WHY ARE MID-CAREER TEACHERS LEAVING THE PROFESSION?

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Ashland University
WHY ARE MID-CAREER TEACHERS LEAVING THE PROFESSION?

By

Laura Hartsel

Ashland University, 2016

James Olive, Ph.D.

This study explored the factors that contribute to mid-career teacher attrition. A secondary focus was to explore how recent policy initiatives have impacted mid-career teacher attrition. Preexisting literature focuses on the attrition of beginning teachers, largely ignoring the problem of experienced teachers leaving the field. This study advances our understanding of the attrition problem and addresses the identified gap in the literature. A multiple case study design, wherein, seven former teachers who recently left teaching during the mid-career stage were interviewed. Additionally, two administrators served as supporting participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and field notes. Four themes emerged from the in-depth analysis of data: (a) psychological contract violations due to policy implementation, (b) leadership/administrative support, (c) lack of work-life balance, (d) feeling disrespect and devalued. These findings, their implications, and suggestions for future research are discussed.
DEDICATION

To my husband, Paul, who has always encouraged me to pursue my goals. Thank you for providing me with my “writing time,” listening to my ideas, and being a wonderful partner and father. Embedded in the words on these pages is my endless love for you. To my beautiful daughter, Sophia, who has brought such joy to my life, and my soon-to-be son, Spencer, whom I cannot wait to hold in my arms - I hope you always know the value of hard work, commitment, and learning. Always dream big, my loves. To my parents, Tony and Cathy, who continuously demonstrate and instill the importance of life-long learning. Thank you for your enduring love and constant support.
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CHAPTER I

Teacher attrition is a growing problem in the United States. The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (Barnes, Crowe, & NCTAF, 2007) estimated the attrition rate of teachers had grown by 50 percent from 1992-2007. The United States Department of Education’s Follow-up Survey also demonstrates a growth in teacher attrition. During the 1991-1992 school year, the percent of teachers leaving the teaching profession was 5.1%. During the 2012-2013 school, the percent leaving was nearly 8 percent (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014). The Alliance for Education reports a teacher turnover rate of about 20 percent (Haynes, 2014). These numbers support the Consortium for Policy Research in Education’s statement that the teaching force demonstrates a trend of being less stable (Ingersoll & Merill, 2013).

Although some attrition is always necessary due to the removal of ineffective employees and retirements, the teacher attrition issue has been shown to envelop a larger problem. For example, the United States Department of Education’s Teacher Follow-up Survey examined the characteristics of teachers who left the profession (Marvel, Lyter, Peltola, Strizek, Morton, & Rowland, 2007). Of the teachers who left in the 2003-2004 school year, 30 percent were retirees whereas 56 percent cited job satisfaction as their reason for leaving. More recently, according to Goldring et al. (2014) nearly 51 percent of public school teachers who left education in 2012-2013 reported the manageability of their workload was better in their new position than in teaching. Additionally, 53 percent of those who left education during the 2012-2013 school year reported that their general work conditions were better in their new position than in teaching (Goldring et al., 2014).

The growing sense of job dissatisfaction is an indicator of an emerging phenomenon of mid-career teachers opting out of the career (Kopkowski, 2008; Santoro, 2011a; Santoro, 2011b;
Tye & O’Brien, 2002). Mid-career teachers are those who have amassed experience and a degree of stability and security through tenure and seniority. They, therefore, risk the loss of human capital when leaving the profession. Mid-career teachers have been teaching for more than five years since beginning, or novice, teachers are often defined as those with one to five years of experience. Mid-career teachers also have several years of service before being able to retire with full pension benefits.

The costs of mid-career teacher attrition are substantial. Local school districts must continually fund recruitment, hiring, induction, and mentoring costs for new teachers due to attrition. Beyond the financial losses, which NACTF (2007) estimates to be a national debt of seven billion dollars a year, there are the losses of teacher quality and effectiveness. Such losses impact student learning and achievement (Carroll & Foster, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Huang & Moon, 2009; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain 2005). Darling-Hammond (2000) found that well-prepared, skilled, and efficient teachers have the largest impact on student learning. These characteristics are often forged through experience (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Other studies have surmised that teacher effectiveness increases with years of experience (Huang & Moon, 2009; Kain & Singleton, 1996; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain 2005). In fact, Huang (2009) found that additional years of teaching experience at the same grade level directly correlates with student achievement for up to 20 years of teaching experience. Although achievement gains drop after 21 years of experience, Huang (2009) found that a 30-year veteran at the same grade level is more effective than teachers in their first ten years of practice. Such studies demonstrate that teaching experience impacts student achievement. As such, teacher attrition may have a negative impact on student achievement.
Furthering the problem, there is a disproportionate impact of teacher attrition on student achievement on schools serving high poverty, minority, low achieving, and special needs students (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Barnes, Crowe, & NCTAF, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2003). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2014) reports the rate of attrition is roughly 50 percent higher in poor schools than in wealthier ones. In a pilot study investigating the cost of teacher turnover in two urban, one suburban, and two rural school district, Barnes et al. (2007) concluded that while the costs of teacher turnover are high for every district, at-risk schools are even more vulnerable to the high costs associated with attrition. This study found that while the costs vary depending on type of school district, the recruitment, hiring, and training of replacement teachers represent a substantial proportion of a school district’s budget. Moreover, the attrition in low performing, high minority, and high poverty schools exhausts already scarce resources. Rather than investing in educational resources to increase teacher effectiveness and student growth, money is spent on the revolving door of teacher hiring and teacher leaving. This proverbial revolving door leads to under-qualified teachers in the classrooms most in need of effective teachers. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2014) reports disadvantaged students have only a 50 percent chance of being taught math and science by a highly qualified teacher. Such findings are echoed in Secretary of Education, Duncan’s (2010) statement that “the challenge to our schools is not just a looming teacher shortage, but rather a shortage of great teachers in the schools and communities where they are needed most” (p. 14). Therefore, the loss of mid-career teachers, those with the professional acumen developed through classroom experiences, places additional strains on disadvantaged schools already struggling to provide an effective and equitable education (Darling-Hammond, 2007).
Statement of the Problem

Given the persisting student achievement gap, there is a need for experienced teachers. Yet, most of the current literature has focused on beginning teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2003; DeAngelis & Presely, 2011; Henke & Zahn, 2001; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005 Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Wong, 2004). The reason for this attention is the relatively high percentage of beginning teachers who leave the profession within their first five years. These numbers vary depending on the study. Darling-Hammond (2003), for example, estimated 33% of new teachers leave the profession within five years. Ingersoll (2003) and Smith and Ingersoll (2004) stated that attrition rates for novice teachers were between 40 and 50% during the first five years. It is widely believed that teacher attrition follows a U-shaped curve in which the attrition rate is high for beginning teachers, low for mid-career teachers, and high again for older teachers approaching retirement (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1989; Shen, 1997). Historically, mid-career teachers have been the least likely to leave, but recent studies have suggested that this model may not typify current trends (Kopkowski, 2008; Santoro, 2011a; Santoro, 2011b; Tye & O’Brien, 2002). Mid-career teachers are leaving the profession and there is a lack of knowledge regarding this issue. Thus, this study will address this gap in the literature regarding teacher attrition by focusing on mid-career teachers’ decisions to leave the profession.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons why mid-career teachers, with their much needed skills and knowledge, have chosen to leave the profession. The study sought to explore why mid-career teachers are leaving when research (Darling-Hammond, 2003;
DeAngelis & Presely, 2011; Henke & Zahn, 2001; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Wong, 2004) has demonstrated that most teaching professionals who make it past their first five years remain in the profession. Given the high financial and academic costs associated with mid-career teacher attrition, this study has policy implications for school districts or government agencies seeking to retain experienced educators.

**Research Question**

The main focus of this study was to develop an understanding of mid-career teachers’ decision to leave the field of education. This study sought to answer the research question: What influences mid-career teachers’ decision to leave the profession? Additionally, the study explored the sub-question: What is the role of federal, state, and local policy in teacher attrition?

**Significance of Study**

The attrition of mid-career teachers creates an economic and educational burden on America’s schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Carolle & Foster, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Huang, 2009; NCATF, 2007; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain 2005). Most efforts to decrease attrition have been directed toward novice teachers through induction and mentoring programs (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; DeAngelis & Presely, 2011; Henke & Zahn, 2001; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Wong, 2004). Less effort has been directed at understanding the attrition of more experienced teachers (Corr, 2009). This study sought to narrow the knowledge gap in this field of study by focusing on the attrition of mid-career teachers. Further, due to the high costs associated with mid-career teacher attrition,
this study has policy implications for school districts, local, state, and federal agencies seeking to retain experienced educators.

**Definition of Terms**

*Teacher attrition:* The action of teachers leaving the teaching occupation (Ingersoll, 2000).

*Autonomy:* worker control (Everitt, 2005; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). In education, autonomy often refers to teachers’ ability to govern their own classroom, choose curriculum, and select pedagogical practices.

*Burnout:* a “prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001, p. 397).

*Demoralization:* The inability to access the moral rewards of one’s jobs resulting in an ethical crisis (Santoro, 2011a).

*Human capital:* “the knowledge, skills competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social, and economic well-being: (Keeley, 2007).

*Mid-career teacher:* a teacher with more than five years of teaching experience who lacks enough years of service to retire with full pension benefits.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study was impacted by delimitations and limitations. The delimitations limit the scope and define the boundaries for the study whereas the limitations are factors and potential weaknesses that are not within the researcher’s control.
Delimitations

This study is delimited to six K-12 teachers from Ohio public schools. Participants have more than five years of classroom experience, and have voluntarily left public education within the last five years. This time frame was chosen to provide data regarding recent education reform initiatives such as Race to the Top. Other studies have correlated education reforms, such as accountability efforts, to poor teacher job satisfaction (Santoro, 2011a; Santoro, 2011b; Tye & O’Brien, 2002). Therefore, this study caught to include the impact of the most recent and pervasive reforms that may have influenced a teacher’s decision to leave.

The exclusion of teachers who left teaching to pursue school administrative roles was purposefully excluded because this is often viewed as a natural career progression in the field of education. This study specifically focuses on individuals who left the field of education to pursue a different career field.

Limitations

This study will used a small sample size and abbreviated time frame for gathering data. Other than gender, this study did not consider demographic variables such as age or race and ethnicity. It also did not attempt to delineate between effective and ineffective teachers. It is unknown whether the teachers who left teaching were considered by their peers, pupils, students’ parents, or administrators to be effective. This is because determining teacher effectiveness is highly subjective.

Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to the study. The remainder of the study is organized into four chapters. Chapter II presents a review of related literature and includes the conceptual framework for the study. Chapter III provides the methodology, including the
research design, data gathering procedures, and data analysis method. Chapter IV consists of a discussion of the key findings. Chapter V presents a summary, conclusions, and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER II

The purpose of this study was to examine why mid-career teachers have chosen to leave the profession. A review of the current literature on teacher attrition was examined in this chapter. The majority of the current teacher attrition literature focuses on beginning teachers (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Henke & Zahn, 2001; Ingersoll, 2001, Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). To better understand mid-career teachers’ decision to leave the profession, it is necessary to expand an analysis of the current literature beyond teacher attrition studies. Therefore, four interconnected constructs frame the issue of mid-career teacher attrition and serve as a structure for this chapter. These constructs include: career cycle models, human capital theory, burnout, and Self Determination Theory (SDT). The theoretical framework underpinning this study will also be discussed.

Career Cycle Models

Teachers experience different stages at varying points in their careers. These stages are often characterized by factors such as attitudes, knowledge, behaviors, pedagogical skills, motivation, enthusiasm, and degree of commitment. Collectively, these stages are referred to as life cycles (Huberman, 1989) or career cycles (Fessler & Christensen, 1992). The study of teachers throughout their career cycle provides insight into the factors influencing a mid-career teacher’s decision to stay in teaching or leave the profession.

Huberman’s (1989) study of teachers in Switzerland drew upon life-cycle research from outside of education to posit a seven phase professional life consisting of the following stages: survival, stabilization, experimentation, reassessment, serenity, conservatism, and disengagement. According to Huberman, the life cycle is neither linear nor universal, but rather a process of career development. Most mid-career teachers will have advanced from the survival
stage, which is mostly comprised of beginning teachers, but may be identified in any of the other stages due to the fluid and dynamic nature of the phases. Descriptions of many of these stages indicate potential factors of dissatisfaction, burnout, and demoralization that may lead to an experienced teacher leaving the field. In the experimentation phase, for example, Huberman described a teacher’s desire to increase one’s pedagogical impact. This desire, however, causes the individual to become increasingly aware of the “institutional barriers that are depressing or constraining such an impact” (Huberman, p. 34). Such feelings of impotence could explain a mid-career teacher’s decision to stop teaching. Further, during the reassessment stage there is a chance for feelings of monotony or disenchantment with the system if reform efforts are not successful. These feelings could also contribute to mid-career attrition.

Fessler and Christensen (1992) similarly described a nonlinear model, but also incorporated the interaction between organizational and personal environmental factors in their eight-stage model. The stages of their model include: a) preservice, in which the individual prepares to become a teacher usually at a higher education institution; b) induction, which describes a beginning teacher’s entrance into the profession; c) competency building, when the teacher improves pedagogical skill and pursues professional development; d) enthusiastic and growing, described as the time when the teacher reaches high level of mastery and skill; e) career frustration, when the teacher is disillusioned, discouraged, and questioning one’s career choice; f) career stability, when the teacher moves into a period of stagnation or renewal; g) career wind-down when the teacher prepares to exit; and h) career exit in which the teacher leaves the profession. Movement between these stages, according to Fessler and Christensen (1992) is influenced by personal environmental factors, such as family, individual dispositions, and critical
incidents. It is also impacted by organizational environmental factors, such as the public’s trust, societal expectations, organizational leadership, and regulations.

Fessler and Christensen’s (1992) contribution of the interplay between personal and organizational environmental factors contributes to the understanding of the multidimensional, and sometimes converging, factors that can motivate or frustrate a teacher. According to this model an unsupportive and negative environment can have adverse effects on a teacher’s career development, the ultimate consequence of which is a teacher’s exit from the field. This model, consequently, helps to identify the personal and organizational variables that may prompt a teacher to withdraw from education as a profession.

