience. A study of a large urban school district found results indicating that teachers with five to 15 years of experience produced up to two months of academic growth in students. Teacher attrition impacts academic achievement for all students. Hard-to-staff schools with large populations of non-white and low-income students rely more heavily on teachers coming into education through alternative certification routes that possess fewer years of teaching (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). For these positive academic experiences to continue and flourish, teacher retention must increase.

Teacher attrition in public education presents a multifaceted problem. The theory of teacher attrition identifies domains that provide a more focused context for examination of attrition. For a reduction in teacher attrition to occur, the public mindset must change. National talks of school choice, instructional standards, and college and career readiness swirl continuously in the media with little discussion of how these talks influence instability in the teacher workforce. A national public poll reported that when asked to evaluate the quality of work for teachers in their local schools, respondents indicated they believed as much as 15% of teachers performed unsatisfactorily (West et al., 2018). Public support for basing teacher salaries on student achievement hovers just

below 50%. When trying to attract and retain teachers, public perception and opinion currently make the task more challenging.

Support for new teachers remains vital. Teachers with longevity in the profession and who perform well in the classroom receive respect from colleagues and administrators (Krieg, 2006). Education agencies desiring to increase longevity need to focus efforts on implementing supports for new teachers that last beyond the first year of teaching. Ongoing support not only fosters a sense of community and collaboration among staff but steers teachers away from a sense of disillusionment with the profession. The complexities of attrition require more in-depth study and research. However, research and data collection alone serve no purpose if action does not follow.

#### *Contributing Factors to Attrition in Oklahoma*

Teacher attrition poses a challenge across the nation and the impact in Oklahoma exceeds that of many states. The revolving door that teacher attrition creates in schools alters the quality of education students receive and reflects in student achievement. The Oklahoma School Testing Program reported that the 2018 standardized test scores for third through eighth-grade students dropped in nearly every grade and every subject (Lewis, 2019). To ameliorate student academic performance and positively impact the future workforce in the state, education reforms must take place in Oklahoma. Research literature associated with this study indicates that contributing factors to attrition found across the United States align with factors in Oklahoma.

Oklahoma experienced a tremendous loss of public-school educators over the last six years, yet little scholarly literature exists on the subject. In a press release in November of 2019, the Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction highlighted



that the state saw growth of over 1,700 classroom teachers since the 2017–18 school year. The superintendent’s use of the phrase “significant growth in the teacher workforce” about this increase in classroom educators remains up for debate considering the state lost approximately 30,000 teachers before the teacher walkout (SDEmedia, 2019, para. 1; Strauss, 2019). The teacher walkout that took place during the Spring of 2018 represented the culmination of frustrations with the handling of public education in the state. Oklahoma reports a higher attrition rate than the national average, but little to no scholarly research or study on the matter explains fully the impact felt by schools, teachers, and students. This study examined and described the specific influencing factors of teacher attrition in Oklahoma and the rationale that teachers no longer in education cited for leaving the profession.

The commentary to follow moves from a national examination of teacher attrition to a more focused look at attrition in Oklahoma. This section, through the exploration of various reports, aims to explore the causes and impact of teacher attrition in the state more fully, supporting the need for targeted and specific research on the matter. The ultimate purpose of this exploration aims to do two things: point to the significant gap in the literature surrounding teacher attrition in Oklahoma and connect parallels in Oklahoma’s teacher attrition factors as compared to national attrition factors. These parallels further support the necessity for the targeted study of the influences that propel attrition rates in Oklahoma beyond that of the nation.

The discussion to follow begins part two of the literature review dedicated to the examination of teacher attrition in Oklahoma. This section analyzes the literature as it relates to the four domains of the theory of teacher attrition similar to the first section. As

with section one, with these four domains comes a discussion on salary and funding in a specific connection with the state. As a result, the discussion in this section concerning teacher attrition trends in Oklahoma also unfolds in five parts. The section concludes with a discussion on the specific impact on the state. An overall summation and conclusion regarding teacher attrition and the state of affairs in the United States bring the literature review to a close.

### *Salary and Funding*

Multiple news agencies reported on the funding crisis leading to the teacher walkout in Oklahoma. While the walkout resulted in legislators moving towards salary increases for teachers, the continued teacher shortage hinges on more than pay alone (Sullivan, 2018). School funding in Oklahoma continues as a prominent topic of discussion. Per-pupil spending in Oklahoma, while no longer at the bottom of the list in the United States, hovers near the lowest in the nation (Fine, 2019b). Oklahoma struggles to attract and retain teachers due to issues such as regional salary competition and job opportunity. Oklahoma's national ranking for average teaching salary increased from 49<sup>th</sup> to 34<sup>th</sup> with the recent funding increases yet still trails salaries in Colorado and Texas in the state's bordering region (Eger, 2019a). While entry-year teacher candidates, either traditionally or alternatively certified, stand to make just under \$37,000 per year in Oklahoma that salary falls approximately \$2,000 below the national average of \$39,000 and \$4,000 below the average starting salary in the bordering state of Texas (National Education Association, 2019; Oklahoma Watch, 2019). Salary increases aside, several unexplored solutions remain as to what more the state should do to become a more attractive place for educators to call home.

Salary and school funding, while at the top of the list of reasons teachers leave public education in Oklahoma, represent only a portion of the major factors influencing teachers to leave the profession. In a recent survey submitted to the Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction, teachers cite concerns not only with pay and funding but also with poor leadership, heavy workloads, and lack of support (CHS & Associates, 2018). The same survey results indicated that top reasons teachers quit teaching in Oklahoma included moving to another state, better opportunity in other industries, and lack of respect for educators. When analyzed using the theory of teacher attrition, the adverse influences on education in Oklahoma in the domains of human capital, uncertain or incomplete information, life-cycle factors, and involuntary attrition elucidates the necessity for further study in this area.

In conclusion, as with national concerns, salary and funding prove to be problematic within Oklahoma. The unfortunate fact remains that Oklahoma still lags behind other states in the region with regards to per-pupil spending and teacher salary. Consequently, the debate for improved education funding continues.

### *Human Capital Factors in Oklahoma*

Oklahoma lacks attractiveness to educators further contributing to teacher attrition. Entering and staying in the teaching profession in Oklahoma remains less than a lucrative career option. Enrollment in teacher education programs declined by one-third nationally since 2010 (Partelow, 2019). Oklahoma follows that trend and shows a steady decline in the number of educators completing traditional teacher preparation programs (Berg-Jacobson & Levin, 2015). To improve human capital capacity, schools and districts must devise ways to attract teachers with the talent, competence, and knowledge to

positively impact students. Surrounding states actively recruit teachers in Oklahoma. District representatives from other states including Texas, New Mexico, and Kansas attend Oklahoma job fairs, and some purchase advertisements to lure teachers to work in their schools (Branham, 2018; Jackson, 2019). The battleground for educators proves to be less adversarial for districts outside the state as those districts provide more attractive offers to teachers willing to leave Oklahoma.

In an effort to recruit talent and make teaching in Oklahoma more attractive, some lawmakers continue to work on legislation plans to provide incentives such as certification test reimbursement, increased student loan forgiveness, and increased planning and collaborative time for classroom teachers (Kauffman, 2019). The Oklahoma State Department of Education announced a new website called OKTeachersMatch.com designed to connect teachers with schools specifically seeking their area of expertise and interest (Hinchey, 2019). The website allows for statewide access to job postings to help administrators and teachers to view vacancies that were once limited to individual district job posting sites. Investing in education and educators in Oklahoma must remain ongoing to see lasting and effective change.

To conclude, the evidence that the work necessary to improve human capital influences in Oklahoma coincides with that of the nation. Many opportunities exist beyond the borders of the state to pursue a career in education with better pay, better school funding, and better instructional support. This matter requires further study to extract root causes and devise solutions to improve teacher retention.

### *Uncertain or Incomplete Information Factors in Oklahoma*

Attrition in Oklahoma generates concerns and gives rise to issues surrounding uncertainty and incomplete information about the profession. Overall job dissatisfaction stemming from the lack of administrative support, student discipline, and a lack of teacher voice and influence all contribute to the unexpected obstacles teachers come unprepared to face (Lepine, 2015). Other challenges such as the academic, social, and emotional deficits many students bring to the classroom influence teachers' decisions to leave the profession as well. Teachers do not always anticipate the ancillary expectations that arise after instruction begins in the classroom. The demands of standardized testing, changing academic standards, evaluation scores that hinge on student performance, and the planning needed for the general instructional process converge making teachers feel ill-equipped for a career in education. New and veteran teachers feel the pressures of education not only within the classroom but also from without. The Oklahoma State Department of Education uses standardized test score results in an annual report card on school performance. With the additional pressures of standardized testing, teachers feel the additional stress of being judged on student performance using instructional standards adopted less than five years ago. Many alternatively certified teachers lack the pedagogical skills and experience for the classroom creating a professional learning curve when starting a teaching career. Lack of pedagogical training coupled with other unexpected aspects of teaching contributes to the state's attrition rate.

Given the circumstances, uncertain or incomplete information poses a great challenge to teacher retention in Oklahoma as it does across the nation. The unexpected pressures of the career coupled with insufficient support mechanisms strongly influence some educator's decisions to leave the profession. Greater support strategies for teachers

must be implemented to improve the negative impact that uncertain or incomplete information imposes on teacher attrition.

### *Life-cycle Factors in Oklahoma*

Changes in life impact employment decisions in many businesses and organizations. A change in life includes personal events such as the birth of a child, a spouse losing a job, or the need to care for aging parents. Teacher attrition due to life-cycle factors represents an area in which education employers possess little control. In a survey of Oklahoma teachers conducted in 2017, 16% of respondents indicated that the decision to leave teaching resulted in a “personal family situation change” (CHS & Associates, 2018, p. 2). Among Oklahoma teachers surveyed in large, suburban districts, 22% left education for personal reasons. Employment choices often follow the personal needs of teachers. When the overflow of demands from teaching impacts personal obligations, the needs of the family come first. Of those surveyed that left education due to personal reasons, 25% expect to return to education in the future.

Career opportunities for educators beyond the public education classroom contributes to life-cycle attrition in the state as well. Teachers with advanced degrees see little opportunity to climb the professional ladder in public education, therefore other careers draw educators away. While the talk of professionals from business and other industries coming to education through alternative certification pathways garners much attention, little discussion takes place surrounding the educators that leave the profession, some after many years of teaching, to seek other opportunities. In 2017, 14% of educators indicated that they left the profession to pursue career opportunities outside of education

(CHS & Associates, 2018, p. 7). The loss of teachers to other industries further hurts schools, districts, and ultimately students in Oklahoma and beyond.

Retirement contributes to attrition in any profession. In Oklahoma, approximately 2% of teacher attrition resulted from teacher retirement in 2017–2018 (Lazarte Alcala, 2018). Reaching retirement eligibility in Oklahoma takes a great investment of time in education employment. It takes five years to become vested and attain eligibility in the Oklahoma Teachers Retirement System. Any teacher hired after November of 2011 reaches retirement eligibility at age 65 or a combination of 90 (age plus years of experience) at age 62 (Oklahoma Teachers Retirement System, 2013, p. 11). Teachers that left education between the 2016–17 and 2017–18 school years totaled approximately 9%. This far exceeds the number of teachers that left due to retirement eligibility during that same period. The goal to retire from education in Oklahoma remains far from lucrative. While life-cycle changes cannot be controlled, creating a climate and culture in public education that retains more educators up to retirement eligibility must happen.

Ultimately, education agencies possess little control of life-cycle factors on teacher attrition. Oklahoma teachers face decisions that require them to leave the profession just as teachers do nationally. It behooves education agencies to improve the status of education so that if life-cycle factors change, those teachers who left decide to return in the future.

#### *Involuntary Factors in Oklahoma*

Not all teacher attrition results from teachers choosing to leave the profession. Just under 1% of teacher attrition in the state of Oklahoma results from involuntary turnover or movement (Lazarte Alcala, 2018). Involuntary attrition occurs for several

reasons including unmet performance expectations in the classroom. Often this type of removal stems from inferior performance or evaluation reviews. The Oklahoma State School Boards Association School Law Book states (2016) “a probationary teacher who has received a district evaluation rating of ‘ineffective’ as measured pursuant to the Teacher and Leader Effectiveness System for two consecutive school years may be dismissed or not reemployed by the school district” (p. 168). Teacher job performance still holds a place of importance in education. Having the right person in the right position means more quality instruction for students.

Other involuntary attrition stems from the closure of schools or the loss of teaching positions within schools. Oklahoma schools cut nearly 500 teaching positions statewide due to budget reductions before the start of the 2017–2018 school year (Eger, 2017). Some schools closed due to forced consolidations and some due to the loss of accreditation (Eger, 2019c). No matter the reason, school closures contributed to involuntary attrition. Program cuts adversely contribute to teacher attrition as well. The number of students served in Oklahoma public schools increased by more than 54 thousand in the last decade, yet the fine arts offerings decreased by more than a thousand classes leaving fine arts educators jobless (Fine, 2019a). Involuntary attrition, while at times unavoidable, plays a role in overall teacher attrition in Oklahoma. Strategic budgetary planning and adequate teacher support in the classroom could create conditions that would potentially reduce involuntary attrition across the state.

To sum up, involuntary attrition results from some factors within the control of the teacher and some factors beyond the control of the teacher. Involuntary attrition influences within the state prove difficult for schools and teachers in Oklahoma just as it



does around the United States. With deliberate efforts of stakeholders, the influences of involuntary attrition may dwindle.

