

A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL
RELATIONSHIPS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE IN TEACHER RETENTION IN PUBLIC
MIDDLE SCHOOLS

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

With a

Major in Educational Leadership in the

Department of Graduate Education

Northwest Nazarene University

by

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May 2022

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AUTHORIZATION TO SUBMIT
DISSERTATION

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank our heavenly Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, who have given me faith, wisdom, and strength to persevere throughout this process. You have answered several prayers along the way, and I am forever grateful for your unconditional love. I could do nothing without your help.

I would like to thank my wonderful husband for his support, patience, and encouragement throughout this entire process. His example, constant motivation, and support have motivated me to start in the program, and to work on fulfilling a lifelong dream of earning my doctorate degree. He will always be my greatest blessing. In addition to my immediate family, I extend a heart full of appreciation to our church family for their constant encouragement and prayers. When things were tough, I would not have been able to continue without your prayers and love.

To Dr. Sarah Quilici, I am deeply grateful for your continuous support, guidance, insight, and academic assistance throughout this entire process. I could not ask for a better Chair, and I am also thankful for your prayers, and for always encouraging me to keep working hard and to never give up. We started this journey together, and this process would have been infinitely harder if you had not been there.

I am exceedingly thankful to Dr. Alina Mihai and Dr. Derek Bub for their useful suggestions, support and dedication to assist me during this journey. Also I am thankful to the entire NNU team, professors and colleagues in the program that have supported me through this program. Your caring support, encouragement, and guidance have made me feel that through

Christ, all things are possible, and you motivated me to keep going. Thank you for all that you have done. I would not been here without you.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Mrs. Christian, a leader after God's own heart and the wonderful staff at Denison Middle School. You have been more than an inspiration for me to conduct this study, and could not have completed this journey without your support.

DEDICATION

To my husband Kenneth Martin Howard, who has always encouraged me, prayed for me, and sacrificed for me to achieve this goal; to my parents who always encouraged me to further my education; and to all educators who are working on improving professional relationships of their educational agencies for the benefit of the students they serve.

ABSTRACT

Teachers desire to work in a growing, positive, and supportive school community where they build healthy, strong professional relationships. Retaining qualified teachers is crucial to ensure quality education. While extensive research has been conducted on school climate in general, minimal research attention has been directed toward the impact of the professional relationships dimension of school climate on teacher retention in public middle schools. This qualitative study explored the role of the 14th dimension of school climate, professional relationships, as described by the National School Climate Center, in middle school teacher retention and the reasons teachers stay in their schools. This study also sought to identify the actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships that have a positive effect on teacher retention. Themes from semistructured interviews and document reviews found teachers from public middle schools perceived professional relationships as having a significant role in teacher retention. Teachers' perceptions of school climate are crucial because their actions are explained as the result of their perceptions. Building healthy relationships is critical because there is a connection between the professional relationships dimension of school climate and teacher retention, where building healthy professional relationships results in higher retention. The following actions and strategies were found critical for building healthy professional relationships: principal being caring and encouraging self-care; principal providing differentiated support and opportunities for learning; using open, effective communication and trusting relationships; openness for encouraging and assisting others; being led by vision and values. Middle school teachers identified the following reasons for staying in their schools: students and love of the teaching profession, staff and overall positive perception of professional relationships, and feeling respected and supported by the leadership team.

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Chapter I

Teacher retention continues to be an issue as the number of teachers leaving their profession is on the rise (Collie et al., 2011; Dahlkamp et al., 2017). Retaining qualified, effective teachers is a critical task when prioritizing the quality of students' education. According to statistical data, half a million teachers leave their schools each year nationwide, and 50% of teachers will leave the field, often in the first five years of teaching (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008; Gray & Taie, 2015; Rinke, 2014). Half of the teachers who leave move to other schools, while the other half leave the teaching profession and move into a different profession or career (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008; Tuan, 2020).

While turnover is an issue in many professions as well, turnover in education is about 4% higher than other professions (Riggs, 2013). Within the field of education, a great number of research studies have found that a positive school climate directly and positively impacts students' achievement and students' behavior, resulting in lower dropout rates, decreased discipline issues schoolwide, and increased teacher retention (Nadelson et al., 2020; National School Climate Center [NSCC], 2014). The school is seen as a microsystem in which school climate is created through the mixture of its members' perceptions related to conflict or cooperation among teachers, staff, and students; academic expectations for students; and collaboration among staff (Rudasill et al., 2018). School climate is about daily experiences of the school community members, and it is different from school to school. The interpretations and perceptions of the experiences form the school climate (Kathleen et al., 2018).

School climate is considered a sum of the overall school staff's experiences, including their values, collaboration, interpersonal relationships among team members, school environment, teaching practices, and organizational structures (Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018).

