TEACHER RETENTION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THREE ELEMENTARY TEACHER STAYERS

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of George Mason University in Partial Fulfillment of The Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy Education

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Jim and Carol Sell, who taught me the power of commitment, honesty, and faith. Their unconditional love and support steeled my resolve at an early age to reach for my dreams. I am forever grateful that they continue to stand beside me as I reach one more dream. And to my granddad, Ervin Ranshaw Harrison, I promised to finish and with you watching over me I did.
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I would like to give special thanks to the three teachers who shared their experiences of staying in the classroom with me. I am grateful to each teacher for allowing me to tell their story.
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ABSTRACT

TEACHER RETENTION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THREE ELEMENTARY TEACHER STAYERS

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George Mason University, 2013
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Teacher stayers have remained within a profession experiencing an average annual turnover rate of 14% (Liu, 2007) and its lowest levels of job satisfaction in 20 years (MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2011). Exploring the lived experiences of teacher stayers might hold significant potential in decreasing the turnover rate given they have successfully negotiated the factors that often drive others out. This study sought to understand the essence of teacher retention for three elementary teacher stayers using Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) ecological structure of the educational environment. Data were collected using four in-depth interviews with each teacher stayer and analyzed using a phenomenological method of data analysis. The findings reveal teacher retention for each narrator involved a unique constellation of factors within the micro- and meso-system that outweighed the perceived frustrations and pressures exerted by the exosystem, thus sustaining them in the profession. Though these findings failed to
uncover a simple and direct cause of teacher retention, they capture a totality of the phenomenon—invoking the interactive nature of an individual and their environment—that provide further insight into teacher retention. Understanding the essence of teacher retention for these three elementary teacher stayers has implications for teacher education as well as education policy.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the field of education struggles to retain public school teachers. Since the 1990s, researchers have reported a steady rise in teacher turnover (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008; Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & Miller, 2010; Keigher, 2010; Liu, 2007; Luekens, Lyter, Fox, & Chandler, 2004; Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005). In 2002, the National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future reported the retention problem “plays itself out, to a greater or lesser extent, in every state” (p. 4). If the profession struggles to retain teachers and lower the turnover rate, then one way to examine this is to understand how those who choose to remain in the classroom successfully negotiate the factors that often drive others out. These individuals, often called “stayers,” have thrived within a profession experiencing its lowest levels of job satisfaction in 20 years (MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2011) and also experiencing unprecedented federal government involvement, especially with regard to student accountability and teacher evaluations. Nevertheless, they have stayed. The purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives of teacher stayers, which will provide more insight into how to bolster efforts to retain more teachers within the profession and lower the turnover rate.

A plethora of research exists on teacher turnover, i.e. teacher leavers and teacher movers; whereas, the literature on teacher stayers continues to be scant. In fact, The
National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) has argued that researchers focus too much attention on teachers leaving the profession, rather than on why teachers stay. The authors suggest a better research question to ask would be “How do we get the good teachers we have recruited, trained, and hired to stay in their jobs? (NCTAF, 2002, p. 3). This study aims to understand the decisions involved in staying within the profession from the perspective of elementary teacher stayers. However, even with such a goal in mind, the teacher turnover research cannot be ignored, because the two phenomena—leaving and staying—inform each other. In fact, the retention literature often becomes subsumed under the larger category of teacher turnover. Therefore, the following literature on teacher turnover provides a background for this teacher retention study.

**Teacher Turnover**

Ingersoll and Merrill (2010) compared turnover rates using six cycles of the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) data from the past twenty years (1987–08). They found average turnover rates from year to year increased since the early 1990s from 13.2% in 1991-92 to 16.9% in 2004-05. Keigher reported that of the 3,380,300 public school teachers who taught during 2007-2008, 15.6% either left the profession or moved schools. Moreover, Boe et al., using Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS) data, reported an increase of 22-23% in teacher turnover during the 1990s, from 478,000 to 767,000 teachers leaving annually. Provasnik and Dorfman (2005) also found an increase in teacher turnover over using the SASS and TFS database and reported a 16% teacher turnover rate for the 1999-2000 school year, up from 13% in 1990-1991. Since these
researchers use different data sets or define their variables differently within the same data set, they open the door to more analysis of the size and scope of teacher turnover, as well as its implications.

Given the generally accepted rise in teacher turnover within the past twenty years, researchers continue to debate whether the teaching profession experiences excessive amounts of turnover in comparison to other professions. Using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data, both Liu (2007) and Ingersoll (2001, 2003) claim teacher turnover rates surpass the national average of 11% turnover found in other comparable professions. Using four independent cycles of data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and The Teacher Follow-Up Survey (TFS) (1987-88, 1990-91, 1993-94, and 1999-2000), Liu found the teacher turnover rate to be 15%—a finding similar to the 14% turnover rate reported by Ingersoll (2001). In 2003, Ingersoll found a teacher turnover rate of 15.7%, in part due to the fact that the NCES had only partially released the 1999-2000 cycle of data; therefore he used partial estimates for this cycle of data.

entered the field, while 212,908 left. According to Ingersoll, these figures represent a constant flow of teachers in and out of the field each year, i.e. teacher turnover, which he refers to as a “revolving door”.

Boe, Cook, and Sunderland (2008) challenge the arguments that there are excessive teacher turnover rates posited by both Liu (2007) and Ingersoll (2001, 2003). Boe et al. adjusted the turnover rate based on the TFS 2000-01 data by eliminating teachers who migrated from one school to another within the same district. Thus, they calculated a new teacher turnover rate for the 1999-2000 school year to be 11.5%; a figure still slightly higher than the 11% turnover statistic reported by the BLS for comparable professions. However, Boe et al. do not use BLS data as a basis of comparison. Instead, they use data from an independent, privately owned company who publish information for professionals in business and government known as the Bureau of National Affairs, Inc. or Bloomberg BNA. More specifically, Boe et al. used the organization’s national corporate employee turnover rate for 2000 of 15.6% to argue the teacher turnover rate of 11.5% in 1999-2000 was drastically lower than the national average. In addition, the authors aggregated the data to find a teacher turnover rate for the 1990s around 10%, a rate comparable to other professions (13%) but less.

Harris and Adams (2007) found mixed results when they conducted a study using data from the 1992-2001 Current Population Survey (CPS), which is a nationally represented survey conducted monthly by the U.S. Census Bureau. Using the CPS data enabled the researchers to use a much larger sample size than data collected from the SASS (18,700 teachers compared to around 7,000 teachers respectively). However, the
CPS only allowed analysis of data specific to teacher leavers, reducing Harris and Adams’s definition of teacher turnover. They compared teacher turnover rates (7.73%) with three professions they claimed to be comparable to teaching: (a) nursing (6.09%), (b) social work (14.94%), and (c) accounting (8.01%). As these percentages indicate, they found teacher turnover rates to be higher than nursing and lower than social work and accounting turnover rates.

The research generally highlights an increase in teacher turnover within the past twenty years, even though researchers differ on the amount of turnover and whether it exceeds turnover amounts of other professions. Regardless, the researchers all found turnover rates to be problematic within the profession. What is clear from these studies is that while they all reported teacher turnover, none of them explains neither why teachers leave the profession or why the vast majority of teachers choose to remain in the profession.

**Teacher Turnover Factors**

Building from the idea of a “revolving door” of teaching, researchers have sought to examine turnover more closely from the perspective of those teachers who leave the field altogether, i.e. teacher attrition. The literature posits several teacher characteristics associated with higher rates of turnover. First, the experience level of the teacher has been found to influence turnover (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ingersoll, 2001, 2003; Shen, 1997). Ingersoll (2001) posits the relationship between a teacher’s age and turnover follows a U-shaped curve, whereas, teachers with little experience and those with the most experience are
most likely to leave. He used three cycles of SASS data from 1987-88, 1990-91, and 1993-94 and their TFS supplement to conduct a multiple regression analysis of the predictors of teacher turnover. Ingersoll found the age of the teacher to be the most salient predictor of turnover: “Both younger (less than 30 years) and older (greater than 50 years) teachers are more likely to depart than are middle-aged teachers” (Ingersoll, 2001, p. 518). In 2003, he claimed that 46% of teachers leave after the first five years of teaching. Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) report more than 30% leave within the first five years. Barnes, Crowe, and Schaefer (2007) conducted a study of teacher turnover in five school districts (2 urban, 1 suburban, and 2 rural) within the US and found similar results; new teachers leave at significantly higher rates than experienced teachers no matter the type of school district.

Besides experience level, other teacher characteristics have been found to influence teacher attrition. For example, teachers married and/or with children have higher odds of leaving the profession (Boe, Bobbit, Cook, Whitener, and Weber, 1997; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2007). In addition, female teachers tend to be at greater risk of leaving compared to male teachers (Borman & Downling, 2008; Johnson, Berg, and Donaldson, 2005; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006). With regard to subject matter, math and science teachers, as well as elementary special education teachers, leave at higher rates than other teachers (Ingersoll, 2001, 2003).

**Race, poverty, and school performance.** As evidenced above, researchers have identified multiple teacher characteristics associated with turnover. Furthermore,
researchers have identified trends within turnover regarding school and student characteristics. More specifically, teachers who work in high minority, low performing, and/or high poverty schools are more likely to leave the profession or move schools (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005; Scafidi, Sjoquist, & Stinebrickner, 2005). Each of these turnover trends undergirds the importance of school context when attempting to understand the problem of teacher turnover.

Barnes et al. (2007) found correlations of three school characteristics with higher percentages of turnover: “high poverty, high minority, and low performing schools lose a higher percentage of their teachers than other schools” (p. 50). A plethora of research exists documenting the fact that schools with a higher percentage of minority students, a higher percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch, and/or schools with a history of low student achievement struggle to retain their teaching staff (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & Miller, 2010; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005; Scafidi, Sjoquist, & Stinebrickner, 2005).

Between the 1999-2000 and 2000-01 school year, Provasnik and Dorfman (2005) found teachers in high-poverty schools twice as likely to move to another school compared to their counterparts in low-poverty schools (10% and 5% respectively). Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2004) analyzed elementary school data for the state of Texas during the years of 1993-1996 to conclude that 20% of teachers in schools in the bottom quartile of student achievement leave their schools each year, while only 15% of
teachers leave in schools within the top-quartile of student achievement. In other words, teachers who choose to change schools within their districts or outside of their district “appear to follow the same attributes, seeking out schools with fewer academically and economically disadvantaged students” (Hanushek et al., p. 80). Moreover, Ingersoll (2001) found higher turnover rates for high poverty schools (15.2%) compared to low poverty schools (10.5%). In 2010, Ingersoll and Merrill examined all six cycles of the SASS and TFS data available to find that 45% of all public school turnover took place in one-fourth of the public schools. More importantly, high-minority, urban and rural schools with lower levels of student achievement experienced the highest rates of teacher turnover. These studies illuminate the importance of both school and student characteristics when determining factors influencing teacher turnover. However, one last major category of variables associated with teacher turnover needs to be discussed, work conditions.

**Work conditions.** Ingersoll (2001) approached the teacher turnover problem from an organizational analysis by conducting a regression analysis of predictor variables associated with teacher turnover. Using linked data from the 1990-91 SASS and 1991-92 TFS, he controlled for both teacher and student characteristics to focus attention on working conditions. Ingersoll found three working conditions to be significantly associated with teacher turnover: (a) administrative support, (b) student discipline, and (c) faculty influence and autonomy. Borman and Dowling (2008) corroborated Ingersoll’s findings. They conducted a meta-analysis on teacher attrition, which consisted of 34 studies. They found teachers’ work conditions to be more salient for
predicting turnover than has been previously noted in the literature; more specifically, schools with a lack of collaboration, teacher networking, and administrative support experienced higher turnover rates. Loeb, Darling-Hammond, and Luczak (2005) conducted regression analyses of data collected from 1,071 California teachers and found teacher working conditions to be the strongest predictor of turnover. Variables associated with working conditions for Loeb et al. included professional development opportunities and their perceived quality, appropriateness of tests required to give to students, instructional materials provided, availability of technology, and adequacy of physical facilities.

The exact variables associated with working conditions vary by research study, as these studies show. Despite this problem of nomenclature, research has identified the importance of understanding working conditions within schools as it relates to teacher turnover. Framing the problem of teacher turnover as a multi-dimensional issue involving teacher characteristics, school characteristics, and working conditions supports a more comprehensive understanding of why teachers leave the profession or move schools.

The next section seeks further clarification of reasons for teacher turnover by situating it within the broader historical and sociocultural context of federal government policies, considering the federal government has taken an unprecedented role in education over the past twenty years.

**Accountability.** According to Hamilton, Stecher, and Yuan (2008) a culture of standards-based reform entered into the school system during the early 1990s. Congress
passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 and the president signed the bill in January of 2002. Not only did NCLB bolster the use of standards and assessments among all states, deeply embedding the use of high-stakes tests into the culture of our schools, but it morphed the standards-based reform movement into a test-based reform movement, “a system in which educators and others rely primarily on the test rather than the standards to communicate expectations and to inform practice” (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, p. 29).

The current culture of schools emphasizes high-stakes tests as a measure of student learning (Au, 2007; Horn, 2003; Jennings & Rentner, 2006; Ravitch, 2010). The results of these tests are reported to the public. Researchers have found that teachers’ creativity and autonomy have suffered due to the heavy reliance on such tests, and that they report tremendous pressure to teach to the test and insure all students pass (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Au, 2009; Certo, 2006). In addition, research has shown that teachers narrow the curriculum in order to focus solely on the tested content (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Au, 2009; McMurrey, 2007; Taylor, Shepard, Kinner, & Rosenthal, 2002). Furthermore, teachers’ control over instruction has deteriorated. In a national survey, Abrams et al. (2003) found that 76% of teachers who taught in states identified with high-stakes tests reported, “their state testing program has led them to teach in ways that contradict their own notions of sound educational practice” (pp. 6).

Within the literature, the correlations between teacher turnover and accountability remain few. However, one study found a direct relationship. Tye and O’Brien (2002) claim teachers who had already left teaching cited accountability (high-stakes testing, test
preparation, and standards) as the number one reason for leaving the classroom. Their work illuminates the influence the current structure of accountability may hold on a teacher’s decision to leave the classroom. Caution should be made, however, when interpreting their findings as they had a very small sample size (12.6%).

The aforementioned research posits variables associated with teacher turnover. In addition, the research clearly highlights groups of teachers within particular school settings exiting the profession faster than others via Ingersoll’s “revolving door”. Overall, the research has led to a better understanding of why teachers leave, which could possibly aid in the retention of teachers. However, these studies posit few reasons teachers remain in the field. To capture the reasons teachers remain within the profession and understand their experience, the voice of teacher stayers needs to be included within the literature. The next section turns attention to teacher stayers, though it remains a less researched phenomenon.

**Teacher Retention**

As outlined in the introductory sections of this chapter, the majority of the teacher turnover literature specifically focuses on teachers who leave the field. Far less research has focused on teacher stayers, i.e. teachers who remain in the same school or district, despite the fact that the majority of the teaching force chooses to stay in the classroom from year to year. According to the SASS and TFS data from 1988 to 2007, the percentage of public elementary school stayers, defined as teachers who remain in the same school in the current school year as in the base year, has ranged from 82 to 86%, meaning roughly 8 out of 10 public school elementary teachers remain teaching in the
same school from the base year to the following year. Despite these large numbers, researchers using SASS and TFS data continue to emphasize teachers that have either moved schools or left the profession (Keigher, 2010; Leukens, Lyter, Fox, & Chandler, 2004; Marvel, Lyter, Peltola, Strizek, & Morton, 2007; Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005). Furthermore, if the field reports an average annual turnover rate of 14% (Liu, 2007), as mentioned above, then it should be understood that an average of 86% of teachers remain annually. Therefore, researchers ignore 8 out of 10 of teachers within the field by emphasizing teacher leavers and movers within their research.

**Retention factors.** Perrachione, Rosser, and Peterson (2008) claim that the literature on teacher retention is relatively scant. To understand why teachers stay in their jobs, research needs to focus more on the perspective of teachers who remain in the classroom each year. Doing so will provide an understanding of the factors associated with teacher retention, which can lead to reforms that keeps the best among those who would consider leaving. A review of the quantitative research supports three factors related to teacher retention: (a) the administration (Ingersoll, 2001; Swars, Meyers, Mays, & Lack, 2009; Tompkins, 1995), (b) the students (Perrachione et al. 2008; Mittapalli, 2008; Swars, Meyers, Mays, & Lack, 2009; Tompkins, 1995), and (c) a teacher’s perception of autonomy (Ingersoll, 2001; Mittapalli, 2008; Perrachione et al. 2008). Qualitative research highlights the personal and emotional dimensions of a teacher’s decision to stay (Chinn, 2007; Cohen, 2009; Day & Gu, 2009; McIntyre, 2010; Williams, 2001). For example, several studies claimed that teacher stayers viewed teaching as a passion or as a calling (Chinn, 2007; Cohen, 2009; Williams, 2001). In addition, teacher
stayers identify internal rewards that sustained them within the profession (Day & Gu, 2009; Williams, 2001). Furthermore, Day and Gu view teacher retention as more of a process than as a result of some particular factor or group of factors.

Conceptual framework. Coupling the findings from both quantitative and qualitative teacher retention research reveals retention as a process of interactions between a teacher and their environment; consequently, this study borrows from the work of Bronfenbrenner (1976) and his “ecological model” (see figure 1).

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model (1976)

![Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model](image)

*Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model*
Bronfenbrenner (1976) posits two sets of forces at work within an educational setting: (a) person-environment and (b) environment-environment. The first system accounts for the individual and how they “live out their lives” within the environment (Bronfenbrenner, p. 5). He suggests educational settings have four person-environment subsystems nested within each other: (a) microsystem, (b) mesosystem, (c) exosystem, and (d) macrosystem. The macrosystem, the largest layer, includes perceptions of individuals and the economy within which the education system operates in our society. The exosystem includes the cultural institutions that influence the individual such as agencies of government and neighborhoods. The mesosystem, the third layer within the model, accounts for the interactions between the individual and the major settings in which they live. The microsystem completes the final layer and consists of an individual and the immediate setting in which they interact daily. The second system Bronfenbrenner discusses consists of the relationships and interactions between each set of environments.

The model gives credence to operationalizing teacher retention as an interactive process between an individual and their environment. In addition, the model suggests the definition of an educational environment to include four nested layers of social interactions called systems. For these reasons, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model will provide the basis of a conceptual framework for this study.

**Purpose**

The general lack of research on teacher retention constitutes a major problem for the field, especially with regards to understanding the process of teacher retention. This
study aims to fill this gap in the literature by conducting a qualitative inquiry into the reasons elementary teachers have chosen to stay in the classroom. It will attempt to understand the role of ecology on teacher retention decisions, i.e. the interactions between elementary school teachers and their specific teaching environment.

**Research Question**

My central research question is:

1. What is the experience of staying in the classroom like for elementary school teachers teaching in public schools?

The subordinate research questions are:

1. What reasons do elementary school teachers provide for staying in the classroom?
2. In what ways do elementary teacher stayers perceive the environment as contributing to their retention?

**Definitions**

Summaries of the definitions used for the purposes of this research are as follows:

1. Teacher Turnover—an umbrella term encompassing both teacher attrition and teacher migration (Ingersoll, 2001)
2. Teacher Attrition—refers to teacher leavers, i.e. teachers who leave the profession and non-teaching educators, i.e. teachers who leave the classroom for another education position (Mittapalli, 2008)
3. Teacher Migration—refers to teacher movers, i.e. teachers who move schools and/or districts but continue to teach in a classroom (Boe et al., 2008)

4. Teacher Retention—refers to teachers who continue teaching within the same school or the same district, i.e. teacher stayers (Chinn, 2007)

**Significance of the Problem**

District leaders, school administrators, teachers, and students benefit from the retention of teachers. Teacher stayers hold a wealth of practical and tacit knowledge that cannot be explicitly taught. Therefore, losing these teachers represents a loss of personal, tacit knowledge. In addition, these individuals provide stability to their particular schools and the profession that novice teachers cannot provide (Guin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2003; Shen, 1997). Within a school, grade-level teams benefit from sustained relationships. Professionally, teacher stayers build school-to-school and district-to-district connections with other professionals. In addition, many teacher stayers often build a rapport with school administrators that influence the implementation of building initiatives. These connections depend on relationships, which take time to build.

Teachers that remain in the field represent money that does not have to be placed in the recruitment of teachers to replace those that leave. In addition, the district serves to benefit from money spent on professional development for teachers as those individuals continue to remain in the classroom applying the knowledge gained through the district professional development. Students also benefit from veteran teachers remaining in the classroom. Veteran teachers hold both pragmatic and pedagogical content knowledge gained through years of experience applying theory to practice in a classroom setting that
new teachers have not acquired yet. Though very few studies connect teacher retention and student achievement, Ronfeldt, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2011) recently suggested that higher rates of retention positively influence student achievement.

Furthermore, studying teacher retention from the perspective of teacher stayers provides insight to district, state, and federal level policymakers as they write policies designed to retain teachers within the profession. Too often these policies have been overly influenced by research on teacher leavers and movers. However, teacher stayers experience many of the same variables often associated with high levels of turnover but stay in the profession. For some reason, they managed to sustain themselves and in many cases thrive. Understanding the particular experiences of teacher stayers will broaden our understanding of teacher retention and validate teacher retention policies. Therefore, further study within the teacher retention literature is substantiated, especially with regards to factors associated with retaining teachers.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to explore the reasons elementary teachers have chosen to stay in the classroom and how they understand their decisions to remain. Johnson, Berg, and Donaldson (2005) claim teacher retention research has no clearly defined body of research. The dichotomous nature of a teacher’s career decision, i.e. to leave or stay, provides one reason. Many studies pursue questions related to a teacher’s career decision to remain as part of a larger, more directed methodological effort to answer why teachers leave, resulting in limited teacher retention findings. These studies, therefore, find a home within the teacher attrition literature. The second reason for an absence of a substantial literature base on teacher retention is that it appears to have been ignored as a research focus of its own.

The next section will explore the field of teacher retention and seek explanations as to why teachers remain rather than leave the field. The review of teacher retention literature will begin with studies that sought to develop conceptual models of teacher retention followed by a discussion of the quantitative studies within the field. Next a review of the scant qualitative work within the field will be discussed.

Conceptual Models of Teacher Retention

Chapman (1983) designed a general conceptual model of teacher attrition grounded in social learning theory, which posits the idea that “psychological functioning
can be explained in terms of the interaction of personal characteristics, previous behavior (e.g. learning), and environmental determinants” (p. 46). The model accounts for five categories of variables that influence a teacher’s decision to either remain or leave the profession: (a) the personal characteristics of the teacher, (b) the nature of teacher training and early teaching experience, (c) the teacher’s social and professional integration into the profession, (d) the external environment, and (e) a teacher’s sense of career satisfaction. Chapman (1983) grounds each of these categories with references from the literature; however, due to the year of publication the majority of his studies reviewed were published in the 1960s and 1970s. Chapman found many correlates of retention to be outside the direct influence of schools, administrators, and teacher preparation programs, such as career commitment, perceptions of career mobility, and family characteristics.

In 1984, Chapman sought to test his teacher retention model using discriminant analysis. Four hundred randomly selected teaching certificate recipients who graduated from the University of Michigan were selected per year for every other year from 1946-1978. A total of 5,764 graduates were selected for participation with 2,933 agreeing to participate, yielding a 51% response rate. These participants were categorized into three groups: (a) teachers who started in teaching and remained; (b) teachers who started in teaching and subsequently left; and (c) teachers who prepared for teaching but never entered the field. He found a teacher’s initial commitment to teaching, their perceptions of career mobility, along with their personal and family characteristics to be highly correlated to teacher retention. In addition, Chapman found little difference between
groups in their academic performance as measured by GPA. Moreover, his research provided scant evidence of a direct relationship between school administration and voluntary attrition.

Billingsley reviewed 13 studies published before 1993 to build a conceptual model of teacher attrition and retention among special education teachers. Her model proposes three broad categories of variables that influence the career decision: (a) external factors, (b) employment factors, and (c) personal factors.

External factors include those variables include the economy, federal and state policies (e.g. NCLB), and teachers’ unions, features generally outside the teacher’s immediate sphere of influence. Billingsley (1993) notes the literature reveals little about the influence of these variables on teachers’ decisions to stay in the classroom.

Employment factors include four major categories: (a) professional qualifications, e.g. educational preparation, initial commitment, and prior work experience; (b) work conditions, e.g. district and school environment and job assignment; (c) work rewards, e.g. internal, external, and ancillary; and (d) level of commitment. Personal factors encompassed teacher demographics and family life, as well as a broad array of affective/cognitive factors labeled as personality, interest, and motivation.

Billingsley (1993) attempted to provide cursory support for each component of her proposed conceptual model of special education teacher attrition and retention, but the complexity of variables involved in making a career decision to stay, transfer, or leave proved to be quite extensive and complex. Nonetheless, she summarized two patterns found in the literature. First, academically talented special education teachers
and those with less experience are more likely to leave the field. Second, the excessive demands of the job and a lack of administrative support were consistently linked to special education attrition.

In 2004, Billingsley extended her work by synthesizing research on retention and attrition among special education teachers since 1993. She chose 20 studies for inclusion in her study; however, the reader is left to reason why these studies were included due to her cursory discussion of selection criteria. Billingsley (2004) provides a thematic synthesis of her findings with an emphasis on work-related factors that she identified as central in the literature. The four themes are as follows: (a) teacher characteristics, (b) teacher qualifications, (c) work environment, and (d) affective reactions to work. Affective reactions include variables such as job satisfaction, commitment, and stress. She also found that younger, less experienced special education teachers were still more likely to leave and that special education teachers with demonstrated higher academic ability are more likely to leave as well. In addition, personal factors, such as a family move or the decision to stay at home with one’s family, greatly influence a special education teacher’s career decision.

In 1993, the same year Billingsley published her conceptual model, Brownell and Smith published their conceptual model for teacher attrition and retention grounded in the literature on both general and special education. They sought to develop a conceptual model that would serve as a basis for understanding future attrition research and assist with efforts to retain teachers, especially in a high needs area such as special education. Moreover, they hypothesized “that it is the relationship of historical factors, external
personal factors, and environmental interactions in the workplace that leads to a person’s successful or unsuccessful integration into teaching and ultimately their decision to stay in or leave the classroom” (Brownell & Smith, 1993, p. 271).

The historical influences addressed by the authors included the following: (a) age, (b) academic ability, (c) gender, (d) ethnic background, (e) socioeconomic status (SES), (f) initial commitment to teaching, (g) coping strategies for handling stress, and (h) level of preparedness. The external personal factors included perceived career options, life cycle events, and economic considerations. And to account for the environmental interactions in the workplace Brownell and Smith (1993) modified Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) ecological model for conducting research in educational environments. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model includes four nested systems of interactions. Brownell and Smith defined the four systems within Bronfenbrenner’s model as they apply to research on teacher attrition: (a) the microsystem consists of the teacher’s classroom and the student-teacher interactions that occur there, (b) the mesosystem consists of the teacher’s school and the interacting variables between the teacher and their workplace, (c) the exosystem consists of the formal and informal social structures that influence the teacher’s workplace such as local education agencies, state policies, and federal policies such as NCLB, and (d) the macrosystem consists of the dominant cultural beliefs and economic conditions that impact the school.

Brownell and Smith (1993) created a more robust conceptual model of teacher attrition and retention. Their inclusion of a variety of internal and external factors within the teacher, as well as the influence of environmental factors mimics the work of both
Chapman (1983, 1984) and Billingsley (1993, 2004). However, the incorporation of Bronfenbrenner’s work, i.e. the four nested levels of interaction, differentiated their conceptual model from the others and underscored the importance of human ecology on teacher retention decisions. Therefore, teacher retention can be understood as a multi-level process of person-environment relations.

**Literature Reviews of Teacher Retention**

The aforementioned researchers (Billingsley, 1993, 2004; Brownell & Smith, 1993; Chapman, 1983, 1984) reviewed the teacher attrition and retention literature with the purposes of developing a conceptual representation of the phenomenon. Other researchers have conducted literature reviews with the purpose of summarizing the current research. For example, Johnson, Berg, and Donaldson (2005) reviewed an expansive body of literature with a focus on the following: (a) teacher shortages and teacher turnover, (b) reasons why some teachers leave prematurely, and (c) strategies for increasing retention rates. They found very broad trends within the literature regarding teacher retention, such as the age of a teacher greatly influences retention, with the younger and older teachers more likely to leave. In addition, those teachers with the least and most experience are more likely to leave. Other demographic characteristics of those likely to remain included being male compared to female and teaching general education rather than special education. The race and ethnicity of a teacher was not found to be significant in determining the likelihood of a teacher remaining.

Regarding the school characteristics, teachers remained longer in places with fewer minorities, fewer students identified as lower performing, fewer students identified
as lower income, and fewer reported behavior incidents. Johnson et al. (2005) found higher salaries were associated with higher rates of retention among teachers within the early span of their career; however, when combined with other variables pay did not play a substantial role in retention. In addition, the authors found that the research suggested schools with more organized collegial work combined with positive perceptions of the school leadership were more likely to retain teachers.

Johnson et al. (2005) also identified several workplace conditions that had no direct association with teacher retention within the literature; however, they did influence teacher satisfaction and sense of efficacy, including: (a) the physical conditions of a teacher’s workplace, (b) the teaching assignment, (c) the quality of the curriculum, and (d) the extent to which teachers must follow the curriculum.

The following year in 2006, Guarino, Santibañez, and Daley conducted a literature review on teacher recruitment and retention with the goal of providing researchers and policy makers with a comprehensive, evaluative, and current review of the literature. The authors noted both topics focus on “mechanisms to adjust the attractiveness of teaching relative to other occupations” (Guarino, et al., 2006, p. 176). Therefore, they did not separate the two topics out for review. Rather, they limited their review to peer-reviewed, empirical studies performed on teachers in the United States labor market using data from 1990 or later and published by 2004. The authors excluded a large body of research on special education and vocational education recruitment and retention due to limited resources.
Guarino, et al. (2006) found 46 studies that met their selection criteria. Each of these studies examined recruitment and retention issues from an economic viewpoint of supply and demand, which was the conceptual framework the authors used to frame their discussion. The authors separated the literature into five categories based on the following characteristics: (a) those who enter teaching, (b) those who remain in teaching, (c) the external characteristics of schools and districts that affect recruitment and retention, (d) the compensation policies that affect recruitment and retention, (e) the pre-service policies that affect recruitment and retention, and (f) the in-service policies that affect recruitment and retention.

Guarino et al. (2006) found higher turnover rates for the following: (a) novice teachers, (b) white teachers, (c) science and mathematics teachers, (d) those with higher measured academic ability, and (e) female teachers. With regards to the external factors, the authors found that private schools and those serving higher proportions of minority, low-income, and low-performing students experienced higher turnover rates. Those studies examining compensation policies illuminated a relationship between higher salaries and lower teacher turnover rates, as well as a decreased perception in commitment to teaching. Reviewing studies examining in-service policies, the authors found schools that provided more autonomy and administrative support had lower levels of turnover. In addition, the authors found that accountability policies might lead to higher levels of turnover in low-performing schools.

In sum, Guarino, Santibañez, and Daley’s (2006) review of the recent empirical literature on teacher recruitment and retention from an economic viewpoint found
teachers will likely remain in the field if they (a) are in the middle years of teaching, (b) identify as other than white, (c) teach in fields other than math and science, (d) hold lower scores on academic ability standardized measurements, (e) are male, (f) teach in schools with few low-income and/or low-performing students, (g) teach in suburban or rural schools, versus urban schools, (h) teach in public versus private schools, (i) receive high wages, (j) received some form of mentoring or induction program as novice teachers, and (k) perceive more autonomy and administrative support.

In a more recent expansive review of teacher attrition literature, Lamonte (2011) compiled a list of approximately 70 variables influencing a teacher’s decision to remain in the classroom. Lamonte constructed a 71-item survey using a 5-point Likert scale for all responses, which investigated both internal and external domains that were most important in a teacher’s decision to remain in the classroom, and the satisfaction associated with each one. A Cronbach’s alpha level of .95 was calculated for the total scale, which indicates a high level of reliability. Lamonte electronically administered the survey to all beginning teachers in Tangipahoa parish within the state of Louisiana. A follow-up phone call was made to the school regarding those participants who did not participate, which clearly denotes voluntary participation was not permitted. The author synthesized the variables into nine factors categorized into two groups (internal and external). The internal variables were support, mentoring, professional development, organizational health, and working conditions; whereas, the external variables were mandates, teacher certification, student population, economics, and personal circumstances.
Summary. Despite the study’s limitations, Lamonte’s (2011) model highlights the importance of both internal and external influences on teacher attrition and retention found within the literature and incorporated into other models (Billingsley, 1993, 2004; Brownell & Smith, 1993; Chapman, 1984; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Tompkins, 1995). Moreover, these studies undergird the nature of teacher retention as an interaction between a teacher and their individual characteristics, students, perceptions of administration, and local school district policies. Only a divergent view of the literature with emphasis on the teacher, as well as the environment, serves to further our understanding of teacher retention. Therefore, further analysis of both quantitative and qualitative work will follow.

Teacher Retention Surveys

Researchers have examined the variables associated with teacher retention using quantitative methods of inquiry; survey methods tend to be the most frequently used. In fact, all the studies within this section include some form of data collected from a survey. Many researchers either accessed national survey data from national databases such as the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS), and the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B) or modified these instruments when designing their own. Regardless, all the researchers sought to explore why teachers remain in the classroom by asking teachers questions regarding their retention decisions.

Following the historical evolution of the quantitative studies from the earliest to the most recent not only illustrates the variety of survey methodology employed by the researchers, but several themes found to influence teacher retention. First, Tompkins
(1995) proposed and empirically tested a model that provided a characterization of teachers most likely to leave. Her model of teacher attrition was based on school characteristics, teacher demographics, and a multi-dimensional concept of teacher burnout using previously collected data from roughly three million private and public school teachers nationwide from the 1990-91 SASS and the 1992 TFS. She included all the teacher demographic variables collected by the SASS and TFS except gender, race, and marital status due to previous research suggesting their impact on attrition to be non-significant. She included five school characteristic variables: (a) region, (b) school level, (c) program type, (d) percent minority enrollment, and (e) community type (rural, small town, urban, fringe/large town, and central city). Tompkins identified 45 variables for inclusion in her model after cross-referencing the literature on teacher burnout with the variables measuring teacher attitudes and perceptions on the SASS and TFS.

The model accurately predicted 50% of the 1992 TFS participants, who chose to leave the profession one year later. More importantly, the model identified 99.14% of the teachers who stayed one year later based on 8 general factors: (a) attitude toward the severity of student disrespect for teachers, the school, and other students; (b) perception of classroom autonomy; (c) perception of administrative support and cooperation among the staff; (d) attitude toward the severity of student alcohol use, drug use pregnancy, and drop-outs; (e) overall attitude toward the profession of teaching; (f) perceived amount of teacher influence on determining school policies; (g) perceived severity of cultural and racial tension in the school; and (h) degree to which students’ home lives was perceived as problematic.
The model Tompkins (1995) proposed and tested highlights the importance of internal factors influencing teacher retention, especially with regard to teachers’ perceptions and attitudes. However, as with the case of many quantitative studies that employ survey methods, these factors do not provide full disclosure of why teachers stay, nor do they provide contextual information associated with each of these factors.