*Conclusion: Contributing Factors to Attrition in Oklahoma*

Teacher attrition in Oklahoma surpasses the national attrition rate, which raises concerns as to what drives teachers from the profession at a higher rate in the state. In 2015, the State Superintendent's office received a report on the climate of education in Oklahoma with recommendations for improvement. In the conclusion of that report, Berg-Jacobson and Levin state that "the supply of educators will continue to be a problem in Oklahoma during the next five years if steps aren't taken to address the issue" (2015, p. 83). Analysis in the report pinpointed the declining number of college students completing traditional teacher preparation programs while the number of nontraditional teaching certifications increased. Other projections in the findings indicated that shortages could grow from the draw to non-education careers in the state. Following this report, three years later in 2018, the teacher walkout took place. Consequently, Oklahoma continues to suffer the ripple effects of mismanagement of public education in the state. The budgetary fixes implemented to this point still receive cautious appreciation. The state remains below the regional average in per-pupil spending and teacher pay. Long term positive impact on attrition requires the development of long-term goals with a strategic and tiered implementation process. For legislators to think attrition rates will change after a pay raise is short-sighted and naïve. Systemic change only comes about through strategic planning that includes all stakeholders tackling this issue collectively.

While the evidence clearly emphasizes the chronic state of teacher attrition in Oklahoma, there remain few studies that systematically examine the unique conditions in

Oklahoma that contribute to the loss of teachers. The snapshot of education in Oklahoma largely comes from publications that report the rising deficits in public education rather than strategic studies. When compared to national trends contributing to attrition, it shows that the right conditions exist for a substantive attrition problem in Oklahoma, yet specific studies remain lacking.

### *Conclusion*

The adverse effects of teacher attrition impact public schools across the nation. Studies and reports from various entities and institutions convey the growing crisis and need for action if public education in the United States stands a chance to provide a high-quality academic experience for all students. As expected, salary and funding remain the primary catalysts for teacher attrition. When analyzed more closely through the lens of salary and funding as well as the four domains of the theory of teacher attrition, the literature exposes deeper causes for teacher attrition that go beyond salary and funding. This literature review examined the causes of attrition in five parts to provide a more focused narrative on contributing factors to teacher attrition.

While teacher attrition remains problematic across the United States, Oklahoma's teacher attrition rate exceeds the national attrition rate. The further problem of teacher attrition in Oklahoma surrounds the lack of research on the topic especially considering that the state lost more than 30,000 teachers over the last six years. Consequently, the significant gap in the research specifically on Oklahoma's teacher attrition motivated the purpose of this study. The methodology for this descriptive single-case study centered around the research questions, follows this literature review.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

#### *Introduction: Research Questions*

Teacher attrition remains a significant issue across the nation. The literature for this problem of practice highlighted in the previous chapter indicates that the 8% national teacher attrition rate continues to be a struggle for many states and districts across the United States. Not only does teacher attrition pose a problem for states and districts from the macro perspective of the nation, but it also poses a significant problem in some states more than in others. For example, the teacher attrition rate in Oklahoma exceeds the national average and exceeds the attrition rates of other states within its region. In this study, I investigated the lived experiences of teachers who left the profession pre-retirement in a large urban district in Oklahoma County, Oklahoma.

For this problem of practice research study, I focused on the constructs influencing the teacher attrition rate in Oklahoma. This descriptive single-case study aimed to answer the following research questions: what are the lived experiences of former teachers that chose to leave the profession? what factors influenced teachers to leave the profession pre-retirement in Oklahoma? These research questions propelled the study and served as an anchor for all aspects of the research.

This chapter describes the methodology used for this descriptive single-case study. The chapter begins with a disclosure of my perspective and positionality on the topic. The chapter then moves on to a discussion of the theoretical framework and details on the research design and rationale. Next, I explain the site selection, participant

sampling, and data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, I conclude the chapter with details related to ethical considerations and limitations and delimitations for the study.

### *Researcher Perspective and Positionality*

The researcher's perspective for this problem of practice study provides the reader with an increased level of transparency and gives insight into the interest in the study's topic. Conveying the researcher's past experiences and how those experiences shaped the interactions in the study allows for a clearer understanding of the research process and disclosure of any potential bias that needed to be accounted for in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Transparency with perspective and positionality supported the trustworthiness of the research results.

The majority of my K–12 education took place in a public school, save the two years my parents chose homeschooling for a period of time in elementary school. Neither of my parents attended college but pushed their children to do their absolute best throughout their education. The education of their children was essential to my parents, and as a result, I pushed myself to excel beyond the educational level of anyone in my immediate family. At the time of this study, I held three college degrees based in education: Elementary Education, Education Media Design and Technology, and Educational Leadership. These degrees supported me throughout my professional career in public education. I spent eighteen years as a public-school educator. In the first ten years of my career, I worked as a classroom teacher before moving into the instructional coach role. After spending two years in the instructional coach position, I moved into

school administration. I spent just over four years in school administration as an assistant principal before leaving public education.

During my career, I worked in two large, urban school districts, one in Texas and the other in Oklahoma. As a classroom teacher, I taught both elementary and middle school students. I saw many educators come and go in my 18-year career in public education. As a result, the topic of teacher attrition became an interest as I saw many educators leave the profession pre-retirement to pursue other careers during my time in public education. Although I no longer work in public education, I still work in the education field at a career and technology education institution. In my role there, I manage the human resources department for the district.

The experiences in my education and career path connected with the purpose behind the research led to framing the perspective from that of the constructivist point of view. Constructivists “seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 7). Through this worldview, I sought to understand the world in which the participants worked as educators, how that impacted their lives, and what ultimately led to the decision to quit teaching. Because I spent many years in public education, I connected with the participants’ recounting of their experiences in a way that allowed me to understand and disaggregate the complexities surrounding the participants’ decision to no longer work as teachers more readily.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The theory of teacher attrition served as the a priori framework for this study. Examination of the causes and the inevitability of teacher attrition took place through the use of this theory. The specific components of the theory of teacher attrition introduced in

chapter two include the human capital approach, uncertainty or incomplete information, life-cycle factors, and involuntary attrition (Kirby & Grissmer, 1993). The theory of teacher attrition uses a multi-lensed perspective of the various contributing factors that impact teachers' decisions to leave the profession. When defined in a broad sense, the term teacher attrition refers to the number of teachers who leave a classroom teaching position. However, when examined through this theory's components, the term's complexity increases and provides a multidimensional perspective. When analyzed from a national point of view, the term teacher attrition takes on a specific application. At its core definition, teacher attrition omits the movement of teachers from one school, district, or state to another. *Movers* continue as teachers but do so in a new location. *Movers* make up a category of teacher attrition not examined in this study. Teachers that leave the classroom to assume other roles in education fall under the term *shiffters*. *Shiffters* make up a different category of teacher attrition not explored in this study. This study focused on the *leavers*. *Leavers* make up the group of teachers that chose to leave the profession entirely before retirement. The theory of teacher attrition breaks down the reasons these individuals leave the profession into four categories; those who leave due to human capital influences, uncertainty or incomplete information about the profession, life-cycle factors, or involuntary attrition. These categories provided a set of parameters by which the factors contributing to the "quit decisions" of *leavers* were examined. As described in Chapter One, *leavers* make up the group of former educators who chose to leave teaching.

The four components of the theory of teacher attrition provided lenses of specificity to examine and describe the lived experiences of teacher who left the

profession pre-retirement. Each component's bounds helped define the constructs of what went into a teacher's decision to move into another career field with more discriminating distinction. The finer details of this theoretical framework helped to segment and, to a degree, compartmentalize teachers' decisions to quit as the study endeavored to answer the research questions.

The research utilized an a priori theoretical framework as a platform from which interview questions evolved—using the components of the framework allowed for greater direction in question development. The questions developed aided the data collection process, which took place in two parts. Part one was to collect general information on the participants through the use of a closed-ended questionnaire. The goal of the questionnaire was to extricate general background information before the formal interview process. This information contributed to the participant overview and supported the asking of follow-up or clarifying questions throughout the interview. Part two of this process included the judicious development of semi-structured interview questions. These open-ended interview questions aligned with the components of the theory of teacher attrition. These questions guided the conversation in the interview with each candidate.

The theory of teacher attrition framed the data analysis process. The theory, coupled with the aspects of the five analytical phases of data, comprised the qualitative research method. That five-phase cycle includes these steps: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (Yin, 2016). Thus, the components of the theoretical lens applied in this study largely contributed to disassembling, reassembling, and interpreting aspects of the data assessment.

### *Research Design and Rationale*

Qualitative inquiry centers around the examination of social circumstances. I chose a qualitative design for this study because I wanted to connect with the experiences of those who left teaching in a way that quantitative research limits. The goal was to learn what caused these teachers to leave the profession and share the participants' lived experiences in a manner that effectively conveyed their voices. Gerrings (2007) perspective reminds us that a "better understanding of the whole [is gained] by focusing on a key part" (p. 1). Although the data of teacher attrition by the numbers provides a wealth of information, numeric data leaves out the voice of those the numbers represent. Using a qualitative research approach allowed me to extract the participants' stories and get a better sense and more profound understanding of their actions. The process of qualitative research provided the framework necessary to examine the lived experiences of former Oklahoma teachers. According to Creswell (2013),

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. (p. 44)

To refine the broad application of the term "qualitative research" and answer the research questions for the study, I specifically chose the descriptive single-case study approach. A descriptive case study describes a contemporary phenomenon in which the researcher has little to no control over the events under study (Yin, 2018). More specifically, this study used this research design to describe the phenomenon of teacher attrition in a large, urban district in Oklahoma. Single-case study design requires that the study be related to the selected theory of interest and forms the substantive context of the



single-case study rationale (Yin, 2018). The theory for this study discussed previously in the theoretical framework section designates the circumstances believed to be true. This single-case approach provided the avenue by which the propositions of the theory were determined as correct as well as extended the theory to a degree. Furthermore the single-case study method format contributed to the knowledge and theory building by confirming the theory for the study (Yin, 2018). This single-case study examined the factors influencing teachers to leave the profession pre-retirement and their lived experiences. This design model facilitated the exploration of an issue by describing the participants' lived experiences. The case study research approach captured a greater depth and breadth of the participants' lived experiences through a real-life bounded system using detailed data collection, case study description, and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As further delineated in the sections to follow, by choosing this research design, I analyzed and described the constructs of the lived experiences of teachers who left the profession in Oklahoma.

### *Site Selection and Participant Sampling*

Yin (2018) explains that boundaries create a “distinction between the phenomenon being studied and its context” (p. 244). Setting boundaries is one way to achieve completeness in a case study. To begin the journey to completeness, selecting the site for the study and participants must take place in the initial stages of the study. This process should occur with intentionality and be purposeful. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state, “the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants [and] sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (p. 185). Being purposeful in the site and participant selection means identifying the

place and people that best help with understanding the research problem and the research questions. Miles and Huberman (1994) indicate that typically the four aspects to consider when selecting the site and participants for a study include the setting, the actors (i.e., those interviewed), the events (i.e., retold, lived experiences), and the process.

Through purposeful site selection, a large urban school district in Oklahoma County, Oklahoma served as the epicenter for the study. The school district selected for the site of this study is one of 511 total districts and is the fifth largest in the state (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2020). The district, referred to as “district 5” for this study, serves 19,652 students. The specificity in the bounds for the site in this study also required that participants be selected from the target district.

As previously identified through the literature, teacher attrition comes in the form of *movers*, *leavers*, and *shifters*. *Leavers* make up the group of former teachers that no longer work in the profession. Individuals falling in the *leavers* group were the target participants. The participant selection process took place using purposeful criterion sampling procedures to ensure that their participation “[informed] important facets and perspectives related to the phenomenon being studied” (Sargeant, 2012, p. 1). Eligibility for study participation required that participants met the following essential criteria:

1. Taught in district five during teaching career
2. Held an alternative or standard teaching certificate while teaching in district five
3. Taught a minimum of three years but no more than ten years before leaving the profession

At the start of the Spring term, the participant selection process began. Because I worked in district five for thirteen years, I used my established professional connections with those still working in the district to contact potential participants. Through primary

and secondary connections with former colleagues in the target district, potential study participants were identified and contacted via email and telephone. As a result of these contact efforts, four participants volunteered to participate in the study. In the outreach process and initial contact, participants provided information about their employment in the target district, the type of certificate they held, and length of time they taught. Using this pre-screening process ensured participants met the basic criteria for the study.

Before the interview, all participants completed an informed consent form. Once selected, each participant shared information about availability and possible interview times. I scheduled interview times that were flexible and fit into the participants' schedules. Participants were sent a link to complete the pre-interview questionnaire developed in Google Forms when interview times were confirmed. This questionnaire gathered general background information about each participant. The questionnaire also helped me gather preliminary data for the participants before the interview. The participant matrix in Table 3.1 shows the breakdown of participant attributes as reported by participants in the initial questionnaire. I used tags in place of participant names in the matrix. These tags, along with pseudonyms, replaced the participants' names in the study and data tables to protect the participants' identities through anonymity and increase confidentiality.

This study consisted of four participants. The participants all taught in the target district at some point in their tenure as teachers. Participants' teaching experience ranged from five to nine years. Upon site selection and confirmation of participants, the data collection process for the study began.