Although both Huberman’s (1989) and Fessler and Christensen’s (1992) models differed in the number of identified stages and the defining characteristics of each phase, they agree on several points such as the nonlinear nature of progression and of the existence of a first stage in which beginning teachers must “survive.” Further, both models describe stages in which feelings of dissatisfaction, disillusionment, and disenchantment are present. These feelings may be useful in explaining why mid-career teachers leave the profession, however, an important question remains. Given that these models typify the professional life cycle of teachers, then it is reasonable to assume most teachers experience similar sentiments at some point in their career. If most teachers experience similar frustrating feelings, why don’t most teachers leave the profession?

Teacher attrition is an acknowledged problem, especially among novice teachers. Researchers provide differing percentages for attrition, but all agree that it is highest with beginning teachers. Darling-Hammond (2003) estimated 33% of new teachers leave the profession within five years. Ingersoll (2003) and Smith and Ingersoll (2004) stated that attrition
rates for novice teachers were between 40 and 50% during the first five years. Attrition rates for mid-career and veteran teachers dramatically decline (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1989; Shen, 1997). Therefore, the majority of mid-career teachers do not leave the profession in spite of the presence of the frustrations associated with the typical career cycle stages. Therefore, other elements must be explored to better understand mid-career attrition.

**Human Capital Theory**

Research suggests salary plays a critical role in teacher attrition (Flowers, 2003; Hoxby & Leigh, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Liu & Meyer, 2005; Shen, 1997). Low pay, for example, is often cited as a cause of dissatisfaction (Ingersoll, 2001; Liu & Meyer, 2005). Flowers (2003) connected salary with attrition in a study of 50 randomly selected former teachers in Texas who had just left the profession. The study sought to identify the most significant reasons why public school teachers leave the profession. Flowers reported that low salary was the most identified factor. Flowers also identified factors that would attract former teachers to return to the profession, and the top three reasons were monetary: increased salary, modified retirement rules allowing individuals to draw upon their pensions without penalty, and tuition reimbursement for professional development. Other studies such as Hoxby and Leigh (2004) and Shen (1997) suggest similar findings regarding the role of salary in teachers’ decisions to stay and that the amount of salary positively correlated with teacher retention.

Research on mid-career attrition has shown it to be relatively low due to the impact of human capital (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1989; Shen, 1997). Human capital theory posits that individuals choose to enter and stay in a profession after systematically assessing the monetary and non-monetary costs and benefits (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987). Teacher attrition, according to this model, tends to follow a U-shaped curve in which the
attrition rate is high for beginning teachers, low for mid-career teachers, and high again for older teachers approaching retirement (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Shen, 1997). The hypothesized reason for this U-shape is the accumulation of occupation-specific human capital. The more specific human capital that is accumulated, the lower the probability of attrition. Thus, attrition is more likely to occur early in a career. Conversely, mid-career teachers have amassed expansive specific human capital resulting in a decreased likelihood of finding an equivalent salary in a different field, and ultimately, a lower mid-career attrition rate (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987). Completing the U-shaped curve model, veteran teachers are more likely to profit from retirement benefits and will choose to leave the profession.

Murnane, Singer, and Willett (1989) suggested the more a teacher earns, the more likely he or she is to stay in teaching. Salary is a significant predictor of attrition for beginning teachers, but “the importance of salary in predicting whether a teacher leaves teaching declines, and by year eight, disappears entirely” (Murnane, Singer, & Willett, p. 336). Further, other research suggests salary may not be the reason why teachers leave the profession. Scafidi, Sjoquist, and Stinebrickner’s (2006) findings, for example, indicated that teachers are not leaving the profession for higher paying jobs in alternative professions. This study did not speculate as to why teachers are leaving except to hypothesize that a teacher’s decision to leave may be motivated by the attractiveness of a higher paying job. This finding is supported by the U.S. Departments of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 1997 report about teacher attrition in which only 6.5 percent reported leaving teaching for better salary or benefits. Such research suggests salary is not a significant factor in mid-career attrition.

Tye and O’Brien (2002) concluded the potential losses of wages, seniority, and tenure for experienced teachers are often perceived to be too great and act as an incentive to stay in the
profession. However, the authors also argued the work environment, within the current context of educational mandates and accountability, is causing a negative shift in teacher’s notions of the costs and benefits of leaving the profession. Salary was listed as the least important reason among respondents who had already left teaching. Work conditions, such as accountability and paperwork, were the leading reasons. These work condition factors led the authors to surmise that “it was the work environment itself that ultimately proved unbearable” (Tye & O’Brien, 2002, p. 27).

Liu and Meyer’s (2005) analysis also discussed the role of work conditions in a teacher’s cost and benefit analysis. The analysis determined that while salary can play an influential role, it is less likely to be a factor in teacher attrition when other working conditions, such as student discipline, are satisfactory. When negative work conditions exist, teacher burnout can result, leading to teacher attrition.

**Teacher Burnout**

The literature on attrition often cites the phenomenon of burnout (Davidson, 2009; 1988). Burnout refers to a “prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001. p. 397). Research on burnout predominately defines it through three dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach et al., 2001). Also consistent in the burnout literature is the impact of situational factors, such as job characteristics, workplace conditions, and organizational features (Davidson, 2009; Hock, 1998; Maslach et al, 2001). Job characteristics often include issues such as job demands, workload, and time pressures. Workplace conditions include stressors such as an absence of resources, lack of supervisory or collegial support, and a deficiency of autonomy. Organizational features include hierarchical controls, operating rules, initiatives, and mandates (Maslach et al., 2001).
Also prominent in the burnout literature is the misfit between a person and the work environment. Leister and Maslach (2004), for example, created a model to determine the degree of mismatch between an individual and six domains of a job environment: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. These domains are consistent with other findings regarding working conditions that lead to teacher attrition. The following discussion correlates Leiter and Maslach’s (2004) model to general teacher attrition studies by focusing on the six domains of misfit.

**Workload**

According to Maslach et al., (2001), workload is most often connected to the burnout dimension of exhaustion. When the demands of the job exhausts an “individual’s energy to the extent that recovery becomes impossible,” there is a workload mismatch (Maslach et al, 2001, p. 414). Workload is often mentioned in the literature that seeks to define the workplace factors that contribute to attrition (Berryhill, Linney, & Fromework, 2009; Buchanan, 2010; Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2007; Davidson, 2009; Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2005; Tye & O’Brien, 2002).

Berryhill, Linney, and Fromework (2009) wrote that 80 percent of teachers reported having either too little time to complete tasks or having too many tasks to complete all of them. In a survey designed to better understand the discontent and attrition of California teachers, Tye and O’Brien (2002), reported that teachers who had already left ranked excessive paperwork as the second most important factor. Teachers still working in the classroom also ranked paperwork as the second most influential factor that would cause them to consider leaving (Tye & O’Brien, 2002).
Likewise, Buchanan (2010) cited workload as one of the factors that caused former teachers to leave the profession. Interviewing twenty-one ex-teachers, Buchanan (2010) found that workload included the nature of the task as well as the amount of work. Teachers often mentioned strains caused by accountability measures such as standardized tests, irrelevant meetings, and tasks that took away from instructional time. A 2007 report from the California Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning about retaining teachers presented similar findings. Bureaucratic impediments that cause “excessive paperwork, too many meetings, and frequent classroom interruptions” were the most oft-cited reason for leaving by dissatisfied teachers (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2007, p. 2).

In interviews with three middle school teachers, Davidson (2009) concluded that workload was one of the major stress-causing factors for teachers. Similarly, Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, and Meisels (2007) found that increased paperwork and assessments was a major stress factor. Their study, however, concluded that it was equally stressful for both teachers who leave the profession and those that stay. As the literature suggests, such stress can cause an unhealthy, elongated response that leads to exhaustion, a dimension of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

**Control**

When an individual lacks the control to accomplish their job in the manner they believe is most effective and productive, the person can experience burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Lack of control is most often related to the inefficacy dimension of burnout (Leister & Maslach, 2004). Since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act in 2001, teachers have experienced a lessening of control in their classrooms (Rubin, 2011; Santoro, 2011b; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009).
In a case study of an experienced teacher in an elementary school, Wills and Sandholtz (2009) analyzed how a teacher balanced the pressures of high-stakes testing with professional decision-making regarding students’ curricular needs. Despite the presence of a principal who supported teacher autonomy, the teacher in the case study often succumbed to the pressures of the high-stakes testing environment. Wills and Sandholtz (2009) described how the broader context influenced her professional judgment, referring to it as constrained professionalism. Even when given the opportunity to retain authority over curricular and pedagogical decisions, the teacher was routinely influenced by the policy contexts, demonstrating the lessening of control faced by teachers today.

The result of policies such as NCLB has been the standardization of curriculum and prescribed teaching practices. These are often top-down mandates that diminish teachers’ authority and often harm their desire to teach (Ohanian & Kovacs, 2007; Rubin, 2011). Santoro (2011b) describes how the “factory model of education” conflicts with teacher’s core beliefs about good teaching” (p. 2688).

Similar to the burnout research, the attrition studies often discuss teachers’ feelings of impotence and inefficacy (Berryhill et al., 2009; Rubin, 2011; Tye & O’Brien, 2002). Berryhill et al. (2009) reported that teacher’s described a lack of influence on student performance. This lack of influence did not stem from the teacher’s abilities, but rather environmental factors such as socioeconomic status and home issues (Berryhill et al., 2009). Tye and O’Brien (2002) chronicled their experiences of listening to experienced teachers “complaining with increasing bitterness about a changing work environment in the public schools” (p. 24). In open-ended surveys, teachers detailed their growing discontent with the accountability policies, leading Tye and O’Brien to conclude that associated pressures of these policies is “robbing teacher [sic] of
the basic satisfaction of work” (p. 28). Rubin (2011) furthers the discussion of the growing sense of inefficacy and impotence by teachers by describing how NCLB has caused demoralization and the “deprofessionalisation” of teachers (p. 408). According to Rubin (2011), standardization and scripted curriculums have deprived teachers of their professionalism. Such feelings are exasperated by policies such as NCLB that attempt to shame those who work in poor performing schools (Pallas, 2012).

**Reward**

In discussions of burnout, reward is not only financial, but also entails social and intrinsic rewards such as recognition and a sense of purpose (Leister & Maslach, 2004). The attrition literature also cites both monetary and non-monetary rewards as a factor in a teacher’s decision to leave the profession (Buchanan, 2010; Ng & Peter, 2010; Nieto, 2009). Because the role of financial factors was previously examined in the discussion of human capital theory, non-pecuniary considerations will be explored.

Ng and Peter (2010), in an analysis of alternatively licensed urban school teachers’ decisions to stay in teaching or leave, found that “psychic rewards” are one of the most notable reasons for both entering and leaving the profession. These rewards included altruistic feelings associated with making a difference in the lives of children and a sense of giving back to society (Ng & Peter, 2010). These findings are supported by Santoro’s (2011b) examination of the moral factors teachers associate with their profession. These include responsibilities to society, the profession, students, and the institution.

Other intrinsic rewards impacting teacher attrition stem from the perceived prestige or status of the profession. Buchanan (2010) reported that former teachers often commented on the lack of respect and lack of appreciation for the teaching profession in interviews with teachers.
who had recently left the profession. Similarly, Nieto (2009) observed an erosion of the status of the profession by society. This deterioration of societal status works to devalue the work of teachers and is therefore associated with the burnout dimension of inefficacy (Maslach et al., 2001).

**Community**

Leiter and Maslach (2004) also discuss a mismatch in membership of a community as a possible source for burnout. Community refers to “positive connections with others in the workplace” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 415). Positive connections create supportive and comfortable work environments. Conversely, isolation and the lack of positive social and professional connections can create negative feelings of frustration and resentment, resulting in an acrimonious work environment (Maslach et al., 2001). In education, community involves support from administration, colleagues, parents, and the community. Lack of support from these sources is often cited as a factor in teacher attrition (Buchanan, 2010; Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2007; Davidson, 2009; Ingersoll, 2001; Kersaint et al., 2007; Tye & O’Brien, 2002). One study analyzing the factors affecting teacher retention found that parent and community relationships had the strongest impact (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang 2005). Others suggest that administrative and colleague relations are most important (Ingersoll, 2001; Kersaint et al., 2007).

**Fairness**

A sense of community is bolstered when fairness is perceived (Maslach et al., 2001). In recent studies, the perception of a lack of fairness has evolved as a factor for teacher attrition. Pallas (2012), for example, argues that the public release of teacher evaluation scores is not only misleading, but also unfair given the lack of validity and reliability in the reporting mechanisms.
The release of these evaluation scores cause “shame and ridicule” and can drive teachers from the profession (p. 56).

Shapira-Lischchinksy and Rosenblatt (2009), analyzed the role of organizational justice, a term used to describe fairness in a workplace, on a teacher’s intent to leave. They found that “when teachers perceive the ethics of their organizations as dissatisfying, they may become less committed to their jobs and may react with dysfunctional work attitude such as considering leaving” (p. 729). The burnout literature suggests this dissatisfying sense of fairness causes exhaustion and cynicism (Leiter & Maslach, 2004).

Values

The final work environment domain of potential mismatch discussed by Leiter and Maslach (2004) is values. This requires an examination of ethics, principles, and moral choices. A discrepancy between an individual’s values and the tasks of the job can cause conflict and lead to burnout. The role of values is emerging as a prominent theme in recent attrition studies as teachers are describing irreconcilable differences between the principles of ethical teaching and the current job of teaching (Santoro, 2011a, 2011b; Vaughn, 2013).

Santoro (2011b) proposed a new category of teacher attrition called principled leavers. Drawing from the idea of conscientious objectors who refuse to participate in a war due to moral reasons, principled leavers withdraw from the teaching profession due to moral and ethical reasons. The thirteen experienced, and formerly committed, teachers from high poverty schools reported leaving after being forced to participate in pedagogical practices that were contrary to ethical teaching. Much of these practices were a result of federal and state policy changes.

Vaughn (2013) also discussed the role of values in describing teacher’s visions and the obstacles they face trying to enact their visions. The visions are based on the teacher’s principles
of good teaching. Exploring three teacher’s visions and the obstacles they faced through a case study design, Vaughn concluded, “there must be a balanced approach to district mandates and support for teachers to teach according to their visions” (p. 130). Otherwise, disillusionment occurs, causing some, like one participant in the case study, to leave.