Ingersoll (2001) examined teacher retention from an organizational perspective. He conducted a secondary analysis of the 1990-91 SASS and 1992 TFS data comprised of 6,733 elementary and secondary teachers (3,343 stayers, 1,428 movers, and 1,962 leavers). A multiple regression analysis of three groups of predictor variables (i.e. teacher characteristics, school characteristics, and organizational conditions) was conducted on the dependent variable (teacher turnover). He identified teacher turnover as a dichotomous variable with two options: (a) remaining with their teaching job, or (b) departing. After controlling for teacher and school characteristics, Ingersoll conducted a two-tailed logistic regression analysis for four measures of school organizational conditions and found 3 variables that remained statistically significant (p<.10): (a) administrative support, (b) student discipline problems, (c) and teacher influence. The variable found not to be statistically significant was advanced salary, suggesting work conditions assert more influence on teacher retention than pay incentives; a finding bolstered eleven years later by the research of Berry and Eckert (2012).

Using a 6-unit scale to measure teacher perception of influence, Ingersoll (2001) found a 1-unit difference between two schools that was associated with a 26% difference in the odds of a teacher departing. In addition, a 1-unit difference on a scale measuring
administrative support between two schools was associated with a 23% difference in the odds of a teacher departing. Lastly, a 1-unit difference on a scale measuring student discipline problems between two schools was associated with a 47% difference in the odds of a teacher departing. When analyzed using only voluntary departures (those not departing because of retirement, layoffs, terminations, or school closings), Ingersoll found that all the associations of the three organizational measures increased.

Mittapalli’s (2008) research findings suggested a similar importance of the school organization on teacher retention decisions. Using the 1993 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study, Third Follow-Up, (B&B: 93/03), she analyzed the personal characteristics, beliefs, and perceptions of teacher leavers, i.e. those that left the field entirely after five years, non-teaching educators, i.e. those who left the classroom for non-teaching positions, and teacher stayers, i.e. those who stayed. Mittapalli chose the B&B: 93/03 dataset because it allowed for a delineation between leavers and non-teaching educators.

Beginning in 1993, the B&B: 93/03 collected data from participants who were enrolled in post-secondary institutions. The students were asked questions regarding their future employment, education expectations, and undergraduate experience. Follow-up data were collected in 1994, 1997, and 2003. The participants were asked questions regarding their job search activities, education, and employment experiences after graduation. Over 11,000 (11,192) participants were surveyed in 1993, dwindling to a sample size of 8,500 in the following years. Of these participants, Mittapalli (2008)
identified 2,000 full-time teachers that included 36 leavers, 59 non-teaching educators, and 946 stayers.

She conducted t-tests among all three categories of participants to determine whether higher ability individuals or those with additional years of education past their bachelor’s degree were more likely to stay in teaching. She found that individuals with higher mean undergraduate grade-point averages were more likely to leave teaching, as compared to non-teaching educators and stayers.

Regarding teacher stayers, Mittapalli (2008) conducted one-way ANOVAs for six school/class characteristics that enable stayers to stay in teaching: (a) enjoy working with students, (b) work is rewarding, (c) flexible schedule, (d) autonomy, (e) giving back to society, and (f) enjoy subject matter. She found statistically significant differences between the variables “enjoy working with students” and “autonomy in running a classroom”, suggesting these two characteristics influence teacher retention. Further analyses conducted by Mittapalli sought to understand the thought processes behind the decision to stay and be satisfied in teaching, reporting findings beyond the scope of this review.

She posits a portrait of a teacher stayer as an individual with a lower GPA score, who enjoys working with students, and perceives a high level of autonomy in the classroom. Her research highlights the importance of teachers’ perceptions and beliefs regarding one component of the school organization, classroom autonomy.

Similar to Ingersoll (2001) and Mittapalli (2008), Perrachione, Rosser, and Petersen (2008) suggested that working with students influenced teacher retention
decisions. They sought to examine the relationship between job satisfaction, intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, and commitment on a teacher’s intent to remain in the profession (the outcome variable) using a mixed-methods approach. The authors created a random sample of public elementary school teachers, K-5, who had taught for five years or more in the state of Missouri. The researchers selected 300 participants to receive surveys and 201 returned them completed for a 67% response rate. The survey instrument consisted of five separate sections. Section one examined a teacher’s perceptions of their job satisfaction and retention using a shortened version of the SASS from 1993-94 and 2003-04. The second section measured a teacher’s intent to remain in the profession with three statements scored on a 7-point Likert scale: (a) I plan to remain in this position, (b) I plan to remain in this school, and (c) I plan to remain in this profession. The third and fourth sections of the survey included open-ended questions scored on a 5-point Likert scale, which were designed to help further explain teachers’ perceptions about their satisfaction and retention. The final section gathered information regarding teachers’ demographic and profile data.

Descriptive statistics and linear regression analysis addressed the quantitative data. However, the authors’ inductive analysis of the qualitative data, which found five recurrent themes, relates more to the purposes of this review. The five themes suggested by Perrachione et al. (2008) that influence teacher retention include the following: (a) personal teaching efficacy, (b) working with students, (c) job satisfaction, (d) schedule/time off, and (e) retirement.
Similar to Ingersoll (2001), Mittapalli (2008), and Perrachione et al. (2008), Swars, Meyers, Mays, and Lack (2009) suggested the students with whom teachers work in their classroom affect their decision to remain. Moreover, Swars et al. found the role of the administration to be in the forefront of teacher retention decisions. The authors conducted a mixed-methods study of the school with the intent of exploring the ways an organization contributes to a teacher’s career decision to remain. One hundred thirty-five teachers at a large, suburban school in the Southeastern part of the United States participated in the study. Eighty-eight percent of the students qualified for free and/or reduced lunch. Moreover, 72% of the students were nonnative English speakers. The school had met annual year progress (AYP) for the past three years.

The authors adapted the TFS, which included 35 questions to create a survey with 41 questions, each using a 5-point Likert scale. All 134 teachers took the survey at a staff meeting. Administrators, school leaders, and university researchers created 8 follow-up questions to be administered to 22 teachers in confidential interviews at the school. In addition, 39 teachers completed a six-item open-ended survey to clarify items on the survey. Swars et al. (2009) analyzed the interview and open-ended survey data using a constant-comparative methodology. They identified five themes from the participants as essential in retaining teachers at this school: (a) shared value of academic success, (b) unique qualities of students, (c) administration relationships, (d) daily lives of teachers, and (e) teacher relationships. Upon further examination of the data, Swars et al. identified two salient factors of teacher retention at this school: (a) the congruence of the teachers’ beliefs and practices with the organization, and (b) high or low relational needs.
and the administrators’ willingness and ability to meet such needs. These two factors helped the authors develop a two-dimensional model of teacher retention and mobility on an \( x \) and a \( y \)-axis. Therefore, a teacher at this school could fall into one of four quadrants “from which inferences can be made about whether a teacher is more likely to stay or leave” (Swarz et al., 2009, p. 179). A person would be more inclined to stay at this school if he/she exhibited low relational needs and held a high congruence with school beliefs and practices. In addition, if a teacher held high relational needs and high congruence of beliefs and practices she/he would likely stay as well. The model demonstrates the interactive nature of retention decisions involving one’s personal beliefs and relationships with their school’s administration.

Recent research emphasizes the role of administration on teacher retention decisions. For example, Boyd, Grossman, Ing, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2011) examined the relationship between new teachers’ perceptions of school working conditions, demographic data collected by the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), and veteran teachers’ retention decisions who work in the same building. The authors built a literature review to support their definition of school working conditions, which they defined in terms of six salient features: (a) teacher influence, (b) administration, (c) staff relations, (d) student behavior, (e) facilities, and (f) safety. Boyd et al. (2011) modified the SASS survey instrument to include all six of these school working conditions. The survey contained more than 300 questions using a 5-point Likert scale, with participants receiving $25 after completion of the survey. The surveys were administered at three periods in the research study. In the spring of 2005, 4,360
first-year teachers in New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) completed the survey (i.e. 70% response rate). In the spring of 2006, a follow-up survey was administered to 1,587 teachers who had completed the previous survey in the spring of 2005 and had remained in teaching a second year (i.e. 72% response rate). In addition, Boyd et al. (2011) administered a survey to teachers who left NYCPS after the 2004-2005 school year. Three hundred sixty-eight former teachers responded with a 61% response rate.

Boyd et al. conducted a multinomial logistic regression in order to estimate the relationship between teacher and school characteristics and teacher retention, which is a three-level dependent variable; (a) stayed at same school; (b) transferred to another school; or (c) left NYCPS. The full model included all six school working conditions, while controlling for teacher and student characteristics. The authors found only one statistically significant (p<0.05) variable, the administration factor, which significantly predicts teacher retention decisions. In addition, they found that a one standard deviation increase in a new teacher’s assessment of the administration decreases the likelihood of a veteran teacher leaving teaching in NYCPS by approximately 28%. Moreover, the administration “emerged as the main factor in teacher attrition in these surveys, just as it did in the analysis of actual attrition behavior…” (Boyd et al., 2011, p. 327).

Caution must be taken when reporting the findings of Boyd, et al. First, the participants teach in the second largest urban school district in the country and context matters. Urban schools differ markedly from suburban and rural schools with regards to administration and the pressures placed upon teachers. A larger percentage of the student body tends to be composed of minority students who struggle with performing on high-
stakes tests. Both administrators and teachers deal with the pressure to have students perform on high-stakes tests, often times straining relationships. Boyd et al. (2011) did not account for these contextual idiosyncrasies found within urban schools when reporting their findings. In addition, the authors did not report a split-half reliability for the survey instrument, which required the completion of over 300 questions and taking participants over 25 minutes to complete. The attention span of the participants could easily wane while completing 300 questions, causing them to rush through the questions towards the end of the survey. A split-half reliability would have addressed this limitation. A third limitation involves the correlation between a first-year teacher’s perceptions of their administration and the retention decisions of veteran teachers in the same New York City Public School. In other words, the perceptions were correlated to the actions of a different participant. The authors argue that teachers will rate their schools much worse when they are dissatisfied regardless of the actual working conditions, often called common source bias. Therefore, Boyd et al. chose to correlate new teachers’ perceptions with veteran teachers’ retention decisions in an attempt to avoid common source bias.

**Summary.** From the above research, both administration and autonomy—two aspects of school working conditions—strongly influence teacher retention. In addition, the quantitative research highlighted factors associated with students. In sum, the above review of the quantitative research from 1995 to 2011 demonstrates three underlying themes associated with teacher retention: (a) administration, (b) students, and (c) perception of autonomy. For a more in-depth and complex understanding of teacher
retention to emerge, as well as solutions, these themes need to be further explored using other methods besides surveys. The survey methods employed with teachers who remain in the classroom often minimize their voice as they are provided with prepared statements and feelings to rate on a Likert-type Scale. Moreover, surveys tend to minimize the context within which teachers make retention decisions. Billingsley (1993) has argued that surveys “constrain teachers’ responses and give little information about the specific contextual influences that contribute to attrition/retention decisions” (p. 167). In addition, Boyd et al. (2011) state that a teacher’s response to survey items:

…are driven not only by their underlying perceptions of working conditions but also by the separate overall positive or negative outlook they have at that particular point in time. Statistically, this tendency can result in correlations between working conditions and retention behaviors that are exaggerated or distorted. (p. 310)

Using qualitative research methods would elicit a deeper understanding of teachers’ reasons for staying in the classroom and would respect the contextual background of such decisions. The next section reviews the scant qualitative literature on teacher retention.

**Qualitative Studies of Teacher Retention.**

Williams (2001) explored the phenomenon of long-term commitment to teaching from the perspective of veteran, exemplary teachers. Over the phone, the researcher asked public and independent school principals and central office administrators within five counties of Western North Carolina to identify teachers, who demonstrated
exemplary teacher characteristics, such as reflectiveness, positive attitude towards teaching, teaching expertise, excellent communication with students and parents, and sense of excitement for teaching. From this list she purposefully chose 12 teachers from four counties representing five public school systems and two independent schools. Five of the teachers either taught in a mid-size city or on the fringe, whereas four teachers taught in a rural school. The remaining three teachers taught in an independent school. The teachers taught an average of 23.3 years with years of experience ranging from 15 to 30 years. It is also important to note that eight of the 12 teachers had left teaching at some point and returned, ranging from 2 to 16 years of absence.

Williams (2001) interviewed each participant twice over a period of two months using a semi-structured format, which lasted from 30 to 120 minutes. After the initial interview, the participants completed a socio-demographic survey. Using an inductive analysis of the data, Williams found seven common themes among the participants: (a) teaching is a calling, (b) rewards of teaching, (c) heart-to-heart connections, (d) intellectual stimulation, (e) professional and personal rewards, (f) teacher characteristics, and (g) professional climate. These 12 teachers sought relationships with colleagues and students and thrived on creativity, novelty, and nurturing their spiritual nature. In an article published in 2003, Williams summarizes, “These 12 exemplary teachers say that they have been able to fulfill strong personal needs for autonomy and creativity in their classrooms, and their rewards are meaningful relationships and the knowledge that they are making a difference” (p. 74).
Applying a similar methodology, Chinn (2007) sought to explore and describe the reasons experienced secondary school teachers have for remaining in a school or school district. More specifically, she wanted to examine the perceptions of teacher commitment, school leadership (administrative support), professional atmosphere (school culture or climate), and professional staff development on retention decisions of veteran secondary teachers. Chinn conceptualized each of these research foci as nested within one layer of Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) Ecological Model.

Chinn used purposeful sampling to identify 50 secondary teachers who were invited electronically to participate in the study. A total of 25 teachers, 15 female and 10 male, agreed to participate. Twenty held master degrees. All the participants taught in an exurban school district located within a county of Northern Virginia. Fifteen of the participants taught middle school and 10 taught high school. The participants represented a broad range of teaching subjects, including five who taught in elective areas and three who taught Special Education and one who taught English as a Second Language. All participants taught for a minimum of ten years in the county. Additionally, 15 of the participants entered teaching as a second career.

Chinn (2007) conducted one in-depth, open-ended interview lasting between 30 to 60 minutes with each participant. An inductive analysis of the data documented patterns, themes, and categories associated with the teachers’ retention decisions within the nested layers of Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) Ecological model. Within the microsystem, the participants identified the love of teaching (84%), students (56%), and colleagues (32%) as the top three internal influences retention. In addition, the internal influence of
commitment was often perceived as a passion for teaching and a “calling”. Seventy-six percent of the participants perceived two elements of the meso-system as influential in their decision to remain: (a) school leadership and (b) school atmosphere. Regarding the micro-system, Chinn found only half the participants perceived staff professional development as a positive influence on their retention, and only 40% of the participants viewed salary as a positive influence.

Chinn’s (2007) work corroborates with findings from the earlier work of Certo and Fox (2002). Certo and Fox conducted group interviews with teachers who stayed in their school division eight years or less. The focus groups were semi-structured and employed a guide that included topics such as personal perspectives of staying. The authors randomly selected from three groups of Virginia teachers: (a) elementary teachers (K-5), (b) middle and secondary math or science teachers, and (c) special education teachers. Of 80 participation letters sent out, 42 were returned. Each of these 42 Virginia teachers participated in one of nine focus group interviews offered at Virginia Commonwealth University. The interviews were audiotape-recorded and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

Contracted professionals transcribed the audiotaped interviews, and the researchers analyzed the data with Hyperresearch qualitative software using a constant-comparative method. In general, the authors found reasons for staying in the profession often related to individual factors such as a commitment to the profession, a belief in teaching as a “calling” and an appreciation for relationships with their colleagues. In addition, three other factors influenced the retention of these 42 participants: (a) quality
administration, (b) perceived autonomy, and (c) opportunities for decision-making, suggesting work conditions influence a teacher’s decision to remain; a finding similar to the previously discussed findings of the quantitative research.

McIntyre (2010) sought to investigate why veteran United Kingdom (UK) teachers have stayed and rooted their professional lives in challenging school environments within the UK. The author chose to collect data from three schools located within one Local Authority in a Midlands city of the UK. All three schools served communities that the authors defined as socially deprived areas and were undergoing structural changes brought about by their low-test scores. Participants included 20 teachers from across the three schools that had taught within the same community for 20 years or more. Eleven participants were male and nine were female. The authors noted that many of these teachers held responsibilities within the school such as headteacher roles, assistant headteacher roles, middle manager roles, or technology coordinators.

McIntyre (2010) conducted one semi-structured interview consisting of 12 interview questions with each participant. All participants were given transcribed copies of their interview for verification. After an inductive analysis of the data, McIntyre found that the veteran UK teachers talked about “the emotional dimensions of their work and the emotional ties of their work-place” (2010, p. 611). For example, the boundaries between home and school life were reconceptualized as an issue of belonging. In addition, their emotional commitment to teaching weighed more heavily on their decision to stay. Overall, McIntyre found that the veteran UK teachers in her study made active decisions to stay that involved an emotional dimension. This emotional element
underscores the personal dimension of the teacher retention process and directly relates to
the previously discussed findings of Chinn (2007) and Williams (2003). For example,
Chinn posits that the love of teaching helps retain teachers; whereas, Williams discusses
personal rewards, relationships with colleagues and students, as well as nurturing a
spiritual nature.

Eick (2002) further explores the personal dimension of teacher retention decisions
using a biographical approach. He compared student written biographies of preservice
secondary science teachers who later were career science teachers with at least three
years of experience. Nineteen students originally returned the consent forms, with a total
of 12 remaining as teachers. The other seven had left the profession. All 19 participants
rewrote their two-page paper in 2001, which he entitled “Why I still want to be a science
teacher”. Eick analyzed the papers through a process of contextual and categorical
analysis. Once he arrived at themes, he shared them with each participant by email so
they could have the opportunity to negate or affirm each statement.

Two major themes emerged from the participants’ autobiographical writings. The
first theme focused on an ethos of caring. For the women participants this was often
expressed through affectionate terms; whereas, the men expressed this care through
concern for student improvement. The second theme to emerge was a growth in student-
centeredness, which Eick (2002) described from the data he collected as an intrinsic
reward involving “reaching”, “loving”, and “caring” for kids (p. 364). Both themes relate
to intrinsic variables within an individual—an idea he further explores by analyzing each
participant’s first and second autobiographies.
Eick found ten participants who felt strongly about remaining in education wrote both autobiographies grounded “in intrinsic interest in science, teaching, and/or the personal rewards of working with students” (2002, p. 365). His findings reveal the importance of intrinsic variables in teacher retention decisions. For those teachers in this study who were no longer teaching or contemplating a return to the profession, Eick found they “had no strong intrinsic reasons for remaining teachers” (p. 363). However, for teacher stayers Eick found the opposite true—they held strong intrinsic reasons for remaining. Moreover, the consistency of the ten teachers’ first and second autobiographies makes a compelling case for the influence of a teacher’s early sense of self and teacher identity on their retention decisions later in life (Eick, p. 365).

Nieto’s (2003a & 2003b) work posited similar findings regarding the influence of teacher identities on retention decisions; “teachers’ identities are deeply implicated in their teaching, and hence in their perseverance” (Nieto, 2003a, p. 16). Over the course of one year, Nieto led an inquiry group with 8 urban teachers from Boston Public Schools with the purpose of understanding what keeps dedicated teachers in the classroom. She found teacher identities and/or experiences influenced their staying power. Nieto refers to both teacher identity and experiences as a teacher’s autobiography. In addition, she found that love for the students emerged as a theme from her study—a theme quite similar to Eick’s (2002) ethos of caring.

Besides a love for the students and teacher autobiographies, Nieto (2003a & 2003b) found hope to be the one characteristic that all the teacher stayers within the inquiry group shared. Borrowing from the work of Maxine Greene (1988), she defines
hope as a capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise. She concludes, “hope explains why many teachers—in spite of the hardships and low status and working conditions—continue to teach” (Nieto, 2003b, p. 53).

Levine (2011) sought to explore how hope sustained mid-career K-12 public school teachers in their decision to continue teaching. Borrowing from the work of Farran, Herth, and Popovich (1995) she defines hope as a way of feeling, thinking, behaving, and relating to oneself and one’s world. Twenty-five teachers with a range of teaching experience from six to 15 years participated in this study. Ten teachers taught in rural schools, 12 in suburban, and three in urban schools. In addition, 10 taught elementary, five middle, and 10 high school. Only two participants identified as African American; whereas, the other 23 identified as European American. Levine utilized a Q-methodology by first collecting 40 statements, i.e. a Q sample, regarding hope as a sustaining influence for teachers from two sources: (a) a focus group interview and (b) a review of hope-related literature. Next the participants either sorted the Q sample in a face-to-face setting with the researcher or using an online sorting format. The only difference being that the online sorting procedure required participants to type in their rationale for their statement choices. The sorting required each participant to rank each statement along a continuum from +5 to -5. The +5 ranking represented statements the participants most likely agreed with as what sustains their hope as a teacher, and the -5 represented statements the participants disagreed with in reference to what sustains their hope.
After conducting a factor analysis of the data, four factors emerged, which represented different perspectives on hope. Levine labeled each factor with a word that best expresses its underlying theme: (a) making a difference through advocacy, (b) faith-based calling to teach, (c) professional autonomy and respect, (d) total reliance on God. For all four factors, Levine, discovered that hope “provides the participants with a sense of meaning in life”, and an “inner source of strength when faced with job hardships (2011, p. 168). With regards to factor one, hope manifested itself in a desire to make a positive difference in students’ lives: “participants expressed hope that positive results based on their efforts with students would one day manifest, whether or not they, the teachers, will see it for themselves” (Levine, 2011, p. 168). For many of the participants hope was understood as a call to teach and this calling sustained them within the profession, which relates directly to factor two. Regarding factor three, the participants identified the need for professional autonomy and respect from building administrators as manifestations of how hope sustains them within the profession.

The ethnographic portraiture conducted by Cohen (2009) adds another individual characteristic common among teacher stayers—hardiness. She presents two portraits of veteran high school teachers from a larger ethnographic portraiture of Johnson High School with the goal of comparing them. She conducted three open-ended interviews and class observations over the course of one year. In addition, Cohen collected lesson plans and interviewed family members, as well as friends, of the two participants. The author sought to answer the question “how is it that certain individuals remain committed and enthusiastic about their work over a long period of time when so many others find the
work and conditions untenable?” (Cohen, 2009, p. 471). The setting is located five miles outside a major metropolitan center where 51% of the students are African American, 35% White, 10% Hispanic, and 4% Asian-American. Almost one-third of the students are eligible for free and/or reduced lunch. Based on a high stakes test for graduation, Johnson High School serves some of the lowest-performing students in the state.

Cohen (2009) found several “themes of endurance” from the two participants. Both teachers created teacher-centered classrooms, with the focus of control on themselves, which is quite contrary to the practice of student-centered teaching promulgated in much teacher research (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2012). The author goes as far to state that the teachers held a narcissism that “seems to be at the root of these teachers’ perspective” (Cohen, p. 481). Another common belief found by Cohen was a passion for their subject matter. Both narcissism and passion contributed to these two teachers’ persistence in the profession despite the stressors of the job. Looking to the work of Maddi (2002) within the positive psychology field, Cohen concludes these two individuals possessed hardiness: “a dispositional factor in preserving and enhancing the performance and health despite stressful circumstances” (2002, p. 76). Therefore, Cohen concludes the hardiness of these two individuals allowed them to persist in an environment proven to be susceptible to high turnover.

Day and Gu (2009) extended the previous work on teacher retention to include the element of human ecology. In other words, the authors sought to understand how the personal dimension of a teacher interacted within a particular environment and how this process affected teacher retention decisions. Though they conducted their study within
the United Kingdom (UK), the work of teaching has many similarities within both countries, especially regarding the interactions of a person with the environment. Two research participants were selected from Variations in teachers’ Work, Lives and Effectiveness research (VITAE), but details were not provided on the process of their selection nor the reasons. The authors only state that both teachers were either in their third or fourth decade of teaching. In addition, the reader is also left to assume the methods involved in the larger VITAE research (i.e., twice yearly semi-structured interviews) applied to these participants with no further data collection. The first narrative tells of a teacher who regained her commitment with the support and trust of a new administration, while the second narrative tells of a teacher who was “holding on but losing motivation” (Day & Gu, p. 451). According to Day and Gu this teacher felt dissatisfied with the creative limits the bureaucracy placed on her teaching, causing feelings of disempowerment. However, both teachers still held a sense of vocation for teaching and a belief in the potential of students, which sustained them through difficult times during their careers. Overall, Day and Gu believe these two portraits illustrate the following:

interactions between teachers’ internal values, sense of professional competence and agency and the external environments in which they work and live that determine the extent to which teachers are able to draw upon positive emotional and professional resources and exercise their resilient qualities. (p. 449)

**Summary.** The findings from the above review reveal teacher retention to be a meaning-making process for an individual teacher involving the following: (a) teacher
autobiographies, which include teacher identities and previous life and professional experiences; (b) teacher feelings such as a care/love for students, an appreciation of colleagues, support from administration, and a passion for teaching; (c) teacher beliefs such as their work as a calling and the potential of all students; and (d) individual characteristics such as hope and hardiness. Moreover, these qualitative studies reveal the importance of the environment within which the individual makes their retention decision, especially in regard to school leadership (Certo & Fox, 2002; Chinn, 2007; Day & Gu, 2009; & Williams, 2001), student population (Chinn, 2007; Day & Gu, 2009; Eick, 2002; & Williams, 2001), and colleagues (Chinn, 2007 & Williams, 2001). In sum, teacher stayers personally interact with their educational milieu negotiating their decision to remain in the classroom.

**Conceptual Framework**

Maxwell (2005) defines a conceptual framework as “a conception or model of what is out there that you plan to study, and of what is going on with these things and why—a tentative theory of the phenomenon that you are investigating” (p. 33). Drawing from the above literature review, I have conceptualized teacher retention as a process of interactions between a teacher and the following components within their environment: (a) students, (b) administration, (c) the school, and (d) local school district policies. Each component—or theme—comprises factors found within the literature that influence a teacher’s decision to stay (see Figure 2).
Factors Influencing Teacher Retention

Teacher
- Initial commitment
- Family characteristics such as relocation or starting a family
- Measured academic ability
- Gender
- Experience teaching
- Subject matter
- Belief in student potential
- Belief in teaching as a calling
- Profess a love of teaching
- Hold a passion for teaching
- Hope
- Hardiness

Student
- Perception of home lives
- Perception of student being a low or high performer
- Perception of student behavior
- Perceptions of student attitude toward student disrespect
- Student ethnicity
- Student socio-economic background
- Connection between teacher and student
- Student-teacher relationships based on care and love

Local School District and Federal Policies
- Mentoring or induction services received as novices
- Compensation
- NCLB

Administration
- Perceptions of school leadership
- Perceptions of Administrative support
- Perceptions of classroom autonomy
- Perception of student discipline

School
- Culture of teacher influence
- Respect and Support of Creativity
- School atmosphere
- Relationships with colleagues
- Location in reference to an urban, suburban, or rural area

Figure 2: Factors Influencing Teacher Retention
Borrowing from the work of both Brownell and Smith (1993) and Chinn (2007), I have overlaid Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) ecological model with my conceptualization of teacher retention in order to create a more robust conceptual framework that accounts for teacher-environment interactions within nested sub layers of the environment (see Figure 3). In addition, coupling my conceptualization with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model posits a more descriptive and transparent theory of teacher retention, which serves to inform the rest of my research design: “The function of this theory is…to help you to asses and refine your goals, develop realistic and relevant research questions, select appropriate methods, and identify potential validity threats to your conclusions” (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 33-34).

For this study, Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) ecological model serves to frame the interactive nature of teacher retention for an individual teacher stayer. The macrosystem refers to the larger culture of public education within the United States and the exosystem refers to the local, state, and federal education policies. The mesosystem refers to both the school, i.e. the culture and location, and the administration. The microsystem refers to the teacher, as well as the students within their classroom.
Conceptual Framework
Adapted from the work of Bronfenbrenner (1976)

- **Macrosystem**: Culture of public education in the United States
- **Exosystem**: Federal, State, and local policies
- **Mesosystem**: School Culture, School Location, Administration
- **Microsystem**: Teacher, Student

*Figure 3: Conceptual Framework*
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The conceptual framework for this research study places the issue of teacher retention within four nested levels of social interaction between a teacher and his/her perceptions of the environment within that level. The abundance of quantitative work has posited formative findings regarding teacher retention; however, these findings neither address the environment nor the interactive nature of individuals within their environment. Aiming for a more in-depth understanding of the interactive nature of elementary teacher stayers’ decisions to remain, I have chosen to address the following research questions using a qualitative methodology:

1. What is the experience of staying in the classroom like for elementary school teachers teaching in public schools?
   a. What reasons do elementary school teachers provide for staying in the classroom?
   b. In what ways do elementary school teacher stayers perceive the environment as contributing to their retention?

As evidenced by my research question and subquestions, I seek to understand the phenomenon of teacher retention. A qualitative methodology seeks for understanding complex interrelationships versus explaining what happens: “The function of research is not necessarily to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate the beholding of it” (Stake, 1995, p. 43). Therefore, a qualitative inquiry aligns with my research question.
However, asserting a qualitative inquiry does not suffice considering the variety of approaches recognized as qualitative work. For example, Creswell (2007) classified qualitative research into five distinct approaches based on frequency used in the social, behavioral, and health science literature, as well as his preference for approaches with systematic procedures: (a) narrative, (b) phenomenology, (c) grounded theory, (d) ethnography, and (e) case study. Choosing the appropriate approach involves aligning the research purpose and questions with the philosophical underpinnings of an approach.

The purpose of this study is to understand the phenomenon of teacher retention from an individual teacher’s experience with staying in the classroom utilizing an ecological framework that captures the totality—as best can be done—of the individual and their environment. Therefore, it remains imperative that I seek out the lived experiences of teacher stayers with careful attention given to the person-environment interactions. Phenomenological researchers concern themselves with understanding the consciousness of an individual’s experience—the phenomenon—and according to Wertz (2005), the nature of phenomenology “makes it analyses of mental life radically contextual and ecological” (p. 169). Therefore, phenomenology suits both the purpose and the framework used in this study. Moreover, Wertz stated “the lived world” is a central theme of phenomenology, which aligns with my research purpose of understanding the lived experience of three elementary teacher stayers. For these reasons a phenomenological methodology was used in this study.

Transcendental Phenomenology
Researchers acknowledge three different phenomenological research approaches: (a) existential, (b) hermeneutic, and (c) transcendental (Baggs, 2012; Wertz, 2005). For this study, I have used transcendental phenomenology. A defining tenet of transcendental phenomenology includes intentionality. According to Moustakas intentionality recognizes an experience as an internal, conscious act intentionally related to something. Wertz stated, “consciousness is consciousness of something (independent of consciousness itself)” (p. 168). That something both Moustakas and Wertz refer to could be a physical object or one or more events—both of which remain external to the individual.

An essential function of intentionality is the relationship between the noema and noesis—both of which refer to meanings (Moustakas, 1994; Wertz, 2005). The noema refers to the object, i.e. the what of the experience, and includes meanings associated with “what is given in the act of perceiving, remembering, or judging” (Moustakas, p. 71). During phenomenological analysis a researcher writes a textual description to depict the noema for the individual. The noesis refers to the individual’s interpretation of the experience, i.e., the how of the experience, and involves “the act of perceiving, feeling, thinking, remember, or judging—all of which are embedded with meanings that are concealed and hidden from consciousness” (Moustakas, p. 69). Therefore, the noesis involves eliciting hidden meanings. A structural description depicts the noesis for the individual, according to the researcher. Combining both the noema, i.e. textual and the noesis, i.e. structural, works out a relationship of “the appearance and the hidden” in order to “create a fullness in understanding the essences of a phenomenon or experience”
(Moustakas, p. 79). This study was concerned with teacher retention—the noema or very obvious—and how three elementary teachers experienced it over the course of their teaching careers—the noesis or highly obscure—for the purpose of understanding its essences.

To elicit the essences of the teacher retention experience, four major processes of phenomenology, as outlined by Moustakas (1994), were used in this study: (a) the epoche process, (b) phenomenological reduction, (c) imaginative variation, and (d) synthesis. The epoche process requires the researcher to set “aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions” in order to “view the phenomenon anew” (Moustakas, p. 85). In this first step, the researcher enters a reflective-meditative state (Moustakas) with the goal of bracketing out their perceptions, feelings, and judgments regarding the experience under study. Though rarely fully achieved, “the energy, attention, and work involved in reflection and self-dialogue, the intention that underlies the process, and the attitude and frame of reference, significantly reduce the influence of preconceived thoughts, judgments, and biases” (Moustakas, p. 90). The second process—one of phenomenological reduction—identifies the underlying meaning units or horizons of the experience via an iterative cycle of looking within the data and describing what one sees. Next, the researcher clusters the meaning units into themes, which in phenomenological research is “merely preparatory in that it organizes data conveniently for a more in-depth, structural, eidetic analysis that follows” (Wertz, 2005, p. 172). Overall, the phenomenological reduction process reduces the “investigative field to the psychological” in preparation for the third process (Wertz, 2005, p. 168).
The third process elicits possible precipitating factors and underlying meanings from the textual themes using imaginative variation. Moustakas (1994) suggests several possible thought exercises utilized in imaginative variation: a) to vary your frames of reference, (b) to use polarities, and (c) to approach the phenomenon from various points of view and/or underlying meanings (pp. 98-99). After reflective thought on the varying possibilities of meaning associated with the textual description themes, the researcher “derive[s] structural themes” and writes a structural description. In the last process of synthesis, the researcher synthesizes the textual and structure descriptions in order to elucidate the essences of the phenomenon for each participant. All four research processes steered the development of the methods used in this study, which will be described in further detail later within this section.

**Researcher Identity**

I not only chose to use phenomenological research because it best suits the purpose of this study, but because it aligns with my own epistemological and ontological beliefs: (a) knowledge is socially constructed and situated within specific contexts and (b) reality does not exist apart from people’s perceptions, conscious experiences, and interpretations of it. Furthermore, phenomenology advocates examining a phenomenon that interests the researcher personally because this approach requires that the researcher “stands in the fullness of life, in the midst of the world of living relationships and shared situations” (van Manen, 1990, p. 32). As a former elementary school teacher, I have experienced firsthand teacher retention; I chose to remain in the classroom for 12 years. Acknowledging a personal connection to the research phenomenon requires the
researcher to reflect and bracket out their experience by allowing “whatever is before us in consciousness to disclose itself so that we may see with new eyes in a naïve and completely open manner” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). In the following section, I will attempt to bracket out my own experience as best as can be done.

**The departure.** In June of 2012, I left my job as an elementary school teacher because I desired to complete my doctoral work and become a teacher educator. Though this answer satisfied my administration, coworkers, friends, and family, I understood my decision as more complex. I had lost my will to remain in the elementary classroom and felt disempowered and demoralized as an educator. In a sense, I felt pushed out. My frustrations with the teaching profession began early on in my career and continued to mold my perspective of an elementary teacher up until I left the field. Unraveling my twelve-year experience, as an elementary teacher, serves two purposes: (a) to reveal the personal connection I have with my research question and in a sense the starting point of this study and (b) to make transparent the assumptions I hold regarding the phenomenon of teacher retention. Both reveal a deep, personal connection and deep commitment to the pursuit of understanding teacher retention—the first research activity van Manen (1990) associates with phenomenology.

**The beginning.** I remember sheer frustration and exhaustion when I began teaching fourth grade back in 1999. Upon entering the classroom I felt intense pressure to meet the demands of the job. At first I struggled with the day-to-day tasks of teaching like writing lesson plans, learning the curriculum, grading, managing student behavior, communicating with parents, and motivating students. These are common struggles for
many first-year teachers. As I learned more about my craft, became better versed in the curriculum, and gained insight into student growth and development, the day-to-day tasks and “secretarial” demands of the job became easier to perform. However, the curricular, instructional, and testing demands forced upon me by federal/state/local government, school officials, and my administration stifled my creativity and innovation. These demands stemmed from the culture of standards-based reform.