Table 3.1

*Participant Matrix*

Participant Number	Certification Route (Traditional/Alternative)	Teaching Certificate Current	Level of Education	Years Teaching	Instructional Level at End of Tenure (Elementary/Secondary)
P1	Alternative	Yes	Bachelors	5	Secondary
P2	Traditional	Yes	Masters	9	Secondary
P3	Traditional	Yes	Masters	5	Secondary
P4	Alternative	No	Bachelors	5	Secondary

*Data Collection Procedures*

Preparation for data collection is equally essential to the research as the actual data collection process. Yin (2018) states that data serve as the foundation for a research study and the demands of a case study on the researcher's "intellect, ego, and emotions are far greater than any other research method. This is because the data collection procedures are *not* routinized" (p. 81). There are four basic types of data collection in a qualitative design. These data types include qualitative observation, qualitative interviews, qualitative documents, and qualitative audiovisual and digital materials (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this study, I utilized qualitative interviews as the primary data collection method. As a secondary data source, I used the information gathered from a general participant questionnaire.

Participants completed the questionnaire before their interview and time was used prior to the interview to review their responses. The questionnaire responses provided a preliminary background on the participants. In addition, the questionnaire provided demographic information on the participants. The questionnaire provided companion data to the open-ended questions asked in a semi-structured interview. As the interview with

each candidate progressed, if a response prompted follow-up on data from the questionnaire, I then referenced specific information to dive deeper into the interview. Because all participants responded on the questionnaire that they had taught multiple courses within an instructional year, that information led me to ask about their experiences with multiple course preparations. However, the question had not been initially included in the protocol. The semi-structured interview format also allowed for follow-up questions as the interview warranted.

Using the qualitative interview model for this study allowed the participants to provide a first-hand recounting of their teaching experiences. The questions in the interview were progressive in nature. At the onset, interview questions related to how the participant got into teaching. Then the questions progressed to explore the experiences the participants had during their teaching careers. Leading to closure, I asked the participants questions that called on them to recount how they got out of teaching. The semi-structured interview model allowed for better direction of the conversation, maintaining alignment with the research questions and consistency between participants. This model ensured consistency by standardizing questions asked to all participants ensuring that every participant responded to the same questions. As the participant responded, they were free to elaborate as much as they desired. Some participants were more concise with their responses than others. When the need arose for a participant to go deeper with a response, I asked follow-up questions. The follow-up questions were not predesigned but emerged organically as the conversation in the interviews progressed. The semi-structured model easily facilitated these impromptu follow-up questions and allowed for greater clarification or a more profound understanding of responses.

Interviews took place via a web-based video-conferencing application. I chose the web-based option for a few reasons. Because this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, health and safety for me and the participants in the study were paramount. The web-based video conferencing option provided a higher-level of safety for all involved in the study as it did not require any party to go to a public space to meet. This option allowed for interviews to take place in self-selected locations that individuals deemed safe and appropriate. Using web-based video conferencing also allowed the participant to set an interview time convenient for their schedule without having to travel as not all participants lived in the same city as I. Additionally, the video conferencing platform made recording and transcribing the interviews simpler. The participants gave prior consent to the recording of the video conference and indicated they understood that video and audio transcripts would only be accessible to me and exclusively utilized for data analysis purposes during the study.

Interview transcripts were downloaded from the cloud storage and printed after the interviews were complete. I reviewed and revised the transcripts for errors as the transcription did not always accurately transcribe the conversation. The video recording served as a fact-checking tool for the interview transcripts. The audio also helped clear up any inaccuracies in the transcripts that a person's accent, dialect, or other influences may have caused the software to transcribe words incorrectly.

### *Data Analysis Procedures*

To guide the data analysis process, I used Yin's five-phase analytic cycle. These five phases include compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. Compiling is the first phase. During this phase, I compiled data through the responses and

interviews. Initial data analysis occurred during the data collection process through a review of notes taken during the interview. I addressed components of this first phase during the participant interviews making notes in the interview protocol and summarizing those notes after each interview. During this phase, I also collected and organized larger chunks of data as general notes. As the transcripts were revised for accuracy using the audio and video from the interviews, some initial categories of information emerged in this phase. During this preliminary examination of the data, I noted potentially significant experiences.

In the second phase, disassembling began. The disassembling data phase required that I begin breaking apart the data and initially categorizing it using framework codes. I utilized in vivo coding as a component of the data analysis process. In vivo coding is a qualitative data analysis process that emphasizes the spoken words of the participants (Manning, 2017). In vivo coding allows the researcher to honor the voices of the participants and aids in the understanding of the telling of their lived experiences. To begin, I read through each interview in its entirety to get a fresh look at the data in its cleaned-up state. Then I went back and reread the interviews, beginning the coding process. In my first review of the data using in vivo coding, I looked more closely at the participants' specific experiences and labeled experiences with more specific tags. I read through each interview three times, tagging data. Finally, I repeated the disassembling step looking for themes within the codes. The tags given to the pieces of data were grouped into themes connected to the framework theory for the study.

Reassembling took place in phase three. The initial theme development evolved from the four components of the theory of teacher attrition framework. Data tags began to

find a home in various themes that evolved from the analysis in this phase. I developed tables to categorize the data by framework theory components. Themes developed from shared experiences of the participants. These shared experiences arose as emergent themes in the data.

The fourth phase is interpreting. In this phase, I developed the narrative from the reassembled data. The focus remained on discovering the story the data was telling. The narrative that evolved included the telling of the individual stories of each participant as they described it. The other narrative that evolved was that of the participants' collective voice of shared experiences. Those collective experiences were categorized as themes highlighting experiences that teachers faced that eventually influenced the decision to leave education.

Concluding marks, the fifth and final phase in the analysis process. At this point, I began bringing together the pieces of the study to indicate implications for the stakeholders this study could influence. The study was then summarized and brought to a formal conclusion revisiting the problem, the associated stakes, the findings related to the literature, and the recommendation on where these findings could have the most significant impact. Using this five-phase plan provided a structured and organized approach to the data analysis process.

Intentional use of strategies that affirm data validity in qualitative research improved the study's trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility. Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) define validity as "the extent to which the findings of the research are accurate or credible" (p. 135). To avoid leaving the impression of selective analysis, I exercised precaution by checking and rechecking data, making analyses as wholly and



thoroughly as possible, and acknowledging unintended biases imposed by my values during data analysis (Yin, 2016). Specific strategies used to affirm credibility included member checking, rich, thick description, and clarifying researcher bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants reviewed data summaries of their interviews to confirm the accuracy of the data collection. Establishing dependability in the research findings complements the establishment of credibility. Dependability procedures included checking transcripts and ensuring that codes retained their meaning throughout the data analysis process. These practices ensured consistency and stability in the findings.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical considerations do not bring into question a researcher's ethics, per se. Being a self-ascribed ethical person did not free me of the duty to ensure that ethical practices were addressed and adhered to in this research study. As a pre-research action for this study, I submitted the proposal for this study to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Baylor University. Once I received approval from the IRB, I then evaluated my ethical approach for the study. Ethics in research surrounds the preservation of participants' sanctity and a researcher's adherence to ethical principles. I pledged to operate under the ideals of respect and responsibility throughout the study. As an initial ethical step in the research process before obtaining informed consent, participants received via email a summary of the purpose of the research and an explanation of the perspective and positionality, the ethics guidelines for the study, and the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality. Upon participant agreement to join in the study, I obtained informed consent and ensured the participants knew "their rights as autonomous persons to voluntarily accept or refuse to participate in the study" at any point without

repercussion (Mohd Arifin, 2018; Orb et al., 2000, p. 95). The voluntary informed consent forms included the aim and purpose of the research, the methods used for data collection, and the notice of the right to withdraw from the study at any time (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). See Appendix A. Respect for the study participants remained at the apex of all ethical considerations. All study participants received pseudonyms, and the name of the target district was not explicitly named in this study to protect the anonymity of those involved and not detract from the study's goal. Each interview occurred individually in a private space. All participants' interview data were stored on a computer only accessible by me. Hard copy prints of participant interviews and research notes were kept in a private file. The ultimate ethical goal in the process of conducting this study surrounded the purpose of doing good for others and preventing harm (Orb et al., 2000). To ensure this research resulted in good for others and the field of education, I remained connected to these ethical guidelines throughout the study.

### *Limitations and Delimitations*

Qualitative research comes with a variety of limitations and delimitations. One limitation of this case study related to reactivity. Reactivity refers to the closeness the researcher has with the topic of the study. This case study included one-on-one interviews. Participants required the dedication of time for me to effectively establish a rapport with them. Schnofeld and Mazzloa (2012) state that participants should feel confident that the researcher respects their responses and do not feel judged. The participants were treated respectfully and in a friendly, professional manner throughout their participation in the study. During each phase of the interview process, I remained courteous and answered all questions thoroughly. The interview sessions were conducted

in a secluded setting free from distraction or interruption. I was diligent in maintaining a safe space in which the participant felt free to respond candidly to the interview questions.

Overidentifying presents an additional limitation in the study. Because I am a former K–12 educator who taught in the target district during my career, the potential to over-identify with the study participants existed. If left unchecked, overidentifying with the participants could affect the study’s findings. I intentionally avoided over-identifying by abstaining from opportunities to relate firsthand experiences to the participants’ experiences. Instead, the focus remained on the participants’ experiences exclusively.

The general limitation of all qualitative research remains that “findings cannot be extended to a wider population with the same degree of certainty that quantitative analyses can” (Atieno, 2009, p. 17). Because I endeavored to describe the lived experiences of a small sample group, the findings in this study cannot be generalized and applied in a larger sense. The study was limited to one school district in Oklahoma. Only four former teachers from the target district participated in interviews. While the likelihood that the experiences of these former teachers have commonalities with other former teachers, the qualitative case study format places limitations on far-reaching generalizations.

A delimitation of the qualitative research was the ability and opportunity to use qualitative research methods to learn from the participants, get a sense of their experiences, and associate those experiences to the framework. To do this, I utilized processes that allowed for discovery. The ultimate goal was to ensure “justice to [the participants’] perceptions, and the complexity of their interpretations” by striving for

organic interactions (Atieno, 2009, p. 16). Providing a safe space for participants to share their stories proved beneficial and allowed for a relaxed atmosphere throughout the interviews.

Ethical research practices include transparency. Transparency about a researcher's positionality as well as the study's limitations and delimitations give the reader a better perspective of what aspects of the study the researcher controlled and what aspects could not be controlled—identifying both the limitations and delimitations of this study help to put the research findings into appropriate context.

### *Conclusion*

This descriptive single-case study examined the influencing factors of teachers choosing to leave the teaching profession pre-retirement to inform change in the education profession. Using the descriptive case study methodology for this research provided a strategic plan of approach to the process. The interactions with the participants during the exploration of the research questions allowed me to do some reflective thinking on the responses and how they related to the theory of teacher attrition. The data analysis revealed some expected themes and some unexpected themes. The results of this study identify implications for reforms exist in the recruitment and retention of teachers at the building and district level and likely at the state level as well. To that end, the following chapter examines the study's results and discusses the implications of the research findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results and Implications

#### *Introduction*

The previous chapter explained the methodology for this descriptive single-case study which sought to identify the factors that influence teacher attrition in Oklahoma and describe the lived experiences of the participants. Chapter four focuses on telling the story of teacher attrition through the lived experiences of former teachers in a large urban school district in Oklahoma. Using a single descriptive case study and Robert Yin's five phase analytical cycle for data analysis, the results revealed the viewpoints and rationale of former teachers as to the reasons they left teaching. This chapter focuses on findings and analysis for the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of former teachers that chose to leave the profession?
2. What factors influenced teachers to leave the profession pre-retirement in Oklahoma?

To begin, the chapter introduces the participants through the descriptive, retelling of their lived experiences in their roles as teachers. The chapter then moves into a framework analysis connecting the theory of teacher attrition to specific experiences of the participants in relation to the components of the theory. The framework analysis leads to the identification of five emergent themes influencing teachers to leave the profession: low or no impact new teacher orientation, ineffective or non-existent mentorship, absentee or disconnected school administration, workload, and "bait and switch" tactics.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the results by addressing research implications and identifying recommendations for change to stakeholder groups.

### *Participants' Lived Experiences*

This descriptive single-case study centered on former teachers in a large urban school district in Oklahoma. The participant selection process began with contacting former colleagues in the target district who were aware of or acquainted with former teachers that met the criteria for participation. The criteria for participation in the study required that participants possessed between three and ten years of teaching experience and spent some portion of their career in the target district. The search for participants fitting the specified criteria resulted in four participants who all spent their careers teaching at the secondary level. Two participants came to education through a collegiate teacher preparation program and held bachelor's degrees in education. The other participants held bachelor's degrees in areas other than education and came to teaching through the alternative certification path provided by the Oklahoma State Department of Education. The alternative path to teacher certification requirements varies based on the applicant, but all applicants must take and pass the required certification tests. However, this certification route does not include any type of practicum or student teaching as it would for someone coming from a traditional teacher preparation program. Each participant possessed unique attributes to their experiences and each story culminated with the decision to leave education which further contributed to the persistent teacher attrition problem in Oklahoma.