As discussed above, the six domains of a job environment that help to describe the misfit between a person and the work environment correlates with the general teacher attrition literature. Factors related to workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values are prominent in studies regarding attrition. When a teacher feels a mismatch with any of these six domains, the individual may experience the phenomenon of burnout. Such an experience can lead to exhaustion, cynicism, inefficacy, and ultimately, the decision to abandon the source of such a mismatch by leaving (Maslach et al., 2001).

**Burnout Summary**

The response to chronic and prolonged stress on the job can lead to the phenomenon of burnout. Burnout often presents itself in the form of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach et al., 2001). A mismatch between the work environment and the worker is a potential source of burnout. Leister and Maslach’s (2004) model discusses the six domains of the work environment in which a potential mismatch may occur. These domains are workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. These domains are consistent with general teacher attrition studies that discuss dissatisfaction with work conditions, suggesting a potential relationship between teacher attrition and burnout.

**Psychological Contracts**

Leiter and Maslach’s (2004) model of the six domains of work environment focuses on the relationship individuals have with their jobs. It is consistent with Rousseau’s (1995) theory
of psychological contracts, in which an employee believes in the “reciprocal nature of the exchange relationship” (as cited in Thompson, 2008). When an employee believes the psychological contract has been violated, reciprocity is also violated, causing the employee to perceive unfairness (Shapira-Lischchinksy & Rosenblatt, 2009). Such perceptions can lead to burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

The current educational landscape is filled with potential violations to teachers’ psychological contracts. Accountability policies, high-stakes testing mandates, and standardization initiatives have led to multiple changes in classrooms and school buildings across the country. As Nieto (2009) wrote, “Too many teachers are leaving the profession because the ideals that brought them to teaching are fast disappearing” (p. 13). Many studies have begun to look at the impact of such policies (Berryhill et al., 2009; Reich & Bally, 2010; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009; Tye & O’Brien, 2001; Vaughn, 2013).

Reich and Bally (2010) report that the pressures to increase test scores places a “tremendous strain on teachers” (p. 181). This strain “robs teachers of their agency” (p. 182). Vaughn (2013) reports similar findings in discussing how teachers’ visions are challenged by the policy context. Berryhill et al. (2009) reported multiple negative outcomes as a result of accountability policies, which can cause teachers to reduce their commitment to teaching, lessen their passion, or decide to leave. Tye and O’Brien (2001) found that the critical factor in teachers choosing to leave the profession was the pressure of increased accountability. Similarly, Hill and Barth (2004) conclude that accountability policies such as NCLB negatively impact teacher retention. Sass et al. (2012) also found that increased difficulty and accountability of high stakes testing greatly increased attrition. In their study of Texas teachers,
they found that the risk of teachers leaving the profession was 24% higher when a new test with higher standards and more severe consequences was started than in previous testing tenures.

The impact of accountability policies often focuses on the narrowing of the curriculum. Crocco and Costigan (2007) define the narrowing of curriculum as the reduction of time for non-tested subjects and the implementation of scripted curriculums and limited pedagogical options. The narrowing of the curricula is considered to be a result of accountability pressures associated with NCLB (Corocco & Costigan, 2007; Rubin, 2011; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009).

Corcco and Costigan (2007), in a study of beginning teachers, found that the narrowing of the curriculum has a negative effect on teacher’s job satisfaction. The impact of curriculum narrowing on retention, however, differs depending on the method of teacher licensure attainment. Traditionally licensed teachers, according to Corcco and Costigan (2007) were found to be more adept at developing coping and resiliency strategies than those alternatively licensed. Despite of this discrepancy, key in the findings is that accountability policies have had a negative effect on teacher satisfaction.

The findings of these studies are consistent with burnout literature that analyzes the role of autonomy and control on burnout. For example, Leiter, Gascon, and Martinez-Jarreta (2010) study of doctors and nurses analyzed the role of employees’ capacity to influence their work environments and the congruence of the work with employees’ core values. The study examined three areas of employees’ capacity for shaping their work: autonomy and decision-making participation, organizational justice, and relationships with supervisors. Leiter et al., (2010) found that control and value congruence had direct connections to the three dimensions of burnout. The authors concluded that when people are “unable to shape their work environment
to permit them to pursue what they value in their work, they experience a conflict” (p. 71). This conflict can lead to exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness.

**Demoralization**

It must be noted that the attrition literature does not uniformly agree to the term burnout. Santoro (2011a), for example, believes much of the current phenomenon of teacher attrition is related to demoralization. She describes a crisis in the field of education in which too many teachers are no longer able to access the moral rewards of teaching. Santoro believes this is often misdiagnosed as burnout when the term demoralization should be used. Burnout, according to Santoro, is often thought of as a depletion of personal resources. Often, it is considered a natural by-product of working in a demanding environment, such as a high poverty school. Demoralization, on the other hand, indicates an inability to access the moral rewards of teaching. When a teacher is ethically at odds with the task of the job, then demoralization can ensue.

Whether burnout or demoralization is used, the literature suggests it is a systemic issue, not just a psychological issue (Berryhill et al., 2009; Corcco & Costigan, 2007; Reich & Bally, 2010; Rubin, 2011; Tye & O’Brien, 2002; Vaughn, 2013; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). The individual manners in which people react and cope with stress are relevant, however, it is necessary to examine the structural and organizational factors that cause the stress in the first place (Tye & O’Brien, 2002).

**Self Determination Theory**

Self Determination Theory (SDT) is a framework for understanding human motivation. As a meta-theory, SDT involves the interplay between extrinsic forces and internal motives and
needs (Deci & Ryan, 2002). SDT propositions that all individuals possess a natural and innate tendency toward growth and development in an effort to create a sense of self. This innate interest in learning and developing is at the core of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

According to SDT, certain social-contextual factors support this innate tendency whereas other factors impede this foundational aspect of human nature (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT posits the social contexts that foster healthy development and wellbeing are concerned with the basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2002). When an individual’s needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy are satisfied, the person experiences wellbeing and effective functioning. When the social context thwarts any of the three basic needs, an individual fails to function effectively and experiences ill being. Thus, a healthy human psyche will gravitate toward situations in which their basic psychological needs are met (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Moreover, SDT theorizes that the fostering of these psychological needs enhances intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Pink, 2009; Wehmeyer, 2003).

**Competence**

Competence refers to people’s need to gain mastery of a task. It is a self-belief in one’s ability to perform well at a task rather than an attained capability. Thus, competence refers to self-efficacy. According to Pajares (1996), “The higher the sense of efficacy, the greater the effort, persistence, and resilience” (p. 544). Resiliency is a critical element often cited in teacher retention literature, (Bobek, 2002; Curtis, 2012; Taylor, 2013) and there appears to be a strong relationship between teacher resiliency and teacher efficacy (Yost, 2006). Bandura (1997) suggests that an individual’s beliefs can influence effort, persistence in the face of obstacles, and resiliency when coping with challenges. Taylor (2013) illustrated the need for efficacy to retain teachers during challenging times in her study of four female African American teachers who
taught in a rural community in the South before, during, and after desegregation. Taylor’s study confirmed Polidore’s (2004) eight themes of resilience, but also included efficacy as an additional theme of resiliency. Similarly, Bobek (2002) contends that the current challenging times in education require teachers to develop resiliency. Competency and self-efficacy are critical factors in developing such resiliency (Bobek, 2002). Thus, teacher retention and its counterpart, teacher attrition, are related to competence. As suggested by SDT theory, the basic need for competence must be met to promote wellbeing. When it is not met, a healthy human psyche will gravitate toward a situation in which the need for competency can be better met (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

**Relatedness**

Relatedness refers to people’s need to feel a sense of belonging and connection to others. The development of significant and meaningful relationships is also cited in the teacher retention and attrition literature (Bobek, 2002; Buchanan, 2010; Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2007; Curtis, 2012; Davidson, 2009; Ingersoll, 2001; Kersaint et al., 2007; Taylor, 2013; Tye & O’Brien, 2002). According to Curtis (2012), lack of administrative support and parental support were among the primary factors for teachers deciding to leave the profession. Buckley et al., (2005) found that parent and community relationships had the strongest impact on teacher retention. Other studies, however, suggest that administrative and colleague support is crucial (Bobek, 2002; Ingersoll, 2001; Kersaint et al., 2007, Taylor, 2013). Positive relationships create networks of support that help sustain teachers and help to build resiliency (Bobek, 2002; Taylor, 2013).

**Autonomy**
Intrinsic motivation is facilitated by autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Pink, 2009; Wehmeyer, 2003). Although autonomy is an ambiguous and evolving construct, it is often thought of as worker control (Everitt, 2005; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). In education, autonomy often refers to teachers’ ability to govern their own classroom, choose curriculum, and select pedagogical practices. It can also refer to a teacher’s ability to influence school policy (Everitt, 2005).

Some studies directly link autonomy with attrition (Everitt, 2005; Santoro, 2011b; Tye & O’Brien, 2001). The results of these studies reveal that teachers’ perceived lack of autonomy is a major factor in attrition. Both Santoro (2011b) and Tye and O’Brien (2001) refer to a reduction in autonomy experienced by their studies’ participants as being a factor in attrition. The teachers in their studies relate changes in autonomy as a result of mandates and policies. Ingersoll (2001) reports that schools with greater teacher autonomy experience higher levels of teacher retention.

Teaching is a profession and teacher authority is one characteristic of the teaching profession (Ingersoll, 1997; Santoro (2011b); Tye & O’Brien, 2001). Ingersoll and Alsalam (1997) suggest that teaching as a profession embodies the “degree of individual autonomy exercised by teachers over planning and teaching within the classroom” (p.vii). This authority is not limitless, but reflects “acting with choice” (Pink, 2009, p.88). In describing the need for autonomy in the teaching profession, Coggins and Diffenbaugh (2013) suggest a “a teaching profession that values autonomy rejects both the notion that teachers should be left alone to do as they please and the belief that teachers are pawns who must be controlled” (p. 44). Research has shown that when teachers sense a lessening of professionalism due to the loss of authority, the result is job dissatisfaction leading to attrition (Santoro, 2011b; Tye & O’Brien, 2001).
Greater teacher autonomy is also associated with professionalism and greater job satisfaction (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). In their study that examined the relationship between teacher autonomy, on-the-job stress, work satisfaction, empowerment, and professionalism, Pearson and Moomaw (2005) found that as general teacher autonomy increased, perceptions of empowerment and professionalism also increased. They also discerned a positive relationship between curriculum autonomy and on-the-job stress. There was no relationship, however, between curriculum autonomy and job satisfaction. The importance of decision-making authority is not isolated to curriculum, therefore, but rather the general need for teachers to control their work environment.

Other studies have also demonstrated a positive relationship between teacher autonomy and job satisfaction. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014), for example, measured whether self-efficacy and perceived autonomy, independently, are related to engagement, job satisfaction, and emotional exhaustion in their study of Norwegian teachers. The results of their regression analyses showed that both self-efficacy and perceived autonomy, independent of each other, positively predicted engagement and job satisfaction while negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014).

Zembylas and Papanastasiou (2005) also examined job satisfaction. Their study did not use the term autonomy, but rather empowerment, defined as “teacher’s power to participate in decision-making about teaching and learning conditions” (Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2005, p. 433). In examining four dimensions, professional growth, decision-making, promotion, and status, Zembylas and Papanastasiou (2005) found that teacher empowerment is positively related to job satisfaction. They concluded that when teachers are empowered with authority to control
their work environment, satisfaction increases which has the capacity to “shape school culture” (Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2005, p. 453).

SDT, as a theory for understanding human motivation, suggests that the psychological needs for competence, relationships, and autonomy are primary factors in determining an individual’s wellbeing, effective functioning, and intrinsic motivation. As discussed, these needs correlate to studies analyzing the factors leading to attrition. Intrinsic motives, characterized by choice and free will, better align with the needs for competence, relationships, and autonomy than extrinsic motivations, involving coercion and pressure (Self Determination Theory website, 2014). Thus, individuals who experience more workplace opportunities to engage in practices based on intrinsic motives tend to experience wellbeing and a desire to stay whereas individuals who experience coercion and pressure will gravitate toward situations where their psychological needs can be better met (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Multiple studies have demonstrated that teachers are experiencing more extrinsic pressures resulting in a context that fails to support the needs for competence, relationships, and autonomy (Berryhill et al., 2009; Reich & Bally, 2010; Tyé & O’Brien, 2001; Vaughn, 2013; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). Such a context may explain why teachers are choosing to exit (Berryhill et al., 2009; Tyé & O’Brien, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

This purpose of this study is to examine the factors that cause mid-career teacher attrition. The theoretical framework for the study draws from three areas of the literature: burnout, psychological contracts, and SDT. Grounding the theoretical framework are the principles of SDT, which are discussed above (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These principles include the preference for intrinsic motivation over coercive pressures as well as the view of autonomy as a basic human need. Additionally, the theoretical framework also employs Leiter and Maslach’s
(2004) burnout model. This model seeks to determine the degree of mismatch between an individual and six work environment domains: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. It also draws from Rousseau’s (1995) theory of psychological contracts, which describes the reciprocal relationship employees have with their work. A violation to the psychological contract causes employees to perceive unfairness, leading to discontent.

**Summary**

This literature review examined teacher attrition through the concepts of teacher career cycles, human capital theory, burnout, and SDT. It also included a summary of the theoretical framework for this study. Chapter three will present the research methodology employed to study mid-career teacher attrition.
This chapter presents the methodology used in this study. The chapter begins with a discussion of the research design, followed by a description of the role of the researcher, the study’s participants, data sources and data collection, methods for managing and recording data, procedures for data analysis and interpretation, and methods used to establish trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with a summary. This chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Design

To examine the factors that cause mid-career teacher attrition, a multiple case study design was used. As described by Creswell (2008), a collective, or multiple, case study explores multiple cases to show different perspectives on a bounded system. In this study, the bounded system, or “quintain,” is mid-career teachers (Stake, 2006). The rationale for using a case study design is threefold. First, the nature of the research question itself leads to the use of a case study. The research question is explanatory in nature, and case studies are credible methods for such questions (Yin, 2009). Second, a case study is the preferred method when a study is examining a contemporary issue, but the researcher cannot control or manipulate relevant behaviors (Yin, 2009). Mid-career teacher attrition is a current issue and the investigator could not control an individual’s decision to leave a profession. The contemporary topic and lack of variables prone to manipulation, therefore, made the case study a favored approach for this study. Finally, the case study approach was used in this study so that the context of the phenomenon of mid-career teacher attrition can better be understood. As described by Yin (2009) and Stake (2006), other methods do not allow a researcher to fully investigate the context in the same manner as a case study. Case study is used when a researcher wants to understand “a real-life phenomenon in depth, but such understanding encompassed important contextual
conditions - because they are highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). The case study is a logical approach for this study because the boundaries between the phenomenon of mid-career teacher attrition and its context are unclear. For example, contextual situations such as the accountability climate of the external environment of the federal and state governments may influence a teacher’s decision to leave. Likewise, it is possible that other contextual variables such as changes to the State Teacher Retirement System (STRS), the implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards, or new teacher evaluation systems may impact a teacher’s judgment. The case study approach will allow the researcher to “study the experience of real cases operating in real situation,” so that these and other contextual influences can be better understood (Stake, 2006, p. 3). Additionally, this study used a multiple case study approach so that a variety of viewpoints on mid-career attrition could be examined. This study sought to give voice to the teachers who are opting out of the profession after several years of service.