I came to believe the frustration and disappointment I felt teaching had to do with a poor career choice. In a way, I internalized the problem and assumed I had caused this by choosing the wrong career. Even though I could articulate teaching to be an art form in 1999, before accepting my first teaching position, I would not frame my struggle with teaching as a battle of values that stripped me of my artistry until 2009.

In 2007, I enrolled in a doctoral program to explore other vocations within education and seek further professional knowledge lacking from professional development opportunities available to me as a classroom teacher. In the Spring of 2009, I explored my frustration with teaching through a self-study research project—an assignment completed as part of an advanced methods course in my doctoral program. I discovered the mesosystem, i.e. the school, to be the source of my frustrations more so than the profession of teaching; therefore, I chose to move schools instead of leave the profession. I wrote the following words within an analytical memo while conducting this self-study research project:

After ten years I understand that leaving will not resolve the tension I feel with teaching, but the answer lies in acknowledging the source of my commitment
issues—the misalignment of my values with the socially–acceptable actions required of me as a teacher. My wavering commitment to teaching was simply a manifestation of this misalignment and a product of school culture…I constructed my teacher identity and judged the profession under the influence of these pressures and feelings, leading me to what I now believe to be a false sense of dissatisfaction and misleading judgment of teaching as a career. (Sell, 2009)

**Teacher mover.** After conducting my self-study I realized the act of teaching did not cause my frustrations, but the context within which I taught did. Armed with this new understanding of context I boldly proclaimed that I wanted to remain a teacher by the end of my self-study. More importantly, I was certain that I had to find a new teaching position at another school. I needed to emancipate myself from teaching at B. E. Harrison Elementary. One month after finishing the self-study research course I did just that: I accepted a fifth-grade teaching position at Ammon Elementary in a neighboring county. For the first time in my teaching career I made a deliberate decision to move schools for professional reasons. I acted with intention and from a place of empowerment.

I began my fifth-grade teaching assignment with high hopes of reconnecting with my passion for teaching. I built relationships with administrators and colleagues, which allowed me the support and collaboration to explore novel teaching methods. I briefly enjoyed teaching again. However, after one year I soon became unsettled and frustrated with teaching again. I yearned to learn more and push the boundaries of acceptable classroom practices. My innovative ideas and nontraditional instructional strategies often
put me at odds with my administration and colleagues. Also, I became less enthusiastic and more cynical towards the profession, which led to further rifts between my administrators and colleagues, and myself.

I decided a new school context along with new administrators would invigorate me as a teacher; therefore, I moved schools within my district. I chose a school with a more diverse student population and that served more students from an economically disadvantaged background. The school also had not met Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), i.e. a measure of school performance as outlined by NCLB using student test scores in reading and math. I had hoped a new school context would support my innovative spirit and empower me to create learning opportunities for the students that supported their academic growth. Unfortunately, my experience at the new school was less than favorable. I continued to feel isolated as a teacher, overworked, disempowered, and frustrated. I made the decision midyear to leave at the end of the school year and pursue my doctorate full time.

**Teacher leaver.** I left the profession because I held no voice as a classroom teacher, which became obvious to me in February of 2012. I remember working with the math coach at my school on implementing the pacing guide for the new math series that our county adopted. The pacing guide mimicked the sequence of the book page by page. In other words, we were to follow the series and not supplement with any other activities. I argued that the series covered lots of material that did not meet state standards for our grade level or that was beyond our students’ developmental levels. Nevertheless, we had to strictly adhere to the textbook. However, in February the author of the textbook visited
our county and met with the math department, including the math coaches for each
school. The author argued her book should not be followed page by page, because she
included math standards from all fifty states within the book. She advocated letting the
teachers decide how best to adapt the program within their own instruction. The very next
day our math coach held a meeting and directed the teachers to use their own discretion
when implementing the math textbook. My voice, nor the voices of other teachers within
my school, mattered. An outsider, who in this case happened to be the author of the new
adopted math textbook, held power over the decisions I made within my classroom
regarding the learning of my students.

**My assumptions.** My lived experience as a teacher stayer, teacher mover, and
eventually a teacher leaver has prompted me to question the experiences of other
teachers, more specifically, teacher stayers. In the beginning of my career, I stayed in the
classroom, because I had wanted to be a teacher ever since I was ten years old. I loved
working with students. I viewed teaching as an altruistic endeavor that satisfied me both
intellectually and emotionally. Even though I left my career in June of 2012, I would
have remained if I felt supported, empowered, and a sense of belonging from both
administrators and my colleagues. Therefore, I have come to believe teacher retention
involves interaction among three elements: (a) a personal element, i.e. an individual
calling, (b) an emotional element, i.e. an ability to overcome challenging obstacles
including disempowerment and demoralization, and (c) a relational element, i.e. the
support of administration and colleagues. What about you mention of being creative?
Role of the researcher. My experiences have pushed me to fight for teacher empowerment and voice; therefore, a role of an advocate will be apparent within this research (Stake, 1995). I also care and seek to empower elementary school teachers by uncovering their lived experiences and sharing these with others. In essence, my research is a caring act placing me in a supportive and caring role as a researcher (van Manen, 1990, p. 5). Consequently, I will refer to my participants as narrators as this term “serves to convey the humanness of the individual whose experience is being considered” (Mears, 2009, p. 100). The term narrator emphasizes each participant’s role in sharing his or her lived experiences and requires the researcher to be an active listener throughout the research process. Narrator also conveys a respect for each participant’s own experience, which I aim to validate and share with a much larger audience. However, as the researcher I will take on the role of writer seeking out the narrators’ opinions and support but owning the responsibility for what I write. In addition, I am hopeful to be viewed as a legitimate researcher provided my personal experiences and identification as a teacher. Such legitimacy will help me access and build relationships with my participants, which will be discussed in more detail within the next section.

Narrator Selection

I used purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2005) to choose three elementary teacher stayers. Ingersoll (2003) suggested 46% of new teachers leave within the first five years of teaching, while Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) suggested 30% leave. With research suggesting a large proportion of teachers leave within the first five years, each teacher stayer had to have taught five or more years at the elementary level. In addition,
each teacher stayer had to have no immediate plans to leave the profession within the next year. Moreover, teacher stayers from different teaching contexts were sought to participate within this study. However, only two distinct teaching contexts were identified from the three narrators who agreed to participate. Two narrators taught at schools with less than 5% of the student population receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Petrilli and Scull (2010) identified these schools as “private public schools”. The third narrator taught in a Title 1 school with a much greater percentage of students identified as receiving free or reduced-price lunch. In fact, to qualify for Title I status a school must have 40% or more of its student population identified as receiving free or reduced lunch. The two distinctive teaching contexts of the three narrators within this study happened to be quite opposite of each other “allow[ing] the widest possibility for readers of the study to connect to what they are reading” (Seidman, 2006, p. 52).

I gained access to narrators by asking former colleagues I taught with at the elementary level to suggest participants. In addition, I asked two current colleagues, one whom I work with as a graduate lecturer and the other whom I work with as a graduate research assistant to suggest participants. I asked each to suggest possible narrators that would fit the following criteria: (a) taught for a minimum of five years in the same school or district, and (b) made no explicit or outright plans to leave teaching within the next year. In addition, I asked for individuals who others perceive as willing to share and talk about their experiences.

After identifying possible narrators, I sent out an email to his/her work account inquiring about their interest in participating. The email instructed each teacher who has
an interest in participating to contact me via phone or email. Three participants contacted me via email, and I immediately set up a phone call with each individual. The foremost purpose of the phone call was to initiate a rapport with the individual before the interviews. In addition, I provided each possible narrator with a brief overview of the research study including the research purpose, questions, and methods. I explained both my role as researcher and their role as narrator before finally confirming their interest in participating within the study. Moreover, I shared with each narrator that I taught elementary school for 12 years and left the profession at the end of the 2011-2012 school year. All three narrators agreed over the phone to participate within the study, after which I set up a time to conduct the first interview with each one.

At the first interview I provided each narrator with an informed consent form and reviewed the purpose and procedures of the study. All three narrators were then asked to sign the informed consent if they agreed to participate in the study. After obtaining each narrator’s informed consent, I asked permission to email their principal concerning their participation in the study as a formality—school district approval was not needed for this study. Via email I informed each principal of the research purpose, the interviewing procedures—which were to occur off school grounds—, and my contact information if they sought further questions about the research.

**Relationship with the narrators.** I understood my relationship with each narrator to be a vital method for conducting research (Maxwell, 2005) and not a by-product of interviewing him or her. Building a relationship requires the development of rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005;
Mears, 2009; & Seidman, 2006). Seidman understands rapport to mean, “getting along with each other, a harmony with, a conformity to, and an affinity for one another” (p. 96). Using his conceptualization of rapport, I sought to build a relationship with each narrator. First and foremost, my experience and knowledge of teaching provided me with the “language and culture specific to the community of experience,” helping me to build trust and a rapport with each narrator (Mears, 2009, p. 98). In addition, I built rapport with my narrators by allowing time to engage in casual conversations at the start of each interview “there is a hurry to get started yet a quiet entry is highly desirable” (Stake, 1995, p. 59). Before each interview I took time to ask about the lives of each narrator and ease the conversation towards the interview questions.

Furthermore, I developed rapport with my narrators through the interpretive analysis of their text. In essence, the term narrator refers to each participant’s role as a co-creator of meaning along with me. Together we developed a textual representation of his/her lived experience. The use of narrator instead of participant was made known to each person before beginning the study, so they were aware of their role in sharing their lived experience. By choosing the word narrator, instead of participant, I sought to validate their voice and lived experiences at the start of the research study, aiding in the development of a relationship. However, caution was made to define both my role as a researcher and their role as a narrator in specific terms at the onset of building a relationship with the narrators, i.e., our first face-to-face meeting. Seidman (2006) argued that too much rapport with a participant confounds “whose experience is being related and whose meaning is being made…” (p. 97). To avoid this type of confusion my
researcher role as writer of their stories was made explicit from the very beginning of the research.

**Narrators and Their Teaching Context**

Each narrator was asked to choose both a pseudonym for themselves, as well as their school, in order to maintain their anonymity. The following provide a description of the three narrators who participated in this study. Moreover, as part of purposeful sampling the narrators were chosen from two distinct school contexts—Title 1 and “private public schools”—which will be discussed in further detail below as well.

**Allyson.** The first narrator was Allyson. She is a Caucasian female who has taught elementary school for 11 years. She graduated from a traditional elementary teaching program at a four-year university in the Northeastern United States with a Bachelor’s of Arts in Elementary Education. However, she did not complete the traditional one semester of student teaching her senior year; instead, Allyson student taught through a Professional Development School for one year in a fifth grade classroom. Her first year she taught fifth grade at Apple Valley Elementary School in a large suburban school district outside of a large metropolitan city in the Northeastern part of the United States. After fear of being destaffed she moved to McNealley Elementary School (McNealley) located in the same school district but within 10-15 miles of Apple Valley. She has taught for ten years at McNealley.

McNealley serves 796 students in grades K-5. Sixty-one percent of the student population is White, 15% Asian, 8.6% Hispanic, and 5.9% African-American. Over 44% of the student population receives gifted education services; whereas, 13.5% of the
population receives special education services and 5.9% receives ESOL services. The school does not qualify as a Title I school and was identified by Petrilli and Scull (2010) as a “private public school”. McNealley is fully accredited by the state and met Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)—as defined by the federal government—during 2011-2012 school year.

**Jae-da.** The second narrator was Jae-da. She is an African-American female who has worked in elementary education for 23 years. She graduated from a small university within a major metropolitan area within the Northeastern United States with a degree in speech and language pathology and worked for ten years at Caprica Elementary School (Caprica) as a speech pathologist. After earning an additional endorsement to teach PK-3, Jae-da was hired to teach elementary school at Caprica in 2000. She has taught at Caprica for the past 13 years and currently teaches second grade.

Caprica is a suburban school located near a major metropolitan area in the Northeastern part of the United States. Caprica serves a diverse population of students (635) in grades K-6 with 37% identifying as Hispanic, 30% African American, 21% White, 7% Asian, and 6% Other. Over 22% of the student population receives English language services, while 18% receive special education services. Caprica is identified as a Title I school—a high needs school based on the proportion of students in poverty as defined by the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch—with 62% of the student body qualifying for free or reduced-priced lunch. Caprica is fully accredited by the state but did not meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)—as defined by the federal government—during the 2011-2012 school year.
Brett. The third narrator was Brett. She is a Caucasian female who has taught elementary school for 12 years in her current district. She earned a secondary teaching license in college. She did not find a secondary teaching job directly after college; instead, she accepted an elementary teaching position a year after she graduated. After teaching for two years—one in second grade and another in third grade—she married, which took her to another state. She could not find an elementary teaching position in the new state and opted to substitute in a variety of teaching positions for three years. She then left the profession for five years to raise her newborn daughter. She returned to work five years later to work part time at a daycare center and decided to pursue teaching elementary school, which required her to return to school. After earning her M.Ed. she accepted a position teaching at Harbor Elementary. She taught there for eleven years—in both kindergarten and first grade. Then she voluntarily moved to Tarah Elementary (Tarah) to teach first grade, where she has worked for the past six years. Overall, Brett has 17 years elementary teaching experience in the primary grades.

Tarah is a suburban school located near a major metropolitan area in the Northeastern part of the United States. Tarah has 428 students in grades K-6. The majority of the student population consists of Caucasian students (65%), with Asian making up the second largest student group (15%). Only 9% of students identify as Hispanic, 8% as Other, and 3% as African American. Only about 7% of the student population receives English language services, while 22% receive special education services. Tara has a small minority of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and has been identified as a “private public school” by Petrilli and Scull (2010).
Tarah is fully accredited by the state and met AYP—as defined by the federal government—during the 2011-2012 school year.

**Data Collection**

I sought to understand the phenomenon of teacher retention through the lived experiences of individual cases. Stake (1995) defines a case as an entity or a noun, which becomes “an arena or host or fulcrum to bring many functions and relationships together for study” (p. 2). Three teacher stayers, who have each experienced the phenomenon of teacher retention, were the focus of this study and constituted three separate cases; therefore, I chose to use a multiple-case design (Yin, 2009).

I collected data from all three cases using two means: (a) researcher memos and (b) in-depth interviews. Saldaña (2009) refers to memo writing as an analytic activity that serves as a place to unload your thinking about the “participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation by thinking and thus writing and thus thinking even more about them” (p. 32). I wrote a questionnaire memo, an interview memo, and a data analysis memo for each participant. Memo writing allowed me to take a reflective role as a researcher, documenting my thinking for further reflection later in the research process. Memo writing also promoted transparency within the research process, as the thinking behind my research choices were documented—creating an audit trail of memos (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Interviewing.** My second source of data collection was in-depth semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Using in-depth interviews allowed me to explore the reasons for teacher retention by first seeking to understand each narrator’s
lived experiences. Seidman (2006) suggests, “at the root of the in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Only after the exploration of each narrator’s experiences with remaining in the classroom, can reasons for teacher retention be explored: “in order to understand why persons act as they do we need to understand the meaning and significance they give to their actions” (Jones, 1985, p. 46).

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) argue that a qualitative interview involves seeking meaning expressed in language involving the everyday lived world of the interviewee and his/her relation to it. In addition, the interview had a focus, i.e. the themes within the study’s conceptual framework, while remaining open enough to explore novel and unexpected phenomena. Regarding purpose, Kvale and Brinkmann posit that the interviewer seeks nuanced descriptions of specific situations and actions seeking clarification—at times allowing for the interviewee to change their descriptions or attitudes towards a theme. Moreover, the interviewer seeks to provide a positive experience for the interviewee, which “can be a rare and enriching experience for the interviewee, who may obtain new insights into his or her life situation” (Kvale & Brinkmann, p. 28). The final aspect of an interview, according to Kvale and Brinkmann, refers to the process of interviewing as a social act of knowledge construction: “it is an inter-view, where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee” (p. 2).

Drawing from the work of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), I conducted a series of four in-depth interviews with each narrator in this study. Four interviews goes above the
three-interview approach suggested for in-depth interviewing by both Mears (2009) and Seidman (2006). In-depth interviewing has no set structure, but instead emerges from the choices an interviewer makes during each interview:

The process of interviewing is one in which researchers are continually making choices, based on their research interests and prior theories, about which data they want to pick up and explore further with respondents and those which they do not. The making of these choices is the imposition of some structure. (Jones, 1985, p. 47)

Therefore, I used an emergent interview design relying on a semi-structured interview protocol (Kvale & Brinkman). The protocol included open-ended questions that provided the interviewer with an initial starting point for engaging the interviewee in conversation on certain topics related to their retention. As the interviewee conversed about their lived experiences on a certain topic, the interviewer asked additional questions that emerged from the conversation.

**Interview protocols.** The interview protocols included the research purpose and questions as a footer to ensure that I maintain focus on the phenomenon of study. In addition, the protocols included a list of open-ended questions to ask during the interview along with space to write notes. Each interview protocol addressed one subsystem of social interaction within the conceptual framework for this study and provided a “foundation of detail that helps illumine the next” (Seidman, 2006, p. 19). Therefore, four interview protocols were developed. The first interview protocol focused on both the teacher and the students, which comprise the microsystem. More specifically, I
attempted to gain a description of the narrator’s context and his/her relationship to the topic. The second interview protocol focused on the mesosystem including the school building and culture as well as the administration. The third interview protocol addressed the exosystem. I asked questions seeking each narrator’s understanding of local school board policies, state policies, and federal policies, e.g. NCLB. The final interview protocol provided the collaborator a chance to clarify any stories they had shared and reflect on the overall meaning of their experiences with retention. Seidman (2006) refers to the meaning as more than just a satisfaction with the interpretation of their experiences but “the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants’ work and life” (p. 18). More importantly, the final interview protocol addressed the macrosystem, or the larger cultural influences that may have influenced their decision to stay.

**Pilot interviews.** Chapter two, the literature review, framed my initial understanding of what questions to include within each interview protocol. After developing a list of open-ended questions pertinent to each subsystem, I conducted a pilot interview using each of the developed interview protocols to further develop the questions. Sonya, i.e. a pseudonym, was chosen for all four pilot interviews. She was an African American female with 22 years elementary teaching experience. She worked with me as a colleague in the same school building four years ago, though we taught different grade levels. I conducted each pilot interview with Sonya prior to interviewing narrator one, which provided ample time to revise each interview protocol before interviewing narrator one. I created a questionnaire memo to document the development of the questions included within each interview protocol.
The changes made as a result of the pilot interviews included the deletion of questions as well as the addition of new questions. For example, several questions that required a yes or no answer were replaced with a question or comment that prompted a deeper, more complex response from the narrator. In addition, the pilot interview allowed me to recognize leading questions that contained hidden bias and/or assumptions. In the first interview protocol, I asked two questions concerning the challenges of working with students. However, during the pilot interview it became apparent that the participant did not see the students as a challenge; my researcher bias had assumed that they would be for all the participants. Therefore, I deleted the two leading questions concerning students as a challenge. Instead, I asked the participant to identify what challenges or rewards teaching provided for them. For examples of each interview protocols refer to Appendix A.

**Interview schedule.** Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes providing ample time to engage in deep conversations with each narrator. The interviews occurred outside of the school building; one set of interviews occurred at the narrator’s home and the other two sets of interviews occurred in a public library. I interviewed each narrator four times spaced out over the course of three to four weeks. Narrator one was interviewed on the last two Tuesdays in September 2012 and the second and third Tuesday of October 2012. Narrator two was interviewed on the last Tuesday in October and the first three Tuesdays in November 2012. Narrator three was interviewed during the first three Saturdays of November 2012 and the first Saturday in December 2012. I scheduled each interview within one-week intervals allowing time for the narrators to
think, “about what transpired in the previous interview and as a result may become aware of added details or illustrative stories that are relevant” (Mears, 2009, p. 106). In addition, the space between interviews provided me time to memo, transcribe the interview, and adjust the subsequent interview script—promoting an emergent interview design. In addition, I wrote an interview memo reflecting on the interview process, identifying topics for clarification, and asserting my initial hunches for each narrator.

I recorded the interviews using a digital recording device. Within one week of recording the interview I had transcribed the interview verbatim using Digital Voice Editor—a Sony program that allowed me to slow the speed of the recording to transcribe it word for word. Therefore, I was able to address any questions from the previous interview and/or ask additional questions during the subsequent interview. I transcribed all interviews into a Microsoft Word document and saved the document to my personal computer using the narrator’s name and the date the interview was completed.

**Data analysis**

I organized and analyzed the data using Moustakas’s (1994) phenomenological method of analysis (Appendix B). First, I conducted a broad reading of all four verbatim interview transcripts for one narrator. While reading I identified statements that signified why the narrator remained in the profession in relation to one of the systems identified within the conceptual framework of this study, i.e. microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Moustakas calls these statements horizons or meaning units and claims each to be the “grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinctive character” (p. 95); therefore, naming this process horizontalization.
Next, I reread the document four separate times—each time identifying statements that related to one of the four systems and separating the statements into individual meaning units when needed (Cilesiz, 2011). For the microsystem, I looked for statements that related to the individual and the students. For the mesosystem, I looked for statements that related to the school culture, location, and administration. For the exosystem, I looked for statements relating to either federal, state, or local school district policies; whereas, in the macrosystem I looked for statements that might relate to the culture of public education within the United States. I highlighted the meaning units for each system, recorded them on another separate document, and clustered them into preliminary textual themes, which only served as an organizational purpose for further analysis.

Reflecting upon the preliminary textual themes, and returning back to the interview transcripts for further validation, I wrote a textual description of the experience for each narrator. In writing the textual description—organized with textual themes—I aimed to evoke a clear image of what happened during the narrator’s experience, including the verbatim words of each narrator whenever possible. I sent the textual description to each narrator via email for his or her verification. More specifically, I asked each narrator to identify descriptive statements that did not represent their experience, as well as identify any incorrect information within the text. Researchers commonly refer to this process as member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each narrator provided a few corrections to their textual description—most concerning the biographical information discussed in the textual description introduction. Overall, each
narrator felt the textual description accurately depicted his or her lived experiences with staying in the classroom.

Next, using imaginative variation, I moved beyond describing the phenomenon to explaining the phenomenon as experienced by the narrator. Starting with the textual description and themes, I engaged in a series of thought exercises, i.e. imaginative variation, to uncover possible meanings of the narrator’s experience. Next, I derived “structural themes from the textual descriptions” of each narrator (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99). These themes organized the experience of the narrator with the phenomenon, as seen by the researcher, and were further validated by rereading the verbatim interview transcripts in an attempt to not only verify the existence of each structural theme but also saturate each one within the data.

In the final step, I wrote a synthesis of both the textual and structural descriptions “into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). The essence statement captured the totality of each teacher’s decision to stay in the classroom and explicated the essence of teacher retention for each narrator at this particular moment in time.

Validity

The design decisions discussed within the previous sections constitute a commitment to research validity. As Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) posit, a qualitative study cannot be assessed for validity, but rather the procedures used within the study. Doing so provides a means for “ruling in or ruling out rival interpretations of data” (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, p. 239). Creswell (2013) lists eight strategies involved with the
process of assessing validity, suggesting researchers engage with at least two: (a) prolonged engagement and persistent observation, (b) triangulation, (c) peer review, (d) negative case analysis, (e) clarifying researcher bias, (f) member checking, (g) rich, thick description, and (h) external audits (Creswell, pp. 252-53). Five of these strategies were employed within the design elements of the study to promote the accuracy of the research findings.

I addressed researcher bias during two processes involved with phenomenological data analysis: (a) bracketing out one’s experiences and (b) imaginative variation. First, imaginative variation involved a variety of thought exercise, which included varying my frames of reference, using polarities, and approaching the phenomenon from various points of view and/or underlying meanings. All of these thought exercises were used to safeguard the findings from my personal assumptions and feelings. Second, I bracketed out my prior experiences and beliefs before collecting data by writing a reflective and honest account of my personal connection to the phenomenon of study, i.e. teacher retention. In addition, I explicitly stated my roles as a researcher that informed the relationships I built with the narrators. Neither bracketing out my experiences, nor defining my roles as a researcher, eliminated all bias within my study, but rather clarified it for both the reader and myself—further safeguarding the findings.

The emergent and in-depth interview design used within this study required prolonged engagement with the narrators—a second strategy for ensuring the validity of this study. The emergent design provided space between each interview for both the researcher and narrator to critically analyze and reflect on each interaction promoting a
further, in-depth subsequent interaction. This space also supported alterations in the
interview script in subsequent interviews ensuring each interview built upon the previous
interaction and helping to create a flow of communication that threaded through all four
interviews. Moreover, conducting four interviews over the course of one month aided the
development of a prolonged relationship between the researcher and each narrator.

Multiple interviews also supported a rich, thick description of the data (Merriam, 2009) garnering about four hours of verbatim interview transcripts used for data analysis. In addition, the phenomenological method of analysis used in this study required repeated readings and analysis of the verbatim interview transcripts from two analytical perspectives—a textual and a structural. Developing both required an iterative process of reading the transcripts, clustering meaning units, developing themes, and writing—all of which supported a rich, thick description of the data within the findings. A rich, thick description was not enough; therefore, an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was constructed to create “a residue of records stemming from the inquiry” (p. 319). Each step taken in analyzing the data was documented to aid in the reflective processes involved in the data analysis, as well as support the transparency of the findings. A rich, thick description coupled with an audit trail more fully addressed the validity of this study.

The fourth strategy used for addressing the validity of this study involved the member checking of each textural description. After composing the textual description, it was sent to each narrator via email, where they were asked if the textual description accurately portrayed their experiences. Each narrator was also asked to offer up guidance
and clarification in revising the document if it did not accurately portray their experience.
The member checking conducted with each narrator ensured that the knowledge
constructed within the interviews represented an accurate textual description of each
narrator’s lived experience, ensuring the accuracy of the data for the next step—writing a
structural description. To further address the validity of the findings, after writing the
structural description and essence statement the researcher sent it via email to a member
of the dissertation committee for peer review. The reviewer checked the themes and
essence statement for saturation of data and to verify the accuracy of the findings. This
peer review added a fifth strategy for ensuring the validity of the research findings.

Limitations

Throughout this chapter I have acknowledged my deep, personal connection to
the topic of this research—teacher retention—in an attempt to understand the values and
expectations I bring to the study and how they could influence all aspects of the research
process. Maxwell (2005) refers to this acknowledgement as reactivity. With regards to
conducting interviews, Maxwell states that reactivity “is a powerful and inescapable
influence” (p. 109). Therefore, every attempt was made to limit my reactivity as a
teacher leaver, specifically during the interview process. Before conducting interviews, I
bracketed out my own research experience by writing a researcher identity that
specifically addressed my identity as a teacher leaver. In addition, I withheld my
opinions and experiences during the interviews allowing the narrators to share their
experiences without my influence. However, due to the nature of qualitative research,
eliminating researcher biases remains an impossible task, serving as the first limitation of this study (Maxwell).

A second limitation of this study involved the sample used to collect data and the timing of the interviews. Only three narrators participated in the study. Moreover, the small sample was limited in its scope consisting of only female, elementary teacher stayers from one state within the United States. The time of year the narrators were interviewed limited the findings of this study too. All three narrators were interviewed before winter break at a time of the year when they were adjusting to a new group of students and only beginning to prepare the students for the standardized tests in the spring. One narrator admitted that it was not until after winter break that the pressure increased on teachers to prepare the students for the tests, “But after Christmas the pressure is on and the pressure is like that until they are over.”

Using a phenomenological approach to understand teacher retention limited the findings to be descriptive rather than predictive. The descriptive knowledge directly relates to the particulars of each participant and their context producing a type of knowledge Flyvbjerg (2006) referred to as context-dependent knowledge. However, due to the analysis of each narrator’s experiences by the same researcher, it was likely that each narrator analysis influenced the subsequent analysis. Every effort was made to address this limitation—including peer review and member checking—but one researcher conducting all three narrator’s context-dependent knowledge made this feat difficult to avoid. Moreover, the context-dependent knowledge proves difficult to translate directly
into teacher retention policies. Instead, the findings stand to inform policy-makers and educational leaders rather than provide an immediate policy solution.

A third limitation of this study lies within the nature of the phenomenological research process. I identified an essence statement on staying in the classroom for three elementary teachers, but each essence statement is bound by a particular time and place (Moustakas, 1994). Over the course of time, each individual will engage in more experiences as a teacher, thereby altering the very nature of the phenomenon making it impossible to ever truly capture the essence of staying for an elementary teacher. For example, one narrator revealed the difference one day would have made in altering her interview data, “yesterday I was frustrated, I was tired, and I wanted to retire. Well today I was rejuvenated. I feel better and I am just waiting for the next crisis.” Capturing the narrator on a good day influenced her interview and the experiences she shared. Therefore, even though I attempted to capture the essence of staying in the classroom for three elementary school teachers, “the essences of any experience are never totally exhausted” (Moustakas, p. 100).
CHAPTER FOUR: ALLYSON

Phenomenological data analysis (Moustakas, 1994), as discussed in the previous chapter, was used to analyze the data for narrator one, Allyson. This chapter presents the findings for Allyson in three sections: (a) textual description, (b) structural description, and (c) essence statement. Allyson was the first in her immediate family to attend college, and she graduated from a traditional teaching program with a one-year student teaching experience in a Professional Development School (PDS). Allyson accepted a fifth-grade teaching position—her first teaching assignment—directly after college. After teaching at the school for only one year, she moved to McNealley Elementary School (McNealley) where she currently teaches fifth grade. She has taught fifth grade for ten years at McNealley—for a total of 11 years teaching experience within the profession. Moreover, Allyson has worked on the same grade-level team with her close colleague and friend, Sarah, at both her former elementary school and her current one—McNealley. She earned a M.S. in Education from an online university several years ago while teaching at McNealley.

McNealley is a neighborhood school in the exurbs of a city located in the Northeastern United States. The school serves about 800 students in grades K-5 with White students making up the majority of the population (61%) followed by Asian
students (15%), Hispanic students (8.6%), and Black students (5.9%). Petrilli and Scull (2010) identified it as a “private public school” because a majority of the population does not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. McNealley has two administrators—one principal and one assistant principal—and about 100 teachers on staff. On Allyson’s grade level, she is one of five fifth-grade teachers.

**Textual Description**

The textual description below describes Allyson’s multiple experiences with staying in the classroom based on the words transcribed from all four interviews. The textual description has been organized using this study’s conceptual framework that includes four interactive systems. Within each system, themes have been used as an organizing tool (Wertz, 2005) to help ensure all experiences described by Allyson have been included within this textual description.

**Microsystem themes.** The microsystem represents the first layer of interaction within the ecology of teaching. As the conceptual framework for this study detailed, the microsystem includes the individual teacher, the students, as well as the classroom where these two components interact. For Allyson, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the microsystem using the following themes: (a) looking for new ideas and knowledge, (b) two callings in life, (c) defining the work of teaching for herself, (d) drive, and (e) love for the students.

**Looking for new ideas and knowledge.** Allyson reported that she tries new ideas in the classroom and referred to herself as an innovative teacher. For example, after only a year of teaching at McNealley Elementary, she and her fifth-grade teammates asked for
permission to team-teach, i.e., teach either language arts and social studies or math and science and then switch with another teacher to teach the same subjects to a different class. For six years, Allyson switched classes with her fifth-grade teammate Sarah. At the start of the 2010-2011 school year, Allyson and Sarah sought approval from their administration to try an open classroom teaching concept where they would combine their students for language arts and math and co-teach all the students using a mixture of student grouping strategies. For the past three years, Allyson has taught in this co-teaching environment with Sarah and continues to be the only teaching pair within the school to instruct in such a manner. Allyson stated that she came up with this open classroom set up and, “wanted to try new things with the different subjects and a lot of time that causes me more work, but I like to try them and see how they go”.

Allyson said she figures out what instructional strategies work best for her students. She recalled a student who struggled in math and wanting to figure out why, “I would work with him on math and part of me was like, ‘okay he gets it,’ and then take the test and bomb. Why? Why did that happen?” She does not always rely on new ideas as she admits to enjoy using successful ideas from previous years; however, she continues to remain open to finding new ways and “seeing what comes up in class.” She recalled her first year of teaching where, on numerous occasions a “spark of an idea” would come to her as she walked to her car after work. Even swamped in paperwork or when helping students during the day these ideas came to her, “and then just kind of suddenly I will have an aha…I just kind of have that little glimmer and I am like maybe I
should try that idea and I think that is something that keeps me going while I have that spark.”

Though Allyson stated she needs the summer to recover from teaching, she also uses the vacation to seek out new ideas. She claimed the website Pinterest to be a great source of inspiration over the summer, which is a content-sharing website that allows users to upload videos or pictures on a variety of topics. Just this past summer she reported that she developed several new math ideas to begin implementing this school year.

Throughout the course of her eleven-year career, Allyson has sought opportunities to gain more knowledge and develop her teaching skills. Early on in her career, she took several math professional development courses offered through her district. She even applied and was accepted to attend the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics national conference one year free of charge—courtesy of her district. After five years of teaching—and desiring to expand her math instructional knowledge—she decided to pursue her Master of Science with a focus in mathematics from an online University and finished the program within 20 months. However, she decided to forgo any reimbursement her district provided for earning a Master’s degree because of the hassle and small monetary amount awarded; as she put it, “they do offer some sort of reimbursement towards tuition but for the amount that you would get and the paperwork and loopholes to go through to get it, it wasn’t worth it—in my opinion…I just got my master’s degree on my own. I got a student loan and took care of it that way.”
**Two Callings in life.** Allyson shared that even at a young age, she would line up her dolls to play school. She always liked school and told a story of wanting extra classwork and homework from one of her elementary school teachers because she enjoyed school so much. She also shared how she would help her younger brother with his homework including making flashcards to help him learn to read. When she went to college she had no doubts about the career she wanted to pursue—teaching elementary school. She claimed teaching has, “always been in me.” Even when presented with the challenges of the job over the course of her eleven-year career, she admits, “that as tiring and frustrating and overwhelming as some of those things can be that when I am just in my classroom and I am teaching and the students when I am working with them and enjoying the things we are discovering and the ways I am able to get through and help them grow it’s just what I was meant to do.”

Allyson revealed a second calling as important to her as teaching in her first interview—being a mother. Her oldest child is six years old and her youngest is three. This past summer she indicated that she enjoyed spending time with her children so much that she questioned her ability to be both a teacher and mother, “the summer where it was 100% stay-at-home mom, I loved it. Now trying to find the balance again is just draining [deep exhale].” Though finding a balance is difficult for Allyson, she acknowledged her calling for both, “I am a teacher, and I am a mother. And if that’s what I’m known as that is fine. I don’t need to be anything else.”

**Defining the work of teaching for herself.** Allyson defines teaching as twofold: (a) creating things or coming up with a way to get an idea across in a lesson or activity
and (b) helping students grow, learn, and enjoy school, i.e. making a difference. She admits to feeling successful at both designing lessons/activities that help students “get it” and making a difference in her students’ lives. Furthermore, Allyson enacts all three of her identified purposes of public education as a teacher at McNealley: (a) to prepare students for the future, (b) to develop a well-rounded, informed individual, and (c) to instill a love of learning and an understanding of one’s own needs and wants. Not only does she assert she can enact her three purposes of public education, but she stated that she prepares the students for a longer journey of which she is just a stepping-stone and feels successful at it, “I do feel like I am good at what I do and I guess if this is what I think teaching is then I feel like I am good at it.”

Drive. During her first year as a teacher, Allyson recalled working until 11:00 p.m. most nights and during the weekends. Even now, Allyson feels completely “submerged in school” and stated that, “it is hard for me to come home and not still think about it and not still do work and because I want to do what I do well.” She compares starting a new school year to boarding a roller coaster that moves frantically up and down until school ends. However, at the end of a school year she admitted to feeling the work abruptly stops and makes her think, “What do I do? I just spent the last 10 months, 24 hours a day like working, thinking, living school.”