### *Mykah's Story*

Mykah spent five years as a public-school educator including three years in the target district. Mykah came to education at the recommendation of a family member. Although she holds a college degree outside of teacher education, the basic needs of adulthood compelled her to seek employment that not only provided a steady income stream but also provided health insurance, and becoming a teacher met both needs. While Mykah's degree background comes from outside that of education, she found it possible to obtain her teacher certification through the alternative certification process with the Oklahoma State Department of Education. Regardless of her nontraditional entry into teaching, Mykah faced challenges not unlike those most first year teachers would experience. Along with the training deficits, Mykah also contended with the lack of mentorship from a more senior teacher in her role as a new teacher to the district. Insufficient orientation, non-existent teacher mentorship, minimal training, and limited school administration support ultimately contributed to Mykah's decision to quit teaching.

Mykah's teaching experience all took place at the middle school level as an English teacher. Her job in district five was the second teaching job in her short teaching career. She sought out a job in the target district because "it wasn't a long drive and... the reviews were really good about [the district]." The start of Mykah's tenure in district five began with new teacher orientation. She found that the orientation lacked usefulness for a teacher with prior experience stating, "if you have been a teacher for a minute, it's not that much fun, but if you're a new teacher, it's great I guess." From that point on Mykah's experience contained various positive and not-so-positive points.

Because Mykah was not a teacher by degree and she had not been assigned a teacher mentor, she felt fortunate to connect with a de facto mentor in her new position. The district's belief in the usefulness of instructional coaches proved to be a wise investment as the instructional coach for Mykah's building became one of her greatest supports and served as an unofficial mentor. Mykah recounts, "the instructional coach at the time...she was my number one support. That woman saved my life. She was super chill and didn't step on your toes, but she'd help you if you wanted and she was always available." The feedback that the instructional coach provided came as a welcomed aspect for Mykah's first teaching experience in the district. Due to Mykah's desire to excel in the profession, she frequently invited the coach to her class saying, "please come watch my class. Tell me what I need help with," and the instructional coach always provided her that greatly desired and needed support. Although Mykah was not assigned a specific mentor, the support she found in the instructional coach was invaluable. Unfortunately, Mykah did not find that same level of support from her school administration.

Mykah further recounted during her tenure the obstacles and insufficient support she faced with the school administration. Mykah possessed the least amount of teaching experience on her grade level team yet felt like she was one of the few that knew what was going on in the school. Mykah recalls that the administration, "didn't hold anyone accountable. They didn't really offer much help. The other teachers were awesome but...I left one district for another in hopes of better administration, and it was almost worse." Mykah viewed the school administration as scared of the parents and in survival mode. In her perspective, "it wasn't working. There was no [administrator] discipline



toward anyone, staff or students.” While the experience proved tough, Mykah pressed on recalling the advice of many educators who stated, “if you can teach for five years, you can do anything.” Mykah’s desire to be successful compelled her to stay in spite of the obstacles she faced. She recounted,

I really enjoyed teaching. I enjoyed the students, and they were the population I wanted to teach. My [Professional Learning Community] partner was amazing. We just kind of lived in our own bubble and tried to stay out of everything. It was a rough year. It was the principal’s first year, and I thought, ‘it can only get better, right?’

Though optimistic and seeking reasons to stay in education, Mykah ultimately made the decision to leave the profession.

When Mykah finally decided to quit teaching the decision was not sudden. Mykah reminisced on her mindset at the time of her decision recalling,

I had been unhappy teaching for the last two years I taught. I had a lot of conversations with my boyfriend, and he never pushed me any other way, he just said ‘you gotta do what’s best for you,’ so I talked with my mom about what I want to do with my life and teaching actually led me to the path I’m on now.

Quitting teaching was not an immediate decision for Mykah as she recalled that the career change was in the works quite some time before the final decision was made. Mykah discussed how the final determining factor about her next steps hinged on her application to graduate school. Admittance to graduate school resulted in a pivot in her career path.

Although Mykah’s school administration changed prior to her choice to leave the profession, that had no impact on her decision. When she spoke with her new school administrator about her decision to leave, she recalls that “he was actually really funny and begged me to stay.” While she appreciated his efforts, Mykah’s decision did not change. The principal wished her well and told her if there was ever anything she needed

or wanted that he could help with, he would do it, and that if she ever wanted to come back to work for him, she could.

Teaching was not an experience that Mykah categorizes as completely terrible, and she stated that there are aspects of teaching that she does miss. As Mykah reflected on her experience, she stated, “I miss the high energy and the kids and not doing the same boring thing every day. They kept me on my toes.” As a person, Mykah stated that she felt like teaching made her a “more flexible person, because with kids you’ve got to change things if they’re not learning it...you’ve got to fix it. I definitely miss that...I don’t really miss anything else.” When asked if the school or district had done anything differently, would she have kept teaching longer Mykah replied,

I think if a few things had been different, I wouldn’t have searched out a new career. I think having an administration that has their teachers’ backs, is good at communicating, and isn’t scared of the students or their parents would have helped me stay. Even if administration wanted to put education first and not everything else that would have helped. I woke up every day to educate children and every day I was told not to do that. I had to do something else that wasn’t our job, so I got tired of leaving work every day thinking ‘what am I even doing here? This is a waste of time.’

Mykah’s choice to leave teaching came after facing several adverse and disappointing experiences. Teaching as a profession is challenging. The additional challenges Mykah faced could have been alleviated with better, more holistic support. Due to the significant gaps in support, Mykah chose to pursue a graduate degree and a new career path.

### *Russell’s Story*

Russell taught for nine years in district five in addition to the years of teaching he spent in other districts. The majority of the time he worked in district five he taught at the same school. Russell shared that his collegiate path started off with a vision of going into medicine. One course changed his college trajectory, and he found himself reimagining

his career path. Although his path toward a career in medicine changed, he still possessed a desire and vision to help and serve people. With the support of his college academic advisor, Russell changed his major to science education and began taking steps to become a teacher.

The idea of teaching was not an abstract career choice for Russell. Russell's father, father-in-law, brother, and wife all have experience as classroom teachers. Russell's first experience in district five came during his student teaching experience. After graduation, Russell taught in a couple other districts, and later joined his wife teaching in district five in 2004. On his decision to come to the district Russell says, "I did my student teaching [there]. I had a great experience, and my wife taught there. I wanted to get back into that district. I eventually got over there after a couple of years." Russell came to district five with teaching experience which made his orientation and mentorship needs different from those of first year teachers with no teaching experience. When asked about his district orientation experience, Russell recounted, "it was just big. It was the big, district-wide, meet-and-greet at one of the high school auditoriums. At the site level it was just your normal, run-of-the-mill professional developments before school started. I think there might have been a couple extra meetings we had to do. That was about it." Because Russell had two years of prior teaching experience when he came to the district, he was not assigned a mentor teacher. Teaching experience aside, Russell found it necessary and important to connect with other staff members, especially early on in his time in the district. He recalled connecting with his teammates who he indicated were outstanding teachers. Of his first-year teaching in the district, Russell reflected, "there were some highs and there were some lows. I made some mistakes, and I had some

really great training. I didn't have a bad experience really. It was just normal. It wasn't the best group of kids I've had, but it by far wasn't the worst."

Russell shared that, overall, his experience teaching was positive. Some of the things he enjoyed most included, "being able to help the kids get over the little humps in their life and seeing those 'aha' moments." Russell spoke fondly of the relationships he developed with the students and how "you never really know until two or three years down the road if they come visit and they're like 'hey you really helped me'."

Connecting with the students was not always easy though. Russell stated that there were times that it was difficult to connect with students from diverse backgrounds. In instances like that, Russell found value in connecting with colleagues to gain perspective on where some of his students were coming from and how his colleagues' experiences could help him find ways to connect.

While Russell spent most of his time in district five in middle school, he transitioned to the high school by the end of his tenure. Russell stated, "I was getting bored with middle school math, so I went to teach high school math. I enjoyed the content, and I enjoyed teaching the kids." In addition to teaching high school math, Russell coached football and track. While working as a teacher, Russell also pursued a master's degree in Public Health and indicated that he had been planning his "exit strategy" for two to three years before finally leaving the field. Russell stated, "I knew I didn't intend on teaching my whole career. I got interested in epidemiology. It took me four years to get my master's degree." This additional education paved the way for Russell's transition out of teaching.

The transition out of teaching was not sudden. Russell put things in order with his education years before he left. When asked about the decision to quit, Russell shared that he talked it over with his wife and family but did not consult with anyone else at the school about his plan to leave. At the time of his departure, Russell was preparing for the next school year teaching high school math. Just before the school year was to begin, he got news that he would not have a classroom of his own that year. This news further spurred the desire to move on to the next phase of his career path. Not long after the floating teacher news came, Russell got a call from a large oil and gas company expressing their interest in him coming to work for the company. The decision to leave at that point was simple. When asked about the reaction of his school administrator to his decision to leave, Russell said that the conversation was unremarkable, and the principal did nothing to try to persuade him to stay. Russell stated, “I had a better conversation with the head football coach [than the principal].”

Because Russell’s wife still works in public education, he remains connected to teaching. He keeps his teaching certificate up to date and stated that he sometimes misses aspects of teaching like the interactions with the students and coaching. He states that he does not miss the stress of planning and extra prep work. One thing he enjoys most about his new career path is that he can “actually go to work and leave it at work 95% of the time now.” The extra responsibilities that come with being a teacher such as, 504 meetings, demands of standardized testing, and the teacher evaluation system remain constant reminders of what Russell does not miss nor want to return to in his career. An additional obstacle Russell grappled with as a teacher that he does not face in his new career field is the high level of bureaucracy related to educational policy at the state and

federal levels. Russell's experience and the similar experiences of the other participants showed that some educators come to the profession never intending retire from teaching. Russell intentionally planned to come to the profession through his education in a collegiate teacher preparation program, but he also intentionally planned to leave the profession through gaining additional education leading him to a different career field.

### *Dallas' Story*

Dallas spent five years of his teaching career in district five. All of his time in the district he worked at one middle school. His college path always included plans to be in education. Initially, Dallas planned to become a band director, but plans changed while in college, and he began his career in math education. Dallas completed his student teaching at a district north of the target district for this study. When asked what brought him to district five, Dallas stated, "I think I was just casting a pretty wide net and [district five] was one of those that had a decent reputation to my knowledge. There was no super strategy behind it." Since Dallas came to teaching through the traditional path of a collegiate teacher preparation program, he did not encounter any challenges with the teacher certification process. Unfortunately, Dallas does not believe that his educational path to teaching nor the onboarding processes he experienced in the target district adequately prepared him for any of his classroom experiences.

Dallas's start in district five was not uncommon when compared to the experiences of the other participants in the study. Of his onboarding experience, Dallas recalled, "I attended the general orientation, what everyone goes to, but prior to that I went to a one-day new teacher orientation that could have been for anybody that was new to the profession or new to the district." Dallas described the orientation days as being

full of various workshops that touched on topics including best practices for behavior management and instructional discussions with different math teachers. From a macro perspective, Dallas perceived the orientation as unhelpful because the topics lacked focus and meaningful discussion time. This unremarkable start to his teaching career was only made more difficult by challenges he faced with inadequate mentorship, time-consuming resource acquisition, and deficits in teacher autonomy during his tenure.

At the start of the school year, Dallas was assigned a mentor teacher. This teacher taught sixth grade math like Dallas and had several years' experience in the profession. Dallas indicated that he and the mentor did not have a positive relationship likely due to the lack of training the mentor received on the role of a mentor prior to taking on the duty. Consequently, Dallas took charge of developing a de facto mentorship relationship with other colleagues to include teachers from other content areas on his grade level and the inclusion special education teacher that he co-taught with for a few class periods in the school day. These colleagues provided Dallas with the support and guidance he was not effectively receiving from his assigned mentor. Besides the colleagues that he utilized as resources for support with classroom management and instructional feedback, Dallas stated that "the internet was honestly amazing" when it came to lesson planning and instructional ideas. However, the limited access to resources and the time to seek and find the tools he felt he needed to be successful in the classroom further contributed to Dallas' frustration in his role.

The lack of autonomy was also challenging for Dallas at times. Teachers perceive and define autonomy in a variety of ways. The desire to be self-governing while still desiring support results in a complex dichotomy of needs. For Dallas, the need for

autonomy connected to his desire to remain authentic as an educator. Deci and Flaste (1996) state that “authenticity necessitates behaving autonomously, for it means being the author of one’s actions – acting in accord with one’s true inner self” (p. 4). From Dallas’ perspective district curriculum coordinators stifled his professional autonomy.

The obstacles Dallas faced with worthwhile orientation, quality mentorship, adequate resource acquisition, and lack of autonomy led him to describe his first-year teaching in district five as both a difficult and a rewarding experience. Fortunately, not all aspects of Dallas’ initial teaching experience were negative. Dallas found several aspects of teaching to be rewarding, too.

Teaching presents challenges, but also results in rewards. Dallas mentioned some rewarding aspects of teaching in his interview. He cited some rewarding aspects of teaching included watching the growth of students, both academically and as people. Each day he took up the charge to instruct his students he saw the progress of their learning growth and as young adults. Dallas also enjoyed how his instructional role allowed for him to build relationships with his students. He found this aspect of teaching to be personally and professionally enriching which made some of the challenges of teaching worthwhile. Dallas also noted that he felt like his job as a teacher had purpose. This sense of purpose provided him motivation and gave him a greater sense of duty to know that his job was not only important but essential for his students. However, this sense of duty also created an imbalance in Dallas’ life. The pressure he put on himself to excel in the profession caused a shift in which work dominated his life and his self-care waned.