The collegial support, teachers' perceptions of this support, and professional relationships are crucial to teachers' commitment and motivation to stay or leave the profession (Kor & Opare, 2017; Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018). A positive school climate is crucial for meeting the school's academic goals, and it is important for school members to support each other's professional and social growth (Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018; Singh & Townsley, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

School climate refers to six components: (a) safety, (b) teaching and learning, (c) interpersonal relationships, (d) environment, (e) leadership and professional behavior, and (f) social media (NSCC, 2014). There is a difference between school climate and school culture, and between the two of them, it is easier to change the school climate than to change the school culture. While the school climate refers to everyday actions and attitudes, school culture is mostly about shared vision, beliefs, and goals (Gruenert, 2008).

Research studies have been conducted on different aspects of school climate over the past 100 years and have documented comprehensive measures of school climate in order to assist with measuring the quality and character of school climate in different schools and educational organizations (Olsen et al., 2018; Rudasill et al., 2018). A research study on school climate conducted by Dahlkamp et al. (2017) focused on four dimensions of the school climate: collegial leadership, professional relationships, achievement, and institutional vulnerability (measures the relationship between school and community). The study revealed that teacher retention was influenced by parents and their expectations. Also there was a relationship between teacher retention and school climate, as the social interactions among individuals in the school, shape the climate of the school (Dahlkamp et al., 2017; Rudasill et al., 2018). A high number of research studies found that leaders' behavior and staff perceptions have statistically significant correlation

and positively impact job satisfaction and long-term retention (Singh & Townsley, 2020). There are school leaders who build and support a climate of educational equity, while there are leaders who have difficulties in building a culture of equity in their schools. For school leaders to efficiently promote educational equity with a positive effect on teacher retention, they first must have an educational equity mindset (Nadelson et al., 2020). For instance, when a school has a growth mindset, the team members work in a way that supports each other (Hanson et al., 2016). The following components were considered characteristics of an educational equity mindset: (a) instructional leadership, (b) organizational climate and culture leadership, (c) transformative leadership, (d) collaborative leadership, (e) advocacy for educational equity, (f) evidence-based decision making, and (g) student success (Nadelson et al., 2020; Nixon, 2016).

Researchers have shown interest in studying school climate from the perspective of teachers. The teachers' perspective on school climate was explored by considering the following aspects: (a) school relationship, (b) discipline, (c) teachers' relationship, (d) teachers' age, (e) school location, and (f) teachers' resilience (Kor & Opare, 2017; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Lane et al., 2019). In the teachers' view, the benefits of a positive school climate included job satisfaction, staying in the current job, and a positive relationship with their administrators and colleagues (Orzea, 2016; Watson, 2018). A study by Orzea (2016) found that new teachers with less teaching experience felt less supported, less efficient, and saw the environment as being less positive, which was different than the perspective of more experienced teachers. When looking at the age and gender of teachers, the study found that teachers ages 41–50 saw the climate more positive in general (when compared with the teachers who were younger than 30), and the teachers who were over the age of 50 scored higher on climate perceptions (when compared with the younger teachers) despite their gender differences (Orzea, 2016).

Previous research also has found there is a relationship between school climate and student achievement, and the school climate is the most critical factor in the school that can promote and assist with student achievement, albeit a great number of school staff viewed the school climate and student achievement as separate components (Shindler et al., 2016). The relationship between diversity, school climate, and staff retention was also researched. Aldridge and Fraser (2016) found that a positive perception of a diverse school climate was related to an increase in employee satisfaction and retention, as well as an increase of employees feeling supported and accepted.

Statistical data have shown that in the state of Florida, by the middle of the school year in January 2020, around 2,440 teaching positions were vacant, which represented a 10% increase from the previous school year (Florida Education Association, 2020). There were several reasons for teacher and staff shortages in Florida: (a) low salaries, (b) lack of autonomy in instruction, (c) a higher number of standardized tests that take the teachers' autonomy to teach what the students need, (d) lack of support, (e) large class size, and (f) unrealistic expectations regarding teacher evaluation methods (Florida Education Association, 2020). Also, when looking at the quality of school climate per grade levels, the quality of school climate decreased as students moved from the elementary to the secondary school level, and such a result was directly linked to school climate (Berg & Cornell, 2016; Shindler et al., 2016). School climate is seen as a vital component of school improvement that should be addressed in school policies and practices (Berg & Cornell, 2016).

Minimal research attention has been directed toward the role of professional relationships dimension of school climate in teacher retention in public middle schools. Because of knowing the importance of school climate in students' achievement (Nadelson et al., 2020; Shindler et al.,

2016) and knowing the importance of teacher retention in students' education (Holmes et al., 2019), it is necessary to determine the impact of the professional relationships dimension of school climate on teacher retention in public middle schools.