**Researcher’s Role**

Qualitative researchers extract meaning by observing, reading, asking, and listening (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The researcher, therefore, is the key instrument in a qualitative study. The researcher maintains a set of assumptions, or a worldview, about a social or human condition. Thus, personal paradigms frame the course of research, interpretation, and understanding (Willis, 2007). As the researcher in this study, my own background and personal paradigms are meaningful because they will invariably shape the inquiry process.
Rechercheur Background

As a teacher for thirteen years, I have witnessed the attrition of colleagues whom I considered highly effective educators. Moreover, I have considered exiting the profession as I reached the mid-career stage. I have become attuned to the tone of conversations I have experienced with my coworkers, sensing growing frustrations, disappointment, and even anger regarding the changing work environment of schools and the roles of the teacher within it. Disheartened by accountability reforms leading to high-stakes testing, scripted curriculums, and public pressure to increase student achievement scores, fellow teachers and myself have seemed to lose the joy, satisfaction, and passion once felt for the profession. My background as a teacher allows me an insider, or emic perspective, allowing me to comprehend the culture of the public school system. As described by Merriam, the emic perspective embodies “the internal language and meanings of a defined culture” (Olive, 2014). For example, the language of education, which is filled with acronyms and jargon, will not need to be defined for me because my role as a teacher has immersed me in this language. As a qualitative researcher, I will also incorporate an outsider, or etic, perspective to develop a model for studying the culture of mid-career teachers. The etic perspective stems from the fact that I have not left the profession despite my acknowledged frustrations. Therefore, there is a divide separating myself from the former teachers whom I seek to better understand. The potential tension between these perspectives is a source for achieving greater understanding of the phenomenon of mid-career attrition (Olive, 2014).
Researcher Paradigm

This study was approached from a relativist point of view. I believe reality is constructed by individuals, and is therefore based on subjective perceptions and interpretations. Even when human beings experience the same phenomenon, the perceptions of the individuals may differ because they are at least partially determined by one’s beliefs, values, and expectations. As described by Stake (2006) “qualitative researchers have strong expectations that the reality perceived by people inside and outside the case will be social, cultural, situational, and contextual” (p. 28). The individuals who composed the quintain for this study presented their individual realities of mid-career teacher attrition. This study sought to interpret and find meaning from participants’ varied experiences and perceptions.

Data Sources

To determine the factors that influence mid-career teachers’ decision to leave the profession, seven former teachers who have left the field of education within the past five years during the mid-career stage were selected as participants for the study. This study used purposeful, snowball sampling to locate participants. I identified initial subjects through my professional connections and then asked for a referral to other former teachers who have left the profession. I selected participants from rural, suburban, and urban school districts in Ohio to determine the influence of type of school on a teachers’ decision to leave since this is cited in the literature (Ingersoll, 2001; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). I also diversified the sample based on gender. This better allowed me to explore how variables such as the birth of children may impact an individual’s decision to leave. This also provided for a more representative sample.
Data Collection Techniques

Three sources of evidence were used: (a) in-depth interviews, (b) policy artifacts and (c) field notes. The interviews will be “guided conversations” with a consistent line of inquiry (Yin, 2009, p. 106). A minimum of two interviews with each participant was conducted. The confidentiality of participants was established through the use of pseudonyms. Using an electronic device, the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Concerns regarding trustworthiness will be addressed in a later section within this chapter.

Another data source this study utilized is document analysis. The majority of the document analysis was related to federal, state, and local policies. This is because in recent years the policy environment of education has changed greatly (Fowler, 2013). Since the late 1980’s, the federal and state government have asserted more authority over local public schools by “issuing a bewildering array of new policies and policy proposals” (Fowler, 2013, p. 9). For example, since 2013, Ohio has witnessed the execution of increased standardized tests, new curriculum standards, and a new teacher evaluation system due to the enactment of Race to the Top. This policy climate has left educators feeling “confused” and “resentful” (Fowler, 2013, p. 10). Given this policy context, it was necessary to investigate the role such policies may have played in a former teacher’s decision to leave the profession. Moreover, document analysis was useful in corroborating findings from the interview process.

The final source of evidence for this study was the researcher’s field notes, which consisted of a written record of the researcher’s thoughts and observations during the
investigation. The field notes consisted of journaling and memo-writing to allow the researcher to reflect on observations and infer patterns and connections emerging from the multiple sources (Charmaz, 2006).

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Data analysis involves reflection on evidence, empirical thinking, and consideration of alternative interpretations (Yin, 2009). This study used the general analytic strategy of developing a descriptive framework (Yin, 2009). The descriptive framework began with a process of initial coding in which patterns and preliminary themes emerged. A more focused coding followed what Strauss and Corbin (1990) call axial coding. During axial coding, themes and categories were created by grouping codes or labels given to words and phrases. Throughout this process, as encouraged by Charmaz (2006), memos were used to help the researcher analyze and interpret codes.

After examining each case separately, cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006) or synthesis (Yin, 2009) was performed. The individual cases were studied to gain an understanding of its situational specific experiences (Stake, 2006). A table was then created that organized data by theme. This allowed cross-case conclusions to be made by questioning similarities and differences between the cases (Yin, 2009). The resulting evidence was used to develop assertions about the quintain of mid-career teachers who left education.

**Methods for Verification or Trustworthiness**

To enhance credibility, this study utilized several strategies. First, in a process known as member checking, the findings were provided to participants to determine their accuracy (Creswell, 2002; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Feedback from participants was sought and incorporated. Also, the process of reflecting on reflexivity, or the manner in which a
researcher’s own involvement in the research may influence the outcome of a study, was undergone through consistent journaling throughout the study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Finally, Creswell (2002) and Yin (2009) recommend multiple data sources to enhance the dependability and confirmability of the findings. This study incorporated multiple data sources through interviews, policy analysis, and field notes in a process of triangulation.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the methodology of this multi-case study. Participants for the study were six former teachers who left the profession during the mid-career stage. They represent suburban, urban, and rural school districts in the state of Ohio. Data was collected through interviews, blog entries, and field notes. Data analysis followed a descriptive framework with cross-case analysis. Trustworthiness was established through data triangulation, reflexivity, and member checking. The next chapter will present the findings that emerged from this multi-case study.
CHAPTER IV

Introduction

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the reasons why mid-career teachers are opting out of the profession. Using a multiple case study design, seven former teachers who had recently left education were interviewed. Additionally, two administrators were interviewed in order to support participants’ perceptions of leadership behavior. The study sought to answer the primary research question: What influences mid-career teachers’ decision to leave the profession? The study also explored the sub-question: What is the role of federal, state, and local policy in mid-career teacher attrition? This chapter presents the findings and evidence that resulted from the study.

Descriptive Data

The primary subjects for this multiple case study consisted of seven former teachers who recently left teaching during the mid-career stage. Participants were purposefully selected for in-depth interviews after email communications confirmed their eligibility based on the following criteria:

- the former teacher left teaching within the last four years;
- the former teacher had taught for at least 6 years but not more than 25 prior to leaving;
- the former teacher voluntarily left;
- representation of type of school at which the former teacher left;
- representation of gender.

Of the seven participants, two (29%) were male and five (71%) were female. This is similar to the 2011-12 national average of 76% of public school teachers being female (Snyder &
Dillow, 2015). Participants left the teaching profession between the years of 2012-2015. The years of teaching experience upon choosing to leave ranged from 6 years to 24 years with a mathematical mean of 12 years.

Although all participants spent the majority of their teaching career in a public school in Ohio, the classification of the districts in which they worked varied. Three participants had teaching experience in an urban setting. One of the former teachers taught in a suburban district, and two participants worked in a rural environment. One participant worked in both a suburban and urban setting. Additionally, two of the subjects also had experience working in a virtual school.

Participants also possessed a variety of experience in terms of grade levels taught. Two of the former teachers spent their entire teaching career at the high school level, two participants taught in a middle school setting, and one individual worked in a middle school for three years before teaching high school. One subject worked only with elementary aged students, and one participant worked within an elementary setting for twenty years and a middle school for four years.

Table 4.1

Participant Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Grade Level(s) Taught</th>
<th>Year Left</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
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<td>Urban and virtual</td>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
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<td>Suburban</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
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<td>Urban</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
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<td>Rural and virtual</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td>Year</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Suburban and Urban</td>
<td>Elementary and Middle School</td>
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<td>2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gale</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant Profiles**

Adam is a former Social Studies teacher who chose to leave the teaching profession in 2014 after nine years. He worked in a middle school in an urban setting out of state for three years. After returning to Ohio, he spent six years working as an online instructor for a virtual school at the high school level. After leaving the teaching profession, Adam continued to work with children in his role as a project coordinator for a nonprofit organization.

Brian taught high school mathematics for six years in a suburban school district before leaving the profession in 2013. He currently works in the private sector in a field unrelated to education. He secured employment outside of the field of education during his final year of teaching, and such stability fortified his choice to leave teaching despite a loss of wages and benefits.

Carol spent eight years as a classroom teacher, and one year as an administrative intern before choosing to leave the teaching profession in 2013. Her experience was at the middle school level in an urban setting. Carol currently works as an educational program specialist for a federally funded entity.

Danielle worked for six years in a rural school district at the elementary level. She was also a virtual instructor at an online school for seven years. Her thirteen years of experience was with elementary school aged students. She left the teaching profession in 2012 to have more time to spend with her children and to pursue a career as a photographer.
Elaine decided to leave the profession in 2015 after 24 years of teaching experience. She spent one year in a private school setting in an urban environment. She then transitioned to a public school setting, which was classified as suburban at the time of her move. She remained in this school district for the next 23 years, but due to shifting demographics, it became classified as an urban school district. Nineteen of her years in this district were in an elementary school setting. Her final four years as a teacher were in a middle school. Though she would not be able to fully capitalize on retirement benefits, Elaine decided to leave the teaching profession in 2015.

Faye spent six years as a high school English teacher before leaving the profession in 2012. She is currently a stay at home mother. She relayed that her primary reason for leaving the profession was to stay home with her child.

Gale taught for eighteen years as a middle school teacher in a rural school setting. She left the profession in 2014. She currently works in the private sector in a field unrelated to education. Gale commented that her general wellbeing improved when she left the education profession though she missed the financial benefits teaching provided.

**Data Analysis**

After careful review and initial coding of the transcript data from the interviews, I clustered similar topics together. Topics were organized into categories, which revealed seven initial themes. These themes were (a) leadership/administrative support, (b) loss of feeling valued and respected, (c) opportunities for growth and advancement, (d) lack of work-life balance, (e) psychological contract violation, (f) incongruence between beliefs and forced practices, and (g) external pressures. After developing a table to organize data by theme, it became apparent that data overlapped into multiple categories, suggesting themes had similar
meaning. Figure one illustrates the overlap in initial coding and theme similarity. The internal circle represents the codes that overlap in two or more initial themes.

Figure 1. Initial Codes and Themes
I further analyzed the transcript data, field notes, and substantiating documents, which consisted of policy statements from local school districts and the Ohio Department of Education. I color coded my initial codes and looked for correlations within the data. Using graphic representations, I investigated the relationships between the codes and initial themes. Due to the interdependence of some of the themes, I narrowed the initial seven themes down to four. The four themes were (a) psychological contract violations due to policy implementation, (b) leadership/administrative support, (c) lack of work-life balance and (d) feeling disrespected and devalued. Below are four diagrams (Figures 2, 3, 4, & 5) presenting the four themes and the connections I discerned from my analysis using color codes. Each of the seven themes was assigned a color and correlations between the themes were investigated through the use of a radial Venn diagram.

Figure 2. Theme One: Psychological Contract Violations Radial Venn Diagram
The codes related to violations to psychological contracts overlapped with codes for work-life balance, leadership support, incongruence between beliefs and practices, and external pressures. Analysis revealed the common connection between these five themes was the violation to psychological contracts resulting in the determination of this as a major theme in the study.

Figure 3. Theme Two: Loss of Feeling Valued and Respected

The second theme emerged after examining the overlaps between the codes related to loss of feeling valued and respected, external pressures, and opportunities for growth and advancement. The unifying entity within this correlation was the loss of feeling valued and respected, and thus this theme materialized as a primary result of the study.
Figure 4. Theme Three: Lack of Work-life Balance

The theme of work-life balance emerged after examining the relationships between the codes associated with psychological contract violations, leadership/administrative support, external pressures, and lack of work-life balance. It was determined that lack of work-life balance integrated these topics.
Figure 5. Theme Four: Leadership/Administrative Support

The final theme emerged after analyzing the relationship between the codes correlating with leadership/administrative support, external pressures, loss of feeling valued and respected, and psychological contract violations. The similarity in codes related to these topics demonstrated the interdependence of these themes. Analysis revealed the common connection between these four themes was leadership/administrative support resulting in the determination of this as a major theme in the study.

Theme One: Psychological Contract Violations due to Policy Implementation

The first theme that emerged from the in-depth analysis of the interview transcripts is the perceived violations to psychological contracts due to recent policy initiatives. Participants discussed many changes in the educational environment including changes to curriculum due to...
the implementation of the Common Core, a new evaluation system called the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES), new student assessments, and the proliferation of technology integration. These changes resulted in a perceived break in the unwritten contract between the teachers and the systems that employed them. When entering the teaching profession, participants held expectations regarding their jobs. Data analysis revealed that all participants felt the teaching career met these initial expectations. Participants expressed happiness and satisfaction with their chosen careers while these expectations were being met. Brian, for example, stated that teaching “Initially met my expectations because I loved it at first.”