Work and life balance posed a challenge for Dallas in his teaching career as it does for many educators. Work-life balance refers to the idea that work and personal life should balance one another in a harmonious union (Johari et al., 2018). Due to an imbalance between work life and personal life, the amount of time Dallas spent on the intellectual preparation necessary for instruction became cumbersome and overwhelming. The demands of “trying to respond to real time learning by adjusting the next day to keep things engaging” drained Dallas mentally, emotionally, and physically. This imbalance resulted in long days of work and short days of self-care pushing him toward professional burnout.

In an effort to learn how to better balance work and life and to learn more about himself as an educator, Dallas moved to a large urban district outside of Oklahoma prior to his exit from teaching. The school consisted of students from a community of people living in high poverty with few resources. Dallas recalls when he toured the school after being hired, that it was not in the best of shape, but he knew the conditions were not completely the fault of the school administration. While on the tour of the school, Dallas’ took on the attitude that he would make it work although conditions were less than ideal. Dallas shared that there was no door to the classroom and that it was filled with too many desks for the space available. Graffiti covered the walls. The drywall had holes. The air conditioner did not work properly causing the room to be so humid and wet that the dry erase marker ran down the whiteboard, and adhesive could not hold posters to the wall. Dallas went on to say,

I was in a wing that wasn’t with any other math teachers. On top of that, the circumstances in the actual classroom were challenging. I had two course preps. I tried to convince myself I could make it work until the day before school started.

That's when I had a breakdown in my classroom...an emotional one. It just kind of hit me out of nowhere. I was like 'I can't' do this, and I'm not going to do this'.

The decision was immediate and final. Because the decision was abrupt, he did not consult with anyone. The decision grew from a need for self-preservation. The need to protect his mental health rose above the desire to stay in the profession. When asked about the response from his administrators about the decision to quit, Dallas indicated that he got none. At 6 p.m. the Sunday before the first day of school, Dallas reached out to his school administration team to make them aware of his decision. Dallas states that he called and emailed the school administration team and got no response from anyone. Upon reflection of his decision, Dallas said, "I'm glad I got out." While sudden, Dallas made the decision he felt was best for him in the circumstance. Making this difficult choice, however, did not mean he dislike teaching entirely.

Although the departure from teaching was not planned and he feels no regrets about his decision, Dallas does miss aspects of teaching. In his reminiscence he said,

I miss having purpose in my work that I felt was important and contributing to society and justice. I miss watching growth. I miss instruction and the instructional process. I never fell in love with math, but I did like teaching it.

While Dallas intends to one day return to teaching, he believes there are massive structural changes needed in education to include curriculum that is engaging and culturally responsive, student management systems that do not contribute to the school to prison pipeline, and teacher salary increases.

### *Luke's Story*

Luke came to education with a desire to coach. Equipped with a degree in journalism, Luke started in district five at the encouragement of a former girlfriend who was a middle school English teacher at the time. Because he held a degree in journalism,

Luke obtained certifications in both journalism and English through the state's alternative teaching certification process. Luke spent five years in the target district before leaving. Luke's first teaching opportunity came at a large high school which he happened to also be a graduate from a few years prior. At the time he applied both the head principal and an assistant principals remembered him and hired him immediately. When Luke began his teaching at his alma mater, he taught freshman English and coached football. His introduction to teaching included little orientation and lacked a dedicated teacher mentor. In reflecting on his start in the district and the school, Luke indicated there was no specific orientation time for him as a new teacher. Regarding the start to school, Luke stated,

I just remember it was just crazy. There was just a lot. There was stuff happening non-stop all the time. I remember very, very vividly having this whole plan and having this whole idea of what's happening. And the first day of school rolls around, and I have a tie on, and I'm standing up there, and the bell rings. Kids are walking in. I remember I walked up to the front of the class and turned around and there were 34 kids there, and it was just like 'oh, hey man, don't eat me'. There was very, very, very little orientation. It was more trial by fire and 'welcome to the show' type of stuff.

Luke recounted that the district did not have a formal mentor teaching program at the time he started and that he was instrumental in the development of that program for new teachers. Of his personal experience he recalled that because he had no mentor, he would go to his head football coach and the defensive coordinator for instructional support. Luke recounted that although he had not met the head football coach prior to being hired, the coach took him under his wing. Luke felt fortunate saying, "luckily, I had a lot of people pouring into me. They all took me under their wing. That helped out drastically." Of teaching he said,

I don't think I thought I was going to [teach] for very long, but then after that first year I was hooked, and I absolutely loved coaching. I enjoyed teaching. I was in love. I absolutely loved my job. I loved going to work every day. I loved the kids. The classroom was different because I didn't have a whole lot of experience, but I believe the experience I had coaching translated to the classroom really well.

As the year went on Luke got a handle on the classroom, and because he could manage student behavior, he was charged with more instructional responsibility for at-risk students quickly.

While he loved coaching, the addition of an English class for academically at-risk and credit deficient students began to impact Luke's mindset on the job. He stated of his time teaching the "repeaters" English class,

I mean everybody that teaches has their turn at the wheel. I could handle the class, but it turned into a goofball fest, and that part stunk. I hate to say because a lot of those kids had a bad go the first semester and eventually turned out great. Later on, down the road when I figured out that these students were moved because it was time for End of Instruction state assessments. I was like 'oh, you're taking these kids out so that our numbers don't look crappy.' So that kind of put a little bit of a bad taste in your mouth. It was a very eye-opening thing for me once I realized that.

Although these at-risk students posed a unique challenge in the classroom, Luke gained an appreciation for the lives many of his students lived outside of school from his teaching experience. He stated, "I 100% appreciate the time I did this because it changed my perspective, my worldly perspective, drastically." There then came a turning point in the trajectory of Luke's teaching career.

Each summer Luke went through an annual cycle of renewal. The summer breaks gave him the opportunity to rejuvenate and prepare for the next school year. He recalls how the stress of the job led to feelings of being "ready to go" and "fed up" by the end of each school year, but summer break usually gave him the time to rest and renew his resolve; until one summer he was not rejuvenated, and it was time to go back to school.

At that point Luke recounted his feelings of dread and thinking, “I can’t do this. I can’t do this anymore.” He was not ready to go back to the classroom.

Luke’s final year teaching came with more changes. The high schools were moving from block schedules to seven period schedules. The idea of the schedule change was not initially concerning, but with the schedule change came increased student enrollment in his classes. In addition to the changes in the schedule and increased enrollment, Luke came to the unsettling realization that the school administration was not the best either. Luke recognized that the student demographics changed significantly from when he was a student at the school. What he realized also was that school and district administration failed to pivot with this change. Luke believed that the school was run “incredibly inefficiently” and that the district administration refused to acknowledge the changes in socioeconomics and racial demographics. He stated, “school administration was turning a blind eye to the problem. It was a completely different environment. I feel like that was a great travesty of that [administration].” The hardship that goes along with providing an education to children in poverty makes teaching an even greater challenge for which teachers must be trained and supported. Luke emphasized, “there’s nothing wrong with a change of demographics, but there are certain things that need to be in place so that we can enrich everyone’s lives.” The failure of district and school administration to adjust their approach to managing the needs and behavior of the students caused greater strain on Luke’s resolve to remain in education. The school administration’s inability to help teachers with the management of student behavior led to what Luke termed as a “very frustrating situation.”

In an effort to make teaching a lasting career, Luke went back to college to work on a master's degree. He envisioned moving into the position of an athletic director and thought additional education would help in this endeavor. Unfortunately, other experiences in Luke's teaching career led him to not finish his degree. While he lacks one semester to obtain a master's degree in education administration, he does not anticipate going back to finish. One of the final experiences influencing his decision to leave teaching occurred in Luke's final year in the district. During his last year in the target district, Luke received the extra duty of monitoring the cafeteria during lunch rather than teaching a class during that period each day. That turned out to be a pivotal experience leading Luke to seek a career change. Another influencing factor in the decision to leave education came when the school released Luke's head coach from his duties that year without true cause in his perspective. The head principal expected that Luke would apply for the coaching job, but Luke did not agree with the handling of the release of the head coach, who he respected and counted as a friend. At that point, Luke informed his principal that he would be leaving to go to another district. Luke viewed this move as an avenue to get a fresh start on the path to a head coaching position. The fresh start came, but it led to leaving the profession.

Luke got hired in a new district to teach English and be the defensive coordinator for the varsity football team. At the time he took the new teaching and coaching job, Luke also applied to the fire department. Joining the fire department had been a goal of Luke's prior to getting into teaching, but due to budget cuts at the time of his interest his plans to attend the firefighter's academy went on hold. After spending five years teaching, he decided to give his hopes of joining the fire department another try but knew

if that career plan did not work out, he still had a job teaching and coaching. Before Luke officially began his teaching and coaching position at the new school, the fire department called to inform him he had been accepted into the firefighter's academy. When Luke told his school administration of the opportunity to join the fire department, while not pleased to hear of his leaving, they were supportive of his decision. Luke greatly enjoys his career as a firefighter and stated that he does not necessarily miss teaching but misses coaching every day. He believes his capabilities as a coach served him well in his role as a teacher and these skills continue to serve him in his role with the fire department.

### *Conclusion*

The participants in this study came to the teaching profession through a variety of pathways for a variety of reasons. The reasons the participants left teaching are as varied as the reasons they began teaching. The common factor between all participants in the study remains that they all left teaching prior to retirement. In the section to follow, the lived experiences of the participants in the study received further analysis through the theory of teacher attrition framework through focus on the research question: what factors influenced teachers to leave the profession pre-retirement in Oklahoma? The themes that evolved from framework analysis include low or no impact new teacher orientation, ineffective or non-existent mentorship, absentee or disconnected school administration, workload, and "bait and switch" tactics. I extrapolated these themes from the lived experiences of the participants in the study.

### *Theory of Teacher Attrition Framework Analysis*

The theory of teacher attrition described in chapter two provided the framework lens for analysis. In the previous section, I introduced each participant individually,

described the lived experiences of what brought the participants to the profession and what ultimately impacted their decision to leave. In this section, the related aspects of the theory of teacher attrition identify the associated contributing factors found in the data that influenced each participant's decision to quit. Mykah, Russell, Dallas, and Luke all shared experiences falling within components of the study's framework. The section begins with identification of human capital influences, then moves to uncertain or incomplete information, life-cycle factors, and concludes with involuntary attrition factors.

### *Human Capital Influences*

As described in the literature review in chapter two of this study, the human capital approach of the theory of teacher attrition encapsulates the ideas teachers associate between the costs and benefits of staying in the profession. The participants in this study each identified aspects of the human capital approach that contributed to the costs outweighing the benefits of remaining in the profession. Human capital influences encompass a variety of areas that influence teacher retention and attrition. School funding and resources, teaching qualifications and supports, and teacher self-efficacy make up subareas of human capital influences to teacher attrition.

Salary and funding play a critical role in the successful functioning of schools. Teachers often find themselves in situations where they do not receive the salary, they deserve nor the funding for supplies they need to effectively provide instruction to students. Luke stated that two or three years into teaching, he looked at the teacher pay scale and realized that the difference in pay between an early career teacher and a twenty-five-year veteran was not more than ten-thousand dollars. He went on to say that a big



draw for him to leave teaching and go to the fire department was the pay; in eight years with the fire department, he makes over double what he made as a teacher.

Russell talked about a similar experience when he received an opportunity to work for an oil and gas company. He stated that the pay he could make leaving education made the decision easy. While salary is a significant topic, other funding issues impact teachers as well. The Oklahoma teacher walkout in 2018 was not just about teacher salary. The larger scale issue surrounded education funding as a whole. Luke indicated that for him the bottom line of the teacher strike was about not having enough resources in the classroom—

You have 40 kids in a class and the state says were going to do five grand [for teacher salary]. I don't care about \$5,000 when I don't have enough books for these kids. I had a class where people had to sit at my desk and had to bring a lunch table to put in the back because I had 43 kids in a class and not enough places for them to sit.

Dallas indicated that better funding for curricular and instructional needs would have helped more than a salary increase. School funding remains a significant contributor to factors influencing teacher attrition in Oklahoma.

In addition to school funding, new teacher orientation and mentorship were cited as human capital influences on attrition in this study as well. Participants indicated that limitations in the areas of new teacher orientation (no matter the experience level of the teacher) and mentorship created a need for self-preservation. The lack of quality new teacher orientation and mentorship created a gap for the participants in their teaching roles from the onset. While all new teachers face challenges, teachers coming to the profession through alternative pathways face a different challenge than those coming through collegiate teacher preparation programs. Upon reflection of his start in teaching

Luke recalled, “I thought it was crazy that they let me teach without having a teaching degree. Especially once I got into it. [Teaching] is hard. You can’t just get random people to do this.” When speaking on her path to acquire an alternative teaching certification, Mykah stated, “the rules are, you have a degree, you pass the test, you are suited for [teaching], when in reality, no.” Mykah went on to say that because she had previous teaching experience before coming to district five that the orientation from the district provided her little benefit in starting her job. The absence of a true mentorship program set forth additional challenges. As a teacher with less than five years of experience coming into a new district, there was a level of disappointment for Mykah at the realization that she would not have a dedicated mentor stating, “that was a bummer. I never had a [mentor], but I guess that’s a thing. Like I’ve never done this before, HELLO.” This gap in support through new teacher orientation and mentorship contributed yet another reason participants cited for leaving teaching.