For Allyson teaching requires, “you give of your whole self everyday.” After describing how one student she remembered required more time and energy than the others, she declared, “I would do whatever it would take in myself to make that [helping him learn]…I don’t see myself losing that drive because for me being a good teacher
means you have to do all of these things [put in more time and effort]”. With that said, she acknowledged that teachers must take breaks and she needs the entire summer to “recover” from teaching. Nevertheless, she finds herself devoting time over the summer to work. Just this past summer Allyson joined a math focus group of teachers and district leaders to align the new county math books with the state standards. She admitted the committee required a lot of time and work during her summer break—questioning herself as to why she agreed to participate on the committee.

*Her love for the students.* Allyson told a story of attending a football game with her husband and sitting next to an eight-year old girl and her grandfather. By the end of the game she had spent so much time talking with the eight-year old girl that her husband jokingly asked, “Did you get your friend’s number?” She believes it is important to take an interest in what kids say and do. Before having her own two children, Allyson attended her fifth-grade students’ sporting events, dance recitals, or gymnastic meets, saying, “…whatever they invited me to I would go.” She strives to develop a relationship with each student and admitted the impetus behind the co-teaching, open classroom was to try and build stronger relationships with her students. When asked if she remembers one challenging student from her teaching, she replied, “There are ones that I just don’t develop that same kind of relationship with.” In addition, Allyson acknowledged that she deeply cares for her students—crying each year at their fifth-grade graduation ceremony.

*Mesosystem themes.* The mesosystem—the second layer within the ecology of teaching—represents the interaction between the teacher and multiple components within their school building, e.g. colleagues, administrators, and work conditions. For Allyson, I
have organized her lived experiences with the components of the mesosystem using the following themes: (a) principal support, freedom, and trust, (b) school climate, (c) people, and (d) success.

**Principal support, freedom, and trust.** The principal of McNealley, Carol, opened the school in August 2003 and hired both Allyson and Sarah that same year to teach in fifth grade. Allyson has worked with Carol for 10 years, and stated that she has a really good relationship with her. She described Carol as easy to get along with and talk to when she has a work-related question or problem. In addition, she stated Carol doesn’t have an “I am the boss” attitude. Allyson reported to hearing “horror stories” of the pressures and demands placed upon teachers at other elementary schools, but she acknowledged that Carol is not demanding of her or other staff members—causing her great happiness. For example, Carol does not check lesson plans or check arrival or departure times of the staff. She believes that Carol is supportive, always reassuring her when the time comes for her students to take the Virginia Standards of Learning tests (SOLs), “And when we all get nervous before SOLs in the spring…and Carol is like you say that every year and every year you do outstanding. We are not even going to worry about it. So she is the opposite of pressure in trying to just reassure us that everything is going to be fine.” Moreover, Allyson shared that Carol always has something positive to say with regards to each teacher’s planning or instruction at team meetings, and Allyson recalled in her most recent staff meeting that Carol complemented the entire staff. According to Allyson, a common phrase spoken to the staff from Carol is “I love you all.
You’re all fantastic. You all know that you’re all wonderful and I appreciate what you do.”

Allyson stated that Carol does not micromanage her or the other staff members at McNealley infrequently visiting her classroom—her last formal observation was six years ago and her most recent informal observation was last year. Allyson repeatedly spoke of enjoying the freedom to do what she wants in the classroom, which she partially credits to the school’s passing test scores on the VA SOLs, “Carol lets us do what we want and as a school we have done really well.” Along with this freedom to “do what I want in the classroom the way I want to,” Allyson still desires a bit more supervision, “I have the freedom to do what I want and that is fine and that’s great and I, you know, the more that I have been in it I am kind of use to the fact that nobody is there with positive or constructive criticism. But sometimes specific positive feedback would be nice.”

After her second year at McNealley, Allyson said she devised a strategy with her fifth-grade team to convince Carol to let them try team teaching; Carol reluctantly gave permission. Six years later, when she and Sarah wanted to try an open-classroom approach to teaching Carol needed no convincing and said, “Great. I trust you. Whatever you want to do,” without even a full explanation of what they were attempting to do. Overall, Allyson credits part of her decision to stay in teaching with Carol, because she supports her, trusts her, and allows her the freedom to teach the way she wants to teach, “Carol fits in in that she is supportive of me, she trusts what I do, and she lets me teach the way I want to teach”.

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School climate. Allyson acknowledged that the school culture permits teachers to make professional decisions within their own classroom, saying, “You have earned your way into teaching so you deserve to be able to teach and do the things that you have learned how to do.” A culture of trust permeates the school building and teachers are left to teach in a manner of their choosing, but Allyson stated that there are plenty of staff members that will help if ever a teacher asks for support. Grade-level teams are an integral part of the culture at McNealley. Allyson stated that a teacher must be able to work on a team in order to be successful at McNealley. Grade-level teams in the school vary in what they value; some seek out creative ideas and collaboration among its members, while other teams use more teacher-directed instruction with little collaboration among the members. However, Allyson valued the variety of team dynamics within the building believing that by the time her students arrived in fifth grade they experienced a variety of different classrooms.

Allyson acknowledged McNealley has a fun, friendly, and relaxed environment. In fact, she recalled that substitute teachers have commented on how the staff at McNealley smiles in the hallways compared to the staff at a neighboring elementary school where they have also worked as substitute teachers. She questioned whether the teachers or the administration have set the school climate but admitted—no matter who deserves credit—it influences her decision to stay, “I like the environment to work in. So if that is because of them [the administration] then that is what’s keeping me there…if a new administrator came in and it still kind of stayed the same, the same people, the same sort of atmosphere. I’d be content to stay with the new administrator too.”
People. Allyson refers to the staff at McNealley as friendly and supportive with a desire to work and help students. She stated that the staff know her and some often rely on her for support. For example, she shared that the fifth-grade special education teacher seeks out Allyson for guidance in creating fifth-grade student schedules for those receiving special education services. Allyson mentioned two other individuals with whom she has a positive relationship with at McNealley: (a) the instructional technology resource teacher who provides many resources and technology support to her and (b) the guidance counselor. Their relationships extend farther than one of support; Allyson talked about how both these individuals value her work and vice versa, “I think there is just definitely a level of just value. Like with Maureen [the school counselor] she’ll say she appreciates what Sarah and I are doing in the classroom…and we appreciate what she does with them. Like I think there is just a, definitely like a respect for each other and what each other can do for the school and the kids that are there.”

These two individuals stood out to Allyson when asked about positive relationships she has with the staff—neither of which are on a grade-level team but part of the school specialist team that Allyson states “support the staff.” According to Allyson the grade-level teams have their “own little groupings” and her fifth-grade team consisting of she and four other teachers is no different. Allyson’s team collaborates with each other—mostly because they tend to like each other’s ideas—but otherwise value their own independence with each person having, “their things that we do and we just have kind of all expected that now.” She considers her team as independent, hard workers and credits her team’s ability to work together with the absence of egos or
aggressive and outspoken personalities. Nevertheless, she considers only one teammate, Sarah, a friend.

**Sarah.** Sarah taught two years prior to moving to the area; whereas, Allyson moved to the area directly after earning her elementary education license. Both attended a local career fair for teachers and interviewed with a principal from Apple Valley Elementary who was looking to hire two fifth-grade teachers who would work well together. They were offered the position and taught for one year together in fifth grade at Apple Valley. The following year, after successfully working together at Apple Valley and out of fear of being de-staffed, they scheduled back-to-back interviews for themselves at a nearby elementary school, McNealley, opening the following fall. Carol interviewed them both and agreed to hire them to work together again on a fifth-grade team.

Allyson stated that she and Sarah have similar teaching styles and beliefs. They work together in the classroom and, “kind of bounce ideas off of each other.” Over the ten years they have worked together at McNealley, they taught separate fifth-grade classes for one year, team taught for six years, and co-taught in a combined, open classroom for three years. Allyson credits Sarah as a reason she has stayed in the classroom above other influences at this level such as the school or the administration stating, “I think we stay because of each other” and “one of us wouldn’t leave to go somewhere else without the other unless it was home.”

The similarities extend beyond the classroom to both their marriages and children. They met their husbands in college, married the same day one year apart, and
coincidentally planned the same honeymoon. With regards to their children, Allyson’s first born was due the same day only a year apart from Sarah’s first born, and they were both pregnant with their second child at the same time. These parallels identified by Allyson have instigated many conversations with Sarah regarding their children, husbands, and work.

**Success.** Allyson acknowledged the country’s education system is experiencing a “breakdown” at the federal, state, and district level; however, she does not believe this to be happening in her school or her own classroom. She admitted to feeling, “good about what happens in my classroom and good about what happens in my school.” She described these feelings as ones of success, “I feel success not only in my classroom but in the school I am in with the people that I work with.” In a story relating to the assistant principal, she described how she implemented a formative assessment computer program within her teaching and was asked by the assistant principal to lead an in-service on it. She also creates the school schedule each August for the administration. Furthermore, she likes that both the principal and assistant principal come to her for questions relating to math. Just this year they both acknowledged the work she conducted with a math focus group over the summer aligning the new math textbooks with the state standards by visiting her room to ask her math curriculum questions. Allyson stated that the principal and assistant principal do not come to her to tell her things but rather seek out her opinion.

With regards to her teammates and other colleagues within the building, she feels they seek out her help and she is able to provide the needed support, “I feel like a leader
on my team that people come to me and ask me to do things and help with things. And even in the school people will ask me for things and I like that I am able to be a resource and that I'm good at it.” However, she also said she understands that conflict does and will occur at times, “…I feel very successful; that is not to say that I think everything goes smoothly.”

Allyson mentioned that parents at McNealley can be a challenge—quantifying that over the years roughly 10% of parents that don’t treat her as a professional—questioning her decisions. However, she feels supported by 90% of parents within her classroom eliciting a feeling of success when working with these individuals.

**Exosystem themes.** The exosystem—the third layer within the ecology of teaching—represents the interaction between a teacher and the environment outside of the school building. The environment within the exosystem includes three levels of government: (a) federal, (b) state, and (c) district. Each level posits educational policy and consists of policymakers that enforce them. For Allyson, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the exosystem using the following themes: (a) chain of command and (b) overcoming her frustrations.

**Chain of command.** Allyson reported that she understands the federal government has “these goals” that they want the states to meet, often measured by the implementation of standardized testing. As the states works to implement “these goals”, Allyson reported the federal government makes sure they are fulfilling them. In addition, Allyson shared that she believed her state adds to “these goals” with even more ideas and
expectations to appear superior to other states, compounding a lot of pressure upon the local school district that then passes it down their chain of command.

**Federal government.** The federal government's role in education centers on the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, more specifically the use of standardized tests in grades 3-5. She admitted that the federal government holds laudable intentions for raising student achievement, but as the mandates trickle down to the state, then the district, and then further down to her classroom they become impossible to implement. She refers to NCLB as a blanket thrown over top the school systems in the country to fix all the problems but stated, "...that blanket doesn't work." She acknowledged such pressure exists from the NCLB legislation for her students to all pass the state tests, but, "it is not a focus that is driving how I go to school."

**State government.** The state Allyson teaches in requires fifth-grade students to take 5 SOL tests—one each in Language Arts, math, science, grammar, and writing. Each of these tests occurs in the spring and for Allyson, “it all comes down to this one test and this one day.” She admitted not hating the test but the, “teaching to the test,” that requires her to shorten units focusing only on tested material and to make time in May to review and practice test-taking skills.

**School district and superintendent.** According to Allyson, the school district runs like a business with a chain of command that follows a linear top-down progression from the superintendent, to the associate superintendents, to the principals, and then to the teachers: “I know a lot of pressure and demands come down from superintendents onto the principals and then the principals, unfortunately, have to pass that on to the
teachers.” She understands the superintendent—whom she has never met and believes misunderstands her work—is in charge. Below the superintendent are associate superintendents who supervise the administration within designated areas.

The superintendent works with the school board to make decisions relating to textbook adoptions, curriculum design, data collection, student growth monitoring and documentation, and teacher evaluation plans. Textbook adoptions may include teacher input, but as was the case recently the final recommendation by the committee, which included teachers, was overlooked and another textbook was chosen. She credits the superintendent in leading the direction of the new textbook adoption and asked if this influences her teaching she responded with, "in the way that those are then the materials that I have to teach with.” With regards to data collection and monitoring student growth, the school board and superintendent influence her teaching in that she has more work to complete, “it is just more paperwork to prove to somebody that I am teaching students and getting them to learn something.” She doesn't feel respected or trusted by the superintendent or the school board. Nevertheless, she admitted to having the freedom to make the best choices for the students and teach the way she wants: "I mean thinking of the things I've said I haven't really said that they don't let us do that."

Associate superintendent. Joanne works as the associate superintendent for McNealley, supervising both Carol and Joy, the Assistant Principal. Allyson referred to her as “Carol’s boss” and stated that Joanne collects classroom data from her administration. Joanne is the one she feels responsible for “proving” something to through her data collection. However, Allyson stated that Joanne monitors her school
with less oversight because of the school’s high test scores, “as a school we have done really well. So the new superintendent [Joanne] hasn’t really come down on her. Where I have heard at other schools there is a lot more monitoring.”

*Teachers.* Allyson reported she feels the pressure of standardized testing that began with the federal legislation NCLB. Just this past summer (2012), she said she developed several new ideas for teaching math and planned to implement them during this school year. During the third week of school the school district delivered unit tests for each subject, including math, which she would be required to use with the students, and which locked her into a “testing system”. There were 10 tests in math requiring her to not only give the tests but also score them and disaggregate the data for various subgroups. In addition, those students who received a score of less than 90% would need to be remediated. Besides stating that there is no time between the tests to teach, the documentation of all the scores overwhelmed her; as she iterated, "…they [the school district] keep coming back wanting more. We keep giving them data--they want more." Allyson’s new math ideas would have to wait, as she would need to focus on testing, data collection, and documentation—due in large part by the federal, state, and local district testing policies.

*Overcoming her Frustrations.* With the demands placed upon Allyson by her school district’s chain of command, i.e. school board, superintendent, and associate superintendent, she acknowledged that Carol allows her to teach and test the way she desires, “I think she [Carol] buffers a lot of what comes from…like the associate superintendent or the main superintendent and the school board.” Allyson described how
Carol will receive “things from them” and then make a general statement to the staff that she will be in her office all day, which she interpreted as, “I am not checking up on you”; whereas, she believed the district’s chain of command insisted, “you need to check up on them [teachers] and she doesn’t agree with that so she doesn’t. And that is where I feel then I am getting my job done. I’m doing what I can do the best I can.”

In another example, she shared that the associate superintendent, Joanne, visited other elementary schools during her first year on the job and criticized the administration for not having, “certain things on the wall for what they [the teachers] were teaching and things like that.” Having heard this, Carol suggested to Joy, who was in her first year as assistant principal of McNealley, that they should require all bulletin boards to be consistent with what the associate superintendent wants. Instead of demanding teachers to be more consistent in creating bulletin boards, Allyson stated that Joy spoke up for the staff claiming that is not how McNealley runs and Carol agreed. Therefore, both Carol and Joy allowed the teachers to use their bulletin boards as they desired no matter the perceived criticism from the associate superintendent’s upcoming visit. Moreover, last school year, Allyson said she convinced Carol to let the fifth-grade team use students’ end-of-the-year data (EOY), instead of retesting all her fifth graders at the beginning of the school year to then manage what she called beginning-of-the-year data (BOY). This small freedom, shared by only the fifth-grade teachers, minimized the amount of testing and data collection Allyson completed—easing her frustration with teaching.

_The story of a starfish._ Several years ago Allyson heard the story of the starfish. A boy walking on the beach surrounded by stranded starfish that had washed up on the
shore picked one up and threw it back into the ocean. When his father asked why he did that, because he could not possibly return all the starfish to the ocean, he replied, “It mattered to that one.” Allyson identified with the moral of the story and applied it to her teaching when she had returned from maternity leave midway into the 2009-2010 school year without Sarah as a partner, who had just left for maternity leave. She recalled feeling overwhelmed in the classroom with trying to help every student, as well as unsuccessful. So she thought, “okay, if I am not going to have time to answer the questions of the ten kids in the room as long as I give my full attention to one and listen to that one through everything then at least I have helped that one.” Last year she said she made one student her “starfish”, and she successfully helped him learn material that had proved too difficult in years past and feel good about himself as a learner with extra support and testing him one-on-one. Allyson focused on making a difference to one student, “Well, I do think that teaching is about making a difference and I feel like by remembering that kind of simple story then I am able to make a difference when I feel like there is a lot to do.”

Acceptance, hope, and faith. Allyson said she accepts that standardized testing is a part of the educational milieu now. It does influence her teaching in that she shortens units to finish the curriculum that will be tested and will return to a topic after the tests to further address student inquiries on the subject, ”And then that is something that I could come back to after we take the SOLs when they can just explore and learn for fun because they have gotten all of the stuff that's on the test out of the way. But then that's sad for them to see that they can only learn for fun, like once the work part is done.”
However, she shared that she tries to incorporate students’ questions and interests into the
county approved curriculum that aligns with the state tests, which requires some well-
intentioned deceit on her part “tricking them sometimes to think that they're learning
something and exploring something that I actually have to teach them.” She has fun
building lessons around students’ questions and interests while also guiding them to
know the required curriculum.

Allyson reported that giving the students practice tests are standard practice for
most teachers within her building, even with her teaching partner, Sarah. But she does
not believe in taking lots of instructional time to coach students for a test. Instead, she
relies on a hope she learned from college that, "if you teach them well enough, then you
know that they will still perform." More importantly, this hope or faith—as she referred
to it later in the interview—allows her to continue teaching, "the way I want to teach with
the philosophy that I want these experiences and activities to be meaningful and
engaging.” The state tests certainly influence Allyson’s teaching, but overall, she has not
allowed them to affect how she plans her lessons or how she works with the students,
“knowing it yourself, knowing what is going to be on the test, giving the kids just a
sample of what they will have to do but spending the majority of the time focusing on
just good lessons and good teaching.”

**Macrosystem themes.** The macrosystem—the fourth layer of the ecology of
teaching—represents the interaction between a teacher and the larger culture within
which the work resides. The environment within the macrosystem includes any influence
of the cultural norms, attitudes, or values perceived by the teacher on their teaching. For
Allyson, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the macrosystem using one theme: approval not needed.

**Approval not needed.** Allyson considers herself a professional, but she believes people view elementary teaching as a simplistic endeavor that requires far less academic rigor compared to middle and high school teaching. She stated, “most people are smarter than the skills you need in elementary school. So they kind of feel like that anybody can go in and pick that up and go teach it.” Even though she believes parents within the building treat her as a professional, she reported some question her decisions, “I think parents see me as a professional, but I feel like in my area they don’t see that that means I know more than them…I mean they still feel like they can question me.” Nevertheless, she reported getting more out of teaching because she does it for herself: "So while those would be benefits to have, to have people respect and value then I get more out of what I do cause I do it for me."

**Structural Description**

Whereas, the textual description aims to describe the experiences Allyson has had as a teacher stayer; the structural description below aims to portray the researcher’s understanding of how she experienced the phenomenon of staying in the classroom. The structural description elucidates the underlying meanings hidden within the textual description through a process of imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). Themes within each system were used to organize the researcher’s understanding of Allyson’s lived experiences (Wertz, 2005).
**Microsystem themes.** The microsystem consists of the first nested layer of interaction within the ecological structure of teaching, which include the teacher, the students, and the classroom. For Allyson, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the microsystem using the following themes: (a) ethos of caring, (b) her definition of teaching, and (c) internal source of accountability.

**Ethos of Caring.** As a teacher, Allyson spoke of forming relationships with her students and letting them know she cares. In fact, she identified challenging students as those with whom she did not have a positive relationship with as a teacher. She viewed each student as “my own kid” and worked to get to know each one both in and outside of school. For Allyson, teaching required her to care, and it was upon this ethos of caring she worked to build relationships with each child in her classroom every year. It was not until she became a mother that she admitted to attending fewer outside events for each student and having “less of a bond” with her students. Her emotional energy would need to be divided between her students and her two children. This emotional “tug-of-war” demonstrated a deeply held ethos of caring that emanated from within her and drove her to identify the work of a teacher and a mother as a calling.

**Her definition of teaching.** The work of teaching became quite personal for Allyson as she sought to build relationships and care for her students, prompting her to define teaching as making a difference in a student’s life and getting ideas across to students, “I do think that teaching is about making a difference…the idea of actually teaching getting the ideas across to the kids was something that was, you know, important to me and one of the things of why I am there.” Defining the work of teaching for herself, provided an
internal source of motivation and drive to teach that shielded her from education critics within the general public: “I am more intrinsically motivated than extrinsically. So while those would be benefits to have—to have people respect and value [teachers]—then I get more out of what I do cause I do it for me.” Moreover, Allyson’s singular definition of teaching prompted the pursuit of innovative curricular and instructional choices. Aiming to make a difference in each student’s life—and realizing that all students don’t learn in the same manner or at the same rate—she worked tirelessly to create new ways to teach students. In fact, when asked what would she miss the most if she left the classroom, Allyson responded with, “I would miss the lessons and activities…I would miss creating things, finding things to do in the classroom, which is really teaching.”

*Internal source of accountability.* Beyond her intrinsic motivation to teach and prompting a creative spirit of teaching, Allyson’s definition of teaching provided her with an internal source of accountability for her actions. In fact, she claimed that she “feel[s] pressure from myself and what I want to get done.” Though she felt pressure from several outside factors, which will be discussed in later systems, Allyson initiates her own drive to succeed in teaching. Moreover, she controls the parameters for successful teaching, freeing her of external sources controlling not only how she teaches but how she feels about her teaching, i.e. successful or not.

*Mesosystem themes.* The mesosystem consists of the second nested layer of interaction within the ecological structure of teaching, which includes multiple components within the school building such as the administrators, colleagues, and work
conditions. For Allyson, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of
the mesosystem using the following themes: (a) relationships and (b) empowerment.

**Relationships.** Allyson has a positive relationship with her administrators, i.e.
Carol (the principal) and Joy (the assistant principal) that stem from the appreciation,
trust, and support shared between them. Allyson admitted to feeling that Carol and Joy
not only recognize her for what she does but appreciate her work: “the fact that I put that
time in [regarding the math committee this past summer] and they will come and ask me
math questions…they’ll come to me and ask me things without telling me things—like
they want my opinion.” Furthermore, Allyson believes the principal trusts her to make
professional decisions, e.g. she and Sarah did not have to defend their case for co-
teaching in an open classroom environment—it was just allowed. With regards to
support, Allyson mentioned on several occasions how her principal will constantly
reassure her with words such as, “you’re doing everything great,” and even stated that
Carol is “the opposite of pressure in trying to just reassure us that everything is going to
be fine.” Because Allyson places pressure on herself to succeed, she flourishes at a
school where the administration appreciates and supports her work and constantly
reassures her that the students will pass the SOL tests.

Beyond the administration, Allyson holds positive relationships with the teachers
and staff at McNealley. She has described the school climate as friendly and relaxed,
which she enjoys. Her relationship with a few teachers extends further to include support
and value, such as the guidance counselor and the instructional technology teacher; both
teachers she admitted supported her with resources and have shared their appreciation for
the work she does with students in her class. Most importantly, the relationship that
exerts the most influence over her decision to stay in the classroom, and specifically at
McNealley, centers on Sarah. Allyson continues working at McNealley because of her
close and personal friendship with Sarah that extends beyond the school. Allyson has
worked all 11 years with Sarah teaching fifth grade (one year at Apple Valley and 10
years at McNealley). She shared that she has “grown up” with her. These two have a
bond with each other that not only transcends her other relationships in the school
building but anchors her to the school and supports her decision to stay in the classroom:
“I think we stay because of each other…I would wander around lost without her”. She
even goes as far to state that if both the school climate and the administration changed
she would stay because of Sarah, “if we still had each other to work with and talk to that
we would manage to get through that.”

**Empowerment.** Allyson has the freedom to “kind of do what I want” at
McNealley, in part because she has “established herself” there as a fifth-grade teacher
over the course of 10 years. Allyson has experienced minimal staff changes that directly
affected her while she has been at McNealley. Only one of her teammates has changed
over the past ten years and only this past year did a new assistant principal join the
administrative team. She has worked with three fifth-grade teachers, including Sarah,
Carol, and both the school counselor and instructional technology teacher—which she
mentioned specifically as staff members that support her—for all 10 years at McNealley.
Furthermore, she has taught the same grade level and in the same room. These minimal
changes have helped Allyson feel “established” as a fifth-grade teacher among the
community, the staff, the fifth-grade team, and the administration at McNealley, in turn further providing her with a sense of freedom: “I feel like I have been there and I have somewhat of a leadership role on my team and even in the school. That people know me and can rely on me…if I went somewhere else I would have to start from the bottom and not knowing anybody and having to go to other people and ask things.”

At McNealley, the locus of control emanates from the individual teacher and at times is shared with a grade-level team. It is this grounded source of control close to the individual that provides Allyson with the freedom to make curricular and instructional decisions. Allyson discussed how teachers at McNealley don’t “have to prove to someone else” that they are capable teachers; instead, they are “just kind of given that freedom [to teach].” In addition, Carol supports Allyson and other teachers in the building in making decisions and does not require every teacher to follow the lead of others within the building—promoting an individualistic spirit of teaching. For example, Sarah and Allyson are the only pair to team-teach in an open environment at the school and her team is one out of two teams in the building that conducted student-led conferences.

The grade-level teams at McNealley represent a secondary source of freedom. Whereas, the teams are not necessarily decided by the teachers, they do have autonomy to develop values, “each team kind of has their team values.” Allyson mentioned that some grade levels chose to share ideas instead of collaborating extensively with each other to create lessons, while others chose to be more collaborative in nature than independent—either way being acceptable. For her fifth-grade team, she discussed how they share
ideas with each other and because “we tend to like each other’s ideas” they will “do a lot of what other people do.” Both the school culture and the administration have promoted an individualistic spirit at McNealley that allows teachers to find their own balance between independence and collaboration. Though at times she has sought collaboration, especially with Sarah, Allyson has thrived on the individualistic spirit at McNealley—in part because of her confidence with teaching, “I know what I am doing. I know what my kids need.”

Allyson not only feels confident in her teaching abilities, but successful. She feels successful as a teacher not just because others value her work but because she has the freedom to make her own choices: “I like to have control over doing it and then since other people like what I do that makes me feel successful.” Freedom provided by the administration, as well as supported by the school culture, along with the appreciation of her colleagues conjure up powerful feelings of success within Allyson that boost her sense of empowerment and drive her to continue working as a teacher.

**Exosystem themes.** The exosystem consists of the third nested layer of interaction within the ecological structure of teaching, which include district, state, and federal levels of government. For Allyson, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the exosystem using the following themes: (a) skepticism, (b) persistence, and (c) balancing act.

**Skepticism.** For Allyson, the federal, state, and district government form a hierarchical power structure from which decisions are made at the top and disseminated level by level to the bottom, where teachers reside. She believes the players at each level
don’t have bad intentions. In fact, she admitted that the federal, state, and local district “want children to succeed that they want everybody to learn.” However, such a hierarchical power structure ostracizes individuals from forming relationships with members throughout the profession, instead relying on compliance and obedience from members at lower levels as those in the highest rank make policy decisions. Allyson doesn’t know or have a relationship with any individual at the federal or state level. What she understands about these two entities stems from their education policies such as the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and the state Standards of Learning SOLs. At the district level, she has never met the superintendent of her school district, nor does she involve herself with the activities of her local school board. However, she has interacted, though rarely, with her associate superintendent—Joanne. She identifies Joanne as “Carol’s boss” and mostly knows about her from the relationship she has with Carol. Furthermore, Allyson feels the players at all three levels, i.e. the federal, state, and local, misunderstand her job as a teacher and the day-to-day realities she faces in the classroom, in part because of the lack of relationships held between her and the individuals involved at the other levels.

The influence of the federal, state, and local government over teacher decisions coupled with the hierarchical structure of the system promotes power struggles, especially between players at the lower levels that work to implement the policies. The relationship between Allyson and her administration, mostly Carol, has resulted in an alliance of sorts that aids Allyson in the power struggles: “she [Carol] tries to block as much as that [rules and regulations] from us as she can and just kind of say ‘oh we are
doing that. I don’t need my teachers to document notes that they have had a team meeting. They’re meeting.’” Nevertheless, the school administration often loses the fight and requires teachers to comply with district initiatives frustrating Allyson. For instance, with data collection the school district has sought information from the teachers, and Carol has in turn allowed her teachers to turn in data in the manner they have been using in their classroom. The associate superintendent wanted something else and therefore instructed Carol to insist that teachers comply with using a more standardized and district-approved manner for data collection. This type of data collection frustrated Allyson: “The fact that I have to create some other form [for data collection] so I can share it with you [administration and district leaders] is time consuming and a waste of time.”

Besides data collection, other policies regarding testing and accountability constantly frustrate Allyson, as her partnership with Carol can do little to stop many of these rules and regulations from reaching her. She commented that the tests themselves were not a source of her frustration but “the amount of them…at the end the kids are just taking tests all the time. There is not time to teacher in between them.” In addition, it is the standardized tests the county requires in preparation for the state standardized test in the Spring: “Like I can say what kids can do and what they can’t do and I can use testing and devices but when you are all locked into that same system. It’s just…it’s hard.”

Persistence. Allyson admitted to feeling frustrated over policies regarding accountability, testing, and data collection and that teaching required her to “put up with all of these other little things.” However, none of these policies made her question why
she stayed in the classroom. They were obstacles to overcome. Moreover, she remained empowered and continued to feel successful as a teacher, in part, because she minimized the influence of these policies within her teaching, “I still feel like I can do enough of what I want to do.” For example, she shortened units to cover all the material before the state standardized test, but mentioned that after the tests she would revisit the unit and focus on questions the students had or teach other information she believed relevant to the topic. She even admitted to “tricking” the students in thinking the required curriculum was actually an exploration into their own inquiries and questions, instead of an imposition of facts that they must learn to pass fifth grade. This subtle form of subterfuge allowed her to continue teaching and find joy in it despite the testing regulations imposed upon her.

Most importantly, Allyson continued to find joy in both the students and the work of teaching—two facets of her definition of teaching. She loved spending time with students and worked hard to build a relationship with each one of them. With regards to the work of teaching, she claimed that if she ever left teaching she would miss creating things and finding things to do with the students, i.e. planning and instructing. Allyson was firmly grounded in her love of both the students and the work of teaching.

She also relied on a faith in her teaching most likely stemming from past successes and a belief in teaching as her calling. When faced with a philosophical or ideological teaching dilemma, Allyson relied on her faith, or hope as she later referred to it, to guide her. For example, she spoke of teachers giving students 10 multiple-choice practice tests in just one subject to prepare them for the state standardized test in the
spring—a practice supported by state and local government leaders to prepare the students. She disagreed with this practice and thought she should spend more time engaging students in meaningful experiences and less time prepping them for the tests. So with Carol’s approval, she gave her students only one or two practice tests in each subject and had faith that it would be enough.

When faced with extreme frustration, Allyson actively reframed her thinking and found comfort in the story of a starfish. She explained the pressure of trying to help all students every day learn and pass the standardized tests overwhelmed her. So she thought that instead of focusing on helping all the students, as her superiors wanted, she would focus each day on helping one student—as the character in the starfish story thought when he saved one starfish out of many on the beach. The story prompted Allyson to reframe her thinking with regards to what she could realistically accomplish in the classroom each day. Armed with this new mindset, Allyson not only continued to teach amidst the pressures placed on her but did so with a feeling of success.

**Balancing act.** For Allyson, continuing to teach requires a balancing act between a constellation of factors across all four systems and she admitted that right now, after 11 years of teaching, that “the good outweighs the bad.” Allyson grounds her decision to remain in the classroom within the microsystem. She holds firm to the belief that teaching is a calling, steeling herself for whatever it takes to make sure she is successful. Moreover, faith enables her to fight for what she believes. Allyson defines teaching on her own terms, setting herself up for success, and when faced with challenges reframes her thinking to make sure she continues to do the work as she defines it. Along with
defining the work of teaching, she defines what constitutes success, helping at least one student learn, change, or grow and believes that she is successful with her students. For Allyson teaching is intrinsically rewarding and she admitted, “I get more out of what I do because I do it for me.”

These factors within the microsystem interact with several important factors from the mesosystem in helping Allyson stay in the classroom. First, her relationship with Carol emboldens her to make decisions in her classroom based on her own beliefs—instilling a sense of control within Allyson. Next, Allyson’s relationship with Sarah has helped her stay in teaching for this long. Together they face the pressures and challenges of the job and work alongside each other as more than colleagues but friends. Allyson has developed a deep emotional bond with Sarah and she has never taught without Sarah on her team. The friendly and relaxed school climate works to help Allyson stay as well. Furthermore, Allyson has achieved success with the people within the school building such as the administration, team members, and other staff.

Overall, she perceives what happens in her classroom, i.e. the microsystem, and her school, i.e. the mesosystem, as productive and successful. However, at the exosystem level she believes that the education system is broken: “I don’t think it is really happening in my school. My county, the state, the country yes. But I feel good about what happens in my classroom and good about what happens in my school.” Nothing within this level or the macrosystem supported Allyson’s decision to stay in the classroom. Instead these two systems provided the frustrations and pressures Allyson fought to remain in the classroom. For Allyson, staying became a battle between the two
inner systems, i.e. the microsystem and mesosystem, and the two outer systems, i.e. the exosystem and macrosystem. By grounding herself within the two inner systems of influence she successfully diverted the frustrations and pressures of teaching found within the two outer systems and discovered her own personal balance of “the good” and “the bad” of teaching that sustained her.

**Essence Statement**

The textual description portrayed Allyson’s lived experiences with staying in the classroom across as she described them over the course of four interviews. The structural description depicted the researcher’s understanding of Allyson’s textual description elucidating the invisible threads or underlying structures within her lived experiences of staying in the classroom. Drawing from both descriptions aided the researcher in uncovering the totality of Allyson’s lived experiences with the phenomenon of teacher retention and supported the writing of an essence statement. Moustakas (1994) referred to this process as an “intuitive integration of the fundamental textual and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole.” (p. 100). The themes used to organize both descriptions, due in part to the significant amount of data collected across all four systems within the educational ecology, supported this process. Below is the essence statement for Allyson’s lived experiences with staying in the classroom.

For Allyson teaching is a calling deriving from an ethos of caring for students that engenders a personal definition of teaching. Operating with her own singular definition of teaching motivates her to work tirelessly, inspires her to innovate, and provides an
internal source of accountability. Allyson is an empowered teacher who has the freedom and autonomy to make her own professional decisions because of her administration’s support and trust of her work. Along with freedom and autonomy, she has opportunities to collaborate with her fifth-grade team and/or her teaching partner, whom she considers a close friend.

The exosystem, comprised of the federal, state, and local governments, functions within a hierarchical power structure that places teachers last. Therefore, all three levels exert tremendous pressure on Allyson with policy mandates, especially regarding accountability, that get trickled down from the top. Allyson accepts her position within the hierarchy, though her acceptance should not be confused with apathy. She works within the power structure to do what she can and influence what she does have control over, her school, administration, students, and self. She relies on the microsystem and mesosystem for a host of factors that steel her resolve to stay in the classroom despite the pressures and frustrations added to her position by factors within the exosystem and macrosystem. She is an active agent in deciding to remain in the classroom as a teacher persisting because she continues to fight the pressures and demands within the two outer systems and right now the positives of teaching outweigh the negative.
Phenomenological data analysis (Moustakas, 1994), as discussed in the previous chapter, was used to analyze the data for narrator two, Jae-da. This chapter presents the findings for Jae-da in three sections: (a) textual description, (b) structural description, and (c) essence statement. Jae-da began her career as a speech pathologist at Caprica Elementary School (Caprica). After roughly ten years as a speech pathologist she earned her PK-3 endorsement from a large state university and accepted a teaching position at Caprica. Therefore, Jae-da is a career switcher with 13 years of experience teaching both third and second grade—all at Caprica. Currently, she teaches second grade.