Likewise, Elaine, spoke fondly of her first years of teaching explaining how proud she used to be to tell people she was a teacher. Carol remarked, “It exceeded my expectations for a while. I really loved it. There was a sweet spot there.” Brian, Danielle, Faye, and Gayle referenced the internal satisfaction and rewards that teaching provided.

All participants, however, perceived a change in their job responsibilities, resulting in feelings of uncertainty, hopelessness, overwhelming stress, and a loss of love and passion for the teaching career. Elaine, for example, described the health effects that she attributed to job related stress. Brian referred to the burden of the extra stress:

I had a hard time sleeping. When I woke up, it was the first thing that came to my mind. It wasn’t because I hated my job it was because I was so nervous about everything I had to do that week.

Danielle referenced the dissolution of her passion due to ongoing stress:

I was overwhelmed. I was tired of being overwhelmed. I was tried of being stressed all the time. I really had lost the love of teaching. It was more of a dreading feeling instead of being excited to meet the new students each year.
Faye explained how she noticed the widespread feelings of disillusionment throughout her school building during her last year of teaching, 2012. “It was miserable. Morale was so bad. Everyone talked about how unhappy they were. I stopped wanting to be in the faculty room.”

Brian expressed a similar perception of the morale in his high school:

The attitude or morale around the school was low. I do think that it was especially in the last couple years. Teachers just seemed rundown and really dejected. Everyone was just rolling their eyes at each other about various things whether it’s administration or new mandates.

Six of the seven participants suggested that these changes directly contributed to their decision to leave the teaching profession. For example, Gale stated, “The job I left was not the job I signed up for, so it was easy to leave.”

According to participants, the perceived changes in job responsibilities can be traced to recent policy implementation. Participants’ concentrated on issues related to additional workload, confusion and ambiguity, distrust and discontent with policymakers, and loss of autonomy due to curricular modifications. Participant responses revealed that these issues resulted in feelings of frustration, unhappiness, and job dissatisfaction.

**Additional Workload**

Elaine spoke about the changes she experienced with the implementation of OTES and the expectation of collecting data to verify student growth in her classroom. She described how these factors were prominent in her choice to leave:

I honestly think that if it weren’t for OTES and data collecting, I could have hung in there. But I was tired. I had no intentions of leaving early. I wanted to work into my 60’s. I thought why not? I love the kids, I love what I’m doing, but I can’t deal with all
this other stuff. The stress became too much. The paperwork, and the monitoring of all these kids, and you have 90 kids throughout the course of a day. I just think they want too much out of us and it made me a basket case. I was always afraid I forgot to do something or I didn’t do it right, and I was very confident as a teacher.

In addition to OTES, Elaine also commented on other mandates such as the charge to incorporate technology into daily lessons, the focus on literacy instruction in all content areas, and standardized tests. Her discussion of the many initiatives influenced Elaine to leave. “I just feel like I’m burning the candle at both ends to try and do all the things I’m told to do plus everything I’m supposed to teach.”

The additional workload created by OTES and the numerous initiatives created due to policy is a prominent theme in the interviews. Danielle expressed how “Every year I was working as hard as I could and yet more was being thrown at me.” Likewise, Gale expressed that “More was being thrown at us, and no one bothered to prepare us for any of it. We were just expected to keep doing more and more.”

Brian portrayed similar feelings of being overwhelmed by what he perceived as an escalation in workload due to the increased pressure to differentiate instruction to achieve a favorable OTES evaluation. Differentiation refers to the teacher planning and providing students with meaningful experiences based on each student’s present level of performance and understanding. Hallmarks of this instructional approach include ongoing assessments to determine student strengths and weaknesses, student choice, and individualized learning opportunities. Differentiation is embedded in every aspect of the OTES rubric. For example, in the Instructional Planning section of the rubric, to be rated accomplished, the teacher must “Establish challenging and measurable goal(s) for student learning that aligns with the Ohio
standards and reflect a range of student learner needs “(Ohio Department of Education, 2015).

Brian illustrated his frustration with the increased pressure to differentiate due to OTES:

Looking at what was expected from OTES I felt I had to differentiate a lot, and that’s fine. I was ok with that, but the issue was my range of skills in the room. It wasn’t three different levels; it was seven different skills at the same time. To not only be expected to reach all these different levels, but then trying to actually do it, just killed me. I also had three preps in my last year, so in addition to three different classes, I’m also expected to prepare 3-4 different lessons per class to show differentiation. And that’s not even touching on grading or even thinking about everything else you have to do. There was never enough time in the day, but the expectations kept increasing.

Brian’s comments illustrated an internal struggle between what was realistically possible within the structure of the job and his ambition to be an effective teacher. Additionally, his comments exemplify how the pressures of being evaluated can magnify such a struggle.

All participants expressed similar concerns regarding the additional workload that has accompanied educational changes due to policy implementation. Participants deemed these additional responsibilities as impractical to the job. In referencing the amount of work required to achieve an accomplished rating on OTES, for example, Carol used an analogy to illustrate the impracticality for a typical teacher by saying, “The plates that you would have to spin to actually score at the accomplished level and all the domains, that’s a really crazy day.” Adam also exemplified how the additional tasks have made an already demanding job more difficult:

Things are a mess right now. The last few years were really, really rough. It’s just a hard time to be a teacher, and that’s in addition to it already being a difficult job. You're going in and you’re doing the best you can each day and there’s a lot that you’re up against
anyway. You’re trying to manage your time, trying to manage your personal life, trying
to manage and meet the needs of all these kids with diverse learning styles and the last
thing you need is more uncertainty, or more paperwork, or more evaluations, or more
things that are put on you.

Ambiguity and Uncertainty

Part of the internal struggles participants revealed throughout the interviews developed
from feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty. Uncertainty weighed heavily on Elaine’s decision to
leave as revealed through her statement that “The biggest reason (for leaving) is that you never
know what’s around the corner.” The uncertainty created from policy changes left participants
grappling for how to do their jobs effectively. All participants mentioned a challenge regarding
doing what they felt was in the best interest of students while managing the inconstancy of the
educational environment. Adam commented on his experiences with trying to prepare high
school social studies students for the new state assessments:

Around 2013-2014 there were a lot of changes in education that was coming down the
pipe in Ohio. It was a lot of stress just because there was a lot of uncertainty. There was
the transition to the new standards, new assessments, there was a lot of confusion at the
high school level with the OGT like who’s responsible and what kids actually need. In
social studies it was a mess because we had to figure out what subjects they would
actually be tested on the OGT.

Adam’s frustration with the confusion regarding the new tests was made worse by the lack of
clear communication from policy-makers. He relayed his experiences in working with the Ohio
Department of Education (ODE):
ODE didn't have a clue often. I was on the social studies advisory committee and at the meetings, ODE would provide an update. But the updates would always be contradictory or confusing. Even the ODE rep was frustrated. I think a lot of times ODE would be blindsided by legislators. Like with the content standards. In social studies we were supposed to begin after the civil war and then the legislators passed something saying founding documents so now that has to be included. It’s just that things were changing all the time and it was hard to keep with it and it was stressful. Then to hear oh and you're going to be evaluated on all of this when we haven’t even gotten a straight answer about anything was crazy.

The feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity left participants feeling adrift in a turbulent sea of educational initiatives. Lacking clear vision and purpose, their discontent with their jobs grew, influencing the choice to leave.

**Discontent and Distrust with Policymakers**

Adam’s comments reveal frustration with policy-makers. His main area of discontent was with poor communication resulting in confusion and disorder. This disorder created concern for not only how to best prepare students to be successful, but also how to be prepared as a teacher to demonstrate pedagogical acumen. In an era of teacher accountability, the latter concern caused stress to all participants.

Both Faye and Gale demonstrated this concern by discussing the potential for merit pay in connection with teacher evaluations. Both mentioned that the possibility of merit pay is “Terrifying.” When asked what terrified them about merit pay, Gale suggested that there was no equitable way to prove who is an effective teacher. She did not believe in test scores, especially when some subject areas such as physical education did not have test scores. She also suggested
that test scores do not demonstrate student growth because “You cannot quantify what they have learned.” Faye expressed similar sentiments suggesting that you cannot apply a business model to the education setting. Given that teachers do not control “Their raw input because we are dealing with a human population,” she suggested that merit pay would be inherently unfair for teachers. Though neither expressed that the possibility for merit pay was the sole reason they left, both expressed that it contributed to their dissatisfaction and as Gale commented, “Made it easier to leave.”

Discontent and distrust with policy-makers surfaced with other participants as well. Similar to Adam, Elaine commented on the uncertainty in education today. Throughout her twenty-four year teaching career, she has seen many changes. She spoke of curriculum adaptations, alterations in instructional mode emphasis, technology proliferation, and government policy reforms. She referred to the volatile educational directions and her distrust of the policymakers making the changes:

All this stuff it just keeps on coming in and then it goes. There’s the third grade guarantee and No Child Left Behind, then its Race to the Top. I think as the government has put their nose into it more and more, it’s made it more difficult. It does go beyond the district. I am so sick of men (mostly men) who have never taught for 5 minutes in their life, never taken an education class, but they’re ready to fix education.

Carol also spoke of her distrust with policymakers at the local level. In discussing her local school board’s decision to move eighth graders to the high school in an effort to save money by redistricting, Carol commented that the policymakers were not making sound, research-based decisions. She also felt they were not being truthful with stakeholders regarding their motives:
I could tell what they were doing is reading the blurbs from a book, reading the blurbs from Educational Leadership and not actually reading the whole thing. For me, it was always about doing what is best for these kids and because we had had it so good. We had been moving in such a positive direction and I just felt like they (policymakers) were undoing so much so quickly for budget reasons and disguising it as research-based.

As a classroom teacher, Carol felt that she was forced to manage the repercussions of the school board’s decisions. As the above comments reveal, this was difficult for her because she did not believe the policymakers were making decisions that best served the students. Her responsibilities as a school district employee, therefore, conflicted with her beliefs.

**Loss of Autonomy**

The intent to fix education through policy reform was also discussed by Danielle. She lamented the loss of autonomy and creativity due to changes in curriculum that transpired with the rise in high-stakes testing. She referred to being treated “Like a robot.” She felt that teachers were being blamed for poor academic performance on high-stakes tests. She commented, “They felt like if testing scores are low then it must be because you’re not teaching what you’re supposed to.” Danielle suggested she was resentful of being told what and how to teach instead of being given a set of objectives and being allowed to ask:

How can we approach it in a way that’s good for kids? And if this child isn’t getting it, what can we change for tomorrow to help him so he’ll have that light bulb moment?

Danielle left the teaching profession and established a career as a family photographer. She commented that she is able to continue to reap the rewards of working with children while also being creative in a manner that teaching no longer allowed.
Incongruence Between Pedagogical Beliefs and Forced Practices

Some comments from participants demonstrated that the former educators often felt an internal struggle due to incongruence between their pedagogical beliefs and forced practices due to policy implementation. Carol exemplified this in her discussion of her local school district’s plan to implement block scheduling in the middle schools. Due to a staffing problem in the seventh grade, the decision was made to make social studies and science a semester long course. According to Carol and supporting documentation this resulted in students being deprived of a core academic subject for six months. Carol felt this decision was “Just plain wrong. It was morally and developmentally inappropriate for kids that age.” To exemplify her point she focused on the impact of losing six months of science, even though she personally taught social studies:

I just don’t believe it was good for kids. I’ll even take social studies out of it. If my daughter did not have science for six months when she’s being tested in it on the state tests, then I’d have a lot of problems with it. Come on, it’s Science! Just think of the STEM movement right now.

Carol expressed that this decision made her feel devalued as a social studies teacher. She also expressed that it contributed to her decision to seek employment elsewhere.

Adam also illustrated how policy was incompatible with his beliefs when he described his irritation with a policy change in his virtual school that eradicated the mandatory use of live lessons. He felt that these live lessons were beneficial to students because they created opportunities for enrichment. These lessons were displaced by additional test preparation opportunities. He felt that the school had chosen to focus on “Test prep at the expense of enrichment.” He no longer felt that he could afford to “delve deeper” because he was required to
stay with the curriculum pacing. This conflicted with his convictions regarding challenging students so they can grow and achieve.

Similarly, Brian discussed how he felt pressured to change his classroom practices to comply with administrative policies regarding attendance, tardiness, and failures. Brian described how he desired to be what he called a “tough teacher” who had high expectations. He believed he had an ethical imperative to prepare students for life beyond high school, but also felt pressured to “water things down” so more students would earn passing grades. Brian believed that this pressure resulted from the state of Ohio reporting on and grading schools for high school graduation rates. Principals felt pressured to improve graduation rates to earn high evaluations on the state report card, which resulted in coercion of the teachers to decrease student failures:

I wish I could have been a difficult teacher without people thinking I’m an asshole…There are times when you get to this internal struggle where you’re like screw it, I’ll just be easier so principals wont be breathing down my neck all the time and that’s a tough struggle.

Danielle also expressed conflict between her beliefs and forced practices. She believed that as a trained professional, she should have been allowed more autonomy and opportunities for creativity. She commented that teachers know their students and know what’s best for them. In the early stages of her career, she believed she was granted such autonomy and respect as a professional, but that later subsided to a more controlled environment. “I felt like I wasn’t able to be the kind of teacher I wanted to be anymore. I felt like I was more of a task manager.” This feeling conflicted with her beliefs regarding what was best for children. Unable to resolve such a conflict, she chose to leave her trained profession.
Outlier

Faye is the only participant to not express policy changes as the major impetus for her leaving. Instead, her decision to have a child and stay at home was the deciding factor. Faye, however, did comment on the policy changes and expressed that when she considers going back, she quickly talks herself out of returning because “it’s not what it used to be.” She commented that she still maintains friendships with many former colleagues. When she considers going back, she will talk to her friends and “Not one tells me to come back. Every single one has told me don’t do it.” Faye has witnessed the changes and the impact they have had on her former colleagues, and does not desire to re-enter the profession in the midst of such turmoil.