New teacher orientation and mentorship are important for teacher success. Especially when teachers come with little to no teaching experience. Equally important to teacher success, is the support of the school administrator. School administration support and quality teacher evaluations contribute to teacher self-efficacy and professional confidence. When teachers feel unsupported and undervalued, their commitment to the profession wanes. In his reflection on teaching, Luke recalled feelings of being undervalued by school administration. He indicated that there were times that he believed he was just there to “keep knuckleheads in a room.”

Further intensified by these feelings of being undervalued by school administration, participants in this study did not view their instructional evaluations as

legitimate nor a true reflection of their capabilities in the classroom. Consequently, there comes a point of resentment on the part of teachers when the state wants to base a portion of their performance evaluation score on factors other than their personal performance in the classroom. These feelings of resentment compound when school administration does not provide effective and constructive feedback. Russell spoke of his displeasure with the way teacher evaluation scores were calculated, “When I started calculating the fact that [the state] was going to base my evaluation on students’ test performance from the year before...I couldn’t accept that.” For Russell, the lagging indicators of student test scores felt unjust and inapplicable.

Human capital factors that influence teacher attrition came forth in a variety of forms in this study. To improve public education, human capital influences need attention. Stakeholders must realize that the continued neglect of human capital factors influencing teaching attrition have far reaching effects for the teacher workforce and student academic performance.

#### *Uncertain or Incomplete Information*

In the theory of teacher attrition, uncertain or incomplete information influences relates to how the persistently unmet expectations and routine encounters in which teachers feel unprepared contribute to dissatisfaction in the career field. The unexpected, changing, and increasing workloads of the participants in this study presented an additional influence in the decision to quit teaching. Participants indicated the challenges they faced with work-life balance due to a variety of factors increased their displeasure with the job. Participants made statements like “work-life balance was impossible.” They also stated that contributors to an unhealthy work-life balance had to do with their

workload at school. All participants in the study indicated that they taught more than one course at a time creating an unexpected set of work expectations. Russell talked of a time when he unexpectedly did not have a classroom— “Two weeks before the school year started, I was told that I would be a floating teacher.” Luke mentioned having a “repeater English class dumped” on him, while Mykah inherited an eighth grade English class because a colleague became ill during the school year. The fluidity of teachers’ work expectations was further compounded by the unpreparedness for the lack of support and respect from the community. Luke stated,

Nobody gives you any appreciation. The general population has zero concept of what a teacher does on a day-to-day basis. [People] think they’ve had a rough day when they have to answer six emails. It makes me want to ask ‘was a 14-year-old cussing you out today? Did you have 175 people waiting on you to do your meetings? No? Then you’re gonna be okay.’

The lack of respect and other pieces of incomplete information weighed heavily on the participants. Too often teachers feel as Mykah did after her first year in district five. When asked how she would describe her first-year experience in the district, she described it as, “not as advertised. My experience was actually a nightmare.” Teaching as with any profession is filled with uncertain or incomplete information. The manner in which professionals are equipped and supported influences the satisfaction with the job. Participants in this study consistently encountered adverse experiences adding to the desire to leave the career field prior to retirement never to return.

### *Life-cycle Factors*

Life-cycle factors relate to changes in an educator’s life that impact their decision to leave the profession. In this study, very few of the participants indicated that life-cycle factors played a role in their decision to leave teaching. Indirectly, salary can play a part

in life-cycle factors since salary impacts quality of life. The need or desire to make more money to support a family or create a better path to retirement can be interpreted as life-cycle influences. One participant specifically pointed to the teacher retirement system as another contributor to changing professions. All-in-all, life-cycle factors contributed minimally to the decision of participants to quit teaching in this study.

### *Involuntary Attrition*

Involuntary attrition is associated with conditions beyond a teacher's control resulting in a change in career. Situations such as a reduction in force, school closures, and temporary teaching contracts encompass causes for teachers to leave the profession through little choice of their own. None of the participants in this study attribute their departure from teaching to involuntary attrition.

### *Factors Influencing Teachers to Leave the Profession*

In Oklahoma, the attrition rate stands at 9%. This high attrition rate negatively impacts the teaching profession by contributing to teacher shortages and proves costly to school districts. This section of the study's findings focused on the research question: what factors influence teachers to leave the profession pre-retirement in Oklahoma? I utilized semi-structured interviews along with an informational questionnaire to gather data and seek out answers to the research questions. The questionnaire found in Appendix B proved useful in prompting follow-up questions in the interview. The semi-structured interview questions found in Appendix C lent themselves to giving me and participants greater liberty to explore responses. The expanded participant responses revealed a deeper, more intimate context for their experiences. Through the coding process, emergent themes arose between each participant's recounting of their time in education.

While no participant indicated that they planned to retire from teaching when they began their career, each referenced experiences that directly and indirectly impacted the decision to leave. The sections that follow identify the major themes and the associated experiences of each participant connected to the themes.

### *Low-to-No Impact Teacher Orientation*

Teacher orientation serves as an introduction to the district and school and are an essential component to supporting inexperienced staff with their acclimation and acculturation in a new district. New teachers, including those who come to the profession through teacher preparation degree paths, require more than a global introduction to the district and school to be successful. New teachers, especially those coming from alternative certification pathways, seldom see instruction modeled by others prior to taking on their own instructional setting. This inexperience creates a disconnect between what teaching is thought to be and what teaching actually is. Education researchers indicate that keeping good teachers includes intentional professional development that allows “new teachers to observe others, to be observed by others, and to be part of [a setting] where all teachers share together, grow together, and learn to respect each other’s work” (Portner, 2005, p. 46).

The participants in this study all conveyed that their new teacher induction was either non-existent or provided little to no benefit to them in starting their first teaching job in district five. Luke recalled of his experience, “there was zero orientation. I don’t want to talk negatively about them, but there was very, very, very little teacher orientation.” Russell recalled that for him, the welcome to the district was a basic introduction at one of the high schools. Participants new to the district with prior

experience found this basic orientation to be an inefficient use of time as the information lacked substance and true application to their teaching assignments. Speaking to his orientation experience, Dallas recounted that he attended a one-day new teacher orientation, then a general district orientation that did not give him any additional instructional insight or preparation and felt that it was unhelpful. When I extended the question and inquired further about building level orientation, participant responses remained consistent with that of the district level orientation. Mykah stated,

The week before school you go to an orientation and all the new teachers are there. Then at the school it was kind of like ‘here’s your room’. I was brought in a little earlier to meet my [Professional Learning Community] partner but that was about it.

The responses of the participants again indicated a vague recollection of impactful building level orientation and indicated it provided little benefit to them starting their job.

New teacher orientation provides districts and schools with a great opportunity to equip new staff with the basic tools to start off successfully in their instructional roles. Each participant in this study indicated that orientation at all levels was an experience that lacked value and usefulness. This common experience resulted in the identification of low to no impact teacher orientation as an emergent theme in this study.

### *Ineffective or Non-existent Mentorship*

As with new teacher orientation, mentorship is a significant contributor to teacher success. Mentorship in any profession gives newcomers additional support that instills the mentee with confidence and improves employee retention. A mentor serves as a “developmental partner [providing] a clear structure, ground rules, and a focus...centered on the mentee’s professional growth” (Axelrod, 2019, p. 23). In this study participants cited that there was little to no dedicated mentorship for them as newcomers, no matter if

they were new to the profession or just new to the district. The revelation of the lack of mentorship came through follow-up questions during the interview as this was not a specific question. The noteworthy aspect of the lack of quality mentorship was that all participants received some form of mentorship from colleagues in spite of the lack of a dedicated or quality mentor.

During each interview, I asked each participant, “who and/or what were your biggest resources when you began [teaching]?” All participants spoke of individuals instrumental in keeping them afloat during their first year in district five. Russell recounted, “I wasn’t assigned a mentor teacher. It was my third-year teaching when I started there. For mentorship or support I visited mainly with my teammates who were outstanding teachers.” I followed up this initial question about resources by asking “were you specifically assigned a mentor teacher?” Luke stated,

No, we did not have a teacher mentor program when I started. I would go to my head football coach. I went to the offensive coordinator. He had several years of experience. Luckily, I had a lot of people pouring into me. They all kind of just took me under their wing.

To the same follow up question Mykah responded,

No, I did not have a mentor teacher and that was a bummer. I never had one, but I guess that’s a thing. I went to my best friend who was a teacher and the instructional coach. She was my number one support. She was phenomenal.

Dallas indicated that a mentor teacher had been assigned to him, but he did not find value in the relationship. He stated, “I was assigned a mentor and I didn’t find that person to be very useful. There were some benefits to my mentor teacher, but I had better support from other colleagues.” All participants in this study desired support when coming aboard. The difficulty they faced with no mentor or low-quality mentorship resulted in



each of them seeking out support from others. While mentorship is important, the support of school administrators is even greater.

### *Disconnected or Absentee School Administration*

School administrators impact the level of success teachers experience in the classroom. Effective school administration plays a pivotal role in the morale and self-efficacy for teachers, especially those teachers who are new to the profession. When school administrators dedicate themselves to supporting new teachers with professional growth activities, focusing on improving day-to-day practices and ensuring there is clarity about expectations, decreases ambiguity and new teachers know what type of support they can expect (Protheroe, 2006). As participants shared their experiences teaching, they rarely mentioned any positive involvement or support from school administration.

The conspicuous absence of school administration in the recounting of the participants' teaching experiences indicated a concerning gap existed between these teachers and school leadership. Each participant talked about school administrators in a disconnected fashion. Teachers expect school administrators to lead and support the instructional process. The participants in this study recounted little in the way of influential leadership from their school administrators during their interviews. In this study, participants shared that in general their school administration left them with a sense of disappointment and disillusionment. Russell stated, "I didn't really have a good assistant administrator. I didn't care for the leadership style of the head administrator. Nice person, but not a real great leader." The perception of ineffective school leadership persisted through each interview. Of her school administration Mykah recalled that the

“administration was lacking. They didn’t hold teachers accountable, and it showed. They didn’t really offer much help. Coming into this I left one district for another one in hopes for better administration and it was almost worse.” No recollection of participants’ experiences included commentary on how a school administrator positively impacted their work experience or presented themselves as an instructional leader. Luke recalled,

The school was run incredibly inefficiently. You go to administration, and you bring this problem and it’s like ‘oh, well, whatever you figure out.’ The hallway was just rampant. People were just acting wild because they had no accountability. Administration was not addressing the issues and that’s a frustrating situation.

Teachers rightfully expect school administration to provide support with student behavior management. In multiple interviews participants indicated that school administration provided limited support in that area. Dallas spoke on the lack of follow through from school administration and his feelings resulting from the experience— “because of the behavior management system that we were using school wide that was not implemented with fidelity, student behavior was insane. That was a tough year. I just had zero support from administration.” Most participants referenced limited interactions with school administration in their career. The disconnect between the participants and their school administrators created a complicated work environment. This disconnect further complicated their resolve and the workload added additional stressors on the resolve to teach.

### *Workload*

The workload of educators often exceeds the timeframe of the school day. Teachers in secondary schools complete between 8 and 11% of their instructional duties outside of the school day before school begins, after school ends, and on weekends (Bubb

& Earley, 2004). The participants in the study each spoke of their experiences in the classroom and how their instructional duties rarely stayed within the bounds of the five-day workweek or within the daily work schedule. Johari et al. (2018) state, “numerous tasks at work with ambiguous roles and responsibilities at the work place jeopardize the quality of work-life balance among teachers” (p. 109). The most common contributors to a heavy workload for participants related to the number of courses they taught and the number of students they instructed each day. All the participants worked at the secondary level. They provided instruction to one hundred or more students each day and often taught more than one course during the year. Luke shared during his interview that during his second- or third-year teaching, the school move from a block schedule to a seven-period day and how unprepared he felt for this change. This shift in schedule resulted in a significant increase in the number of students enrolled in his courses. The increase in enrollment coupled with the number of courses he taught contributed to a larger workload for him.

Dallas mentioned in his interview that at one point in his teaching career he taught three different grade levels and because of that “work-life balance was impossible.” Planning of instruction for one course takes more than the 50-minute plan period included in the workday for teachers. Preparing for multiple courses for one hundred or more students results in workloads compounding quickly. Mykah recounted, “my first year I had to teach remedial reading, then seventh grade English. Then the eighth grade English teacher got ill so eighth grade English was added to my schedule. I was teaching three different classes that year.”

Russell too spoke about preparing for his multiple course workload. He recalled that in one teaching assignment he only taught one grade and subject area but, he had multiple courses within the subject. He stated, “I always had two or three preps. At the middle school I had the honors pre-algebra, an accelerated level, and a general sixth grade math level.” Russell also indicated that in other times in his career he taught multiple grades and multiple courses having taught up to four different courses in a school year. Workload creates the potential for an unhealthy work-life balance. The challenges with workload become further frustrating when teachers face unexpected changes in their teaching assignment, especially when the changes come after being hired.