Caprica is located in the suburbs of a city within the Northeastern United States. The school serves about 635 students in grades K-6 with Hispanic students making up the majority of the student population (37%) followed by African American students (30%) and then Caucasian students (21%). Sixty-two percent of the student population qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch; therefore, Caprica receives Title I funds from the federal government. According to the federal government’s benchmarks, Caprica did not meet Annual Yearly Progress for the 2011-2012 school year. Caprica has three administrators—one principal and two assistant principals—and about 80 teachers on staff. On Jae-da’s grade level, she is one of five second-grade teachers.
Textural Description

The textual description below describes Jae-da’s multiple experiences with staying in the classroom based on the words transcribed from all four interviews. The textual description has been organized using this study’s conceptual framework that includes four interactive systems. Within each system, themes have been used as an organizing tool (Wertz, 2005) to help ensure all experiences described by Jae-da have been included within this textual description.

Microsystem themes. The microsystem represents the first layer of interaction within the ecology of teaching. As the conceptual framework for this study detailed, the microsystem includes the individual teacher, the students, as well as the classroom where these two components interact. For Jae-da, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the microsystem using the following themes: (a) path to being a teacher, (b) destined to teach, (c) who she is as a teacher, (d) teaching as an investment, (e) the rewards, (f) students, and (g) managing stress.

Path to being a teacher. Jae-da admitted to graduating high school with the thought of choosing a career to make money. While attending college, she decided to pursue speech pathology—the “school route” over the clinical path. She stated, “I always knew I wanted to do the school route. I didn’t want to do the clinical.” She completed her degrees in speech and language pathology and was hired to work at Caprica as a speech pathologist in 1990. After several years, the superintendent pushed for speech pathologists in the district to do more in class therapy instead of pulling students out of the classroom. With this change in her routine, she noticed, “I really liked the idea of
being in the classroom…I liked having the whole class pay attention and I could kind of like do the teacher thing.” When she was in the classroom for group therapy, she reported that teachers would compliment her and tell her “You really have a knack for this. You really need to do this job.” Moreover, she stated, “The paperwork became more important than the therapy.” Therefore, she reported, “that I wanted to go into the classroom.” She pursued a PK-3 endorsement at an university and in the fall of 2000 moved from being a speech pathologist at Caprica to a regular education teacher. She felt that working as a speech therapist at Caprica prepared her for becoming a teacher:

“It did prepare me because I knew the population. I had a rapport with the parents—the parents knew me—and because I had been exposed to so many of the children within the building outside of me just being the speech teacher for so long. I kind of knew what I was going to get myself into.”

Destined to teach. Jae-da admitted she probably wanted to be a teacher from the beginning, “I think in the back of my mind that is probably what I wanted to do.” She never had the desire to be a principal. She reported feeling that teaching was a calling, “Everybody has a calling, and I really do feel like this is what I was meant to do. I really feel that I am supposed to teach…I do really feel like this is my calling.” Jae-da explained how teaching was “almost like a gift,” stating it came natural, easy, and automatic. Moreover, Jae-da shared that she loved what she does in three out of the four interviews. She admitted to having not just a love for it but a passion, “I just have a love and a passion for it.” Jae-da also described teaching as “just where I want to be.” She
does not want to be anywhere else and stated, “I can’t explain it….I just want to do what I am doing.”

**Who she is as a teacher.** Jae-da mentioned two former teachers who influenced her. One was a seventh grade teacher who, she stated, “was one of my favorite teachers because she could see the potential in the class.” The second teacher she recalled was one of her high school English teachers, “…the cool teacher. She was, you know, the person you could kind of talk to.” She described both teachers as holding high expectations and telling students “that you could be successful.” She stated that she, “really looked up to teachers like that.” Jae-da admitted that who she is and what she does as a teacher comes from these two former teachers, “What I do and my character, a lot of the same things that they did I see I am doing.”

As a teacher, Jae-da described herself as strict and holding very high expectations for students. She also admitted to feeling “that all students can learn and it is just that you have to be able to determine what type of learner they are. You have to tap into the strengths they have, and you have to start there.” Moreover, Jae-da described herself as a teacher using the words “flexible”, “nurturing”, “professional”, and “special”.

**Goals for students.** Jae-da discussed the goals she has for her students in second grade. First she wants to “prep them for what is to come”—whether it be the SOL tests in the next grade or their learning in future grade levels. Even though these students are young, she wants them to “understand the importance of education” with the hope that they will “value how things have to happen in school before you can do other things in your life.” Second, she described herself as “the type of teacher that thinks accountability
is very important and for them to understand that they are accountable for their learning.” She stated that she wants her students to be responsible for their own learning. Next, Jae-da discussed wanting to provide her students with “an avenue to grow” with regards to themselves and their communities. Jae-da admitted that for her “it has always been about growth and that is important for the students to see that you were growing.” Lastly, she stated that she wants every student “to know that they can be successful.” Jae-da stated that she could achieve each of these goals within her own teaching.

**Teaching as an investment.** Jae-da shared that teaching is “a 24 hour job” that requires additional time put into it beyond the contract hours. She reported that teaching is “not a 9 to 5 kind of job,” because whether in the car or later while in bed you are thinking about things you could do with the students. She acknowledged that she must take work home with her each evening stating that, “I don’t feel that you are going to be completely successful if you leave with your purse swinging in the wind with no books or no bags.” Her first year of teaching proved difficult because the workload encroached into her personal time, and she reported telling herself “if you work for two extra hours at work then I can’t go home and work for three more hours.”

Jae-da acknowledged that teaching “sucks the life out of you and if you don’t love what you do you are going to leave.” She spoke of teaching as an investment, “You have to be invested in what you are doing.” For Jae-da, the investment required all of herself, “All of it. You have to invest everything—your whole self.” Therefore, she stated, “You have to find your own ways of finding the rewards of why you’re doing this.”
**The rewards.** Jae-da acknowledged to feeling successful with teaching, which reaffirms her calling to teach: “I do feel successful and it makes me, it reaffirms how I think…I know this is what I should be doing.” Jae-da stated that she has identified her own rewards from teaching, “and those types of things may not be good enough for somebody to want to stay. They may have to find other things.” The first reward for Jae-da included feeling she has made an impact on a student’s life such as, “When they get anything. When they learn anything. When they are happy to be there.” Jae-da described helping students feel successful as a second reward of teaching. She stated that, “it may just be something quick. But it doesn’t matter because you see their eyes lift up and your like ‘oh, they got it’”. She reported that some of the students “feel so defeated that they feel like they can’t do anything.” For example, she discussed working with students who want to read more advanced books, which their peers may be reading already, and feel defeated by their present reading ability. She said that she works with these students to help them overcome their defeatist attitude and recognize that small steps—such as using reading strategies—and more time will enable them to read advanced level books like their peers.

For Jae-da, a third reward from teaching occurs when former students return to visit her. She stated that, “it makes it [teaching] all worth it.” In addition, she stated that a lot of “my kids come back because they remember the talks that we had, and I think that is how they come back and they are happy to share with me what they are doing and how they are being successful.” She described how the first class she taught at Caprica graduated from high school last year, so several of her former students within that class
stopped by her classroom to visit her. She stated that they laughed and reminisced about their year in her classroom.

A fourth reward for Jae-da focused more on her colleagues than on the students she taught. She reported that when colleagues used her materials or ideas she finds that rewarding also: “I guess that is rewarding too, that I see, oh, my stuff is being used.” In addition, she stated she feels rewarded when her former students “got to the next grade level and the teacher comes to me and says you know your kids could do so and so.” So she felt rewarded not only when her students are successful in the following grade, but when their teacher acknowledged her for their success.

Jae-da admitted her administration and colleagues rarely have the time to praise her for a job well done: “I don’t need that good job every time because it is not going to happen. It is not going to happen in this field. It is too much happening.” She stated that she has learned, “If somebody else doesn’t give me that kudos, I give the kudos to myself.” Sometimes the praise comes in the form of a feeling, “just by the way I feel by when I see some or one of my teammates do something that I have done or that I have shown them. I am not like I have showed you that, but I see it.” However, she acknowledged needing to “pat myself on the back a little bit more.”

**Students.** Jae-da reported that the students are the key to teaching and that she is in the classroom for them, “I am in there for the kids…I am in it not for myself but for the kids.” She claimed having fonder memories of her former students than her colleagues, “I can remember more things that have happened with kids in my first class as opposed to those teachers that were on that staff that first year that I started teaching.”
Jae-da described the students in terms of a connection she forms with them, the lines of communication she develops with them, and the love she has for them: “it is just that the connection that I have with them and the communication and the love that I have for them and that is what keeps me there.”

The connection. Jae-da admitted that having a relationship with each student to be extremely important. She described her teacher-student relationships as open and close-knit, “where they can talk to me and also know that if there is something that I can’t handle that I know where, who they can talk to.” She stated that she has a rapport with her students, which enables her to “feel when there was something wrong with them.” She also stated that the students “understand the respect I have for them and I expect the same respect.” Moreover, she reported that she works “together as a unit” with the students to support the connection she has with them. With regards to her class, Jae-da referred to her class as “one big happy family.” She reported that they are a learning community and like a family.

For Jae-da, the teacher-student relationship extends beyond academics as she reported striving to “have that relationship with each one of my students where we can sit and talk about something else besides school for five minutes.” She stated that she wants the student to know that she identifies with them and is invested in their education. She wants more than a teacher-student relationship stating, “I just really feel that it is important that it is just not a teacher-student relationship.” When the students leave her class, she stated feeling like “they just don’t leave me.” She shared that the connection she forms with her students remains when they leave her classroom, “That is just like my
thing that I do with all my kids and there is a constant connection that I have with them throughout the entire time that they are here [at Caprica].” She stated that her students may leave her, but she is always watching them. She discussed seeing one of her former students in middle school and declared that he knows “that I am watching you.” Moreover, she reported that her former students “know that they have a reputation. I can’t have anybody embarrass me.”

*The communication.* Jae-da claimed that dialogue helps her build relationships with her students. She described working with a challenging student who struggled academically by first talking “about the areas that he was having difficulty with,” and then she “talked about how can I help you.” She reported that establishing a relationship with this student took a bit of time and required “a lot of talking, a lot of dialogue.” Jae-da stated that she has students give her daily reports of what is happening at home and she feels that many of her former students return because “they remember the talks that we have had.”

*The love.* Jae-da admitted that if she left teaching she would miss the students because she enjoys working with them and loves them. When disciplining her students, she stated that the students recognize that, “I love them and it is not to belittle you to make you feel bad but it is just something that you need to work on.” She admitted that not all teachers understand why she cares for her students so much.

*Managing stress.* When faced with the pressures of the job, Jae-da claimed that she tells herself, “And the pressure is still going to be there. Nothing is going to change that. So you have to make a choice. Are you either going to drown in it and make it
make your life horrible, which some days we do…or are you going to take it and say ‘this is what we have to do. Let’s try to figure out what we have to do to do it.’” She reported that picking yourself up and moving on from the pressure is “sometimes minute by minute, sometimes it is hour by hour, sometimes it is subject by subject, sometimes it is day by day….Yesterday, I was frustrated, I was tired, and I wanted to retire. Well, today I was rejuvenated. I feel better, and I am waiting for the next crisis.”

One year she remembered being “so consumed with school” and realized she had to do something: “I think the straw that broke the camel’s back was doing all of this, and I still would have to come to school and there would be something else added. So I can’t. Enough is enough. Enough is enough.” She admitted that sometimes you will bring work home and it doesn’t get done. She stated that this, “is okay, but you have to get yourself to that place of ‘okay, I am just not going to do it.” She claimed that throughout her career she has learned on her own to know when “enough is enough”, which has helped her not “get bogged down with you know what you have to teach and when you have to teach, because it will consume you and you will not be effective in the classroom.”

*The cycle.* Jae-da stated that handling the pressure of the job and realizing when “enough is enough” is a cycle:

I am okay today, but then I can do more. I can do more. Then my head is getting bigger. Oh my god I am pulling my hair. Oh my god I am graying. And I can’t sleep at night. And then I get to enough is enough and I go back and then the same thing happens. It is just a vicious cycle.
When she starts the cycle, Jae-da reported that she uses self-talk such as the following, “You have been here before. Okay, what did you do last. Come on you have been here before. Let’s bring it back down. Take a break. Don’t bring this stuff home and relax.” Nevertheless, she admitted that on some occasions she cannot get out of the cycle and becomes a wreck. At these times she reported needing to talk to a colleague, “I need somebody to come in and talk to me. I can’t talk myself down.”

**Mesosystem themes.** The mesosystem—the second layer within the ecology of teaching—represents the interaction between the teacher and multiple components within their school building, e.g. colleagues, administrators, and work conditions. For Jae-da, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the mesosystem using the following themes: (a) teaching as a package deal, (b) school context, (c) school climate, (d) the parents, (e) the staff, (f) the team, and (g) the administration.

**Teaching as a package deal.** Jae-da acknowledged that staying in the classroom requires finding a balance between what you enjoy and what frustrates you with the job of teaching: “Cause sometimes one is lacking but the other is so good that it is okay that this is not great. It is like a balance. It is a balance cause I have never had it to the point that everything was like ‘uh’ [deep groan] because I think that I wouldn’t be here. I wouldn’t be in it as long.” She referred to this balance of positive and negative factors associated with teaching as being a part of a package deal: “I just really feel like I have a package deal and sometimes some of the package isn’t working but then the other part of the package is helping that package be okay.” With regards to the mesosystem, Jae-da admitted that her package has a nice balance due to what is happening in her building and
her team: “I think it is just a nice balance of what is happening in the building but a lot of it has to do with my team.”

The school context. Jae-da reported that Caprica has a diverse student population that is, “…hard to define…because it is like multicultural.” She also stated Caprica has a “high English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) population” and many of the families are transient—meaning the students often transfer in and out during the school year. Jae-da used the word vast to describe the variety of students she has been exposed to while teaching at Caprica, “Your exposure is very vast.”

She stated that Caprica is considered a low-performing school or Title 1 school, which impacts instruction. She acknowledged that she taught at Caprica when, “we were an Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) school.” However, Caprica has not made AYP for several years now, including last school year. She acknowledged that her school has now been labeled, “as a school that hasn’t made AYP,” which she stated served as a stereotype that comes with pressure. Whether Caprica achieves AYP or not, Jae-da said, “it doesn’t show what we are as a school.”

Sense of place. Jae-da shared the importance of developing, “a sense of the school that you are in…the population that you are with.” At Caprica, Jae-da described having more needs in the classroom now than when she first started 12 years ago: “…maybe 10 or 12 years ago I might have had five or six different types of needs. Where now I have like 15 or 16 different types of needs.” She discussed talking to her students about, “latch key kids and things like that,” because students don’t get to see their parents often due to their work schedules. She also mentioned that she calls her
Jae-da stated that different schools require different investments. Caprica is located in an area of the school district with a larger percentage of linguistically diverse and economically disadvantaged students than the rest of the county. She refers to this area of the school district as the “River Road area”. Jae-da reported that, “your investment may be different on the River Road area as your investment in another area. The commitment level is always high, but it is a different investment.” For Jae-da, the level of investment originates with the students: “You have to make an investment, and you have to understand the type of children that you are working with and what you are getting into.”

Jae-da admitted that teaching in a school in the “River Road area” required, “a special kind of person and everybody can’t teach on this River Road area, you know, you have to be a special kind of person.” Not only is Caprica in the “River Road area” — serving more linguistically diverse and economically disadvantaged students than in other schools within the district—but it also has not made AYP for a number of years, including last school year. She reported that she likes “the whole challenge aspect of the population and working with different types of children.” Moreover, Jae-da stated that, “this is where I need to be. I am happy…this is where I make the most impact.”

School climate. Jae-da stated that while working at Caprica she has been taught that, “all children can learn regardless of their academic or economic situation.” She
shared that the pressure, demand, and expectations placed on teachers is high: “the pressure is high. The expectation is high. The demand is high. And you are held accountable for everybody and the whole thing is that there is no leeway.” She shared that when a school meeting is scheduled outside of contract hours, “it was just expected that you were supposed to go.” Given the climate of high pressure, demand, and teacher expectation, Jae-da stated that, “When you work in my building, you will be ready to work anywhere.” She mentioned that not one teacher who has transferred out of Caprica has told her their new school was more difficult to teach in than Caprica.

Jae-da described the school climate at Caprica as different because, “we are all in it together.” She stated the staff works collaboratively, which relieves some of the pressure, “we are working collaboratively as a school so the pressure is not totally on us.” She referred to the staff as close knit and like a family stating there is camaraderie among the staff within the building.” She reported that the staff all strive for the same goals and know that all students can learn: “We are a professional learning community. We are striving for all the same thing. We are working for the same goal. We know that all kids can learn.”

The parents. Jae-da reported that you have to work together with parents. She stated that she has a good rapport with the parents in her school, and she likes to have that rapport because, “it makes my life a lot easier.” She acknowledged feeling that for a lot of parents at Caprica school represents an unsafe place because they usually hear from a teacher or visit the school when a child has misbehaved. However, she stated that once the parents realize the investment she has in their child they turn around:
They don’t feel like the school is a safe place for them to come in and be a part of it because the only time I get phone calls is when my child is not doing good…when they see how much I have invested in their child I think that they turn around.

She admitted to feeling that the parents have, “a sense of wow she does really care about my kid,” when she talks to the students about more than academics. She stated that she wants the parents to be a part of school because, “I don’t ever want it to be home and school. They need to know that there is a connection between the two.” She shared that she wants the students to come to school and share about their home life and in turn go home and share their school day creating, “a constant circle of what is happening.”

**The staff.** Jae-da admitted to staying at Caprica in part because of the staff: “I think that part of the reason why I am there too is because of the staff.” She reported to always liking the staff and getting along with everyone in the building stating that, “I haven’t really had any issues with anybody and I could have a conversation with anybody or talk to anybody.” She reported that her staff share everything, “We share resources. We share strengths. We share weaknesses.” She acknowledged that she does feel comfortable seeking out help from other staff members, “cause there is somebody in the building or on the team that does know.”

She stated that she has a reputation with the staff for wanting to talk about her former students, “I have that type of reputation with the staff that I am going to tell you about my former kids.” She mentioned that when her kids move to third grade she has a meeting with the teachers to share anything that may help her former students be
successful. Jae-da reported being, “close with the first grade team,” meeting with them and the third grade team to vertically plan and provide information about her kids.

Last year, Jae-da reported a new administration took over Caprica and over half the staff were new—including about 30 brand new teachers. She stated the turnover was adjusted and, “For us old heads it was difficult because we were used to doing things a certain way and it was a complete 360 [sic].” Jae-da admitted to thinking about transferring to another building because the change was difficult. However, she stated that because of the turnover in staff, “A lot of positive things came out of it, and it was a lot of things that we learned that needed to be changed so we could be more productive.”

**The team.** Jae-da admitted to thinking about retiring last year because of all the administration and staff turnover at Caprica; however, she said that, “I stayed because I had such a strong team.” When asked what influences her to remain at Caprica she retorted the team as being the first factor. She stated that she has had really strong teams for the past four or five years, but she recalled, “The past three years we have been really, really strong.” Even with the changes Jae-da described experiencing this year at Caprica—the staff turnover, the new district policy regarding report cards, and the new teacher evaluations—Jae-da admitted that it, “is so good with my team.”

Jae-da described her current teammates as strong, compassionate, good problem solvers, and aware of each other’s strengths and weaknesses. She reported that they all like each other, are friends, and can discuss more with each other than their jobs. She acknowledged to feeling that her team has her back and trusting them. Jae-da stated that her team plans together and tries, “to strategize how we could take the load off of each
other.” She acknowledged the team can, “help each other and take pressure off of each other...because I know that this person is going to take care of this.”

Team talks. At one interview, Jae-da admitted that the previous day she had a meltdown and one of her teammates talked her through it: “I had a meltdown yesterday...and my teammate, I call her my twin, she came in and she closed my door and she said what is going on, and I just had a meltdown.” At times like these, Jae-da acknowledged that she has, “to talk to a teammate,” because she is not able to, “talk myself down.” She stated that all her teammates have these meltdown moments and when they happen they talk to each other, “You know we talk and you know if I am not bringing her back then somebody else is bringing them back. You have to bring them back to kind of like reality.” She stated that one of her teammates repeatedly tells her that she feels like a first year teacher. She reported telling her often, “You’re not a first year teacher. Let’s talk about some things that you have done. Let’s talk about some things that you’re doing now and then she says okay. She kind of comes back.” She reported that it was nice to talk to her teammates about issues she has at school, “Because when you talk to people that aren’t educators they don’t know what you are going through they have no clue.”

The administration. Jae-da shared that when she first started teaching, she felt the administrators could tell when she was exhausted. At these times she said the administration would encourage her to go home saying, “the work is going to be here tomorrow.” She also shared that her administration handpicked her class the first year. She stated that the assistant principal told her, “Oh, we knew what we were doing. Got
you in here this first year and gave you this golden class. And then next year we will
give you a little bit more.” Jae-da discussed how her administration had been supportive
during times of family crises. For example, when her dad passed away she said that the
principal called her in Ohio to ask her how she was doing. She also stated that the
administrators were supportive when her mother had major surgery. She reported that,
“It is good to have a very supportive administration that sees the need that you have, and
that is willing to be there for you and to help in any way that they can to try to make your
life a little easier.”

Jae-da stated that the principal does visit her classroom and provide her with
feedback regarding her teaching, “but it seems like they always seem to provide you with
the feedback when it is not right.” She reported feeling the principal feedback usually
focuses on what she needs to improve on instead of what she did well. She reported that
recently her principal shared her smart goals with the staff as an exemplar for others to
use and she felt, “…just like wow [with a huge smile].” She stated that this made her
feel, “…empowered and I was like okay and I think it made us feel better as a team
because we all had pretty similar things that we were doing it.”

Jae-da stated that the professional development opportunities within the building,
which she described as being vast, come from the administrators. Many of the
opportunities have, “come through the district…been filtered through the school.” She
admitted the administrators have been good at helping her find opportunities. However,
she described the opportunities as being too much, making it difficult to know what
works and what doesn’t, “…sometimes it is almost we get too much. So it is very hard to
kind of filter out which one works and which one is best.” She recalled at one point being a Literacy Collaborative school, while now they are a Responsive Classroom school. All of her professional development opportunities have derived from the district but she admitted that, “A lot of the stuff that they tell us to go to encompasses everything that I want to learn about.”

Jae-da reported the demand and high expectation of teachers originates with the administrators. Moreover, she reported her new administrators, who started last year, insisted that teams collaborate, “I have always had a collaborative team but…now it was like this is just what you must do.” She remembered collaborating with her team during her first year teaching while also being able to do her own thing, stating it was, “You teach the way you want to teach it and you give whatever test you want to give, and now it is not like that.” She credited her new administrators with instilling a more collaborative attitude in the school, “It was never my students it was always our students and that is what the administrators had instilled.” She said this attitude has led her to feel more relaxed and less tense.

Jae-da stated that she had a good rapport with her previous principal, “She was a stickler on competence, and she was pretty cut and dry. And she was very soft-spoken, but you knew that she meant business…She was like really good.” She described the new administrators as less rigid than the previous administrators and more personable. She reported that she “can see them [the new administrators] be real people.” For example, she reported that the new administrators—experiencing stress from the demands of the district leaders—talks to the staff about it: “We can see them just as
stressed out as we are…They are getting it from the higher ups and they are talking to us and it is just the deliver, ‘We are going to do this together. We know this is stressful.’”

Overall, Jae-da admitted that her administrators influence her decision to stay, “…because I have a strong team and the administration is good it makes a big difference…It makes me stay.”

**Exosystem themes.** The exosystem—the third layer within the ecology of teaching—represents the interaction between a teacher and the environment outside of the school building. The environment within the exosystem includes three levels of government: (a) federal, (b) state, and (c) district. Each level posits educational policy and consists of policymakers who enforce them. For Jae-da, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the exosystem using the following themes: (a) federal level, (b) state level, (c) district level, (d) handling the pressure, (e) teaching as a package deal revisited, and (f) outsiders vs. insiders.

**Federal level.** Jae-da acknowledged the federal government’s role in education is to not only provide money but also decide where the money goes. With regards to the federal legislation, NCLB, Jae-da stated it does influence her teaching in that it “makes me work harder.” She reported the legislation’s focus on student test scores has made her keenly aware of students who are at severe risk of failing, on the cusp of failing, and not at any risk of failing. In addition, she reported she does not have the time to work with each group often having to choose those students, whom she works with each day,

My kids that are not going to be left behind I can’t work with them like I want to, because I am so busy trying to work with these students that are going to be left
behind that it makes me have to work harder….and sometimes those kids that are really, really below grade level and having issues sometimes they are neglected, because I am focusing on the kids that if I work with them a little bit more I can push them over the edge.

Jae-da stated the federal government consists of policymakers who make rules and regulations with little understanding of what these rules and regulations entail for her as a teacher: “we [federal government policymakers] are just going to make them [teachers] do this and we don’t care how they do it but they just need to do it without looking at what this is going to entail.” For example, Jae-da mentioned the federal government standardized testing benchmarks set for schools to meet in order to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), which the federal government has changed to Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs) starting with the 2012-2013 school year. She admitted that she would like the federal government policymakers to visit her class for a week and, “be responsible for planning and teaching and getting everything done”, which would help them understand the difficulties of her job as an elementary teacher.

*The scarlet letter.* Jae-da described a staff meeting last year where they learned they did not make AYP by less than one percentage point: “That was just so heart wrenching and a lot of people were upset about that…We knew that we were going to make it, and we didn’t and it was very upsetting to a lot of us that worked that hard.” She remembered how no one from the district acknowledged just how close the school came to passing, “did anybody come down and say ‘gosh you guys did such a great job.’ No, you failed—period. And that is crazy.” She admitted that she had hoped someone one
from the district would have at least recognized “the little bit of growth that we made.”

Overall, Jae-da admitted feeling, “that being in my building is almost like a scarlet letter because…we haven’t made AYP.”

**State level.** Jae-da suggested the state government places unfair priorities on her district, because “I think the people that are making the rules and regulations haven’t been in the classroom…I don’t even think that they have a clue of what they are expecting.” One priority reported by Jae-da centers on the state standardized tests required of elementary students in third, fourth, fifth grade, and sixth grade. She claimed, “…you can’t do the fun things that we use to do five or six years ago. Everything is to the test…everything is just we have to get them to pass and that is all you think about.” Two other priorities for Jae-da were benchmarks and the new teacher evaluations, which are discussed below.

**Third grade and the pressure.** Jae-da taught third grade for several years where the students were expected to take state standardized tests in reading, math, social studies, and science during the spring. She remembered feeling stressed and even crying to the math specialist one year before the test, because she felt many of her students were not going to pass. She stated, “I really could feel what the kids were going through and it almost became a part of me—the stress level.” Jae-da reported feeling pressure too: “It is scary. You could feel the pressure like September and October you are doing okay. But after Christmas the pressure is on and the pressure is like that until they are over.” The pressure stems from being held accountable for every student passing the tests, “And you are held accountable for everybody and the whole thing is that there is no leeway.”
Jae-da recalled using room chants and a baseball metaphor of knocking the SOLS out of the park with her third grade students to “get them kind of hyped up and things as it got closer and closer to the test” in order “to make the situation not stressful for them.”

After a number of years teaching third grade she felt “that I had paid my dues” and wanted to move back down to second grade—a grade with no SOL tests. She recalled feeling stressed out and needing a change, “I was just stressed out, and I just really felt that I needed a change.” Therefore, she approached her principal and asked to be moved to second grade. Her principal did not move her the following school year, but the two years later she was moved back to second grade as she had requested.

*Second grade and the benchmarks.* As a second grade teacher, Jae-da admitted that she still teaches, “like I am teaching an SOL grade because I know a lot of the things the kids need to know in third grade.” She acknowledged that she has to get second graders ready for the SOLs in third grade and must start prepping them for the tests now, “I even tell my kids now that you know we don’t have a minute to spare because we are getting ready for the SOLs and my kids know that from the beginning and that helps them to understand that next year is a big year.” She admitted that while teaching second grade she is “in that SOL mode”; however, when it comes close to the SOL tests in the spring she is “not stressing out to the max.”

In second grade, Jae-da stated her teaching has shifted focus from SOLs to getting the kids to benchmarks. For example, in reading she used the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) to ascertain the reading level of her students at various points in the school year. The benchmark for students by the end of second grade was a DRA level
28. However, because the tests are given to students at multiple points during the school year, Jae-da reported that even if students don’t make the benchmark she can determine their growth in reading, which lessens the pressure for her: “I mean it is still pressure, but it is less because it is different for me. If I have a child that was reading on a level 4 and they get to a level 16 that is a lot of growth.” Jae-da stated that for her teaching has, “always been about growth and that it is important for the students to see that you are growing.” She acknowledged that she tries to show each student their growth and “if they are not making any growth we sit and talk about why they are not making this growth.”

According to Jae-da, the state has focused more on meeting student benchmarks. So a student who enters second grade below the first grade benchmark (DRA 16) would have to work significantly harder to make benchmark by the end of second grade (DRA 28). It has been done, but in some instances the students do not make the DRA 28 benchmark. However, Jae-da shared that within the past year she believes the state and district are moving more towards a growth-based model of accountability than one based on benchmarks: “So I am like oh great this is how we should of thought last year but that isn’t what we were supposed to be thinking. So it is a little different now.”

_New teacher evaluations_. In addition, to the SOL tests and benchmarks, Jae-da acknowledged the new teacher evaluation system comes from the state level and is overwhelming: “With this new evaluation process coming up and the new regulations from the state it is very, very overwhelming.” She admitted to feeling pressure from this new evaluation system, even though she will not be evaluated this year by her
She stated that the new teacher evaluation system “is time consuming…I spent three hours with my coworkers trying to help them…It is ridiculous. It is really too much.”

**District level.** Jae-da described her school district with the word stringent. She stated that, “They are holding everyone accountable to the same standard regardless of your ability and I don’t think that that is fair.” She felt holding everyone to the same standard was unfair to both the students and the teachers. One example she provided dealt with accountability and testing—two policies passed down from the federal and state levels: “there are standards set for everybody and no matter what your situation is, whether you are in special education, ESOL, gifted, a young scholar, or regular education, everybody is supposed to score in a certain realm.”

Jae-da spoke of individuals at the district level—including the school board members, the superintendent, and area supervisors—as having good intentions but lacking the classroom experience to make sound decisions for teachers: “the people that are making these decisions for us have not been in the classroom for years.” She stated district leaders should visit classrooms and observe teachers in action, “to me it has always been about coming in and seeing somebody in action….should be more important than writing on a piece of paper and telling you how I want to implement stuff.” In addition, Jae-da mentioned that district leaders should talk to both teachers and administrators before creating policies: “talk to teachers. They need to talk to and well not just teachers they need to talk to administrators.”
Superintendent. Jae-da acknowledged that superintendents hold a higher rank than teachers, “superintendents they are like up here and you can’t touch them.” She admitted to never disliking any of the district’s past superintendents; however, according to her they hold no sway on what she does in the classroom or on her decision to stay. Her current superintendent visited her classroom one year on the first day of school with what she called his “entourage” and engaged her in a conversation about her tenure at the school, “he was shocked that I had been in that particular school for so long.” She admitted that the previous superintendents and the current one “have no idea what is happening in my building.”

Area director. Jae-da’s area director, Kara, who oversees the administrators at Caprica is new to the position. Jae-da stated she is fabulous and likes her for two reasons. First, she stated that Kara is a member of her sorority, “she is one of my sorority sisters.” Second, she stated that Kara had “been in the trenches…come through the district as just being a teacher and moved up the ranks.” Jae-da has met her but has not worked with her at the school. In fact, Kara has never addressed the staff at Caprica. Jae-da stated that she knows Kara more from other people’s interactions including her administration and her team leader: “I have talked to people who have worked with her.” Jae-da called Kara approachable, a realist, and repeatedly said she knows what she and other teachers deal with in the classroom, “I just know that she knows what we are going through. She knows.” Jae-da also suggested that Kara understands principals, “there seems to be just a connection with the principals and her.” She claimed that her own principal is “a different person” because of her. Jae-da stated that Kara doesn’t influence
her teaching, rather she “kind of reenergizes me or she gives me…a new outlook that you know okay I can breathe a little bit.” Jae-da perceived that Kara is working with her and her school, which relieves some of her stress, “I am stressed but I am not as stressed because it seems like now we are all in here together. If we don’t succeed we will all fail. It’s like we are together. It is very cohesive, very cohesive.” Jae-da credited Kara with having a calming effect within her school, because she understands her role and the teachers’ roles in schools: “She works both sides of the coin and she knows what is expected from her end but she also knows how we are and to me she has brought into the district or at least into our area a more calming effect.”

Curriculum. Jae-da reported that the school board policies concerning the curriculum, especially the pacing of it, don’t influence her teaching; instead, their policies “determine my type of teaching.” She stated that last year the district compiled a revised curriculum guide—that “dictates how your teaching is going to be”—consisting of 300 pages. The curriculum guide included a pacing guide for the teachers to follow. She stated that, “it was just too much. And I think in essence they [the school board] really tried to make it better, but it was really worse.”

Again, Jae-da stated that finding resources to teach the curriculum was not issue. For her, she reported, “Time is a big issue. We have a lot of curriculum to teach and a small amount of time. Our curriculum is pretty mapped out for us.” She acknowledged that the amount of work it takes to cover the curriculum—including all the strands, goals, and benchmarks—before the spring drains her: “just drains you. It drains you not to want to do it and a lot of times it is not fun.”
Allocating resources. Jae-da stated the district provides “an abundance” of resources for her school. In addition, she said that she could see money being used in her school on materials, especially technology. She referred to her district as “one of the more high profile” districts that have worked to provide technology, e.g. smartboards, for her school and others in the district. However, she stated that, “sometimes it is more important for them for the show. For it to look good as opposed to giving the best implementation for the teachers and for the kids.” She stated that district money needs to be allocated differently, “I do see the technology and all this sort of stuff, and I do see the money and I think that sometimes the money needs to be allocated a little differently.”

She reported the district does not communicate with individual schools when creating district-wide initiatives stating that, “Sometimes they need to relook at what they are allocating and they need to maybe talk to that particular area and to see what is needed in that area.” Jae-da stated that her school “needs funds for additional staff.” She acknowledged feeling that the district would rather allocate funds for material resources and technology instead of on her teaching needs:

If you can cut away two or three smartboards or whatever and bring in a part time person then that smartboard is not going to be as helpful as a person coming in and being additional support. And honestly to me they must rather put that into what they have happening in the building than put it into me, which is sad.