Participant’s responses indicate that recent policy implementation such as OTES had a significant and devastating impact on their work life. These policies resulted in an increase in work responsibilities, discontent and distrust of policymakers, a loss of autonomy, and conflict between forced practices and personal beliefs. The implication, according to participant responses, is that psychological contracts were violated resulting in feelings of unhappiness and frustration. These feelings, according to participants’ responses, directly impacted their decision to leave.

Theme Two: Leadership/Administrative Support

The second theme to emerge was leadership/administrative support. Participants commented that the lack of support from administration contributed to their decision to leave the teaching profession. The supports can be classified into three categories: (a) handling student behavior (b) leadership of staff and (c) professional development. Handling student behavior refers to the traditional administrative role of principals in which unacceptable student behavior is addressed and consequences, as appropriate, are dispensed. Leadership of staff describes the
ability of those in administrative positions, such as superintendents and principals, to lead staff in an effective manner. Professional development references opportunities for learning and preparation in response to change initiatives. Those in leadership positions in a school district, such as principals, curriculum directors, or curriculum coaches, typically plan and provide these opportunities.

**Student Behavior**

Some participants addressed concerns regarding how student expectations and behavior was handled at their schools. The responses referred to perceived changes in student behavioral expectations and administrative consequences. Participants discussed what was regarded as a lowering of expectations and a reduction in meaningful, or more severe consequences. Adam and Carol, for example, both referred to administration as being “weak.”

These perceived changes resulted in feelings of alienation, impotence, and low morale. Faye, for example, described how there were no clear expectations and a lack of consistency. She commented, “It depended on which principal was dealing with a student. Sometimes a kid would get a slap on the wrist when they probably deserved a suspension.” This lack of consistency and clear behavioral expectations created feelings of resentment towards administrators. She described how she did not feel supported, but instead felt that she had to oversee all student discipline in addition to her regular teaching responsibilities. Illustrating this point, Faye expressed, “I figured why even bother taking the time to write an office referral. It wasn’t going to be taken seriously anyway.”

Brian also described a lack of consistency in the high school where he worked. He attributed much of this to the small school model the school had adopted. He describes this model as ineffectual at handling student discipline:
There was no one principal. It was four principals. So each was in charge of 300 kids and there was no consistency between them. If one kid in one small school did something his principal was in charge of taking care of that. In another small school, another principal took care of it and there was no consistency.

The lack of consistency Brian experienced made him feel disrespected by students and administration. When a student did not comply with behavioral expectations and was not given what Brian perceived as an appropriate consequence, he began to feel as though students were being “enabled to be disrespectful.” It made Brian doubt his power as a teacher and created feelings of impotence. Brian confessed, “I felt like I should have been a prison guard if I was going to deal with that.

Supporting interviews with two administrators from the school districts where Brian and Faye had worked verified the perception of a lessening of severe consequences, such as suspensions and expulsions. Gary, an administrator who has worked for two different urban school districts as an administrator for the past seven years, agreed that schools have been making efforts to curtail suspensions and expulsions. He described how state reported data regarding suspensions and expulsions is consistently provided to principals at administrator meetings. The underlying message of the conversations regarding this data, according to Gary, has been to reduce the numbers. Howard, a principal in an urban school for the past three years, concurred with Gary’s impressions. Howard suggested, “There is obvious pressure to keep kids in school as much as possible. That means we don’t suspend as much, and rarely talk about expulsion.”

When asked for the source of this pressure, both Gary and Howard said they felt pressured by the leadership teams in their districts, including the superintendent. Both principals
surmised that the focus on behavioral consequences was related to the state report card system by which schools are graded for academic performance. Howard suggested the urgency to improve graduation rates underscores the coercion to reduce suspension and expulsion rates. He suggested this connection because research (Losen & Martinez, 2013) has demonstrated a negative connection between suspensions rates and graduation rates. Howard relayed his experiences at principal meetings saying, “We’ve been asked to read a few articles about how to improve graduation rates, and suspensions always comes up. “ The underlying message received by Howard has been to minimize suspensions and expulsions.

Gary also believed the intent to reduce suspensions and expulsions was related to the state report card, but focused his attention on the academic performance of subgroups. Because schools are evaluated for their ability to reduce the achievement gap between subgroups, Gary believes school districts are “always looking at the data related to all of these different groups such as low income, special education, and minority students.” Data in his district, according to Gary, demonstrated that these subgroups were disproportionally suspended and expelled:

We talk about this at a lot of principal meetings. It’s hard to talk about because we always think we have a good reason to suspend someone. But, we have to accept what the numbers say. These same groups are not performing like they should, so maybe we do have to think more about the effect of suspending a kid.

Both Gary and Howard supported the perceptions of participants that repercussions for student misbehavior, such as suspensions and expulsions, have lessened. Similar to the manner in which policy influenced changes in the work of a teacher, policy has also dictated changes to administrators’ responsibilities and functions. These administrative changes have trickled down to impact teachers’ job satisfaction resulting in feelings of alienation, impotence, and low
morale. For teachers such as Faye and Brian it also resulted in the decision to leave the profession.

**Leadership of Staff**

When participants discussed what was least satisfying about their time as a teacher, they often spoke of what they discerned as weak leadership. Participants expressed frustration with how the leaders in their school districts failed to establish high expectations for all staff members. They also expressed disappointment with a perceived lack of leadership credibility and trustworthiness. Several participants suggested these irritations contributed to their decision to leave the teaching profession.

Carol, for example, discussed changes she discerned when a new principal was positioned in the middle school during her last year as a teacher. She expressed discontent with the lack of clear vision and what she saw as a lack of standards for the staff:

It’s not that I didn’t like the new principal, but it’s just that he didn’t strive for excellence as much as the old principal did. He didn’t hold people to the same standard. The old principal didn’t allow people to get away with being crappy teachers, being ineffective. I felt there was a change towards meanness. The faculty room changed where I felt people became more mean towards kids and I saw some things that I really didn’t like. That would have never gone over with the old principal because she was much more of a dynamic individual. I’m not saying that the principal that was there when I left isn’t a good guy, but more static. I wasn’t sure what the standards were. The standards were just keep ‘em alive, and don’t cause any trouble.
Carol expressed that her decision to leave was made easier because of a lack of strong leadership. When asked if anything would have caused her to stay in education, she mentioned the old principal again whom she described as “dynamic” and “inspiring.”

Similarly, Elaine discussed how changes in administration resulted in a loss of leadership. Elaine focused on the role and abilities of superintendents during her twenty-four years. She spoke fondly of a superintendent from the beginning of her career. She relayed a story of having an issue and feeling secure in speaking with the superintendent about it. She described this leader as “approachable and genuine.” Elaine believed the staff trusted her because “she was a teacher in the district for years and that showed in her whole demeanor towards teachers. She never made you feel put out. She just had that presence.” Elaine mentioned that she could not have imagined speaking with another superintendent because she “didn’t trust them.” She felt that since that first leader the “superintendents have been bad, worse, and worse.” For Elaine, it was important to have a leader whom she felt she could trust. Her lack of confidence in the leadership of her former school district directly contributed to her decision to leave, suggesting the power of leadership.

Adam also expressed dissatisfaction with leadership for what he perceived as a lack of high expectations and follow-through. His frustration focused on a lack of standards for the teaching staff:

I got frustrated when I felt some of my colleagues weren't pulling their weight, as they should and not feeling that there were any repercussions for that. Especially in the virtual world, there’s a lot more transparency as far as what teachers do. I wished that administration would have taken a harder line with that. Adam felt that there were no rewards or consequences regarding the work effort of the teachers.
He desired to be acknowledged for his hard work and believed it was appropriate to hold everyone accountable to the same standard. The lack of consistent high standards contributed to his job dissatisfaction and influenced his choice to leave.

Carol, Elaine, and Adam expressed frustrations regarding a perceived lack of leadership. They desired to be energized by a strong leader who created a vision, maintained high standards, and inspired everyone in the organization to strive for excellence. The lack of such a leader intensified the desire to leave the profession.

**Professional Development**

Participant interviews also reveal dissatisfaction with the schools’ leadership regarding professional development and instructional support in preparation for change initiatives. Given the turbulent educational environment, participants expressed a desire and need for strong, ongoing professional development. When discussing OTES, the Common Core, new assessments, and new technologies, for example, participants frequently relayed frustration with a lack of learning opportunities that would have allowed them to feel prepared. As a result, participants communicated feeling alienated, disoriented, and insecure. Navigating through unfamiliar territory, participants expressed a desire for strong leadership to guide them. Instead participants felt abandoned and compelled to make sense of the new world in which they found themselves working.

Brian, for instance, relayed his experiences with the transition to the Common Core. He expressed frustration with the lack of professional development saying as the new standards were being introduced, he had “spent maybe a year during PD on it, so I never really felt like I was prepared.” Brian chose to leave the profession right before the Common Core was implemented, and he expressed relief at not having to manage the curriculum changes. He expressed, “I
remember thinking, Oh my god! If I had to be here next year, I would be screwed because despite all the work I’ve done while still maintaining my usual routine, I’m not prepared at all.” Brian’s frustration was not with the Common Core itself. In fact, he commented, “There’s anything wrong with upping the standards.” His frustration and dissatisfaction rested with the lack of preparation provided by his leadership. Deciding to pursue a new career and leave teaching eased his anxiety regarding his feelings of unpreparedness.

Gale expressed similar feelings regarding her poor preparation for the transition to the Common Core. She recalled being handed a binder and sitting through a twenty-minute presentation that highlighted the changes to the standards. She explained the ineffectiveness of such an approach by saying, “I already have a million things to do, and they thought I had time to study this binder?” She also described her lack of feeling prepared for the new assessments that aligned to the Common Core saying, “I was glad I got out before the new tests. No way was I ready for them.”

Elaine’s discussion of professional development focused on the lack of preparation she experienced regarding technology implementation. During the 2013-2014 school year, her school district instituted a one-to-one technology program in which every student at the middle school was provided an iPad. Additionally, teachers were given devices, Apple TVs, and Macbooks. She recounted her experiences with the rollout of these devices:

Our district did a horrible job of training us with technology. It was just thrown at us and we were told to use it. And now they’re measuring how much we use it and how the kids use it. But yet the things don’t always work, and you’ve never helped us know how to use it.
Elaine continued by explaining that she was not “computer illiterate,” but the continuous changes in technology make her feel as though she is in foreign territory. She expressed her struggles with “trying to learn everything that is foreign to me. Every time you turn around, there’s something new. One Drive, Edmodo, Google Docs. Things like that are very stressful.” Elaine experienced stress with this technology because the district failed to provide appropriate and meaningful professional development.

Adam also expressed frustrations with the lack of professional development. Trying to improve his effectiveness he “asked the school what can you do to help me so I could become better.” Receiving no guidance and feeling lost in the middle of an unstable education environment, he felt as though he was “not very supported.” Adam felt as though he were alone in his endeavor to improve. He expressed, “I wanted to be the best teacher I could be, but it was really challenging when I’m the only one trying to deal with it.” Lacking the needed support, he felt alienated and insecure in his teaching abilities. Such feelings led to him considering employment outside the teaching profession.

**Theme Three: Work-Life Balance**

The third theme to surface was the difficulties of maintaining a productive work-life balance, the ability to balance professional and personal demands. As previously discussed, participants described experiencing a more strenuous workload due to changes in the work environment. The increased workload created stress, but it also led to feelings of guilt. Six of the seven participants described regret at losing family time due to work responsibilities. They described how the teaching career was often not compatible with a healthy work-life balance. They spoke of feeling torn between their teaching responsibilities and their responsibilities outside the workplace. These participants also believed stress related to work-life balance had
increased in recent years. Additionally, participants believed that the conflict created from the stress and guilt related to work-life balance directly impacted their job satisfaction. Previous research (Padma & Reddy, 2014) has demonstrated that positive work-life balance leads to higher levels of job satisfaction. In this study, the lack of work-life balance contributed to dissatisfaction.

Brian illustrated how the increasing conflict between his personal and professional demands contributed to the loss of passion for his career:

I felt like I had so much to do and not enough time to do it. I felt like I was bringing stuff home constantly, and I was used to bringing stuff home but then it became I’d be working the entire night. And get up and just do it all over again. I was like this is not what I signed up for. It was in my first year of marriage too and I felt like my first year of marriage was hard because I didn’t get as much time with my wife as I wanted because I was too busy doing school stuff at night. And if I wasn’t doing school stuff at night I was thinking about school stuff at night. I just felt like I got to this point where I was like I don’t love this at all.

Brian also demonstrated his belief that stress related to work-life balance had increased over the past five years. He also illustrated feelings of guilt due to not spending enough time with his new wife.

Similarly, Danielle exemplified feelings of guilt due to work pressures detracting from family life:

One of the things I noticed when I had kids was the hard time I had decompressing from the day. It gave me a lot of mom guilt. I would finish my day, and get home and I was
either too overwhelmed or stressed until about 5 to really participate in family life. And that was just daily stress. It adds up.

Danielle continued to explain that the daily conflict of work-life balance was not sustainable because she desired to be both an effective teacher, wife, and mother. To be effective at all of these roles, in her opinion, required time that was not afforded to her:

I’m not the kind of person who says I’m only here from 8-3:30 so if it doesn’t get done, then it doesn’t get done. If you’re giving more, then I need to live up to that expectation so I’m going to need to stay hours and hours past the school day and that is unrealistic. You just can’t continue.

Elaine also commented on guilt related to work-life balance. Her commentary suggested sympathy for parents trying to balance work with younger children in the current education environment. Elaine also addressed unrealistic workload in connection with maintaining a healthy work-life balance:

It was ridiculous. You couldn’t do it all in a day. Fortunately, for me, my children were in late elementary school when I started. I cannot fathom how you ladies and gentlemen with young babies at home do it. I can’t. You must not sleep and you must feel guilty all the time. You must feel guilty because you’re not doing what you feel you should be doing for work. On the other hand, you’re going to feel guilty because if you do what needs to be done for work, you’re taking from your family. I see that.

Elaine continued to describe how the lack of a healthy work-life balance contributed to her decision to leave the teaching profession. Leaving her career as a teacher, allowed Elaine to focus more on her life outside of work, which made her a happier person:
I think of so much wasted time. I just want to live a simple life and be happy. I’m volunteering. I took the hit financially but I’m rewarded in other ways that teaching could no longer do. I still want to serve and I need to fill that. I was willing to take the financial hit in order to do that. I wanted to be a grandma, a wife, a daughter, a mom, a sister, and I wanted to do good. I wanted to do good work, but on my own terms. It was worth it to me. It was worth paring down my life, not eating out, selling my house, getting rid of a car. I downsized a lot in order to be happy. It’s quality of life. I didn’t want to have to lie anymore so I can go to my grandchild’s Grandparents Day and then pray nobody sees me. I was tired of planning my life, planning my whole life, around when [the school district] says I can because we don’t have flexibility.