#### *Bait and Switch*

The participants in this study became teachers for a variety of reasons. Mykah came to teach in the target district because she decided, “it was time to be somewhere different. The reviews were really good about the district.” At times, teachers come to education due to incentives programs and promises that lead to disillusionment and frustration with the profession when those incentives and promises produce unexpected results. Participants spoke of taking a position and things changing in their teaching assignment without warning, preparation, and at times without support. All participants similarly experienced times in their tenure as educators when work circumstances, expectations, or conditions changed unexpectedly. Dallas talked about how he interviewed and got hired to teach seventh grade math and just two weeks before he was to begin in the position, his teaching assignment changed to sixth grade math. While he was not keen on the idea, he had moved eight hours east for the job, so he accepted the

change although it was not what he was originally hired to do. Russell discussed how he made the transition to teach high school after teaching middle school for a few years and was informed just before the school year began that he would not have his own classroom and would be a “floating” teacher. During each interview participants shared disequilibrating events that resulted in negative feelings. Luke recalled of his experience that the realization of students being moved into his class to improve the state assessment scores left him feeling deceived and disappointed. Mykah described her experience in district five as “not as advertised.” The feelings of being swindled were recurring in this study. The participants shared in each of their stories times when they felt subject to duplicitous practices. This lack of candor and transparency contributed to the eventual decision of the participants to leave teaching.

### *Conclusion*

The emerging themes from this study answered the research question: what factors influence teachers to leave the profession pre-retirement in Oklahoma? Each of these themes identify participants experienced in their tenure as educators that directly and indirectly influenced the pursuit of a different career path. These emergent themes exemplify specific areas upon which stakeholders should focus to reduce the teacher attrition rate in Oklahoma.

### *Discussion*

Teachers quit teaching, and attrition is an inevitability of the profession. The concern in this study was the rate at which teachers leave teaching and the factors influencing the decision to do so in Oklahoma, where attrition rates exceed the national average. This descriptive single-case study focused on teacher attrition in a large urban

district in Oklahoma. To further delve into the focus of this study, the discussion to follow identifies the contribution to the literature on teacher attrition, the recognition of what could improve the study, an overview of an unexpected result from the data, and what further research could be done on the topic.

Studies and research abound on the topic of teacher attrition in a macro-perspective. Renowned educational researchers and institutions provide a significant contribution to the information available on the topic nationally. In their report on teacher turnover, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) of the Learning Policy Institute state that teachers have a significant, direct impact on student learning and retention which is paramount to effectively meeting the needs of students. This makes teacher retention critical. Kini and Podolsky (2016) indicate in a report on the impact of teacher experience and effectiveness that not only does teaching experience improve effectiveness, but when students have experienced teachers for multiple years the impact on student achievement is significant. The challenged faced for this problem of practice was the deficit of research related to the high attrition rate in Oklahoma supporting the need for this study to provide perspective on the phenomenon. The a priori theoretical framework on teacher attrition served as the structure for this descriptive single-case study.

The theory of teacher attrition, as overviewed in chapter one, indicates that teacher attrition factors connect to four general areas: human capital approaches, uncertain or incomplete information, life-cycle factors, and involuntary attrition (Kirby & Grissmer, 1993). In conducting the research for the study, the data collected from participant interviews were sorted into each of these four areas. A point of note was that

the participants all left teaching due to factors falling into multiple categories of the theoretical framework. Educators and researchers should take from this study that the factors influencing teacher attrition are complex and overlapping. Because of these complex, overlapping factors, addressing teacher attrition takes multiple stakeholder groups working in vertical alignment and understanding how decisions made in isolation from other stakeholder groups generate obstacles for everyone, ultimately leading to a problem verging on chronic proportions. The silos of decision-making that currently exist among stakeholder groups need unification and to work in tandem to combat the problem of teacher attrition.

While the study results offered insight into the contributing factors of teacher attrition in Oklahoma, there too lies an opportunity to improve on and expand the research. This descriptive single-case study was bounded by district and years of teaching experience. Qualitative research lies in an undeniable human connection. Omona (2013) states, “qualitative researchers believe that humans are complex, somewhat unpredictable beings and those individual differences and idiosyncratic needs override any notion of universal laws of human behaviors” (p. 170). As such, the natural complexities of qualitative research provide an occasion for researchers to improve qualitative research methods. One improvement for this study would include diversifying the participant pool. All the participants in the study spent their careers in secondary education. Another area that could improve this study would be to seek out participants in a non-urban district. The reasons for leaving teaching could very well impart new knowledge and understanding on the topic of teacher attrition that differs from teachers leaving an urban district. As further research on the topic of teacher attrition in Oklahoma lies ahead, this

identification of improvements could provide additional rich data to the study of this phenomenon.

Most of the results from this study on teacher attrition in Oklahoma aligned to initial expectations on the topic in relation to the theoretical framework save one significant point of intrigue. An unexpected result from the study was that none of the participants came to the teaching profession with the intentional plan of retiring from teaching. This discovery was intriguing and raised additional questions that could not be explored in this study. The idea that there was never a plan to retire from teaching raised the question of whether people make a conscious decision to choose a career from which to retire from the onset or if retiring from a career field happens for other reasons. There is also the question of whether retiring from a primary or single profession has something to do with generational influences. The fact that retiring from teaching is seemingly not an intentional decision provides another research opportunity.

The topic of teacher attrition is broad and comes with a plethora of study pathways. Under the theory of teacher attrition, further study could center around any of the four components specifically. One specific study of contrast would be what keeps teachers in the profession. This study focused on what factors influence teachers to leave. A study on what keeps teachers in the profession could provide insightful data and solutions to counteract the influences of teacher attrition.

### *Implications*

The literature review for this study revealed complexities in teacher attrition. Attributions for teacher attrition derive from a variety of factors. Educators face often insurmountable challenges in educating students in the United States. Teacher attrition



contributes to the challenges that states, districts, and schools face in the charge to educate all children. The categories of the theory of teacher attrition provided a lens for the analysis of attrition in this descriptive case study. The implications of this study lay out specific recommendations for stakeholders to consider when dedicating resources to combat attrition in Oklahoma.

*For Legislators and State Education Agencies*

The adverse influences of teacher attrition lie in part with legislators in the funding and certification pathways. The research indicated that school funding played a role in the decision for teachers to leave the profession. When states face budget cuts education suffers and the trickle-down effect leads to teacher attrition. In 2020, Oklahoma faced a projected \$1.4 billion shortfall resulting in a 2.5% decline in education funding (Southern Regional Education Board, 2020). Legislators worked to lessen the impact on k–12 education by redirecting money from other funds. Lawmakers additionally moved forward legislation that allowed for additional time added for teachers holding emergency or provisional certificates to meet certification requirements (Southern Regional Education Board, 2020). While legislators make strides to improve the funding of education, the fact remains that the gap between the needs of teachers and what the state perceives still exists. Legislators must accept and address the fact that teacher pay continues to impact the decision for teachers to leave the profession as evidenced in this study although pay does not singularly cause teachers to leave the profession. Insufficient school funding to do the job effectively plays a role in the attrition rate as well. According to Fine (2019b), Oklahoma sits low in the rankings on per pupil spending. The

lack of funds dedicated to schools coupled with being one of the lowest teacher salary bases in the region makes leaving education in Oklahoma a simple decision.

In addition to inadequate funding for salaries, teachers coming to the profession through alternative pathways often feel ill-equipped to step into the classroom. They lack much of the pedagogical knowledge that teachers that come through collegiate teacher preparation programs already possess. This puts alternatively certified teachers at an even greater disadvantage and increases the potential of leaving the profession quickly. State departments of education see the need for more educators, and with lower enrollment in teacher preparation programs, alternative pathways to teaching help fill vacancies. Getting teachers certified must include pedagogical and other instructional preparation for those who lack it prior to standing in front of students in the classroom. Capel et al. (2015) indicate that pre-service education improves teacher competence and enables them to acquire knowledge in education foundations, subject area, and pedagogy; skills for effective practice; and attitudes that embody professional teaching values.

#### *For District Leaders*

A renewed focus on onboarding and orientation practices needs an overhaul for districts to attract and retain teacher talent. It takes more than a general welcome to get new teachers to a place where they feel confident about their success in the classroom. In the literature, Shockley et al. (2006) indicated that districts with excellent teacher retention attributed their success to strategic and intentional induction and mentoring programs. District leaders must become more vigilant in attracting new talent and equipping them with relevant and valuable tools for the classroom. The one-size-fits-all orientation often leaves new teachers with more questions than answers. Shockley et al.

(2006) additionally stated that districts with strong and supported teacher induction and mentor programs positively impact teachers and retention rates. Hope for improved teacher retention in Oklahoma remains if district and school leaders make strategic and dedicated planning and resource allocation to educators a priority.

#### *For School Administrators*

School administrators serve as the instructional leaders. As such, the charge for school administration support of teachers remains vital to teacher retention. Experts consider teachers with less than five years of experience to still be learning their craft further supporting the importance of the role of school administrators as instructional leaders (Headden, 2014). Staff and students look to the people in these roles to be the beacon of educational practices in the school building. School administration in today's schools requires more than just the management of people. School administrators serve as instructional leaders as they play a key role in teachers' success and growth (Goldrick, 2016). To combat attrition, school administrators need to develop dedicated instructional support and provide mentorship to teachers at the local level. Headden (2014) indicates "it's not money, or lack of it, that's causing most teachers to leave. The primary driver of the exodus of early career teacher is a lack of administrative and professional support" (p. 5). To provide this support to teachers, school administrators must focus on professional learning that improves their leadership practice as well as providing intentional professional development, support, and actionable evaluation feedback to their staff.

#### *Conclusion and Summary*

Teacher attrition makes providing students entitled to a free appropriate public education in the United States challenging. Teacher attrition in Oklahoma exceeds the

national attrition rate, posing an even greater challenge to public education in the state. Still the charge remains to educate children. Doing more with less proves to be next to impossible but remains a continued expectation of educators. Consequently, the need to reduce teacher attrition through means that address larger issues such as school funding, teacher orientation and mentorship, and strong school administration remains paramount. The literature associated with this study indicates the problem of teacher attrition remains constant. To improve the problem, stakeholders must utilize the data surrounding attrition to inform legislation and other practices impacting public education.

The descriptive single-case study methodology provided the structural format for this study. The bounds for the study required participants meet a predetermined set of criteria for participation. Participants engaged in a semi-structured interview which I used to gather and deconstruct data to analyze in relation to the research questions. Key findings in this study indicate that participants left the profession largely due to factors related to human capital and uncertain or incomplete information components in the theory of teacher attrition. An intriguing finding in this research that did not link to a specific component in the a priori theoretical framework was that no matter how the teacher came to the education profession, none of the participants ever truly planned to retire from the profession.

Multiple stakeholder groups hold various levels of responsibility for teacher attrition. Individually, these stakeholders influence attrition in a variety of ways. The charge for each of these stakeholder groups requires accountability for areas over which they hold oversight. Collectively, these stakeholder groups must engage in more vertical

alignment practices that indicate their contribution points and how each group supports the other in the reduction of teacher attrition in Oklahoma.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Distribution of Findings

#### *Executive Summary*

To provide a free, appropriate, public education effectively and efficiently to students in the United States, schools need teachers. A complication schools face with meeting the charge of educating students in the United States comes in the form of teacher attrition. Nationally, the teacher attrition rate stands at 8%. While all career fields experience attrition, teacher attrition exceeds that of other degree requiring career fields including nursing and engineering, creating a far reaching concern for education agencies (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). This study focused on the attrition rate of teachers in Oklahoma. As a state, the attrition rate in Oklahoma averages 9% exceeding the national average. With the intent to counteract the impact of this 9% attrition rate, the Oklahoma State Department of Education continues to approve a growing number of alternative and emergency teaching certifications. This attempt to counteract the diminishing teacher workforce lacks the teacher preparation components vital to preparing teachers for a successful and positive experience.

The challenges Oklahoma schools face with teacher attrition called for further research on the phenomenon. The literature on teacher attrition in the United States is readily available, yet there is little that can be found concerning the higher attrition rate in Oklahoma. The purpose of this study was to contribute to the gap in the literature on the matter of teacher attrition through the exploration of the lived experiences of teachers who left the profession pre-retirement and the specific factors influencing their decisions.

### *Overview of Data Collection and Analysis Procedures*

To explore the phenomenon of teacher attrition in Oklahoma, I used the qualitative research approach. Qualitative research allowed me to “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). I specifically utilized the descriptive single-case study approach with an a priori theoretical framework. The theory of teacher attrition served as the theoretical framework of the study, which focused on teacher attrition in a large, urban school district in Oklahoma. Using the methodology for a descriptive single-case study, I secured the voluntary participation of four former public-school teachers who taught in the target district during their tenure in the profession. All the teachers in the study taught between five and nine years.

The data collection portion of this study happened amidst a global pandemic. For safety and convenience, the interviews for the study took place via a web-based video conferencing tool. I used a semi-structured interview data collection process. Following the interviews, I used Yin’s five phase analytical cycle to disaggregate the data. The phases of this analysis cycle include compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (Yin, 2016). I utilized in vivo coding and thematic analysis throughout the data analysis process. The themes and findings in the research arose from the collective analysis of the lived experiences of each participant in the study.

### *Summary of Key Findings*

The key findings of this study yielded some expected as well as some unexpected results. Each participant’s personal story contained details on how they got started in teaching and how their teaching career ended. The details between the beginning and the

end of each story produced data points that linked to one or more of the components in the theory of teacher attrition. The human capital approach, uncertain or incomplete information, life-cycle factors, and involuntary attrition make up the elements of the theory of teacher attrition. Each participant's recounting of their time in the profession revealed multiple connections to one or more of the components of the theoretical framework for the study. Emergent themes in the data indicated that participants shared common experiences related to the areas of low-to-no impact orientation, ineffective or non-existent mentorship, disconnected or absentee school administration, workload, and "bait and switch" situations during their tenure as teachers that ultimately played a role in their decision to leave the profession.