Salary. When asked what topics she would discuss at a school board meeting if she had the floor, she stated, “The salary would be a big thing.” She told a story of losing 7% of her salary due to a budget cut in 2009. In 1999, most district schools held
early release on Mondays to provide planning time for teachers, including Caprica. However, from 1999-2009 Caprica was chosen to participate in a district initiative to increase student instructional time in schools with a high proportion of language minority students and students from a lower socioeconomic background. Starting in 1999, the initiative paid teachers an additional 7% of their salary to work longer days on Mondays. The initiative was cut from the district’s budget in 2009 and Jae-da lost that 7% of her salary she had received as compensation for the extra instructional time on Mondays. Jae-da acknowledged, “I had had this 7% for 10 plus years and then they took the 7%...my lifestyle changed. I had to move. I had to make some big adjustments in my lifestyle period.” She considered leaving the district for a neighboring one but learned that they would not pay her for all her years of experience: “I tried to go to different counties but because I had so much tenure in my district they weren’t going to give me all my years.”

Handling the pressure. Jae-da stated that the students don’t know or care about the rules and regulations stemming from the federal, state, and district level. However, she admitted that teachers “get bogged down with that. That I have to do this because it is a regulation,” and some even quit because of it, “some people can’t pull themselves out of that funk per se…They just can’t do it. And this is a profession that will grind you.” She even admitted at times to having a, “mindset of being so consumed with the regulations and what you have to do and what we have to do.”

Jae-da acknowledged that she has learned that the rules and regulations from all three levels are not going to change and she must learn to do something about them: “The
regulations are not going to change. The standards are not going to change. The expectations are not going to change. Everything we have to teach is not going to change. So now that you know how are you going to go about doing it? She shared that the rules and regulations could consume any teacher and make them less effective in the classroom. Jae-da argued that complaining would not help and that she had to figure out something she could do: “Again are you going to suffer and drown yourself in it or are you going to pick yourself up and move on.” She shared that the pressure still lingers but nothing will remove that pressure, so she made a choice to focus on what she could control. For example, she suggested if you have 15 students who are struggling then focus on helping some of those students to cut that number down—realizing you will not help all 15 students.

Jae-da acknowledged that she still feels frustrated with all the pressure at times, though not enough to make her quit,

I’m worrying about this and I’m worrying about that. Oh, now I have got to teach. It is too much for you to handle...It frustrates me. It definitely frustrates me. Does it frustrate me to the point that I want to leave? No, because this is just how it has been for years…

At times she still admitted to getting back on her own soapbox and “complaining, complaining, complaining and you are spending all of this energy complaining…just what can you do.” However, she has learned “after you finishing beating yourself up about that for a while it is time to change up what you are trying to do.”
**Teaching as a package deal revisited.** As discussed in the mesosystem, Jae-da referred to teaching as a package deal—one where she looks for a balance between what frustrates her and what she enjoys with the job. With regards to the exosystem, Jae-da admitted policies on the district, state, and federal level are included within the teaching package: “Everything is included…they all play a part. I mean you can’t get away from it.” Jae-da not only shared that the district, state, and federal policies come with the package but that policies on these three levels make the package less attractive, “to me the package isn’t pretty like with the bow and the frills it is just like a black box…the box isn’t as pretty as it used to be.”

**Outsiders vs. insiders.** Jae-da suggested that the education system as a whole is not broken—just some loose parts. She denoted a difference between what is happening on the inside to what is happening on the outside: “It is not what’s happening inside it is what is happening outside. Whatever is happening outside is determining what happens inside.” She identified the teachers, her administration, and her area director—“The people that are in the trenches. The people that are doing the job”—as being on the inside. She referred to these individuals, including herself, as a solid core, “the core is so solid.”

She stated that the outside consists of, “the ones that make the laws, the ones that make the regulations, the ones that put the money in, the ones that tell us how we are supposed to do and what we are supposed to be doing. To me that is what is broken.” For Jae-da, these individuals within the education system include, “the school board, the superintendent’s office, the higher ups.” She perceived the outside to be broken and
these individuals to be clueless: “the superintendent—clueless—and then everybody over him—clueless. Have no idea what is going on.” However, she perceived the core to be “so solid because we are like this. We are trying to hold it together. But it is crumbling. Everything around is just kind of like crumbling.”

**Macrosystem themes.** The macrosystem—the fourth layer of the ecology of teaching—represents the interaction between a teacher and the larger culture within which the work resides. The environment within the macrosystem includes any influence of the cultural norms, attitudes, or values perceived by the teacher on their teaching. For Jae-da, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the macrosystem using the following themes: (a) how society views teachers and (b) broken.

**How society views teachers.** Jae-da stated that teaching is not a respected profession in the U.S. culture. She acknowledged feeling that other cultures hold teachers in high regard. For example, when making an unannounced home visit to a student from India, she described how the family quickly organized a spread of food to offer her on china dishes making her feel, “like I was a queen.” In addition, she perceived that kids nowadays do not hold teachers in very high regard—claiming, “it is just how society has ranked us”—and there is no big push for students to stay in school. She reported feeling, “that there is not enough attention put into education and there are more negative things said about education than positive things. And I think there are so many positive things happening in education across the county…”

Jae-da admitted to feeling that her colleagues, administrators, and the parents of her students view her as a professional. However, others outside of the education system
do not as they often associate professional with someone in the corporate world. Jae-da stated that, “regardless of what people say or what people think, I know that I am a professional.” Her idea of professional encompasses more than what she believes the term professional means in our culture: “I always felt that our job is far more than just a profession because we impact children’s lives. We impact parents. We impact the community. We impact each other. We provide support systems.” She claimed that you have to be “a special kind of person” to teach and that teaching is a craft: “It is something that everybody can’t do. You can go to school and get all the schooling that you need but everybody can’t be a teacher. So I think that we are really in a class by ourselves.”

**Broken.** Jae-da stated that many people in the United States think that the education system is broken; however, she said, “They don’t get it. They just don’t get it.” She wants those who complain about the system or believe it is broken to experience firsthand what is happening in a classroom and then try and help before they pass judgments about whether the entire education system is broken: “that’s what I have said all the time until you’ve come in and experienced what I experienced or even come in and try to help what is happening don’t tell me anything is broken.” She invited anyone who believes the education system is broken to come and visit her classroom and judge for themselves.

**Structural Description**

Whereas, the textual description aims to describe the experiences Jae-da has had as a teacher stayer; the structural description aims to portray the researcher’s understanding of how she experienced the phenomenon of staying in the classroom. The
structural description elucidates the underlying meanings hidden within the textual description through a process of imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). Themes within each system were used to organize the researcher’s understanding of Jae-da’s lived experiences (Wertz, 2005).

**Microsystem themes.** The microsystem consists of the first nested layer of interaction within the ecological structure of teaching, which includes the teacher, the students, and the classroom. I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the microsystem using the following themes: (a) teaching as a personal commitment and (b) self-talk.

*Teaching as a personal commitment.* Jae-da approached teaching as a calling; therefore, she held a personal commitment to the profession, especially to making a difference in students’ lives and building lasting relationships with them. Furthermore, teaching in a school in the “River Road area”, perceived by her as historically marginalized by the larger district as a group of schools consisting of low performing students, engendered a stronger sense of commitment to her students. Such commitment required higher levels of emotional, mental, and physical energy from Jae-da, which went beyond the professional obligations of teaching. Therefore, Jae-da understood teaching at Caprica, or in the “River Road area”, as requiring a deep personal commitment to the students that set her apart from other teachers within the profession. She embraced such a commitment to teaching within her specific school context often referring to herself, as well as other colleagues at Caprica or other teachers working within the “River Road area”, as “special”.

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Setting personal goals and rewards. Jae-da mentioned several times the work of teaching as an investment. She believed it required a tremendous amount of energy and effort, which often extends past her contracted hours. Jae-da stated the “money stinks” for the amount of time you put into the investment. Therefore she needed to see that she is getting a return on her investment, and she did so by identifying her own goals and rewards for teaching.

Her goals extended beyond the curriculum encompassing more than sheer knowledge or academics. Her goals as a teacher focused on the students, which included helping them grow as learners and becoming responsible for their own learning. She wanted students to recognize their own potential and realize they each have the capability to be successful in school, no matter the labels the system imposes on them, such as learning disabled. She perceived that she had the power to enact these goals with the students.

Jae-da identified two types of rewards from teaching. The first type of reward focused on the students. She felt rewarded when she helped students overcome an obstacle in their life and when the students felt successful, “when they feel like they have been successful and it just makes everything good.” With regards to students, she also felt rewarded when her former students visit her and maintain the relationship she worked to develop when they were a student in her class. The second type of reward focused on her colleagues and administration. She likes to be complemented by both groups on the work she does. However, she doesn’t wait for others to complement her. Simply seeing a teammate use her idea conjured up feelings that others have listened to her make her
feel successful. She has learned to acknowledge her own successes even when she has received no external prompting or acknowledgement from others. Jae-da set her own goals for the students and her own terms for feeling successful as a teacher demonstrating that her reward system stems solely from the components of the microsystem. Establishing her own reward system enabled Jae-da to feel successful sustaining her commitment to the profession.

_Students._ Teachers are expected to care for their students; however, Jae-da admitted to caring deeply for her students beyond what others, including her colleagues, expected. She stated that it was “within my character” to care so deeply for the students, and she would not have it any other way. Jae-da believed the students are an extension of herself:

> It is one of the reasons why I stay, because I just feel like I am an extension of the kids. I feel like I see when they go to the next grade level they’re a representation of me. They come from my classroom.

She truly believed that the connection she formed with her students transcended the boundaries of her second-grade classroom and supported the students throughout their educational career; therefore, her work as a teacher manifested itself in the relationships she formed with her students making teaching for her a personal commitment to the students.

_Self-Talk._ Jae-da understood the pressures and demands of the job that frustrated and/or overwhelmed her. When overwhelmed with the pressures and demands of teaching, she learned to use self-talk as a means to calm herself down and move past the
frustrations she encountered, “I have learned to deal with my emotions to be able to not beat myself up as much.” One successful form of self-talk involved telling herself “enough is enough.” At these moments of tremendous pressure, Jae-da learned her limits and prevented herself from becoming consumed by the demands placed upon her. Using self-talk, she discovered a way to handle the pressures of the job and continue investing in her work as a teacher.

**Mesosystem themes.** The mesosystem consists of the second nested layer of interaction within the ecological structure of teaching, which includes multiple components within the school building such as the administrators, colleagues, and work conditions. I have organized Jae-da’s lived experiences with the components of the mesosystem using the following themes: (a) the interaction of rewards and school context and (b) a sense of connectedness.

**The interaction of rewards and school context.** Jae-da held a strong understanding of the student population she served at Caprica. For example, she talked to the students about being home alone after school, because the majority of their parents work late. She also wanted the students to feel that school is a safe place where they are hugged and appreciated. Jae-da even adjusted her teaching investment claiming one’s investment should vary depending on the student population you serve. For example, she understood that each year the majority of her students would enter her classroom reading below grade level claiming she would not quite know how to teach if they were not so far behind in reading, “It would be great to have 15 out of 20 of your kids reading on grade level. But I don’t even know if I would know how to act if I had 15 kids reading on
grade level.” In fact, Jae-da referred to Caprica as a low performing school that had not made AYP. However, with a student population that underperformed on state standardized tests and struggled to meet grade-level benchmarks Jae-da not only welcomed these challenges as a teacher at Caprica, but she believed she could make a better impact on the students as a teacher within such a context,

I am in a school that has not made AYP for a number of years, but I really feel like at the school I am at I have been there so long I feel like this is where I make the best impact.

Her students’ test scores or the school’s failure to make AYP had not diminished Jae-da’s sense of success. As discussed within the microsystem, she looked to other rewards of the craft such as forming a relationship with the students, helping students overcome an obstacle and experience success, or making a difference in their lives. In fact, the more challenging context at Caprica positioned Jae-da not only to make a larger investment in her work but to reap larger rewards. The students she worked with stood to make more academic gains or overcome difficult obstacles as compared to schools outside the “River Road area”. She even admitted that she would not “be going someplace else, because I really wouldn’t be feeling like I would be making an impact.” Jae-da embraced the unique school context of Caprica and worked to invest more of herself in teaching the students, an interaction between the micro-and mesosystem. Doing so served to not only maximize the impact she had on students, but provided her with further intrinsic rewards that sustained her within the profession.
**A sense of connectedness.** Jae-da admitted that when her staff experienced a large turnover, including her principal, she relied on her team to get her though the changes, “My team got me through it. It was great. They were great…I know one minute one would be crying and the other minute I would be crying. It was the team. We worked together.” Her teammates at Caprica have also helped “take the pressure off of each other,” with regards to the new teacher evaluations and student report cards issued by the district this year. Working with her teammates helped Jae-da overcome some of the demands or pressures of the job; however, Jae-da sought more than just collaboration with her teammates. Jae-da sought camaraderie with her teammates. She wanted to feel that someone else understood her and that she wasn’t facing the demands and pressures of the job alone, “just for them to listen to what is happening with you and then for them to be able to say, ‘Well it is okay, and well I have had the same kind of day’ and to know that you are not alone.”

She admitted to enjoying collaborating with others; the collaborative spirit made her feel less alone as a teacher, “We are all in here working together and that is what makes such a big difference because you know that you’re not alone.” Jae-da’s teammates listened and empathized with each other promoting a deep sense of understanding and connectedness among them. This sense of connectedness has helped Jae-da face the pressures and demands of the job. She admitted that without such a sense of connectedness with other teachers, the stressors of the job would cause her to leave, “When you don’t feel alone in the process that helps a lot. Like if I was alone and things got so bad it might push me out.”
Jae-da credited her current administrators for establishing a school climate of unity, furthering her sense of connectedness with others in her building, including her administrators. For example, she reported the administration supported a collaborative spirit with regard to the new district teacher evaluation plans. She reported the administrators as telling the staff “we are all in this together with this new evaluation process.” Furthermore, she stated the administrators want all staff members to refer to the students in their classroom as “our students,” which instills a sense of shared responsibility among all members of the staff. The administrators have created a school climate of shared responsibility and unity, aiding Jae-da in feeling connected to other teachers.

Teaching as a package deal. Jae-da talked of teaching as a package deal with positive and negative attributes. She sought to actively balance the stressors of the job with its positive attributes. For Jae-da, a vital positive attribute of teaching belonged within the mesosystem, a sense of connectedness to other individuals within her school building. She stated, “To have that camaraderie that we are all in this together and that you are not alone. That is really important.” So it is not the staff Jae-da gets along with, the teammates she collaborates with, or the administration that supports her but what lies beneath each of these components of the mesosystem, a sense of being understood and connected to others. It was these individuals who helped her balance the pressures and demands of the job,

…teaching is hard. And you can’t do it by yourself, you know, especially with everything that is happening now. You can’t do it by yourself, and you have to
have somebody that is working with you to help you get through it because you will lose your mind.

Armed with a sense of connectedness among the staff at Caprica, she successfully thwarted the pressures and demands that often originated from the exosystem to achieve a balance within her package deal of teaching.

**Exosystem themes.** The exosystem consists of the third nested layer of interaction within the ecological structure of teaching, which include district, state, and federal levels of government. For Jae-da, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the exosystem using the following themes: (a) managing the pressure, (b) a lack of understanding, (c) division and (d) outsiders vs. insiders revisited.

**Managing the pressure.** All three levels of government within the exosystem enforced education policies that augmented the demands and pressures Jae-da felt as a teacher, which spiraled down from the federal level reaching both the state and district levels. At the federal level, Jae-da identified the federal benchmarks in reading and math set for schools to achieve AYP as a source of pressure. These federal demands have caused more than pressure for Jae-da. She stated that not making AYP has stereotyped Caprica and forced judgment upon her school by federal, state, and local policymakers, as well as parents, “But you know what can you do when you get that stereotype, you know, that is pressure too.” At the state level, Jae-da identified the SOL tests issued by the state and the new teacher evaluation plans as adding pressure to her work. Jae-da even admitted the pressure to teach to the SOL tests was so great while teaching third grade that she requested, and eventually moved, to second grade, which is not an SOL tested
grade, “And I could not take the pressure….it was too much….just stress, oh my god, I can’t do it. I can’t go back [to third grade] and do it.” The pressure to have all students pass the SOL tests trickled down to the district in the form of time. Jae-da referred to the district pacing guides, which provided a schedule of when to cover the tested curriculum, as adding pressure to her work. Moreover, Jae-da reported the district expected all students, regardless of other educational or social factors, to pass the state tests in the spring of each year in order to meet federal benchmarks for AYP.

Though frustrated because of these policies, she acquiesced to policies from all three levels. She realized the policies were not going to change; therefore, she must divert energy from complaining to finding solutions. Jae-da identified ways to work within the system instead of against the system. For example, “if you’re thinking that 15 kids are going to get left behind what can you do to cut that down to seven kids?” In this example, Jae-da took control over her work and set reasonable, as well as attainable, goals that did not necessarily align with those of the district, state, or federal levels. In part, because she remembered feeling, “victim to having all that come down on me,” and realized she couldn’t remain in teaching without managing the demands and pressures of the work. Jae-da learned to stop being a victim of her circumstances, in this case the pressures and demands of the exosystem, and claim control over her work.

*Lack of understanding.* Jae-da admitted that if policymakers at all three levels of government within the exosystem stopped all accountability rules and regulations, a current source of frustration with teaching, they would be replaced with other rules and regulations, “And I think that even if they [policymakers] did do away with something
they would bring something to replace it. I think that it is going to be like this for a long time.” Admitting that current policies could easily be replaced with other ones revealed, for Jae-da, how the accountability policies of the exosystem were a manifestation of a greater issue, a lack of understanding between the policymakers within the exosystem and teachers, such as herself, within the microsystem. Jae-da acknowledged that policymakers at all three levels lacked an understanding of what she does.

She stated the policymakers at the federal level, who are responsible for policies such as AYP, don’t understand her job and what it would take to implement such a policy as AYP. At the state level, she stated that policymakers “haven’t been in the classroom;” therefore, they lack an understanding of her job. She called the state policies, i.e. teacher evaluations and SOL testing, as unfair priorities placed upon the district to implement with their teachers. At the district level, she also referred to their policies as unfair, as well as created by policymakers that lack experience in the classroom. She stated that holding all students, regardless of their individual learning differences, to the same standard such as a passing test score was grossly unfair. Jae-da repeatedly stated that she invites policymakers, like those within the federal government or in her local school district, to visit her classroom for a day and observe the work that she does. She wanted policymakers to understand the realities of the classroom and the work required to implement the policies such as making AYP and achieving high pass rates on standardized tests, “They need to walk the walk and then you can talk the talk. If all you're looking at is stats, and the stats are so horrible, then let’s go into the building and
see why it is so horrible.” Jae-da desired for policymakers to truly understand the work of teaching and appreciate the context of teaching from an experiential perspective.

**Division.** For Jae-da, the lack of understanding encompasses more than experiencing what she does as a teacher, it involves an understanding of what she needs to complete the task required of her and to be successful. Jae-da shared that her district superintendent, “does nothing to make me do anything that I want to do,” revealing a sharp division between what she wants or needs to be successful and what the superintendent views as necessary. Jae-da and the superintendent are not working in unison but separately. Jae-da discussed a similar division between the district and schools with regards to allocating monies. She claimed that money does get provided to her school for resources; however, she professed to need fewer resources and more personnel to help in her classroom. She suggested that district leaders should visit her school, as well as others, to understand its needs and then determine how best to allocate funds across the district, “I think that the county needs to come in and look at how they are allocating funds.” As with the superintendent, Jae-da viewed the district as being out of touch with the needs of her school and her as a teacher fueling sentiments of isolation. A lack of understanding between policymakers within the exosystem has exacerbated this division for Jae-da leading her to develop an “outsiders vs. insiders” or an “us vs. them” mentality.

**Outsiders vs. insiders revisited.** Jae-da demarcated a line between those on the inside that understand her job and what she endures and those on the outside that do not understand what she does as a teacher. Jae-da identified, “the teachers, the
administrators, and then maybe our area director who is on board with us,” as being on the inside. Jae-da included Kara, the area director, based on her perception that she had taught in the district and understood the obstacles and needs of teachers in a classroom. The outside consisted of district leaders, the school board, the superintendent and then all policymakers at the state and federal level. Jae-da called all these individuals clueless with regards to understanding the obstacles or needs of teachers in the classroom. Jae-da clearly felt isolated from the individuals who make the rules and regulations within the exosystem and developed an “us vs. them” mentality. She identified with individuals within both the microsystem, like students, and the mesosystem, like colleagues. Within these two levels she found camaraderie and a connection that sustained her through the pressures and demands exerted by the exosystem,

…the camaraderie of the building. It is the atmosphere of the building. It is the way we are like a family….as a building we just work. We work together. We are a professional learning community. We are striving for all the same thing. We are working for the same goal.

The exosystem influences Jae-da’s package deal of teaching, which was discussed within the mesosystem. It took the pretty package of teaching and turned it into a black box, “but to me the package isn't pretty like with the bow and the frills it is just like a black box.” Nevertheless, she admitted to having, “some streamers and a bow because of the administration and my teammates.” Jae-da stayed in the profession despite the demands and pressures of the exosystem. The camaraderie and connection she found
within the micro- and the mesosystem balanced the influences of the exosystem, and not to mention brightened her package deal. So Jae-da stayed.

**Essence Statement**

The textual description portrayed Jae-da’s lived experiences with staying in the classroom as she described them over the course of four interviews. The structural description depicted the researcher’s understanding of Jae-da’s textual description elucidating the invisible threads or underlying structures within her lived experiences of staying in the classroom. Drawing from both descriptions aided the researcher in uncovering the totality of Jae-da’s lived experiences with the phenomenon of teacher retention and supported the writing of an essence statement. Moustakas (1994) referred to this process as an “intuitive integration of the fundamental textual and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole.” (p. 100). The themes used to organize both descriptions, due in part to the significant amount of data collected across all four systems within the educational ecology, supported this process. Below is the essence statement for Jae-da’s lived experiences with staying in the classroom.

Understanding her work as a calling helped Jae-da develop a unique perspective on the profession; a perspective that viewed teaching as a personal commitment to her students. Jae-da remained committed to forming lasting relationships with her students that supported them throughout their educational career. Moreover, she attempted to do more than teach the curriculum, she sought to make a difference in her students’ lives by providing them with opportunities to experience growth and success. Jae-da’s personal
commitment engendered a sense of resiliency that sustained her when faced with the demands and pressures of the profession. Furthermore, she identified her own intrinsic rewards within the microsystem that allowed her to feel successful as a teacher and further sustained her within the profession.

For Jae-da, the mesosystem strengthened her resolve to stay in the profession and overcome the frustrations stemming from exosystem. Jae-da sought understanding and the camaraderie of other individuals within the mesosystem to avoid feeling alone. The administrators, the staff, and especially her team members provided Jae-da with a deep level of connectedness and understanding that she desired; therefore, she successfully thwarted the demands and pressures that originated from the exosystem.

Jae-da constantly weighed the demands and pressures of the exosystem with other positive attributes of teaching that resided within the micro- and the mesosystem. She recognized her limits for what she could handle and learned to manage her emotions when she did become overwhelmed. More importantly, she learned what factors supported her within the profession. For Jae-da, remaining in the classroom became an act of constantly weighing the positive attributes with the negative attributes. This mental negotiation aided Jae-da in becoming an active agent with regards to her decision to stay, instead of remaining victim to the pressures or demands of the exosystem. For now, the balance favors the positives and Jae-da’s “package deal” of teaching, though wrapped in a black box, contains enough to make her stay.
CHAPTER SIX: BRETT

Phenomenological data analysis (Moustakas, 1994), as discussed in the previous chapter, was used to analyze the data for narrator two, Brett. This chapter presents the findings for Brett in three sections: (a) textual description, (b) structural description, and (c) essence statement. Brett graduated from a large state university within the Southeastern part of the United States with a secondary teaching license. Though Brett taught elementary school for two years soon after graduating college in the 1970s, she took a substantial amount of time off from teaching elementary school full-time. She raised her daughter, worked as a substitute teacher, and worked part-time at a daycare center during her career break.

After earning her M.Ed. in early childhood education and sending her daughter off to college, Brett decided to reenter the profession in the early 1990s—making her a career reentrant. Brett accepted a position teaching kindergarten at Harbor Elementary School (Harbor). She worked at Harbor for eleven years teaching both kindergarten and first grade. She then moved to Tarah Elementary School (Tarah) where she has taught first grade for the past six years. Due to reentering the profession later in life Brett remains eligible for retirement with only 17 years of teaching experience.
Tarah is a suburban school located nearby a major metropolitan area in the Northeastern part of the United States. The school serves about 428 students in grades K-6 with White students making up the majority of the student population (65%) followed by Asian American students (15%), Hispanic students (9%) and Black students (3%). Petrilli and Scull (2010) identified it as a “private public school” because a majority of the population does not qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch. Tarah has two administrators—one principal and one assistant principal—and a staff of about 40 teachers. Brett works with two other teachers on her grade level.

**Textual Description**

The textual description below describes Brett’s multiple experiences with staying in the classroom based on the words transcribed from all four interviews. The textual description has been organized using this study’s conceptual framework that includes four interactive systems. Within each system, themes have been used as an organizing tool (Wertz, 2005) to help ensure all experiences described by Brett have been included within this textual description.

**Microsystem themes.** The microsystem represents the first layer of interaction within the ecology of teaching. As the conceptual framework for this study detailed, the microsystem includes the individual teacher, the students, as well as the classroom where these two components interact. For Brett, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the microsystem using the following themes: (a) on the move, (b) retirement, (c) personality characteristics, (d) teaching beliefs, (e) teaching goals, (f) teaching rewards, and (g) student interactions.
On the move. Brett worked at a bank for one year after graduating from a large state university located within the southeastern part of the United States and then taught for two years in an elementary school. After teaching two years, she married a member of the U.S. Air Force and moved to a state within the Midwest, one of many moves she and her husband would embark on during his career in the Air Force. She reported moving to five states. In one state, she got a job as a part-time kindergarten teacher where she worked for five years. In another state, she worked part-time at two daycare centers while working on her M. Ed. in early childhood education, "When we moved to Deerpark I decided I am going to get my Master's in Education cause I really want to teach and I want to be able to go full time." After 5 years they moved back to a state within the Southeastern United States where she worked at a private school for one year and then as a part-time kindergarten teacher for another year. After a long career break from teaching full-time, Brett reentered the profession in 1990. She worked 11 years at Harbor before moving schools within the district to Tarah where she currently teaches. Overall, she has taught full-time in the primary grades within the same district for the past 17 consecutive years. Due to her later reentrant in teaching, she can retire at any time now.

Retirement. For Brett, teaching constituted a part of who she was, but it did not define who she was, “That doesn’t define who I am….It is a big part of who I am.” As a late career reentrant, Brett remains eligible for retirement and reported that she can still feel “good about me if I am not a teacher any longer. However, she admitted that at this point in her life she has no plans to move schools or change careers again, “I am not
moving on to anything.” She reported struggling with the decision to retire. At one point she declared, “I think more and more this may be my last year. There is just so many things that I don’t believe in;” whereas, at another point she stated, “I am not totally sold that this is my last year.” A few months after our interviews she reported that she had made the decision to stay one more year.

**Personality characteristics.** Brett described herself as a positive, flexible, and opinionated. First, Brett reported trying to maintain a positive attitude as a teacher, “I walk in everyday and say ‘this is a new day, and we are going to have a positive experience today’.” She reported approaching problems as a teacher from a positive perspective rather than a negative one. She identified herself as flexible when it comes to solving problems because every year a new set of problems arises that differs from the ones solved the previous year. She claimed, “I am pretty flexible.” Moreover, she acknowledged being able to “anticipate problems,” which “sometimes help you in teaching.”

A third characteristic Brett ascribed to herself was opinionated. She stated, “I am not a shrinking violet. I will speak up and give an opinion.” She admitted to freely sharing her opinion with regards to teaching with others in the school, especially her team. She mentioned sharing her opinion during lunch conversations with her teammates, “When we are at lunch, and we are talking about something I mean I will give an opinion. I mean that is just the way I am, and who I am.”

**Responsibility.** Brett referred to herself as being “an extremely responsible person.” She admitted that when given a task to complete she not only takes it seriously
but also works to complete the task to the best of her ability, “I take everything that I am supposed to do very seriously and try to do it to the best of my ability.” She reported feeling a strong sense of responsibility if a person of authority, such as her administrators, asked her to complete a task, “if someone ask me to do something and they have a position of authority, then I need to do it.” She declared that the work she does as a teacher matters to her and even if it is not perfect she wants to be able to say, “I really tried. I did the best I could.” Brett acknowledged losing sleep at night, “if I just blew it off and didn’t live up to my responsibilities.” Even when teaching required work that she dreaded, such as standardized tests, she stated, “I am constantly trying to think of how can I make this better.”

Brett described herself as a people pleaser. She suggested that it “is partly my personality,” and mentioned, “I am a middle child, so I am a people pleaser.” For Brett, trying to please people stemmed from “an extremely strong personal sense of doing what people want me to do and what is expected of me.” Moreover, it stemmed from a strong sense of empathy she held for others. She acknowledged, “trying to think of their [colleagues and administrators] feelings and where they are coming from.” She admitted that seeking to please others and wanting them to like her has helped make her “road in teaching less bumpy.”

**Teaching beliefs.** Brett specifically referred to some of her ideas and statements throughout the interviews as a teaching belief. The following statements—provided in Brett’s own words—reveal teaching beliefs she acknowledged: (a) “one of my core beliefs is that children learn through playing,” (b) “I believe in every single child, and I
think they are all unique,” (c) I firmly believe that kids do better with a positive environment.” Moreover, she admitted to “coming from an early childhood perspective where I don’t truly believe in standardized tests.” She stated that, “I do not believe it is appropriate to assess first graders the way they [policymakers and administrators] want to assess first graders.”

**Teaching goals.** Brett acknowledged that she wanted “every single child to succeed to the best of their ability.” She shared how she would pick several students each day to praise and support in reaching his or her best effort, “I try to pick a different child each day and I’ll go and say ‘oh look, they added background to this’.” She even reported feeling that, “in some respects my job is not just teaching but it is also being a counselor…and you know helping them be the best they can be.” Brett mentioned a second goal of teaching, which stemmed from her role as a grandmother in the past five years. She shared that her granddaughter “wasn’t that excited about first grade,” and she “didn’t feel from the communication of what she [her granddaughter] told me or what my daughter told me that her teacher really believed in her.” Therefore, she desired to help her students “be excited about first grade,” and she wanted to “inspire best work from every single one of my children.” She reported feeling that she would want a teacher to do the same for her granddaughter.

Brett stated that the socialization of the students—a third goal of her teaching—to be very important to her. For Brett, socialization meant teaching the students to “be kind to one another or at least respectful.” Moreover, it meant teaching the students “how to act towards others…and being good citizens.” Brett worked hard to have the students
solve their own problems encouraging her students, “to sit down and discuss it and work it out and tell me what they worked out.” When accidents occurred between students, she shared that students need to be the one “to take responsibility to help the person that was hurt and to ask them if they are okay.” Brett reported taking a “stand against bullying” in her classroom. When a recent report of a student being bullied was brought to her attention, she talked to her students about bullying the next day letting the students know bullying others would not be tolerated.

Brett acknowledged “wanting the students to value learning and share it,” as well as “learning to be independent workers.” She stated these goals to be “more important almost than teaching the actual academic curriculum.” In fact, she credited herself with doing a better job of “teaching school” rather than the curriculum and stated, “I think I work real hard at that every day. I really do. I think that is almost more critical than teaching two plus two.”

Teaching rewards. Brett shared that she liked the money and it helped her “feel good about being independent.” However, she spent a considerable amount of time discussing other rewards from teaching unrelated to money. Brett reported feeling successful at making a difference in her student’s lives, which is a “critical component of feeling good about your life’s work. She stated, “You really need to take a snapshot of the beginning so that you remember, and then take a snapshot at the end so that you can see that you have made a difference.” For Brett, making a difference comes in many forms. For example, she stated that she “loves seeing the growth,” of her students when “they are reading chapter books at the end of the year...that is huge growth.” In another
example, Brett shared how she helped a struggling student by using humor and giving him extra time and attention to improve. She shared that, “he really started liking school. I think I am good at giving second chances.”

Brett also reported feeling successful when, “first grade students, even though I was really tough on them that day, give me a hug at the end of the day.” She mentioned feeling rewarded when she received notes from students that “tell me they like me and liked me as a teacher and that they miss me.” With regards to reading she stated that, “it still warms my heart when I see first graders holding up the book the way I do and reading to someone.” She shared a story of reading a book out loud to her first graders and being delighted when one student took the ideas she had introduced in the story and wrote a story based on them. Brett admitted that, “it was the most delightful thing that you have ever seen, and it just made my heart glad.” Brett also shared that she has an extensive collection of both picture books for shared reading and for the kids to read independently. She admitted to still getting “really excited when they are excited about reading various types of books and that has been a wonderful part of it.”

**Student interaction.** Brett shared a variety of techniques she used to create a positive environment for the students and help them enjoy their year in first grade. She admitted to having “quite a bit of energy” as a teacher. She shared that when she makes a huge deal out of something or what someone has done that “it gets best work out of them [the students].” She referred to herself as “pretty animated at times during the day.” She admitted that she can’t compete with television or videogames, but she tries to at least “use some animation,” within her teaching. Brett also admitted to “use humor at times.”
She stated that, “I will be silly. I try and make a big deal if I make a mistake…so that they learn that they can make mistakes, and it is okay.”

Brett reported wanting the students to not just remember her for what she taught them—like how to read—but how she taught them. She stated, “I hope, maybe in some way, they remember me and some of the things that I did…acting funny, reading a book in a voice. You know, laughing with them. More so than just teaching them how to read.” More importantly, she simply wanted the students to remember, “having an adult besides their parent truly care about them.” She reported that she truly loved the children and cared about them. She acknowledged that every morning she greets each child and welcomes them into her room, “When I greet the children I stand at the door, and we shake hands in the morning as they come in. And I say good morning to each and every one of them.” She acknowledged that she “truly enjoy[s] working with the kids. They make me happy and make me laugh.” Moreover, she stated that, “when I close the door and it is just me and the kids I love it. That is the best part.”

Brett called herself a cheerleader for the students within her class, “I try to be a cheerleader, especially with those kids who are struggling with their behavior.” She admitted to being “passionate about helping kids.” Furthermore, she stated that, “I believe in all my kids. At times, Brett reported to “fight for the rights” of a child if she felt their needs were not being addressed. For Brett, the students’ needs came first, “…the students’ needs and that is what I care about more than the teachers’ needs.”

**Mesosystem themes.** The mesosystem—the second layer within the ecology of teaching—represents the interaction between the teacher and multiple components within
their school building, e.g. colleagues, administrators, and work conditions. For Brett, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the mesosystem using the following themes: (a) Harbor Elementary, (b) Tarah Elementary, (c) relationships, and (d) changes, colleagues, and conflicts.

**Harbor Elementary.** Brett reported that Harbor had at least three different principals during her eleven-year career there. She stated that the staff and administration did not always work well together and “there was quite a bit of animosity” among the staff towards the administration. She shared that, “the staff banded together to continue doing what we knew was best for children, and what we knew sometimes despite the principals.” She referred to the school climate at Harbor as toxic, “It was toxic in that I saw things that happened to other people where they were being attacked.” However, the staff supported those teachers who the administration treated unfairly and “sort of rallied around them,” which helped create a “very positive attitude for the teachers.”

She reported that her teaching teams at Harbor had been “strong teams.” She acknowledged, “when I was there, there were four of us and they use to call us the Dream Team because we worked so closely together.” She remembered an energetic, younger teammate that was “an absolute natural,” who would provide advice to her at the end of the day. She stated that after a challenging day she would ask her for suggestions and together they would “sort of brainstorm ideas to help solve the problem or make it better.” She claimed her teammates provided her with “a great deal of support and we had a great deal of fun planning and doing things together.”
Nevertheless, Brett reported struggling with the administration. She felt that the principal didn’t appreciate her “experience, age, and wisdom.” She reported that once a month, on a Thursday morning, the administration and her team would meet to discuss student concerns. She stated that, “I kept bringing up the fact that this child wasn’t getting any support with ESOL.” According to Brett the student had been overlooked and was not receiving the support she needed. Brett stated that providing support for this student “didn’t fit in with her [the principal’s] grand plan of things.” Brett shared that she tried her best but this student—and others—needed more support and she was vocal about it, which the principal didn’t like. Brett admitted that she “might have stepped over the bounds,” but when “I feel like a child isn’t treated fairly and something is not right then I will fight for the rights of the child.”