Elaine felt that work had dominated her life for too long. After leaving the profession, she tried to right the scale by focusing on her personal relationships and personal activities that created satisfaction in a way teaching no longer offered her.

Gail also spoke of guilt, but added that it eventually led to feelings of resentment:

As a teacher, you are asked to not just be an educator, but you have to be a mother, nurse, counselor, buy school supplies, provide food, even buy clothes when students don’t have them. You start to think I’m doing all this for someone else’s child, but what about my own? I began to feel angry and maybe even bitter. There has to be a better way so you don’t feel guilty all of the time when you decide to make your own family a priority.

Both Carol and Faye did not speak specifically to feelings of guilt, but rather articulated how their decision to leave the teaching profession allowed them to spend more time with their children. Faye chose to leave the profession when she had her first child. She chose to be a stay at home mother because she “could not imagine working full-time as a teacher the way it is now
while trying to be a good mom.” Carol left the teaching profession to pursue a different career, which she feels affords her more flexibility. She spoke of being able to attend her daughter’s school parties during her lunch, something she would not have been able to do as a teacher because of a lack of time or scheduling flexibility. She felt that her new career afforded her the opportunity to maintain a better work-life balance because she is no longer bringing work home and has more time to dedicate to her family.

The six who spoke of conflict between family obligations and work were married during the tenure as a teacher. Additionally, five had children. The only participant who did address feelings of guilt and stress related to work-life balance was Adam, a single man. He did, however, comment that in addition to the many details teachers must manage, they are also “trying to manage your personal life.” This suggests that marital status or parental status may be a factor for how influential work-life balance is to mid-career teacher attrition. Participants’ responses reveal that marital and parental status are factors due to stressful feelings of guilt when work responsibilities impede with family time.

**Theme Four: Feeling Devalued and Disrespected**

The final theme to materialize was feeling devalued and disrespected. Regarding this theme, some participants discussed how their school district devalued their opinions. These participants relayed experiences with administrators, superintendents, and board of educations that led to feelings of disrespect and disregard. Other participants perceived disrespect from a macro level by addressing issues related to the general public’s impression of teachers. From either perspective, participants struggled with the lack of respect. No longer feeling valued for the work they performed became a factor in choosing to leave the profession.
Lack of Voice

Some participants spoke of feeling alienated and devalued as a teacher because it felt as though no one in their organization was listening to them. Studies (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2000; Levine & Tyson, 1990; Whyte, 1955) have demonstrated that participation in an organization is a powerful factor in both morale and productivity. Participants, however, relayed stories in which they did not feel supported or heard, causing a loss of morale, productivity, and eventually the decision to leave.

Carol exemplified feeling as though she did not have a voice within her organization when asked to explain why she chose to leave the teaching profession. In her response, she recounted how she felt as no one was listening to her:

I definitely felt like I reached a point in my district where my voice was no longer being heard. They were like thank you very much, now we’d like to hear from somebody else.

Carol did not feel as though her organization valued her. She believed she had positive leadership qualities and was knowledgeable about many situations on which the district was making decisions, but she felt the district did not respect her judgments and this perception directly contributed to her decision to leave:

These decisions were made without any input from me. Not that I felt I could change it, but I would have liked to have felt like what I did mattered. And I was speaking from a research background. Not just an emotional background, and they were just like yeah yeah ok, but we’re still doing it. So I decided I’d go find a place that would listen to me and value my opinion.

Carol’s responses demonstrated that much of her frustration regarding her perceived lack of voice stemmed from her desire to attain a leadership role in the district. Having attained an
administrator’s license and working as an administrative intern in the district, she had projected a career as a principal. When this did not happen, she became more disillusioned by the lack of opportunities for meaningful participation:

It’s like at every turn they were saying you’re not really valued. If you really just want to teach, then you’re fine. But if you want to be part of the discussion, part of where the building is going or where the district is going, then it can be really frustrating. I wanted to be part of something where I could contribute and be valued.

Elaine also recounted feeling devalued and disrespected. She conveyed these feelings in her discussion of the many superintendents who had served at the helm of her school district. She spoke fondly of one for being approachable and demonstrating respect towards the teachers. Elaine felt that every superintendent that followed was “worse, worse, and worse” because there is “no respect.” She felt as though the administrators and board of education:

Look at us like we are the enemy. We are not part of the process. We are not valued assets. That’s how I used to feel, that’s not how I feel now.

Elaine further described how a forced transfer to a new school building and grade made her feel devalued and alienated. She described attempting to speak with the human resources department about her feelings and being told by the human resources director, “It’s nothing personal. You’re just a piece in the puzzle.” Elaine mentioned that she would never forget those words because:

Those words stung. Its like I’ve given so much of my life to this district, to this building, and along comes this guy who’s been in the district for one year with no prior experience and I’m gone. It was devastating. I never felt safe after that. There was just no respect for what we did.
Through her experience with the human resources department, Elaine felt that the administration in her school district did not understand the meaning teachers ascribe to their work. As Mayo suggested through the Hawthorne studies, this was problematic for Elaine because as an employee within an organization, she desired to feel recognition, security and a sense of belonging (as cited in Morgan, 1989). Mayo believed that these things motivate workers because humans have a need to believe that their organization cares about them and is willing to listen (as cited in Morgan, 1989). Because Elaine did not feel a sense of belonging or value, she left teaching as a career.

Gale also discussed how her perception of a lack of voice in her school district contributed to her choice to leave. She was disconcerted by the district-mandated curriculum that she felt did not serve students’ best interests. She described how, in her opinion, the curriculum failed to understand the importance of motivation regarding young adolescent learning. She chronicled her attempts to discuss her concerns with her principal, content area coaches, and curriculum directors. She continuously felt as though “no was listening. No one wanted to listen.” Gale explained that she was made to feel like “the cranky old teacher who was trying to cause trouble” rather than an invested educator attempting to have her concerns vocalized. Gale continued to explain her frustration with being excluded from the decision-making process:

Of course they’re not the ones that have to deal with it. They don’t have to answer to the kids or parents or state tests. We’re on the frontlines and they sit in their offices making idiotic decisions.
Gale, like Carol and Elaine, desired to be a part of the process. The lack of opportunity for participation and the silencing of her voice, caused her to pursue employment where she could “feel like my opinion matters.”

Public Perception

Other participants also discussed feeling as though they were not valued or respected as teachers, but they concentrated on external perceptions from the general public. Adam, Brian, and Danielle mentioned their belief that the public does not respect the teaching profession and tends to blames teachers for systemic educational woes. Danielle, for example, discussed how teachers have become “scapegoats for all the wrongs in the education system.” Danielle’s responses demonstrated frustration with a perceived lack of trust in teachers. Adam also discussed the public’s lack of faith and respect:

It seems to me that there is an element of trust that people need to have in teachers as professionals and I think that’s something we don’t necessarily see. It’s not reflected and it’s a shame.

Both Danielle and Adam lamented the lack of faith in teachers perceived by the public. They expressed a desire to be esteemed as knowledgeable and caring professionals. Lacking such reverence, they chose to leave the teaching profession.

Similarly, Brian expressed how the public’s perception of teachers burdened him. He relayed how his “ego definitely got bruised by the public perception of teachers.” To illustrate his point regarding the disrespect of the public towards teachers, he referred to Senate Bill 5 (SB5), a 2011 proposed law that would have limited the collective bargaining rights of public employees, such as teachers. Brian recounted how this bill created arguments between himself and his good friends because political conversations often focused on the value of teachers:
There’s definitely a disrespect there. It’s definitely from people who don’t know what happens in a classroom. I know some people who are like hard-core right-wingers and when SB5 was happening, we hated each other. I would get so fired up. I was like you’re not in a classroom. Come sit in a classroom for a week and tell me teachers don’t deserve what they get. It was a perception thing. It was bruising on the ego. I feel like it should be one of the most respected professions and some people think you’re just a big leech on tax dollars.

Brian’s perception of a lack of respect was not only “bruising on his ego,” but contributed to his decision to leave the teaching profession. He admitted that he would still argue with anyone about the value of teachers. However, he now argues as an outsider, no longer directly feeling the disrespect and contempt of the public.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the findings from the multiple case study analysis. After coding and analyzing the interview responses of the seven participants, four themes that describe why mid-career teachers are leaving the profession emerged. The four themes are (a) psychological contract violations due to policy implementation, (b) leadership/administrative support, (c) lack of work-life balance and (d) loss of feeling valued and respected. The next chapter will discuss these findings in-depth and provide recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER V

Introduction

This chapter includes a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations for further research. It will begin with an overview of the statement of the problem, research questions, methodology, and the major findings. Following the summary will be a discussion of the results. The discussion will be organized according to the themes ascertained during the analysis of data. The chapter will conclude with an explanation of the implications of the research findings and recommendations for future research.

Overview of the Problem

Mid-career teachers opting out of the profession is a growing phenomenon in the United States (Kopkowski, 2008; Santoro, 2011a, 2011b; Tye & O’Brien, 2002). When these teachers leave, they take with them much needed skill and experience. Additionally, there is a substantial cost associated with the loss of these teachers. Historically, mid-career teachers have been the least likely to leave the profession. It has been widely believed that teacher attrition follows a U-shaped curve in which the attrition rate is high for beginning teachers, low for mid-career teachers, and high again for older teachers approaching retirement (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1989; Shen, 1997). Thus, a majority of the current literature has focused on beginning teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2003; DeAngelis & Presely, 2011; Henke & Zahn, 2001; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005 Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Wong, 2004). Recent studies (Kopkowski, 2008; Santoro, 2011a, 2011b Tye & O’Brien, 2002), however, have captured the trend of mid-career teachers leaving teaching as a career and there is a lack of knowledge regarding this issue.
This study addresses the gap in the literature regarding teacher attrition by focusing on mid-career teachers’ decisions to leave the profession.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons why mid-career teachers, with their much needed skills and knowledge, have chosen to leave the profession. The secondary focus was to explore how recent policy initiatives have impacted mid-career teacher attrition. Given the high financial and academic costs associated with mid-career teacher attrition, this study has policy implications for school districts or government agencies seeking to retain experienced educators.

**Research Questions**

The main focus of this study was to develop an understanding of mid-career teachers’ decision to leave the field of education. This study sought to answer the research question: What influences mid-career teachers’ decision to leave the profession? Additionally, the study explored the sub-question: What is the role of federal, state, and local policy in teacher attrition?

**Review of Methodology**

This study used a multiple case study design to explore the factors that cause mid-career teacher attrition. Subjects for the study consisted of seven former teachers who recently left teaching during the mid-career stage. Additionally, two administrators served as supporting participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and field notes. The interviews followed a semi-structured approach and utilized an interview protocol. Analysis consisted of open and axial coding followed by cross-case analysis. Data were organized in a word table by theme. To enhance credibility, the study utilized member checking,
and reflective journaling. Feedback from participants and reflective memos were incorporated into the findings.

**Overview of Findings**

Four themes emerged from the in-depth analysis of data: (a) psychological contract violations due to policy implementation, (b) leadership/administrative support, (c) lack of work-life balance, and (d) feeling disrespect and devalued. The violation of psychological contracts refers to the perceived break in the unwritten contract between the teachers and the system that employed them. The second theme involved the lack of leadership or administrative support. The lack of support that contributed to participants’ decision to leave was classified into three categories: (a) handling student behavior, (b) leadership of staff, and (c) professional development. Participants’ felt disappointment regarding the lack of leadership and this dissatisfaction was instrumental in their choice to leave. The third theme involved the difficulties of maintaining a positive work-life balance. This involved the ability to balance professional and personal demands. Participants discussed feeling stress, guilt, and job dissatisfaction as a result of the conflict between these responsibilities. The final theme was feeling disrespected and devalued. This involved both the lack of voice and participation within participants’ former organizations and the public distrust and disrespect for teachers in general.

**Discussion**

This study sought to answer the primary research question: What influences mid-career teachers’ decision to leave the profession? This study also explored the sub-question: What is the role of federal, state, and local policy in teacher attrition? This study found that four factors influence mid-career teacher attrition: psychological contract violations, lack of leadership support, conflict regarding work-life balance, and feeling disrespected and devalued. Although
these factors have been previously discussed separately, in reality, they converge and entwine in a complex manner. Analogous to a perfect storm, these forces merged to create a dangerous situation in which needed, experienced educators left the field of education. Unlike a perfect storm, however, in which the forces are typified as rare, the origin of these factors has become common and ordinary: policy enacted upon the education system. Policies such as NCLB and Race to the Top created an environment in which teachers experienced a breech in psychological contracts, lack of leadership, conflicts trying to balance work and personal responsibilities, and an erosion in respect and value as a teacher. The external pressures of federal and state mandates impacted local policy, creating an unbearable and unsatisfying work environment. With their much needed skills and knowledge, mid-career teachers, the group previously thought of as the least likely to leave, are choosing to depart the educational system. Research has suggested, a well-prepared, skilled, and efficient teacher has the largest impact on student learning, and experience is the producer of such educators (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Thus, the loss of mid-career teachers has substantial consequences. Experienced teachers, therefore, have become the unintended casualties of the policies that were intended to improve the education system.

**Psychological Contract Violations**

The finding that violations to psychological contracts influenced mid-career teacher attrition is consistent with previous literature regarding psychological contracts as well as burnout and SDT studies. Regarding psychological contracts, the study confirmed that when an individual perceives a discrepancy between what they believe they were promised by an organization and what they received, the employee views this as a breech of contract (Turnley & Feldman, 1999). Such a breech reduces the employee’s loyalty to the organization, leading to attrition (Turnley & Feldman, 1999). The mid-career teachers who chose to leave the profession
in this study spoke of violations to their psychological contracts due to systemic changes precipitated by policy. These included policies such as the Common Core, new assessments, and OTES. The former teachers not only perceived a breach by their organization, but also by the educational system. These violations included an increase in workload, feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity, distrust of policymakers, loss of autonomy, and a mismatch between values and beliefs and forced practices. Such violations reduced job satisfaction and loyalty, resulting ultimately in attrition.