To end each interview, I asked each participant if they ever planned to return to teaching at any point in the future. Seventy-five percent of the participants said they did not intend to return to teaching. Some participants indicated that if some things were different during their time teaching, they may have stayed longer, but overall, the decision to leave teaching and not return was predominant. The most intriguing and unexpected finding of this study emanated from the discovery that none of the participants ever really planned to retire from teaching from the onset in the career.

### *Informed Recommendations*

The results of this study on teacher attrition in Oklahoma produced recommendations for various stakeholder groups. This section contains informed recommendations for stakeholder groups including legislators, state education agencies, district leaders, and school administrators. These stakeholder groups each hold decision making powers that directly and indirectly impact education. Some of these decisions can



help or harm the teacher attrition rate in the state. The information from this study can help stakeholders make more informed decisions regarding the aspects of education in which they have direct influence.

*For legislators and state education agencies.* Providing an education to all students continues as the charge of public schools in the United States. This charge requires teachers to be in classrooms. Legislators and the State Department of Education must do more to strategically plan to tackle the problem of teacher attrition in Oklahoma. Legislators need to make the commitment to ensure adequate funding for education is a priority. Funding education not only means increasing teacher salaries but also includes increasing per pupil spending. The State Department of Education must realize that increasing the number of alternative and emergency teaching certificates provides a temporary solution to a persisting problem. Making the qualifications to become a teacher easier only contributes to teacher attrition in the long run. To make true and lasting change, the root cause of attrition must be analyzed, and solutions devised to disrupt the status quo and improve the future of education for Oklahoma's children.

*For district leaders.* To recruit and hire new teachers costs money. Districts spend more money on recruitment and hiring than they do on professional development and mentorship. Districts must prioritize making the new hire onboarding and orientation experience ones that proves valuable to new teachers. To do this, district leaders must elicit feedback from new teachers about the current orientation processes and utilize that information to continue to improve and evolve in this area. Improving the new hire

experience to give new teachers what they need to be successful can lead to improved retention rates.

*For school administrators.* School administrators hold the position of not only managing the happenings in the school, but also for being the instructional leaders. New teachers need and want to know that their school administrators find their success in the classroom important. When school administrators provide intentional support to teachers, their feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty decrease. To create a positive environment for new teachers, school administrators should ensure a solid mentorship program is in place and the opportunity for professional learning abounds.

#### *Findings Distribution Proposal*

Describing the lived experiences of former Oklahoma teachers and identifying specific factors contributing to the decision to leave the profession served as the basis for this study. The teacher attrition rate in Oklahoma stands at 9% while nationally teacher attrition holds at 8%. Because of the disparity in the attrition rate between Oklahoma and the nation, findings for this study serve to inform stakeholder groups of the problem the state currently faces and offer recommendations to address the issue. The section to follow delineates the plan to distribute the study's findings through the identification of the target audience, the methods and venues for distribution, and the related distribution materials to be used.

#### *Target Audience*

For this research to make an impact in the education community, the lived experiences of the participants must be shared with stakeholders. The research contains

information for various stakeholder groups that gives insight as to the influences impacting teacher attrition. This insight gives stakeholder groups an opportunity to use this information to promote change and ultimately to benefit the students in the Oklahoma public education system. The reach for this research includes, but is not limited to, legislators, state education agencies, district leaders, school administrators, and other education researchers. The actions resulting from access to the results of this study for these stakeholder groups creates prospects for positive, long-term effects on teacher attrition rates.

The findings of this research provide each of the identified stakeholder groups a lens from which there comes an opportunity to influence change. Legislators hold the key to school funding. This group of individuals needs to be attuned to how decisions they make with education funding ultimately contributes to the attrition rate of teachers in Oklahoma. For the State Department of Education, the findings of this research suggest the need to work more intentionally with colleges of education to provide greater support for new teachers, especially those coming to education through alternative certification pathways. District leaders and school administrators must come to terms with the findings that identify the gaps in supporting teachers and strategically plan to reduce attrition at the local level.

#### *Proposed Distribution Method and Venue*

Distribution of the findings for this study means tapping into avenues that reach the target audiences for the study. One such avenue comes through publications for educators at the national, district, and state levels. The Cooperative Council for Oklahoma School (CCOSA) Administration is one such avenue to share the findings for

this study through their quarterly publication *Better Schools: Fundamental Resources and Editorials for School Administrators*. An additional distribution option for the findings in this study is through the publication of a white paper through open access resources hosted by SAGE Publications. This publication resource option creates the possibility for the research findings in this study to go beyond Oklahoma, contributing to the body of literature on teacher attrition on a grander scale. Another study distribution opportunity comes through membership in the American Association of School Personnel Administrators (AASPA). The American Association of School Personnel Administrators (2021) is an organization for school and district administrators and individuals who work with school personnel in other capacities or functions including those involved with teacher certification, educational research, or school administrator training. Developing a presentation on the findings of this study to be shared at a conference through this organization increases the reach and potential impact for those involved with education on a variety of fronts.

#### *Distribution Materials*

To effectively distribute the findings in the afore mentioned academic and industry publications, the study information will take different forms. For the CCOSA magazine publication, an infographic for the study can be submitted. Through this publishing approach therein lies the potential to reach the nearly three thousand members of the organization in Oklahoma. The submission of a white paper to SAGE Open Access creates a channel for distribution of the findings in the study to potentially international education audiences. Distribution of findings through AASPA include opportunities for

members to submit blogs and articles as well as through webinars, Human Resources leadership summits, and conferences.

### *Conclusion*

The focus of this study centered on the phenomenon of teacher attrition in Oklahoma. The data collection and data analysis led to key findings for consideration by various stakeholder groups. These key findings and recommendations provide stakeholders with research-based considerations to address the teacher attrition conundrum in the state. The research for this study can be readily distributed in several ways to contribute further to the exploration of solutions to teacher attrition in Oklahoma. Through a variety of distribution outlets this research has the potential to reach educators not only across Oklahoma, but also across the United States and beyond.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Informed Consent

Baylor University

Title of Research Project: Leaving Education Questionnaire

Name of Principal Investigator: Romel Muex

Faculty Advisor: Sandra Talbert, EdD

Phone number of Principal Investigator: [REDACTED]

#### A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Romel Muex, a doctoral student in the Learning and Organizational Change doctoral program at Baylor University is conducting research on teacher attrition in Oklahoma. The purpose of your participation in this research is to help the researcher examine and describe the lived experiences of former fully certified teachers that left the profession. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a former fully Oklahoma certified teacher in the school district selected as the sample site.

#### B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- Each participant will complete a pre-interview questionnaire sent electronically via a Google Forms link to gather information on certification background and general teaching history taking no longer than 10 minutes to complete.
- A semi-structured interview via a web-based video conferencing application will be conducted lasting no longer than one hour. The interview will consist of questions related to the participants' teaching experiences and what went into the decision to leave the profession.

#### C. RISKS

Because of your participation in this study, you are exposed to minimal risk of the following side effects.

- Some of the questions you will be asked as part of this study may make you feel uncomfortable. You may refuse to answer any of these questions, take a break, or stop your participation in this study at any time.
- Any time information is collected, there is a potential loss of confidentiality. Every effort will be made to keep your information confidential, however this cannot be guaranteed.

- There may possibly be other risks that are unknown at this time. If you are concerned about other unknown risks, please discuss this with the primary investigator.

**D. CONFIDENTIALITY**

The records from this study will be kept as confidential as possible. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. All questionnaire, video and audio recordings, transcripts, summaries, and any other associated data will be given codes and stored separately from any names or other direct identification of participants. Research information will be kept in secure files at all times. Only the principal investigator will have access to the research data and only those with an essential need to see names or other identifying information will have access to any specified files. At the conclusion of this study all digital and hard copies of forms, notes, and other data associated with the study will be destroyed and/or deleted from digital storage.

**E. BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION**

The direct benefit to you from participation in this research study will come in the form of a \$15 Amazon digital gift card to be emailed to you at the conclusion of the study. The anticipated benefit of your participation in this study is to contribute to the literature on teacher attrition in Oklahoma to impact change and inform future decisions on teacher retention practices.

**F. VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Your decision whether or not to participate in this study is voluntary and will not affect your relationship with Baylor University. If you choose to participate in this study, you can withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

**G. QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Romel Muex by calling [REDACTED]. You can also contact [Baylor IRB] with any questions about the rights of research participants or research related concerns.

**CONSENT**

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE BELOW INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICPATE IN THE STUDY AFTER READING ALL OF THE INFORMATION ABOVE AND YOU UNDERSTAND THE INFORMATION IN THIS FORM, HAVE HAD ANY QUESTIONS ANSWERED, AND HAVE RECEIVED A COPY OF THIS FORM FOR YOU TO KEEP.



Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Participant

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer

## APPENDIX B

### Pre-Interview Questionnaire

# Leaving Education Questionnaire

A component of this study includes this pre-interview questionnaire. Your name is asked for on this questionnaire only to keep information separated until anonymous interview ID tags can be assigned. Once those tags are assigned, your name will be replaced with that tag on all data collected and referred to throughout the study. Thank you for volunteering to participate.

\* Required

Name (first/last) \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

What path did you take to become a teacher? \*

- Traditional route-I have a degree in education and completed a teacher preparation at a college/univeristy
- Alternative route-I have a degree in a field other than education and I obtained my certification through alternative certification procedures.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any degrees beyond a bachelors? \*

- Yes
- No

If you answered yes what additional degrees do you hold?

Your answer

---

Is your Oklahoma teaching certificate expired? \*

- Yes
- No


If yes, when did your certificate expire?

Date

mm/dd/yyyy 

If no, when does your certificate expire?

Date

mm/dd/yyyy 

What certifications do you hold? \*

- Early Childhood
- Elementary Education
- Middle Level Education
- Secondary Education

If you hold any secondary certifications, indicate the subject areas below:

Your answer

---

Do you hold a certification in school administration? \*

Yes

No

If you answered 'yes' to the previous question, what administration certifications do you hold?

Elementary

Middle Level

Secondary

Do you hold a superintendent's certification? \*

Yes

No

When did you begin teaching with the school district? \*


Date

mm/dd/yyyy 

---

When did you stop teaching for the school district? \*

Date

mm/dd/yyyy 

Did you teach in another district when you left this district? \*

Yes

No

If you answered 'yes' to the previous question, how long did you continue teaching after leaving this district?

Your answer

What subjects/grades did you teach during your tenure as a teacher? \*

Your answer

If you were a secondary teacher (middle/high school) did you have multiple preps during the course of a school year?

Yes

No

If you were a secondary teacher (middle/high school) did you have multiple preps during the course of a school year?

Yes

No

If you answered 'yes' to the previous question, what courses did you teach?

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

At this time, do you think you will return to teaching in a k-12 public school before retirement? \*

Yes

No

**Submit**

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Protocol

Script to begin interview:

*Thank you for your willingness to participate in my study. I look forward to hearing more from you about your time as a teacher during this interview. As mentioned previously my study seeks to examine and describe what factors influence teachers to leave the profession pre-retirement in Oklahoma. I also aim to examine and describe the lived experiences of former teachers that left the profession pre-retirement. The ultimate goal of this study is to give the problem of teacher attrition in Oklahoma a voice that will provide stakeholders a different perspective of why teachers leave that number data doesn't convey in quite the same way.*

[review key points of the consent form]

*Prior to this interview you completed a consent form indicating that I have your permission to video and audio record our conversation. Do I still have your permission to record this interview?*

*If yes: Thank you for your confirmation of permission. If at any point during the interview you would like me to stop recording or keep something off the record, please let me know.*

*If no: Thank you for making me aware of your preference. I will only take notes of our conversation.*

*Before we get started with the interview, do you have any questions? [Answer any questions]*

*If at any point you have questions during the interview, I want you to feel free to ask them at any time.*

Primary research question: what factors influence teachers to leave the profession pre-retirement in Oklahoma?

Secondary research question: what are the lived experiences of former teachers that left the profession pre-retirement?

Question 1: Let's begin by talking about what brought you to the teaching profession. When did you make that decision? What was going on in your life? *Follow-up:* Do you have educators in your family?

Question 2: Tell me about what brought you to district 5.

Question 3: How would you describe your first year teaching in district 5? *Follow-up:* [If the first year was challenging] What made you stay?

Question 4: Do you think your path to teaching prepared you for your first classroom experience? [If yes] How so? [If no] Who and/or what were your biggest resources when you began?

Question 5: What were some of the rewarding aspects of teaching? What were some of the challenging aspects?

Question 6: In your questionnaire response you indicated that you had [refer to details of teaching included in questionnaire].

Question 7: Tell me about that last year you were in the classroom. What was that like for you?

Question 8: Describe what went into the decision to quit teaching. Did you consult anyone? What was that conversation like? How did it go when you told your school administrator you were no longer going to teach?

Question 9: How long has it been since you left teaching? Do you miss it? Do you think you'll ever return to the classroom?

Interview wrap-up:

*Those are all the questions I have for you. I will complete a summary of our time together and will contact you to verify that the information I've summarized is accurate. This will help support the validity of my study. I thank you again for your time and appreciate your participation in this study.*



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