In a second incident with the principal, Brett reported that, “the principal accosted me and told me that I didn’t support the school mission.” She shared that her team had decided against handing out tickets to students who had followed school rules for a popcorn party. She stated, “We just felt like it was best for our little tender-hearted kids not to have this competition thing and we wanted to celebrate everybody following the school rules.” She stated that this incident “could have been another big factor” in the principal not wanting her at Harbor. She stated the principal told her later in the year that, “she wanted me to move to fourth grade.” Brett had never taught any other grades besides kindergarten or first grade and decided that she had to move schools,

So the thought of moving to fourth grade when I was 59 years old and buying all the things that you need, investing in all the things that you need, and learning an
entire new curriculum was more than I could handle…I thought well, I don’t have to work, but you know, I still like it. So I will look around for another job.

Brett reached out to her friends and discovered Tarah had a first grade position for the following year. She contacted a friend of a friend who worked at the school. She shared that she was interested in teaching at her school because, “I am going to be moved to fourth grade. If I don’t get this job I am out of here, but I don’t want to quit yet.” She interviewed with the principal of Tarah and was hired to teach first grade, where she has been for the past six years.

**Tarah Elementary.** Brett reported the students she has worked with at Tarah to be “bright, high-achieving kids.” She stated that Tarah has few students at risk of not making the benchmarks or passing the SOLs. She said that she has been “insulated” from the effects of standard testing at Tarah due in part to “the population that is at the school and not necessarily the teaching that goes on.” She stated if she moved to another school “my kids wouldn’t make nearly the progress at the school that I am at [Tarah], because I have a great deal of support from parents and really bright kids.”

**Parents.** Brett stated she is fortunate to teach at Tarah where “99.9% of the kids come from families that have the time and the money to care for them.” She stated that she has a very “supportive parent base that is appreciative.” She claimed policymakers ignore “how critical home life and all that can be,” stating for her it is “a real valid factor” in student achievement. Brett reported working hard “to communicate with them [parents], because I feel that the parents and I and the community of the school that we are a team.” In addition, she reported feeling “good most of the time” with regards to her
relationships with parents, though at times they can be challenging. She stated she tries “to think about things from their stand point…and you know make them feel that this is a partnership.” Throughout her career in the district she stated having a problem with only a handful of parents.

Colleagues at Tarah. Brett admitted to feeling good about her relationships with teachers at Tarah. She stated, “sometimes I spend more time talking to a colleague in the hall than I do in getting my class ready, and I pay for it later.” She discussed having a good relationship with several individuals outside of her team. First, she shared how the librarian seeks personal and professional advice from her, due in part to the fact that Brett felt she was a good listener. Second, she reported visiting a second grade teacher when she gets frustrated with work. She acknowledged that, “it helps me blow off steam and the fact that somebody listened to me and empathized with me helps me go ‘okay, fine we will go on to another day or a new thing’.” The third individual Brett reported being close to was the reading teacher. She stated the reading teacher has “been encouraging of my change and she has acknowledged—sometimes not overtly but certainly in some ways—that I am willing to change and trying to change.” Moreover, she stated the reading teacher seeks her opinion and together they “work very collaboratively to do things that benefit reading and writing and the school.”

Her teammates. Brett referred to herself as a team player and stated that she valued working with a team. She claimed that, “I might have been burned out more if I didn’t work as collaboratively as a team.” For Brett, her personality helped her work with a team because “I want to get along, and I will do what the majority says, even
though personally I would prefer to go in a little different direction.” Brett described her current teammates as really good people and teachers. She reported that her teammates realized, “working together was going to be the best thing for the children, parents, and for us.” Brett learned new ideas from her teammates and often tried them in her classroom, “She [a teammate] would tell me about things that she did…I went ‘oh that sounds great. I will try that too’.” Last year, Brett agreed to attend a professional development course that met four times with her teammate, simply because she had asked Brett to join her.

Although her team worked together, Brett admitted they disagreed at times leading to frustrating moments. For example, over the summer she reported one teammate shared wonderful ideas that were just not practical to implement during the school year hoping they would all agree to them; they did not. She also mentioned how frustrating “finding enough time to come together,” was for her team, especially when they tried to plan common assessments and meeting after school was not an option for all team members. In another example, Brett stated that her teammates wanted to make spelling more challenging in response to parent concerns. She felt that she wanted her students “to be successful and feel good about school….but I didn’t want to give them something and sort of play gotcha.” Nevertheless, Brett agreed to try the more challenging spelling, “I went along with them. I am a team player.”

*Her administration.* Brett worked with two different assistant principals and principals while at Tarah. With regards to the assistant principals she reported to liking the first one personally but struggling with her professionally. She stated that the former
assistant principal “didn’t follow through on anything….I just go to the point where
unless I absolutely had to go to her for something I didn’t go to her for anything.” She
reported that she sat on a panel that interviewed the new assistant principal and that she
was both “extremely capable…and very nice.”

Brett reported that her former principal and current principal—having worked for
three years with both—appreciated her and her knowledge. Moreover, she reported that
they “care about me and I feel that they care about other people in the building as well.”
Brett acknowledged that both principals “have tried to shield us from some of the edicts
that come down from the area director.” Albeit, she stated her former principal
“protected us even more,” by standing up to the area director. It was her former principal
that she acknowledged to having a very strong and comfortable relationship with. She
referred to him as a contemporary and stated that she felt admired and respected by him,

Just by the way he talked to me, by the way he listened, by the fact that he wasn’t
coming down to try and micromanage me and tell me what to do. He let me…he
trusted me, and he trusted just about every teacher in the school to do the best
they could do.

Regarding her current principal, Brett claimed that she has a very strong
relationship with him. Brett shared how she and a teammate asked the principal to join
them for happy hour when he first joined the staff at Tarah. He was unable to attend, but
they promised to offer up an invite at another time. A year later, she reported that they
set a date for happy hour and “it was pleasant to meet outside of school and have that
relationship.” She admitted principals should try to connect with teachers in some way, and she stated how nice it was that the principal joined them for lunch.

She reported feeling that he respected and listened to her. When she has a problem, she acknowledged that he listens and is “open to considering the possibilities of doing it another way or helping in some way.” Moreover, Brett shared that he appreciates her and gives her opportunities to be a leader. In fact, she acknowledged that he gave her the “best complement that I could ever have,” by putting his daughter in her class. Though she admitted that he doesn’t often provide specific feedback, last year during her evaluation she stated he rated her teaching performance as exceeds in every category but one.

Brett reported supporting her principal as he does with her. She stated that the area director wants each grade level to develop online practice tests. Therefore, she admitted that her team “spent quite a bit of time developing some online tests last year just because we wanted to do it for him.” She acknowledged that, “it would look good for my principal if we did it….we try to support the principal and the school.”

**Relationships.** Brett acknowledged that she cares about people and wants to be with people. She claimed that making friends with other teachers at a school have “…been important for me cause I like…I am a people person.” At both Harbor and Tarah, Brett has been a part of the social committee that worked to plan social events for the staff. Brett stated that she really liked “getting together with my colleagues.” Moreover, having moved throughout her life to various states she shared that her colleagues were “sort of an extended family for me.” She stated that teachers need a
support system, “whether it is the professional learning community that you have to meet with or somebody at a different grade level that seems to have the same philosophy that you do. That makes a huge difference.” When she needed help, Brett admitted that her first response is to ask a person, “Usually my first go to approach is to ask a person.” She admitted that she has stayed in the profession because she has worked with strong teachers that she referred to as “some of the finest teachers that there ever were.”

Brett stated that relationships invigorate her, even those with former colleagues. She mentioned calling a close friend from her former school, Harbor, when she has a problem and needs to brainstorm solutions, “she listens and we talk about it and we come up with some other way that we might be able to tackle it or another solution.” Furthermore, she shared how she coordinates a group of former Harbor teachers meeting up once a month for dinner. She stated that the third Tuesday of each month they meet at the same restaurant and chat about their families and their schools. She described these meetings as “real invigorating.”

**Changes, colleagues, and conflicts.** Brett shared her teaching has changed from more of a whole class focus to differentiated instruction in guided math and guided reading groups, “I have gone from teaching almost totally whole group lessons to guided math and guided reading lessons.” However, with regards to teaching guided reading groups she and the reading teacher “don’t agree about everything.” They “disagree vehemently” about round robin reading, which use to be an accepted literacy practice. Brett has not fully abandoned the practice of round robin reading, because she liked “the idea of listening to kids and have other kids listen to other kids read.” Even though the
reading teacher expected Brett to abandon this practice, she refused and continued to “sneak in the round robin when she [the reading teacher] was not going to be in there.”

Brett has tried to change her whole group math instruction to accommodate guided math groups and math stations—two new ideas supported by both her principal and her teammates. She shared that her younger teammate taught for five years in Florida using math stations and has encouraged her team to try them, “she is an excellent teacher and the only way that she has ever taught is stationed based so we were trying to move to stations this year, and I am trying to do the stations.” She stated that her principal supported this transition to station-based teaching in math and purchased a professional development book for her team to read on using stations in the classroom. She acknowledged that she did not believe in stations in the same way her teammates did, but she “decided to try.” She admitted struggling with stations until December of this year when a teammate shared leveled math worksheets with her. The worksheets structured her guided math groups so that they “were short enough that I could work with a small group and then get them back into stations and then pull another group.” Though teaching stations “are still not perfect,” she admitted that station work is “going better and the kids are learning it better.” Nevertheless, Brett acknowledged that she still feels teaching math in a whole group worked better for her,

But I still feel that some of my math was better in more of a whole group than it is in a guided math group in small groups. I mean I felt like I could check on them as they were all doing work on papers on their desk much more easily than I could check on all the kids in a station.
Exosystem themes. The exosystem—the third layer within the ecology of teaching—represents the interaction between a teacher and the environment outside of the school building. The environment within the exosystem includes three levels of government: (a) federal, (b) state, and (c) district. Each level posits educational policy and consists of policymakers that enforce them. For Brett, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the exosystem using the following themes: (a) federal level, (b) state level, (c) district level, and (d) district policies.

Federal level. Brett stated she does not “love all the politics” that encompass teaching. With regards to the involvement of the federal government in education, Brett acknowledged they play a role in providing money and issue basic standards for education. She shared that her district gets federal money to help with “poorer communities” and “to offset the number of families who are military and don’t pay Virginia state income tax.” Regarding standards, she reported that at the federal level “it was good to have certain standards for education.” However, she stated feeling that federal policymakers are conflicted with NCLB and the standards they have set for all students in education. She claimed that federal policymakers “thought that if they had these standards that all the schools and all the children could reach the standards.”

State Level. Brett reported education issues could be better dealt with at the state level, “I think it is probably better to deal with it at the state level, because I think different states are different.” She claimed the federal and state governments have more of an adversarial role with each other than a collaborative role, especially with regards to the NCLB waivers, “If they came up with a new teacher evaluation and submitted some
other suggestions to the federal government then they didn’t have to follow the NCLB…to me that is more of an adversarial type thing rather than working together.”

She stated that the state policymakers are “trying to find their own way and not necessarily follow the federal government.”

Nevertheless, Brett acknowledged the state policymakers enforce standardized testing—SOL tests—to meet the demands of the federal government, which she reported, “influence what I teach.” Even though students don’t take their first SOL tests until third grade, Brett stated, “there are aspects of the SOLs that are taught in first grade.” Brett stated she wants to prepare the students for the third grade SOL tests and help the third grade teachers:

I still want to do my part to help kids throughout their whole school career not just when they are in my classroom…So I feel a great need to try and do the best that I can to check to know what is on those SOLs or what is in my curriculum so that I cover it in first grade so that it will help the third grade teacher and the kids by the time they get in third grade.

Though Brett taught to the standards, she reported that, “I like first grade because I don’t have to worry so much about those [SOL tests].” However, she reported feeling the SOL tests add pressure to her administrators, “I think it has put stress on the administration. I think they have tried really hard to make sure they do remediation work…to help those kids who are struggling.” As for other state policies besides SOLs and the SOL tests, Brett stated, “I am just not that interested…I feel fairly isolated in first
grade, and I felt even more isolated in kindergarten because nobody cared that much about kindergarten.”

**District level administration.** Brett admitted the district level to be best suited to deal with education issues, “the best way to deal with it [education] is on a county level than either a state or a federal level.” Brett described her district as racially and socioeconomically diverse, as well as large. Moreover, she reported the district to be innovative often not waiting for new policies to be tested. Brett described her district as “very data driven,” with the goal “to find data and have specific scores and things like that for all children.” She admitted that, “the area director [one level above the principal] in particular and probably the other district leaders don’t feel like something has been attained unless they have some data.”

Brett stated that, “I think the district has done a poor job of listening to teachers and finding out what they want and what would help them.” For example, she discussed professional development opportunities designed around popular authors that she perceives have no relevance to her classroom needs, “The district pays big bucks to say the DuFours know everything…and it is not that they are not good. But I don’t think they specifically meet my needs.” She reported feeling that the county values the standardization of teaching practices and tries to “cookie cutter every teacher.”

Brett stated the superintendent and the area director—who oversees her principal and answers to an assistant superintendent assigned to her district area— Influenced her teaching via the policies they chose to implement, “The superintendent, then the area director, they really are pushing those things that do affect my teaching.” However, she
acknowledged feeling that the district area, consisting of an assistant superintendent and a area director had more direct influence on her teaching. She stated they influenced, “…testing…the number of meetings I have to go to and the paper work I have to submit. But I don’t particularly see them influencing me in a positive way unfortunately.” Brett acknowledged that she doesn’t feel the assistant superintendent and the area director are bad people. She stated that they just don’t “understand what first grade is like.”

**District level policies.** Brett mentioned several district level policies that influenced her teaching. She admitted frustration with the new teacher evaluation policies, which included “much paperwork,” and the new report cards that included over sixty individual math standards she must assess for each student. She also shared her frustration with the curriculum pacing guide the district “insists that we follow.” She discussed the assistant superintendent and the area director met with her team to discuss the math curriculum. She stated that her team shared how the principal had allowed them to teach place value and skip counting during third quarter instead of first. She reported that, “we were trying to do something that was going to make it easier for the first graders.” Nevertheless, she reported the principal got in trouble and her team was directed to follow the pacing guide as written,

> We basically threw him under the bus…And after that we were told we could not make any changes to the pacing guide. We had to teach it the way the district said we had to teach it.

Brett also mentioned the testing policies of the district as a frustration. She stated that, “one area person wants us to do two online tests each quarter—one in math and one
in language arts.” She claimed her principal did not strictly enforce this policy, “He didn’t say that we absolutely have to;” however, she acknowledged that completing the assessments would “look good for my principal if we did it.” So Brett reported developing online tests with her team because “the three of us think highly enough of him [the principal].” She stated that she doesn’t “really like that part of my teaching right now,” and that this year it is sending her “over the cliff with some of the stuff…mostly assessments and things.” Brett admitted to “feel absolutely passionately about not assigning a number value to kids based on how they do on a standardized test especially in first grade.” She claimed that testing first graders was like herding cats and “very, very difficult to find an accurate assessment for first graders.”

_The new math series._ Brett referred to the district as causing “a level of frustration” with her teaching. One such frustration was a new math series the district adopted to use this school year, which is entirely online. She stated that it “is an absolute nightmare,” and it doesn’t meet her students’ needs. She reported the county offered one professional development session—in the form of a webinar—last year before implementing the program. Other professional development programs were offered by the district but during the summer, and Brett chose not to attend. With the math program, the teachers were only given one set of student textbooks, one copy of the teacher’s manual, and one set of supplemental materials to share amongst the team. A disposable workbook for students to complete practice work, which they used with the last math series, was not included with the new series’ materials. Brett mentioned that a lot of the materials are online and she struggled to “maneuver though it.” She acknowledged that
she is “willing to take time in my day to try something new like that but the math I can’t figure out.” Therefore, Brett resorted to supplementing the math series with items she has purchased or that have been downloaded from websites, “I have about 15 years of *The Mailbox* that has worksheets and things like that in it. I have sorted through those, and I am pulling those out for paper-pencil work.”

Brett acknowledged the changes she has endured in teaching over the past 17 years, e.g. a new math series, have not been as drastic for those who have taught much longer. She admitted that, “it would have been harder to change if I had worked straight through in some ways…They can’t survive teaching the way it was say twenty years ago. They just can’t do it.” For example, she remembered a period when the district stopped teaching phonics to students and required teachers to use a whole language approach to reading—two distinctly different philosophical approaches to teaching literacy. She shared that, “teachers were having bootleg copies of phonics textbooks to try to help those kids to read;” however, she wasn’t teaching at that time. When she entered the district, she could use reading approaches from whole language, as well as phonics—a blended approach. She reported that, “by the time I had got into first grade the district was saying ‘oh, yes, we do teach phonics’.”

Brett reported that reading approaches and other teaching ideas follow a circular pattern within the district, “there is a new idea and everybody has to do that and then there is another new idea and everybody has to jump on the bandwagon and do that. And it sort of goes in a circle.” She acknowledged that, “there isn’t necessarily one right way.” Brett stated that, “you need to use lots of approaches [reading] because not every
child learns in the same way.” However, she stated within her district there is too much “you must do it this way.”

**Macrosystem themes.** The macrosystem—the fourth layer of the ecology of teaching—represents the interaction between a teacher and the larger culture within which the work resides. The environment within the macrosystem includes any influence of the cultural norms, attitudes, or values perceived by the teacher on their teaching. For Brett, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the macrosystem using the following themes: (a) limited career choices and (b) the state of the profession.

**Limited career choices.** Brett attended a private high school before attending the University of Tennessee. She reported that the “career paths were not open at that time as much as they are now,” which only provided her with three career choices during college: (a) nursing, (b) secretarial work, or (c) teaching. She stated that, “nursing didn’t appeal to me at all even though my father was a doctor. Being a secretary didn’t appeal to me. So it was like the thing you’re going to be is a teacher.” Brett had relatives who worked in the profession and acknowledged that, “I actually come from a long line of teachers.” In fact, her sister earned a teaching degree at the same university; however, Brett admitted that she “ended up not teaching as much as I did.”

Brett acknowledged that teaching provided “more flexibility as a parent,” because teachers have, “the same holidays off. They have the summer off that they can spend with their child. They have the same vacations.” She stated she values the time off that can be spent with her family claiming it to be a benefit of the profession:
I have had those weeks off at Christmas. I have had those weeks off in the spring for spring vacation. I have two months in the summer that is off from school, and I get out at an earlier time or I can leave work at an earlier time. I think that that is a benefit that goes beyond just the salary.

She admitted that the time off has helped her daughter be a wife and a mother, “time is very important and I have always wanted my daughter to be a wife and a mother, which she is. And being in education helps her a little bit.” Other than offering time, Brett reported that she liked earning her own salary and being financially independent, which teaching provided, “I like the money. I feel good about being independent.”

The state of the profession. Brett stated that she does view herself as a professional. In addition, she reported that she feels her students’ parents, her administrators, and her friends view her as a professional; however, she stated, “I think society not so much today.” She acknowledged, that society “has broken expectations about schools.” She discussed how policymakers and other members of society, “don’t know much about school and they don’t understand that there are things that can’t just be fixed easily with even the best of teachers, and so they blame the schools because there is not a quick fix.” She reported that anyone could visit her classroom and find something wrong, “I firmly believe that even as I am a good teacher…that anyone could come in and find something to criticize me or nitpick with me or anybody else and run me out.”

Brett reported that, “I don’t think society as a whole has the same respect for teachers and the teaching profession as they did years ago.” She stated that parents use to tell their child “no matter what listen to your teacher;” whereas, now parents question her
asking, “Why did you tell my child to do that?” She acknowledged feeling that teachers have “lost a lot of credibility” in the younger generation. For example, she shared that now parents question students’ grades and she stated, “it is not whether the child got the grade, but whether the child earned the grade.” Brett also reported feeling that students have more pressure placed on them in schools stating, “Some of them take school and life way to seriously. There is a lot of pressure on kids today even more so than in the past.”

**Structural Description**

Whereas, the textual description aims to describe the experiences Brett has had as a teacher stayer; the structural description below aims to portray the researcher’s understanding of how she experienced the phenomenon of staying in the classroom. The structural description elucidates the underlying meanings hidden within the textual description through a process of imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). Themes within each system were used to organize the researcher’s understanding of Brett’s lived experiences (Wertz, 2005).

**Microsystem themes.** The microsystem consists of the first nested layer of interaction within the ecological structure of teaching, which include the teacher, the students, and the classroom. For Brett, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the microsystem using the following themes: (a) unique perspective, (b) a clash of personality characteristics, (c) goals and standards of success, and (d) student interactions.

**Unique perspective.** Brett entered the teaching profession by default. She perceived only three career options available at the time for women, i.e. nursing,
secretarial work, and teaching. She admitted to having no interest in either nursing or secretarial work; therefore, she chose teaching. Moreover, teaching provided a flexible schedule for her to be a wife and mother, two goals she set for herself. Brett admitted her rationalization for entering the profession to be “outdated somewhat now,” as women have more career options open to them. Nevertheless, she earned her secondary teaching certification and aimed to start teaching right after college. Not being able to find a secondary teaching position after graduating college, she worked at a bank for a year and then accepted an elementary school position. Brett taught elementary school for two years before getting married.

Brett and her husband, a member of the U.S. military, moved frequently as he was often transferred to another military base in a different state. Living a very transient life, Brett found plenty of opportunities to work with young children, none of which were a full-time teaching position. She worked in a daycare, a preschool, and as a substitute teacher in elementary schools. She enjoyed working with young children and stated that, “I had always liked children.” After raising her daughter, Brett decided to reenter the teaching profession and sought her elementary teaching license via earning a M. Ed. in early childhood education. She then accepted a full-time position as a kindergarten teacher in her current district, reentering the profession much later in her life, qualifying her as a late career reentrant.

As a late career reentrant, Brett qualified for retirement rather quickly. Furthermore, Brett admitted that, “money is not a critical issue for us [she and her husband]”. The choice to retire coupled with the financial freedom of not needing to
work framed Brett’s rationalization of staying or leaving the profession. Brett viewed her teaching career now in terms of one more year. Her unique perspective, produced as a result of her late reentry into the profession, eligibility for retirement, and financial success, influenced her interactions with both the meso- and exo-systems.

**A clash of personalities.** Brett referred to herself as opinionated by nature and described a willingness to share her opinions with others. Her opinionated nature prompted Brett to not only articulate her beliefs but also examine the very nature of her teaching. Doing so allowed her to develop a set of teaching beliefs and a sense of what she values as a teacher. Many of these beliefs stemmed from what she called her “early childhood perspective” of teaching, that could be seen as a result of both her M. Ed. in early childhood education and her experience with only teaching primary students within an elementary school. Holding such strong beliefs and values supported Brett in vocalizing her opinions to individuals within the mesosystem such as teammates, staff members, and administrators.

While holding firm to her belief system and sharing these opinions with others she remained under the influence of an even stronger personality trait—seeking acceptance from others. Brett needed people, including the parents, her teammates, her staff members, and her administration to like her. And for Brett, this extended beyond liking her as a teacher; She reported several times that her current principal liked her “as a human being.” Wanting acceptance from others has led her to seek pleasing other people, which she openly admitted to stating, “I want to please people.” Brett’s strong urge to please others has led her to be a very responsible individual in her work as a
teacher. She stated that it is “almost to the point of obsession that if I am supposed to do something, by gosh, I am going to do it the best I can.” Seeking acceptance from others has led her to feel a strong sense of responsibility for following directives and completing her work to her administrator’s satisfaction, while being opinionated has led her to develop a strong set of teaching beliefs and values that she can articulate. Together these diametric forces complicated her relationships with individuals in the mesosystem.

**Goals and standards of success.** Brett set her own teaching goals and her own standards of success, thereby increasing her teaching self-efficacy. With regards to goals, she set clearly defined goals for her teaching that all related to the students and extended beyond the curriculum. These goals focused on the social and emotional development of students and included teaching students to enjoy learning and how to socialize with others. Brett referred to these social and emotional goals as “teaching school” and stated, “I almost do a better job of teaching school rather than the core subject[s].”

Brett also developed her own standards of success, standards more expansive than those issued by individuals in the exosystem and not limited to standardized tests. For Brett, she wanted to make a difference in students’ lives, which required a keen sense of where the student started academically, socially, and/or emotionally in order to determine their growth over a period of time. Therefore, Brett focused on student growth as an outcome of her teaching and felt successful when she could identify that growth. Brett also looked for small moments that reflected she had made a difference in a students’ life. These moments, which could come in the form of a hug or a hand-written note, made Brett feel like she was making a difference for a particular student. Brett did not look for
outside validation from the macrosystem or exosystem in defining her success as a teacher; she looked within herself for validation.

_Student interactions._ Brett kept the focus of her teaching on the students. She simply enjoyed working with the students in her classroom stating, “if I could shut the door and could be in there with the kids all day and didn’t have to worry about the other stuff that is when I really love it.” For Brett, teaching was about interacting with the students. However, it was not simply about interactions based on transmitting knowledge. Interactions for Brett involved showing the students she cared for them and laughing with them. These interactions built a positive environment in her classroom, supporting the students, “I firmly believe that kids do better with a positive environment.”

Something other than care and love influenced Brett’s interactions with students. She believed in her students and wanted them to succeed, not just in first grade but also in life. Brett worked to demonstrate to children that she believed in them and their potential to be successful. Brett placed students’ needs first and foremost in her teaching and stood up for students when she felt they were not being provided opportunities to be successful. She stated,

“It doesn’t matter what the principal says, doesn’t matter what the administration says, doesn’t matter what the superintendent says, doesn’t matter what the parents say…The bottom line is that we are there for the kids to make a difference for them.
**Mesosystem themes.** The mesosystem consists of the second nested layer of interaction within the ecological structure of teaching, which includes multiple components within the school building such as the administrators, colleagues, and work conditions. For Brett, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the mesosystem using the following themes: (a) social networks, (b) care, and (c) change.

**Social networks.** Brett thrived on interactions with other teachers. She admitted that, “being around other people is important for me.” Brett’s transient lifestyle also influenced her desire for interaction with colleagues. She admitted the teaming approach “worked extremely well” for her, because she “came in new to a place” lacking established social networks. Even when she moved schools within the district, Brett kept in contact with her former colleagues referring to one in particular that she often called after work for advice. Therefore, over her seventeen-year career in one district, Brett developed a social network with both former and current colleagues who she relied on for social interaction and support. Both schools Brett worked at within the district promoted a positive space for Brett to build a strong social network, which she would rely on during times of frustration or struggle with teaching. For Brett, the microsystem clearly interacted with the mesosystem manifesting itself in her development of strong social networks that spanned both elementary schools she worked at within her district and supported her decision to stay.

**Care.** Brett’s strong desire for acceptance manifested itself within the type of relationships she sought with her administrators; she wanted them to care. She not only wanted them to care about her, but she desired her administrators to care for other
teachers too. At Harbor, the teachers, including her, supported one another when they perceived the principal had mistreated a staff member and did not care about them. When she moved to Tarah, she felt cared for by both her former principal, as well as her current one.

For Brett, caring involved her principal showing an interest in her personal identity. Brett stated that her current principal “likes me as a human being. He likes me as a person.” She discussed several other actions her current principal took that revealed he cared for her such as attending a lunch or happy hour if they invited him, listening to her when she had an issue, and valuing her opinion. In fact, after struggling with the administrators at Tarah, she set a goal to find a principal that would value her. Working with her current principal at Harbor, as well as with the former one, she feels valued and admitted that, “I did achieve that goal. I know that I am valued and that is very important to me.” Moreover, Brett felt a great sense of value from her principal’s actions this past year when she was chosen to teach his daughter in first grade.

**Change.** For Brett teaching required change, whether it was adopting a new program or using a new instructional strategy. She tried to make changes in her teaching and described learning something new as “very powerful.” However, Brett did not embrace all change and relied on her well-developed belief system and perspective as an early childhood educator to guide her. Most importantly, she judged the change with regards to the students putting their emotional, social and academic needs first.

However, Brett’s desire for acceptance from others induced a strong sense of duty and responsibility. She claimed to have “an extremely strong personal sense of doing
what people want me to do and what is expected of me.” When approached with new ideas she stated, “I am going to do the best that I can….I [will] push myself.” Her sense of duty conflicted with the evaluative stance she took on a new idea or a proposed change to her teaching, which engendered an internal conflict for her, either she follows her belief or she acts responsible and complies. These conflicts caused Brett to struggle at times and become frustrated with teaching.

For example, while at Harbor she and her teammates refused to follow the school’s new discipline policy of monthly rewards, instead choosing to rewards students at the end of the year. Doing so put Brett in direct conflict with her principal, which eventually led to her moving schools. However, Brett successfully navigated other conflicts in teaching. She “went along with” her team with regards to providing students more challenging spelling words, even though she did not believe in doing so. With regards to her teammates, as well as other colleagues, she admitted to trying to “play nice a little bit…and be a little less negative,” when presented with a new idea or a proposed change. For Brett, navigating these internal conflicts did not always end in an either or situation. For example, she found her current principal to be an excellent support system when engaged in such conflicts. During her struggle to use stations during math lessons, Brett sought his advice. Though he was a leader in initiating the use of stations, he suggested that Brett implement stations in a way that works for her. He permitted Brett to change at her own pace and within her own comfort zone easing the conflict she felt between her belief system and her sense of responsibility to comply. Therefore, Brett did not simply accept a proposed change or refuse it, but she worked to integrate the changes
and new ideas into her preexisting belief system, which took time. Doing so allowed Brett to change not just her actions but renegotiate her belief system, thereby ensuring the change would be lasting.

**Exosystem themes.** The exosystem consists of the third nested layer of interaction within the ecological structure of teaching, which include district, state, and federal levels of government. For Brett, I have organized her lived experiences with the components of the exosystem using the following themes: (a) sources of influence, (b) lack of trust, and (c) teaching around the district.

**Sources of influence.** For Brett, influence equaled proximity, and the closer a policymaker was to her and the microsystem the more direct influence they had. Brett perceived the federal level of government to have the least influence over her teaching. However, she admitted that the policymakers at this level set standards for schools and forced state policy makers to develop standardized tests, which indirectly influenced Brett’s teaching. Brett perceived state policymakers not as developing state curriculum for her to teach, but as creating the tests that she had to teach to. However, these tests lacked direct influence on her teaching for two reasons: (a) she taught a grade that did not give students one of the SOL tests and (b) she acknowledged the majority of the student population earned high scores every year. Therefore, the district level provided the most direct source of influence over her teaching. Even within the district, those individuals that worked with her principal directly, i.e. the area director, were perceived as exerting more influence over her teaching. At this level, Brett felt the effects of policymakers’ decisions, such as having to attend meetings, implementing a new program, teaching with
a new textbook, or completing more paperwork. Within the district, she acknowledged the area director more so than any other individual as influencing her teaching, in part because this individual supervised her administrator.

*Cookie Cutters.* Brett acknowledged that, “there is no correct model of teaching.” However, this belief directly contradicted the perceived belief of her district that “they are trying to make us cookie cutters.” For example, after Brett’s first-grade team successfully persuaded their principal to let them reorder the pacing guide for math based off of their students’ developmental needs, the area director enforced the strict adherence to the pacing guide for math overriding the principal. In another example, her area director asked all grade levels to develop common assessments in reading and math per quarter. Her principal did not strictly enforce this policy at first; however, he was quickly instructed to require more teachers to comply from the area director. Therefore, Brett’s team created common assessments to reflect positively on their principal, an act based on loyalty rather than based on best student practices. Both of these examples demonstrated a sense of loyalty that developed between Brett and her principal; they supported each other. Moreover, these two examples illustrated her principal’s effort to shield the teachers from some of the district policy initiatives that standardized their practice, a clear interaction between the mesosystem and the exosystem that directly influenced the teacher. Even though, the principal could not prevent the teachers from complying with the area director’s initiatives in the above examples, it did engender a loyalty between them, a far greater outcome in influencing her to stay than being able to override a district policy.
Lack of trust. When Brett discussed the policies of the state, she focused more on the SOL tests than on the state’s role of writing the curriculum she taught. For Brett, it wasn’t the curriculum the state created she took issue with, it was the accountability that came from passing or failing the state-created tests that aligned with that curriculum, i.e. SOLs. Brett firmly felt that the SOL tests should not be “the story of how successful a teacher is or how good a teacher is.” The tests represented more than just a resistance to test students or collect data; they represented a lack of trust in her ability to teach. Brett felt the tests judged her.

This lack of trust carried over to the district level where she was directed to create two online practice assessments for her first graders in reading and math each quarter. Brett perceived her district as being data driven and needing to have data to conclude a student has learned, thereby inferring a teacher has done their job. She felt the district looked at data saying, “Here is a number that says, yes, they learned this.” Again, Brett perceived the sheer reliance on test data as a lack of trust in her to teach, this time with individuals at the district level, especially her area director.

Teaching around the district. For Brett, the changes she was forced to undergo as a teacher within her district have not been as drastic as when the district switched from teaching phonics to whole language, two distinct philosophical bents on teaching reading. Brett did not experience such a drastic policy shift, because she left the profession after only two years of teaching before returning in the early 1990s. For Brett, missing such a shift within her district supported her retention in the profession, “one of the reasons I have stayed as long as I have is because I took a break from it.” When she reentered the
profession, she acknowledged that the district promoted a blend of both philosophies, instead of a reliance on just one as they had done previously.

Nevertheless, the district introduced a variety of new teaching practices throughout Brett’s career, which she viewed as less drastic than moving from phonics to whole language. Brett understood her teaching must change and even realized that her district wanted her to change, “I am truly open to change. I know that the district wants me to change.” However, Brett struggled with the change process and received little support from individuals on the district level. For example, she reported the district only provided one webinar on the new, online math series before she had to implement it the following year. Although the county did offer other professional development on the math series, it took place during the summer, which she could not attend. Brett lacked the proper training and the support she needed to use the new math series; therefore, Brett averted full compliance and integrated the new math series with a host of outside resources she had collected over her career. Instead of working with the district Brett worked against them to change her teaching at her own pace and on her own terms.

**Essence Statement**

The textual description portrayed Brett’s lived experiences with staying in the classroom as she described them over the course of four interviews. The structural description depicted the researcher’s understanding of Brett’s textual description elucidating the invisible threads or underlying structures within her lived experiences of staying in the classroom. Drawing from both descriptions aided the researcher in uncovering the totality of Brett’s lived experiences with the phenomenon of teacher
retention and supported the writing of an essence statement. Moustakas (1994) referred to this process as an “intuitive integration of the fundamental textual and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole.” (p. 100). The themes used to organize both descriptions, due in part to the significant amount of data collected across all four systems within the educational ecology, supported this process. Below is the essence statement for Brett’s lived experiences with staying in the classroom.

For Brett, the students firmly grounded her within the profession. She interacted with her students in humorous, supportive, and caring ways in hopes they would enjoy school. Moreover, she developed a personal reward system oriented around the students. Brett focused on intrinsic sources of motivation that included student growth and extended beyond academics to include social and emotional development. However, the individuals within the exosystem equated successful teaching with student test scores leading Brett to feel unfairly judged as a teacher. In addition, such a narrow focus on tests scores gravely reduced the means by which Brett could feel successful as a teacher. Therefore, she set her own teaching goals and standards of success, which bolstered her sense of self-efficacy. And feeling successful with teaching sustained her within the profession.