These psychological contract violations are also consistent with the literature regarding burnout, suggesting mid-career teachers may choose to leave when they feel exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy, characteristic of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). The findings are compatible with Leister and Maslach’s (2004) burnout model of misfit between a person and the work environment. For example, Leister and Maslach (2004) discuss the workplace domains of workload, control, and values. These domains parallel the findings that the breach to psychological contracts added additional workload, reduced autonomy, or teacher control, and created conflicts between the values of the teacher and the practices forced upon them.

The influence of psychological contract violations is also congruent with the SDT literature. As a framework for understanding human motivation, SDT involves the interplay between extrinsic forces and internal motives and needs (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Certain extrinsic forces address the basic human needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, thus fostering individual wellbeing and healthy functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2002). SDT theory suggests that when extrinsic forces derail any of the three basic needs, individuals will choose to leave the situation that is causing them ill-being and gravitate toward a situation in which their basic psychological needs will be met (Deci & Ryan (2002). The violations to psychological contracts
were an example of external forces that failed to meet the basic human needs. Lacking the satisfaction of these needs, the mid-career teachers chose to leave the teaching career in pursuit of a situation where they could experience wellbeing.

**Lack of Leadership Support**

The finding that a lack of leadership support contributed to the decision by mid-career teachers to leave the profession is also consistent with the burnout literature regarding the workplace dimension of community and fairness. Community refers to the positive connections individuals experience with others in a workplace (Maslach et al., 2001). The lack of such positive connections creates acrimonious work environments. This study demonstrated how the lack of support from leadership regarding student behavior and professional development created a work environment filled with resentment, frustration, and low morale. Moreover, the lack of leadership regarding staff expectations and vision is compatible with the burnout literature regarding fairness. Mid-career teachers experienced frustrations regarding the lack of equitable high standards for all staff members. They also expressed disappointment with a perceived lack of vision, trustworthiness, and credibility from leaders. The perceived lack of fairness resulted in a loss of commitment and the decision to leave.

The lack of leadership support also connects to the SDT literature because one of the basic human needs described by this theory is relatedness, which describes the human need for belonging and connection (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Previous teacher attrition studies (Bobek, 2002; Curtis, 2012; Ingersoll, 2001; Kersaint et al., 2007; Taylor, 2013) suggest that administrative support is crucial to the retention of teachers. Likewise, this study affirms that the lack of a supportive relationship with leadership diminishes job satisfaction and commitment.
Work-Life Balance

This study found that conflicts arising from work-life balance also contributed to mid-career teacher attrition. This is consistent with previous studies regarding work-life balance and attrition. Carlson (2015), for example, explored the factors that impact retention of clinical nursing teachers. Conflict between personal life and job responsibilities was cited as one of the primary reasons for not wanting to continue to work at a school of nursing. Sorenson and McKim (2014) also found a correlation between work-life balance, job satisfaction, and professional commitment. Unable to balance the responsibilities of home and work, mid-career teachers opted out of the profession. The conflict created from the imbalance of these diverging responsibilities led to feelings of guilt, resentment towards their workplace, job dissatisfaction, and ultimately, the decision to leave.

Feeling Disrespected and Devalued

The finding that feeling disrespected and devalued contributed to mid-career teacher attrition is also compatible with SDT. As policy, such as NCLB and Race to the Top, was enacted, teachers experienced a lessening of control in their classrooms. Teachers felt as though they were being blamed for poor academic performance, reducing self-efficacy. As a result, the human need for competence was not met. Additionally, these policies and mandates lessened autonomy, decreasing job satisfaction and the perception of teaching as a profession. As another basic need, the loss of autonomy contributed to teacher ill-being and the decision to leave.

The lack of value and respect experienced as teachers is also consistent with most of the literature regarding burnout. Leister and Maslach’s (2004) burnout model discussed the workplace dimensions of reward and control. The reward dimension includes not only financial benefits, but also social and intrinsic rewards such as recognition, respect, and purpose (Leister
& Maslach, 2004). This study is consistent with research regarding the importance of these intrinsic rewards. When the mid-career teachers felt disrespected and devalued, they could no longer draw on these rewards. Like Nieto’s (2009) observation, the teachers observed an erosion of the status of the profession by society. The mid-career teachers who left also expressed an inability to harness the moral rewards of teaching because forced policies precluded them from doing what they believed was in the best interest of the students whom they served. Moreover, the lack of respect and value is consistent with the control domain of the work environment in the literature regarding burnout. Policies such as NCLB led to the standardization of curriculum and prescribed teaching practices resulting in the loss of teacher autonomy. Mid-career teachers saw this loss as an erosion of value and respect for teachers as knowledgeable and capable professionals. Unable to reap the moral and intrinsic rewards of teaching, these teachers chose to leave even though most experienced a loss in financial rewards. This suggests that the social and intrinsic rewards are more powerful than the financial benefits.

**Demoralization Versus Burnout**

As noted in the literature review, the attrition literature does not unilaterally agree on the term burnout. Santoro (2011a) refers to demoralization rather than burnout. She describes burnout as a depletion of personal resources whereas demoralization indicates an inability to access the moral rewards of the job. This study demonstrates that both phenomena contribute to the attrition of mid-career teachers. Teachers experienced burnout due to a mismatch between themselves and the six domains of the work environment: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values, influencing their choice to leave. These teachers also expressed being ethically at odds with the tasks of the job. Therefore, demoralization was also a factor.
Discrepancies with Literature

Although this study was consistent with much of the general attrition literature, discrepancies regarding human capital theory exist. Human capital theory suggests that individuals choose to enter and stay in a profession after assessing the monetary and non-monetary benefits (Grismer & Kirby, 1987). Previous studies (Flowers, 2003; Hoxby & Leigh, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Liu & Meyer, 2005; Shen, 1997) demonstrated the critical role of salary in job satisfaction and teacher retention. These studies propose that teachers leave the profession in order to make more money in a different career. This study, however, did not confirm the role of salary. In fact, all but one participant in the study relayed losing salary and benefits when they left. Elaine, the only participant to indicate she is making more since leaving teaching, did not suggest that this was a factor in her choice. Instead, she referred to it as a happy byproduct.

Implications for Action

Given the high costs associated with the loss of mid-career teacher, this study has implications for policymakers at all levels. To retain experienced teachers action must be taken to increase job satisfaction through efforts to improve teacher autonomy, supportive leadership, reduce unnecessary job demands and time pressures, and expand opportunities for participative decision-making.

Federal and State Policymaker Recommendations

The current educational environment is filled with accountability policies, standardization initiatives, and high-stakes testing measures. These top-down mandates are bureaucratic impediments to autonomy, a critical factor in both motivation and job satisfaction. Such policies not only diminish teacher authority, but also their desire to teach. Accountability measures, therefore, must be balanced with the professionalism of teachers so that teachers can exercise
their expertise and agency. As suggested by SDT, autonomy improves individual wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Additionally, autonomy as a workplace condition increases satisfaction and reduces burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). As part of education reform efforts, accountability measures may be rooted in sound principles, but it is the application of these measures that must be reconsidered. For significant change to occur, the collective good of all stakeholders, including teachers, must be examined. If significant reform to advance student achievement is the ultimate goal, then policymakers must realize that effective change is not done to people, but rather empowers followers to participate in the change process by raising their consciousness in a manner that transcends self-interest (Northouse, 2010).

**State and Local Policymaker Recommendations**

Schools, local districts and state policymakers also need to consider the impact of policy on teachers. Consideration should be given to teachers when assigning additional duties, responsibilities, and paperwork. Such considerations would allow teachers to better prioritize and focus on that which is most impactful to student achievement without additional feelings of stress. Rather than continually adding to the workload of teachers, administrators would find it beneficial to remove unessential responsibilities from teachers, or provide comp time so teachers can better manage job demands.

Better professional development and administrative support is also needed at the state and local level because change is so commonplace in education due to legislation and ongoing research. Because of its inconstancy, effective, ongoing professional development is crucial to creating an environment that is beneficial to both students and teachers. According to current research, effective professional development includes nine characteristics: learning communities, resources, learning designs, outcomes, leadership, data, and implementation (Hirsch & Killion,
2009). By utilizing these principles, school leaders can lessen the escalated levels of uncertainty and ambiguity and increase opportunities for teacher competence, one of the basic psychological needs according to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

A major factor in implementing effective professional development is the potency of school leaders. Administrators can greatly impact the culture of a school so an environment constructive to growth and development is established. According to Brock and Grady (2000), school leaders can foster such an environment through four steps: (1) develop strong communication; (2) prioritize team building that focuses on morale; (3) problem resolution; and (4) role modeling. By creating such a supportive environment, research suggests teachers are less likely to suffer from burnout and more likely to remain in the profession (Brock & Grady, 2000; Certo & Fox, 2001). Administrators play a crucial role in the wellbeing of teachers. They must support teachers by creating a positive school culture, provide meaningful professional development, and enforce teacher professionalism. As suggested by Kinsey (2006), “School leaders are not only advocates for their students, but advocates for their teachers in the important role they play each day (p.147).” Administrators, therefore, must take on an active role in increasing teacher job satisfaction and teacher retention.

Finally, school leaders must create more opportunities for participative decision-making within schools. As demonstrated through this study, teachers desire to feel valued and heard. As the Hawthorne studies suggest, people within an organization respond to recognition, security and a sense of belonging (as cited in Morgan, 1989). Mayo believed that these things motivate individuals because humans have a need to believe that their organization (or school) cares about them and is willing to listen (as cited in Morgan, 1989). Although these studies relate to employees in an organization, the theories can also be applied to teachers within a school.
Moreover, research shows that participative decision-making improves school climate and teacher retention (Ingersoll, 2003). Teachers yearn to feel a sense of ownership and engagement in the process. Creating an environment in which teachers voices are heard and teachers feel respected and valued, would cultivate the psychological need for relatedness, and reduce teacher attrition.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The results of this study lead to recommendations for further study on why mid-career teachers are leaving the profession. First, research is needed to understand the impact of personal attributes of teachers on the decision to leave the profession. When psychological contract violations, weak leadership, work-life balance conflicts, and feelings of disrespect pervade the educational environment, why do some mid-career teachers stay when others choose to leave? A study that explores the role of traits and personal characteristics is therefore needed. Second, a quantitative study that identifies the most significant factors in mid-career teacher attrition is recommended. Finally, because OTES was frequently referred to by participants in the study as a source of stress and dissatisfaction, an in-depth study of the role of public teacher evaluations in teacher attrition is needed. Given the critical need for experienced teachers, the goal of such research should be to provide a voice to teachers so that efforts can be made to improve the educational environment so that teachers can realize the intrinsic rewards of such an important job.
References


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How many years of teaching experience did you acquire before leaving the profession?

2. Describe the school district(s) where you worked.

3. Describe the quality of the work environment at the school(s) in which you worked.

4. What are your reasons for leaving the teaching profession?

5. What was most satisfying about teaching?

6. What was least satisfying about teaching?

7. Did teaching live up to your initial expectations? Why or why not?

8. Did you feel prepared to do your job effectively?

9. Were there any local school district policies that impacted your decision to leave?

10. Were there any state or federal education policies that impacted your decision to leave?

11. How would you describe your relationships with administrators, colleagues, parents, and students during your time as a teacher?

12. Did you experience work related stress as a teacher?

13. How much autonomy were you afforded as a teacher?

13a. How did this degree of autonomy contribute to your job satisfaction?

14. Would anything have kept you in education longer?
APPENDIX B

HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL
The Human Subjects Review Board has approved your research study. You may proceed with the study as you have outlined in your proposal. The approval is granted for one calendar year. Research participant interaction and/or data collection is to cease at this time, unless application for extension has been submitted and approval for continuance is obtained.

The primary role of the HSRB is to ensure the protection of human research participants. As a result of this mandate, we ask that you adhere to the ethical principles of autonomy, justice, and beneficence. We would also like to remind you of your responsibility to report any violation to participant protections immediately upon discovery. Likewise, we would like to remind you that any alteration to the research proposal as it was approved cannot move forward. Any amendment to the application must be submitted for approval before the project can resume.

We wish you success in your discoveries.

Dr. Christopher R. Chartier
Ashland University
Chair Human Subjects Review Board
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Laura Hartsel in Ashland University’s College of Education is conducting a research study to understand the factors that contribute to mid-career teacher attrition. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a former teacher who voluntarily left the field of education during the mid-career stage.

B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

1. You will complete two interviews with Laura Hartsel which will last between 30-60 minutes.

2. During each interview, participants will be asked to reflect upon their teaching experience and decision to leave the profession. A semi-structured research protocol will be used in the study.

3. Each interview session will be audio recorded and transcribed by someone who possesses no knowledge of your true identity. All information that could potentially lead to your identification will be changed or removed from the transcripts.

4. If and when applicable, you will be encouraged to share documents and artifacts to clarify or support your statements.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

1. There is no physical risk to participants of this study. If a question makes you feel uncomfortable, you may decline to answer it.

2. Participation in this research study will involve no loss of privacy and all information with be handled confidentially. A list of the participants and their respective pseudonym will be kept on a password protected flash drive in a secure office. References made to participants within the researcher’s final paper(s) will utilize pseudonyms.
D. BENEFITS
There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide will help inform the subject of mid-career teacher attrition. It may help policymakers better understand how to retain experienced teachers.

E. COSTS
There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study.

F. PAYMENT
There is no payment associated with taking part in this study.

G. QUESTIONS
If you have questions regarding this study you may contact the researcher, Laura Hartsel, at 440-821-8447 or email laura.corwon@gmail.com
If you have any comments or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the researchers. If for some reason you do not wish to do this, you may contact the Human Subjects Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 and 5:00, Monday through Friday, by calling or writing....

H. CONSENT
You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep. Additionally, a copy of the interview protocol (questions) will have been provided to you prior to signing this informed consent form. Please indicate, by signing your initials in the space provided below, that you have been given a copy of the interview protocol for review.

__________ I certify that a copy of the interview protocol (questions) have been given to me. I have reviewed the proposed protocol and consent to this line of questioning.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point.

If you agree to participate, you should sign below.

_________________________ _____________________________________________
Date     Signature of Study Participant

_________________________ _____________________________________________
Date     Signature of Person Obtaining Consent