For Brett, new ideas or proposed changes she encountered within either the mesosystem or the exosystem engendered an internal values conflict, follow her beliefs or act responsibly and comply. Therefore, change involved more than altering her actions; change required a shift in thinking. Brett required support and time to
successfully implement change in her classroom, which at times both her administrators and colleagues provided her. With this support the process of change became easier for Brett to undergo aiding in her decision to stay.

Though at times her administrators supported Brett in shifting her beliefs and enacting an authentic change in her teaching, there were other times Brett simply complied with a change in her teaching out of loyalty to her administrators or because she simply wanted to get along with her teammates. Therefore, her relationships with both colleagues and administrators influenced her decisions to change, more so than any individual within the exosystem, where many of the changes initiated. For Brett, her intense focus on both the micro- and mesosystem successfully helped her to alter her teaching beliefs, or at times succumb to a belief, thereby sustaining her within the profession over a period of time.

Not only did the mesosystem provide support for Brett to change, but also it provided Brett with a social network and caring relationships with her administrators. For Brett, teaching provided a means to build a network of colleagues that provided her with a sense of family and camaraderie that she desired due to her extroverted nature and her transient lifestyle. At both Harbor and Tarah she built relationships with colleagues that resulted in a strong social network, which supported her retention within the profession. Brett also sought a relationship with her administrators, a caring relationship where she was valued as both a teacher and a person. She developed such a relationship with her current administrators and her previous ones at Tarah, which have sustained her within the profession over these past six years.
Brett stayed in the profession because of her student interactions and a strong sense of teaching self-efficacy prompted by her personal reward system. Moreover, she stayed due in part to three factors within the mesosystem: (a) a strong social network, (b) caring relationships with her administrators, and (c) support throughout the process of change often initiated by the exosystem. Even given Brett’s financial autonomy, meaning she did not need her teaching salary, and the option she had each year to retire, Brett relied on the above factors within both the micro- and meso-system to continue teaching for now.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

This study sought to understand the essence of teacher retention for three elementary teacher stayers by addressing the following question: What is the experience of staying in the classroom like for elementary school teachers teaching in public schools? The question was subdivided into two parts: (a) What reasons do elementary school teachers provide for staying in the classroom and (b) In what ways do elementary school teachers perceive the environment as contributing to their retention? Chapter seven reviews the essence statement for each narrator, including a graphic that frames the findings within the educational ecology, and addresses the original research questions. Moreover, this chapter discusses the findings in relation to the current literature, which was reviewed in chapter two, and provides implications for the profession, teacher education, and future research.

Overview of Findings

For narrator one, Allyson, the essence of staying in the profession involved an ethos of caring that manifested itself in her student interactions and her teaching beliefs. In addition, Allyson defined successful teaching as making a difference in students’ lives and learning ideas that provided a source of intrinsic motivation when faced with external definitions of successful teaching. Within the mesosystem, Allyson relied on her teaching partner, and good friend, of twelve years for professional and personal support
to stay in the classroom. Moreover, she developed a robust sense of empowerment due to her administrators’ trust and support of her work. When coupled with the microsystem, these two factors within the mesosystem provided a means of defense for Allyson to face the frustrations and pressures she perceived exerted from the exosystem.

Allyson perceived the exosystem as the source of accountability measures that exerted pressure on her work and caused her frustration. Furthermore, Allyson viewed the exosystem, including the federal, state, and district levels, as a hierarchical power structure with teachers residing at the bottom and often powerless to affect change. She accepted her position within the exosystem power structure and focused on her sphere of influence, the mesosystem and microsystem. In essence, she insulated herself within the micro- and mesosystem helping her stay in the profession for now. As is evident, the person-environment interactions within the micro-, meso-, and exo-systems, as well as between these three systems, shaped the essence of teacher retention for Allyson at this moment in her career (see figure 4).
Essence of Teacher Retention: Allyson

Exosystem
- A hierarchical power structure that places teachers at the bottom
- Source of accountability pressures

Mesosystem
- An empowered teacher due to the trust and support of her administration and staff
- Teaching partner of 12 years

Microsystem
- Ethos of Caring
- Personal Definition of Teaching

Macrosystem
Very little influence

Figure 4: Essence of Teacher Retention for Allyson
For narrator two, Jae-da, the essence of staying in the classroom revolved around her belief in teaching as an act of personal commitment. Jae-da felt called to teach and felt a personal responsibility to her students that drove her to work hard. Furthermore, she sought to building lasting relationships with her students that sustained them throughout their K-12 schooling. Jae-da also defined successful teaching for herself, making a difference in her students’ lives by providing opportunities for success and growth, which bolstered her sense of self-efficacy as a teacher. These factors within the microsystem firmly grounded Jae-da within the profession.

One factor, situated within the mesosystem, sustained Jae-da within the profession: feeling connected with teammates, staff members, and administrators. She felt camaraderie with the staff members and administrators at her school, which kept her from feeling alone. However, this sense of connectedness did not extend to the individuals within the exosystem, with the exception of Jae-da’s area director, and she distinguished those within the exosystem from those individuals within the micro- and meso-system. Jae-da perceived policies of the exosystem, especially accountability policies, as spiraling down from the federal level until they reached the meso- and micro-system. She acquiesced to these policies by learning to mentally negotiate between what was expected from the exosystem and what she knew could be accomplished with the students in the microsystem. For Jae-da, she taught despite the pressures exerted by the exosystem because she remained grounded within the microsystem and felt a connectedness and camaraderie with individuals within the mesosystem. Clearly, the
micro- and meso-systems interacted with the exosystem providing for Jae-da the right balance in favor of staying in the profession for now (see figure 5).

**Figure 5: Essence of Teacher Retention for Jae-da**
For narrator three, Brett, the essence of staying in the classroom consisted of student interactions and a focus on student growth beyond academic development to include emotional and social development. Emphasizing all three areas of growth engendered a stronger sense of self-efficacy that influenced her decision to stay in the profession. Moreover, with regards to the mesosystem, teaching provided Brett with a social network that allowed her to build personal relationships with a variety of individuals.

Teaching also involved navigating changes. Brett perceived the exosystem as initiating change in her teaching, usually focused on student accountability. However, it was the individuals within the mesosystem, i.e. her teammates and administrators, that either helped her avert the changes or helped her align the changes to her own teaching beliefs. Furthermore, Brett developed relationships with her administrators based on care. So when the change initiated by the exosystem seemed unbearable, she looked to factors within the micro- and meso-systems to support her, overriding her yearly option to retire, and stayed in the profession for now (see figure 6).
Figure 6: Essence of Teacher Retention for Brett
Discussion

This study sought to fill a gap within the literature on teacher turnover by exploring the phenomenon of teacher retention in order to understand what sustains teachers within the profession, instead of what forces them to leave. As is evidenced in the above section, the lived experiences of each narrator involved a unique constellation of factors within the micro- and meso-systems that outweighed the perceived frustrations and pressures exerted by the exosystem, thus sustaining them in the profession. This finding substantiates the work of Day and Gu (2009), who posited teacher-environment interactions sustained teacher stayers by engendering resilient qualities that helped them overcome external frustrations.

As with Day and Gu’s (2009) work, the findings of this study failed to uncover a simple and direct cause of teacher retention. However, in this study the conceptual framework helped to capture a totality of the phenomenon, involving the interactive nature of an individual and her environment, which provided a deeper understanding and insight into teacher retention. Therefore, studying teacher retention from an educational ecology standpoint, such as Bronfenbrenner’s model, offers an interpretive framework that elucidates the complexities of the phenomenon and complements the existing literature. Brown and Smith (1993) first suggested using Bronfenbrenner’s model within teacher retention studies of special education teachers as a design and interpretive framework for future work. This study corroborates their suggestion as Bronfenbrenner’s model allowed for a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of teacher retention within this study. Moreover, the complex findings of this study revealed an array of both
internal and external influences on teacher retention that earlier conceptual models demonstrated (Billingsley, 1993, 2004; Brownell & Smith, 1993; Chapman, 1984) and literature reviews supported (Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Tompkins, 1995).

Approaching the phenomenon from an ecological perspective revealed a far more complicated phenomenon that defied a reductionistic understanding; the findings revealed a personal, idiosyncratic, and contextual nature to teacher retention. Nevertheless, similar components were found within each narrator’s essence statement. These similarities, along with their substantial differences, warrant further discussion with regards to the previous literature. Headings have been used to delineate between the similarities or differences in each narrator’s experiences and organize the discussion.

**Students.** Within the microsystem, the students played a pivotal role in the retention of all three narrators echoing the findings from previous studies (Chinn, 2007; Day & Gu, 2009; Eick, 2002, Nieto, 2003a, 2003b; Mittapalli, 2008; Perrachione et al., 2008; Williams, 2001). However, subtle differences surfaced on exactly how they influenced the retention of each narrator. Allyson held an ethos of care that permeated her student interactions and teaching beliefs. Eick (2002) found a similar ethos of care among 19 teachers within his study and posited that the women teachers within the study expressed this ethos in affectionate terms. Allyson treated her students with great affection, even revealing the emotional difficulties that arose when she had her own children, because she felt that she could not emotionally invest as much in her students. Clearly, Allyson cared for her students, but her struggle revealed what McIntyre (2010)
referred to as an emotional dimension of teaching. Moreover, McIntyre found teachers who talked about the emotional dimensions of their work remained in the field.

Similar to Allyson, Jae-da emotionally invested herself in the work of teaching by forming lasting relationships with the students. She used these relationships to help her students achieve success within her classroom and beyond. Jae-da loved when former students returned to visit because it provided reassurance that she succeeded in forming a relationship that lasted. Therefore, these relationships with students mattered in her retention, a finding similar to Williams (2001). Though Brett did form relationships with her students, the degree to which she emotionally invested in them varied from both Jae-da and Allyson. She sought positive interactions with students that made them laugh and enjoy being in her classroom. She did care for the students, but her relationships were not based on such a strong caring element. Nevertheless, it was working with the students, as both Mittapalli (2008) and Perrachione et al. (2008) posited, that sustained her.

**Teaching is a calling.** Several researchers discovered teachers remain in the profession if they possess a belief in teaching as more than a job but as a calling (Certo & Fox, 2002; Levine, 2011; Williams, 2001). In this study, two of the narrators, Allyson and Jae-da, discussed teaching as a calling. Allyson remembered wanting to be a teacher from a very young age and never pursued another career. Jae-da switched careers discovering teaching as a calling much later in life. However, for Jae-da the calling to teach involved a strong sense of working with students within her specific contexts, i.e. a low performing, Title I school, to help her overcome personal obstacles and achieve
academic success. McIntyre (2010) referred to this as an emotional commitment and found teachers within similar contexts, i.e. low-performing schools, in the United Kingdom relied heavily on this element to sustain them in the profession. Driving this call to teach and her emotional commitment was a strong sense of hope, a hope that she would make a difference in her students’ lives. Levine (2011) found hope manifested itself in a variety of ways with teachers, one being the desire to make a positive difference in students’ lives. Therefore, Jae-da felt called to the profession out of a sense of hope in helping her students within her specific school context succeed.

**Teaching self-efficacy.** With regards to teaching efficacy, Williams (2001) found teachers remained if they experienced rewards of teaching that were meaningful to them, and all three narrators did. In fact, all three narrators identified making a difference in students’ lives as their ultimate reward in teaching. However, striving for this idea manifested itself in a variety of subtle forms for each narrator. For Allyson, making a difference involved getting an idea across to students; whereas, for Jae-da it involved helping a child grow academically and achieve success. Brett shared that making a difference in students’ lives involved more than academic growth but emotional and social growth, which she referred to as teaching “school” instead of teaching “content”. Nevertheless, each narrator discovered intrinsic rewards related to working with students that sustained them in the profession mimicking Eick’s (2002) research. Moreover, Perrachione et al. (2008) found a personal teaching efficacy helped retain teachers affirming the results of this study as well.
**Colleagues.** All three teacher stayers within this study discussed having positive relationships with her colleagues, affirming the previous research that suggested these relationships helped retain teachers in the profession (Certo & Fox, 2002; Chinn, 2007; Johnson et al., 2005; Williams, 2001). Developing relationships with colleagues was especially important for Brett. She sought to build a social network among colleagues that brought her tremendous joy and emotional support. Jae-da also sought relationships with colleagues at her school, but more out of a desire for camaraderie that made her feel less alone and connected to other individuals. Moreover, since her school did not make AYP last year, she sought collegial support to work towards improving student test scores. Johnson et al. (2005) suggested schools with more organized and collegial work supported teachers’ decisions to stay in the profession, and Jae-da’s experiences corroborate this finding.

Allyson, spoke of her relationships with the same emphasis on collegial work but emphasized her teammates, i.e. teachers who taught the same grade level as she, rather than the entire staff. She worked closely with her teammates and developed a strong professional relationship with them. However, her team worked more cooperatively than collaboratively by sharing resources and ideas, instead of planning lessons or creating assessments together. Allyson worked more collaboratively with one individual on her team, Sarah. Moreover, Allyson developed a personal relationship with Sarah, with whom she worked her entire teaching career. Their personal and professional relationships sustained her within the profession.
The other two narrators spoke of their relationships with teammates in a more intimate manner than did Allyson. Brett and Jae-da both sought personal, as well as professional relationships with their teammates as a group and expressed their good fortune of having worked with exceptional teammates on well-functioning teams. Brett and Jae-da both worked with their teams in a collaborative manner to create common assessments, often given on the same day, and to develop similar lesson plans. For all three narrators, relationships with their teammates played a part in their experiences; however, the previous literature lacks studies on the influences of these relationships with regard to teacher retention. Given the findings in the present study that these teachers paid more attention to their microsystems and their mesosystems more than they did to the exo- and macro-systems, the field needs greater understanding of the role close colleagues play in retaining teachers in the profession.

Belief System. Swars et al. (2009) posited that teacher retention decisions involved the congruence of a teacher’s beliefs with the organization’s beliefs, which can be viewed as both the district and the school. Of the teachers involved within this study, only one affirmed these results, Brett. Though the other two narrators had strongly-held beliefs, for Brett, the act of teaching involved a more explicit act of renegotiating her beliefs with those of the school administration and the district. When confronted with teaching beliefs dissimilar from hers, Brett required support from her administrators or her colleagues to work towards changing; however, at times her desire to please others overrode her desire to confront the changes and she simply complied. Both produced changes within her teaching but the first scenario created a far more authentic change.
than the second scenario. It should be noted that not only was Brett the oldest narrator, but that she received her initial teacher training during the 1970s, quite a long time from when she entered the district in the 1990s. Her age combined with the time span between her initial teaching experience in elementary school and reentry in the field, both personal factors, played a role in defining her experiences with staying in the classroom. A role highlighted by the previous work of Chapman (1984), who noted that one of the more important correlates of teacher attrition/retention to be the personal characteristics of teachers.

**Context.** Allyson and Brett taught in a “private-public school” (Petrilli & Scull, 2010) with a large majority of students identified as Caucasian and from a higher socio-economic background. Whereas, Jae-da taught in a Title I school with more minority and lower-income students. Moreover, Jae-da’s school consisted of more low-performing students compared to the students within Allyson’s and Brett’s schools. The findings of this study for Allyson and Brett remain consistent with previous research that suggests teachers remain in schools with fewer low-income and low-performing students (Guarino et al., 2006; Johnson, et al., 2005). However, just because Allyson’s and Brett’s contexts match the previous literature does not mean that context played a major role in their retention. Such a claim is beyond the scope of this study.

Jae-da’s experiences with staying in the profession did not fit with the previous research suggesting those who work in high-minority and low-performing schools leave teaching (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005; Scafidi,
Sjoquist, & Stinebrickner, 2005). In fact, she thrived in a school that did not make AYP last year and where 62% of the student body qualified for free or reduced lunch. Unlike the other narrators, Jae-da explicitly referred to her teaching context as “special” and more difficult than others, especially since they had not made AYP last year. However, not making AYP and her student’s previous record of lower test scores did not constitute a deterrent to remaining in the profession as previous research would suggest, but her school context provided a challenge she willingly accepted with an attitude of “we are going to get there.” The findings of this study, for Jae-da, suggest a more explicit interaction between herself and her school context that influenced her retention. Such a finding suggests further research on teacher stayers within a similar context to Jae-da’s, i.e. schools underperforming and with a large proportion of their student population identified as low-income. It may be that remaining in a hard-to-staff school requires teachers to negotiate their micro- and macro-systems differently. Again, there is not much work on these differences found in the literature.

**Administrative relationships.** Previous research suggested school administrators heavily influence teacher retention (Boyd et al., 2011; Certo & Fox, 2002; Chinn, 2007; Day & Gu, 2009; Guarino et al., 2006; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson et al., 2005; Swars et al., 2009; Tompkins, 1995). The findings of this study affirm the role of administrators in teacher retention as all three narrators experienced administrative support and claimed to have a relationship with their previous and/or current principal. However, the findings revealed relational differences based on individual needs mirroring the work or Swars et al. For example, Allyson’s administrators supported her efforts in
trying new instructional approaches and class groupings, i.e. team teaching and co-teaching. Such support provided her creativity, autonomy, and the ability to innovate, which served to empower her as a teacher. Therefore, she formed a relationship involving empowerment with her administrators that sustained her.

Jae-da formed a different type of relationship with her administrators. She desired to be understood and feel connected to her administration. Once she felt that her school leaders understood her, she did not feel alone in the work of teaching, which supported her in staying. Therefore, perception heavily influenced the creation of relationships for Jae-da mirroring the research of Tompkins (1995), who noted that perception of administrative support to be one of 8 general factors included within a model that accurately predicted 99.14% of teachers from the 1990-91 School and Staffing Survey (SASS) who stayed one year later. Brett, too, relied on her perception of the administration; however, she desired to be valued as a teacher and cared for as both a teacher and an individual. She needed to feel that her school leaders cared about her, first and foremost, before she could develop a working relationship with them. In addition, she desired to be recognized and valued as a teacher in the school by her administrators. At Brett’s first teaching position, she did not feel cared for or valued, which led to her questioning her commitment to teaching; she thought of retiring. However, it was her desire to work for a principal who valued and cared for her before retiring from the profession; therefore, she set out to move schools. Finding this type of relationship with her administrators at her current school has motivated her to remain for a while longer. Brett’s experiences mimic those of a participant in Day & Gu’s (2009) research, who
using a narrative form of inquiry discovered that one teacher regained her commitment to teaching after gaining the support and trust of a new administration.

**Exosystem.** For these three narrators, the findings of the present study suggest the exosystem, including federal, state, and district levels, to be the source of the accountability movement within the profession. For them, this movement represented high-stakes standardized tests used to determine student learning and teacher effectiveness. As with similar studies (Abrams et al., 2003; Au, 2009; Certo, 2006), all three narrators discussed feeling tremendous pressure to teach to these tests. However, the findings for each narrator revealed that they believed the pressure trickled down from the federal level to the district level where these three teachers felt the most direct influence on their teaching. Therefore, the district level represented more of a direct influence on all three narrator’s teaching than did the federal or state level.

For example, at the district level, Allyson experienced having to use countywide unit assessments in each subject and disaggregate the data by hand. Whereas, both Jae-da and Brett reported their district required teams to create common, multiple-choice unit assessments that served to prepare the students for high-stakes tests in future grades, all three teachers discussed collecting and managing student data that the district required of them. Moreover, all three narrators mentioned feeling pressure to teach to the test. However, that pressure varied and was greatest for Allyson who taught fifth grade, an SOL tested grade. Both Jae-da and Brett taught non-SOL tested grades, but Jae-da, a second grade teacher, continued to feel pressure in preparing the students for the tests, while Brett, a first grade teacher, admitted to feeling minimal pressure from these tests.
All three narrators continued to teach despite the exosystem, but doing so involved a unique combination of perceived positive factors situated within the micro- and meso-systems and their interactive nature with the exosystem. More specifically, this study found an interaction between each narrator’s administration and the district they worked in, an interaction between the meso- and exo-system. At the district level, all three narrators specifically mentioned their administrator’s supervisor, the associate superintendent for Allyson and the area directors for Jae-da and Brett. Albeit, Allyson and Brett had very different experiences than did Jae-da. For Allyson and Brett, this individual had, at times, an adversarial role with their principal. Both Allyson and Brett described their principals shifting away from positions they favored, e.g. data collection and pacing guides, after speaking or meeting with their supervisor. Allyson and Brett perceived this shifting as a lack of decision-making power given to the principals within their districts that undermined their principals’ sense of autonomy, as well as their own. They viewed the administrators as having to follow orders, much like themselves, promoting a sense of unity between the administrators and these two narrators. Jae-da experienced quite the opposite. She perceived her area director as working with her school administrators to support her and her other colleagues. She felt that the area director was a part of the collective spirit in her school that stressed, “we’re all in this together.” Given the important role an administrator plays on teacher retention found in the previous research (Boyd et al., 2011; Certo & Fox, 2002; Chinn, 2007; Day & Gu, 2009; Guarino et al., 2006; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson et al., 2005; Swars et al., 2009; Tompkins, 1995), which this study affirms, the role of the district-level administrators
supervising the school-level administrators needs to be addressed more explicitly within the literature. Whether positive or negative, all three narrators experienced the influence of a district supervisor mediated through their school administration.

**Implications**

The findings from this study suggest that an idiosyncratic, complex set of interactions between the micro- and the meso-systems bolstered each teacher’s ability to withstand the external demands and pressures of teaching, mostly stemming from an emphasis on student and teacher accountability within the exosystem. Given the current culture of accountability present in the U.S. public education system (Au, 2007; Jennings & Rentner, 2006; Horn, 2003; Ravitch, 2010), this study provides a critical perspective of teacher stayers with powerful implications for the teaching profession, a profession struggling to retain teachers. More specifically, the findings from this study could help inform both district level policy and teacher education, which are discussed below along with implications for further research.

**District level policy.** Individual factors within the microsystem, i.e. intrinsic rewards, beliefs about teaching, and care for students, affected all three narrators’ retention in the profession. Moreover, previous research affirmed these three factors as having a role in teacher retention (Certo & Fox, 2002; Eick, 2002; Levine, 2011; McIntyre, 2010; Nieto, 2003a, 2003b; Perrachione et al., 2008; Swars et al., 2009; Williams, 2001). Therefore, district leaders may find it helpful to address such personal beliefs and attitudes to help teachers stay. Perhaps, it would be beneficial to provide teachers with more avenues to explore their individual beliefs and attitudes broadening
the notion of teacher professional development to include more of a career counseling perspective, where personal and emotional needs are stressed. However, doing so requires differentiating for the needs of teachers—an idea Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, and Keeling (2009) argue remains absent within the U.S. public school system. They state teachers are treated as interchangeable parts instead of individual professionals, which is a “denial of individual strengths and weaknesses” (p. 4). Approaching teacher professional development from a career counseling perspective respects each teacher’s personal and emotional needs. Treating them as individual professionals as Weisberg et al. suggest could help teachers remain in the profession longer.

Both this study, as well as previous research (Boyd et al., 2011; Certo & Fox, 2002; Chinn, 2007; Day & Gu, 2009; Guarino et al., 2006; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson et al., 2005; Swars et al., 2009; Tompkins, 1995), has shown the value of the relationships administrators create with teachers in retaining them. Districts could help promote the development of these teacher-administrator relationships by providing information and professional development on the relational role of school leaders, or the value of collaborative efforts that entail teachers expressing their beliefs about the school direction. In addition, such a role could be made more explicit in a principal’s job description, as well as in the hiring process, which may ultimately benefit teachers and keep those who want to stay from either leaving the school or leaving the profession altogether. Furthermore, the findings from this study suggest the important role of school leaders as mediators of the pressure each teacher felt from district policies. Therefore, improving the relationships between teachers and administrators could help with policy
implementation at the district level, and create the kind of collaborations these three narrators form naturally in their mesosystem with selected peers.

**Teacher Education.** As previously discussed, the findings from this study substantiate previous research with regards to several factors that influence teacher retention: (a) student-teacher relationships, (b) teaching purpose, (c) teacher self-efficacy, and (d) relationships with colleagues and administration. Each of these topics relates to the inner lives of teachers and focuses more on their personal rather than professional knowledge. Therefore, teacher education programs should consider bringing to the forefront the inner lives of teachers complicating the notion of teacher identity to include both the personal and professional selves. Teacher education programs could work to integrate the personal and professional lives of teachers in two ways: (a) within graduate programs that enroll inservice teachers and (b) in school improvement-focused professional development in collaborative environments at either the district or school level. Both groups of teachers, those in graduate programs or those in professional development meetings, have had time to develop their teaching beliefs and attitudes as well as enact them within specific educational contexts. Therefore, providing teachers the reflective tools to explore their inner lives within the microsystem and teaching as a situated act within their mesosystems will support the blending of their personal and professional lives into a more holistic teaching identity.

Many teacher education programs require their practicing teachers to write a teaching philosophy statement, which attempts to integrate the personal lives of teachers with their professional identities. However, these statements often rely on more general
descriptions of teaching and student learning. Broadening such an assignment to include student-teacher relationships, teaching purpose, teacher self-efficacy, and relationships with colleagues and administration might initiate a more sophisticated understanding of teacher identity for program candidates integrating both personal and professional selves. For example, the following questions could be included as part of the teaching philosophy assignment: (a) How would you describe your student-teacher relationship?; (b) What relationships within your school support you?; (c) Why do you teach?; and (d) When have you felt successful as a teacher and what made you feel this way? Including a specific question on each topic might provide sufficient scaffolding needed for each inservice teacher to reflect on the micro- and meso-system as it relates to their teaching identity. Such a complex understanding of teacher identity might help prepare practicing teachers to face future challenges within the profession and stay.

In a similar fashion, school improvement-focused professional development for practicing teachers could be framed using the above four questions. Teachers could have time to reflect on each question and then share their thoughts in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), grade-level teams, or heterogeneous group settings, i.e. mixed grade-level settings. Moreover, the facilitator could help lead a discussion among the staff to identify themes across questions. Such themes among staff members could be shared with district level leaders and/or school administrators within that school building. Next both teachers and either district level leaders and administrators or just administrators could join the staff members to use the information to reexamine the school vision and goals. Furthermore, the themes from the initial discussion could be
used to develop a school action plan that promotes the emotional aspects of the job and works to sustain teachers within the building.

**Future Research.** This study framed the problem of teacher retention on a national level but explored the essence of three teacher stayers on a district level. It would be helpful to repeat this type of phenomenological study on teacher stayers situating the work within a more localized context such as a district, and perhaps an urban district, where the teacher retention rates are lower. Districts vary greatly so further contextual information, including retention statistics on a district, could provide a different perspective on the data further illuminating the subtlety of the findings. Moreover, this type of study could be narrowed to one particular school demonstrating a more sophisticated understanding of teacher retention at the level of the mesosystem.

The current literature is replete with studies suggesting that teacher-principal relationships influence teacher retention. In this study, all three narrators developed teacher-principal relationships within the mesosystem further substantiating these bonds as a factor in teacher retention. However, the nature of these relationships remains less studied on the specific topic of teacher retention. Further qualitative research with teacher stayers should explore the teacher-administrator relationship within the mesosystem examining how relationships form, why they form, and what sustains these relationships over time. Moreover, qualitative research must address these questions from the perspective of teacher stayers and their administrators. Doing so will generate more insight into the nature and function of these relationships with regards to teacher retention.
In addition, the relationship between teacher stayers and their teammates needs further examination within the literature. My data analysis suggested relationships with teammates provided each narrator with support, playing a crucial role in each narrator’s retention. Therefore, perhaps a more narrow and explicit examination of grade-level teams should be studied to further understand what effect, if any, they have on teacher retention. As of now, the previous literature has examined a broader view of relationships among individuals within schools, such as Tompkins’s (1995) study, which posited that perception of cooperation among staff members influenced retention. Given the popularity of Professional Learning Communities and the organizational structures of elementary schools within grade-level teams, it makes sense to examine these relationships further within both quantitative and qualitative research as they both could serve to support teacher retention.

This study suggested both the principals and district leaders directly influenced these three teacher stayers with regards to U.S. accountability policies filtered down from the federal level. Further research is therefore warranted to examine the perception of other teacher stayers’ interactions within and between the meso- and exo-systems. In addition, these three teachers perceived federal and state policies affecting themselves mediated through district and school leaders. Therefore, further policy studies would be helpful in exploring the influence of both federal and state accountability policies on both district leaders and school administrators. Moreover, because all three teacher stayers taught in the United States similar research on teacher stayers within other countries
would provide a cultural perspective on the interactive nature of the meso- and exo-systems.

Lastly, this study found teacher retention to be a phenomenon rooted within the micro- and meso-systems of each narrator, suggesting a personal and contextual nature to retaining teachers. Therefore, researchers must continue to grapple with the complicated intersection of teachers’ personal and professional lives. In essence, the profession must personalize the work of teaching and value the teacher above all else. However, within the U.S. culture of accountability that emphasizes student test scores, teachers have become a means to an end with scant attention given to their inner lives. Nurturing the individual teachers within the classrooms, though difficult and complex, could help the profession successfully retain more teachers and lower the turnover rate.
APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol #1: Microsystem (Teacher and Student)

1. Do you remember when you first decided to pursue teaching as a career? Can you tell me how you came to be a teacher? (training, college, mentoring services)
2. Where have you taught, what grades, and for how long?
3. Can you tell me about the teaching position you hold now? (how long, grade, setting)
4. How would you describe yourself as a teacher? Do you have any core values or beliefs that influence you as a teacher?
5. Research defines a teacher stayer as someone who remains in the field. Would you consider yourself a teacher stayer? Why or why not?
6. During your career did you ever consider leaving the profession? Why and what made you stay?
7. I want to switch topics from you as a teacher to your students. Students come from a variety of home lives, hold different attitudes about school, and behave in a variety of ways in school. How do you accommodate the needs of students with such differences in their home lives, attitudes, and behavior with regards to your teaching? Do any of these differences make teaching more challenging for you? If so, what resources do you have that support both you as a teacher and the student? Can you think back to a particular student who was challenging to teach and tell me about how you worked with him/her? What motivated you to work with this student?
8. You also teach students with diverse academic strengths and weaknesses. How does this variety in academic ability influence your teaching and/or your relationship with the students? What resources do you have that support both you as a teacher and the student? Can you think back to a particular student who was challenging to teach and
tell me about how you worked with him/her? What motivated you to work with this student?

9. Do your students play a role in your decision to stay? If so, what role?

10. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me about your decision to stay in the classroom? Have you shared all that is significant with reference to who you are as a person and students that influence your decision to remain?
Interview Protocol #2: Mesosystem (School and Administration)

1. I want you to pretend for a minute that I was a teacher wanting a job at your school. What could I expect with regards to working here? Would you recommend me taking a job here? Why or why not? (are there plenty of resources?)

2. As a teacher, what do you enjoy most about working here? Least?

3. Thinking back to the teaching beliefs or values you mentioned in our last interview (list some here...), can you describe how you are able to enact these within your teaching at this school? Are there some values/beliefs that are more challenging to enact at this school? Why? Are there some values/beliefs that you feel that you cannot enact at this school? How do you feel about this?

4. Has teaching at “____” influenced your decision to stay? What about teaching here has influenced you to stay?

5. Can you describe the last time you remember feeling valued or empowered as a teacher in this school?

6. How would you describe the relationship you have with your fellow teachers?

7. Are there individuals within the building that support your role as a teacher in some way? Who are these people and what role do they play in your current teaching position?

8. I want to focus on the administration, i.e. your principal and assistant principal, for these next few questions. How would you describe your relationship with the school administration? Have you always held such a relationship with your administration?

9. Can you tell me about a time when the administration provided you with feedback regarding your teaching? On average, how many times a year would you say this occurs?

10. When was the last time your principal complemented you as a teacher? On average, how many times a year would you say this occurs?

11. How important is the role of your administration when it comes to your decision to stay in teaching?

12. If you had to leave this teaching position, what would you miss the most? Why?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share concerning your school or your administration?
Interview Protocol #3: Exosystem (Local, State, and Federal Policies)

1. How would you describe the school district within which you teach?

2. Your local school board determines a variety of local school policies (e.g. salary raises, textbook adoptions, formative assessment programs, class sizes, curriculum frameworks that include pacing guides, and professional development). Pretend for a moment your local school board, including your school superintendent, asked you for feedback about some of their policies. What would you choose to discuss? Why?

3. What top three words or phrases come to mind when I say VA Sols? Why?

4. Let’s say a new teacher transferred to your school this year that taught in private schools outside of Virginia; therefore, they are unfamiliar with the VA Sols. If you were assigned to mentor them, how would you describe the VA Sols to them? What advice would you provide them for implementing the Sols and preparing the students to take the Sol tests?

5. How do you feel about high-stakes tests? Would the VA Sols ever be enough of a reason to make you leave?

6. Can you identify other state policies that influence you as a teacher?

7. Federal legislation titled No Child Left Behind (NCLB) covers policies ranging from “highly qualified” teachers to student accountability and teacher evaluation. How does NCLB impact the teaching profession?

8. NCLB is already up for reauthorization. If the federal government did away with this policy, what would be your reaction?

9. Imagine that you’ve walked into the teacher’s lounge and joined several teachers for lunch. The teachers are complaining about NCLB and the VA Sols saying they negatively influence their feelings about the profession. If they asked you to join in the conversation, what would you contribute to the conversation?

10. Could the local, state, or federal government enact policies that would make you consider leaving the classroom?
Interview Protocol #4: Macrosystem (larger culture of public schools within the United States)

1. If you had a son or daughter and they asked you if they should become a teacher, what would you say?
2. What do you consider the three most important purposes of school? How do these purposes influence your decision to stay?
3. You have shared a lot of your experiences with me over these interviews with regards to yourself as a teacher, your students, your school, your administration, and the local, state, and federal education policies. As time has passed and you have had time to reflect on the conversations we have had can you tell me why you have stayed in the classroom?
APPENDIX B

Steps to Moustakas’s (1994) Phenomenological Data Analysis

I. Bracketing out one’s own experiences.

II. Phenomenological Reduction
   a. Read all four interview transcripts and identify all statements (horizons) that relate to staying in the classroom—a process referred to as horizontalization.
   b. Review all horizons and type them into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet making sure to separate each horizon into separate units of meaning. All these meaning units—as they are now called—are then color-coded based on the interview source, i.e. the system.
   c. Read the spreadsheet of meaning units that covered all four systems and identify those that relate to factors within the Microsystem, i.e. the individual and the students. Organize these meaning units into another Microsystem Excel spreadsheet. Repeat for each system.
   d. Cluster the meaning units within each system into preliminary descriptive themes and begin to describe the quality of each.
   e. Return to the interview transcripts to reflect upon and further validate the preliminary descriptive themes of each system and change the themes if necessary.
   f. Write a textual description of the narrator’s experience as it relates to each system using the textual themes to organize the writing—including verbatim quotes from the narrator when necessary to support the textual description.
   g. Send the textual description to the narrator via email to be member checked.

III. Imaginative Variation
   a. Review the textual description of the narrator’s experience as well as the interview and data analysis memo.
   b. Engage in a series of thought exercises to elucidate the underlying meanings jotting down ideas and thoughts below each textual theme using blue font.
   c. Read the blue text and look for preliminary structural themes to organize your thinking behind the structures of the textual experience.
d. Write a structural description using structural themes as an organizing tool making sure to review the original transcripts for verification of ideas.

e. Send the structural description to a committee member for further verification.

IV. Essence Statement
a. Reread both the textual and structural description in order to synthesize both into an essence statement of the experience for the narrator.
REFERENCES


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