The purpose of this exploratory research study was to explore the role of the school climate's professional relationships dimension in middle school teacher retention, and their reasons to stay in their schools. This study also sought to identify the actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships in middle schools and have a positive effect on teacher retention rates. Identifying the actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships will assist other schools that desire to improve professional relationships in their schools in order to increase teacher retention rates.

Background

Climate is based on collective perceptions, while culture is about shared values and beliefs (Alqarni, 2020; Gruenert, 2008; Rudasill et al., 2018). Although climate studies are frequently done in public schools, their focus is not solely on professional relationships or how such relationships influence school climate and teacher retention. Extensive research involving school climate conducted from the teachers' perspective (Orzea, 2016; Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019) has explored the influence of leadership on school climate (Nadelson et al., 2020) and the relationship between school climate and student achievement (Prius, 2011; Shindler et al., 2016). School climate is about how school staff experience the internal atmosphere; how they understand their relationships; and how they act, interact, and influence each other (Alqarni, 2020).

According to national education standards, the following indicators used to measure school quality: (a) quality of process, (b) quality of teachers and staff, (c) quality of graduates,

(d) quality of financing, (e) quality of content, (f) quality of facilities, and (g) quality of management (Dekawati et al., 2020). School climate variables such as student relationships and collaboration among staff predict commitment. In addition, stronger beliefs and integration of social–emotional learning predict two types of teacher commitment: greater general professional commitment and organizational commitment (Collie et al., 2011).

Previous research has shown that student characteristics, teachers, and schools are components that influence teacher turnover, and there is less understanding about the effects of organizational conditions on teacher retention (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009). Limited research attention has been directed toward the role of the professional relationships dimension of school climate in teacher retention in public middle schools. This study identified actions and strategies that middle schools can implement in Florida and other states to positively impact teacher retention rates, especially in school counties where thousands of teaching positions remained unfilled (Florida Education Association, 2020).

Research Questions

The intent of this study was to conduct research that answered questions and contributed to a lack of research identified by the researcher. This is because there was limited research on the relationship between the school climate professional relationships dimension and teacher retention in public middle schools.

The research questions for this study include the following:

1. How do middle school teachers perceive the school climate of their schools, as it relates to professional relationships and teacher retention?
2. What reasons do middle school teachers identify for staying in their schools?

3. What actions and strategies contribute to healthy professional relationships and positively impact retention of middle school teachers?

Description of Terms

In an effort to minimize confusion or false assumptions regarding terminology, the following definitions were used in this dissertation:

Collegial leadership. Refers to school leaders and the relationships they build with their teachers, according to school's goals and expectations, and the support they offer to the teachers according to their needs (Yuner & Burgaz, 2019).

Interpersonal relationships. The type of collaborative, productive, and strong relationships between teachers and administrators. Trust is critical in building and sustaining these relationships in the school setting (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Organizational climate. The sum of employees' reactions and perceptions to all daily events in terms of operations, decision making, and interactions with others. It also includes a series of characteristics based on the perception of the staff working in that place (Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019).

Professional relationships. A subcategory of the "Staff Only" category of school climate as found by the National School Climate Center. Professional Relationships are defined as positive attitudes and relationships among school staff who support each other, as well as work and learn together (NSCC, 2012).

Professional teacher behavior. Behavior that shows respect for colleagues' experience and qualifications, commitment to students' success, willingness to collaborate, and commitment to self-assessment (Yuner & Burgaz, 2019).

Responsible leadership. A leadership theory that refers to the process of including a series of leadership approaches in educational organizations (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2019).

School climate. The atmosphere and interpersonal relationships of the school (Marsh et al., 2014). Each school has its own school climate based on the perceptions of teachers, students, parents, and administrators, and reflects the school's values, mission, goals, and norms (NSCC, 2014). According to Halpin (1967), a school's climate is created based on the stakeholders' subjective feelings.

School culture. School climate and school culture are similar terms as they measure a school's sense of community, but each term has a different meaning. For instance, each school has a unique culture, and although school climate is about everyday actions and attitudes, school culture is mostly about shared vision, beliefs, and goals (Gruenert, 2008; Nadelson et al., 2020).

Trustworthy leadership. Leadership that is related to three critical aspects of school culture: academic press, collective teacher efficacy, and teacher professionalism (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for all public middle school teachers and school and district administrators who are interested in actions and strategies that contribute to strong professional relationships in order to improve these relationships and increase teacher retention at their schools. Analysis of the research has revealed a gap in the academic literature related to the role of the professional relationships dimension of school climate in middle school teachers' retention. Although there has been extensive quantitative research on school climate studies, there is limited qualitative research on the specific school climate subcategory of professional relationships and its role in teacher retention. This could be because this dimension was created

in 2016 and is still new and also because school climate components are mostly assessed together rather than separately.

Several studies have shown how a negative, hostile school climate negatively impacts the retention of teachers (Dahlkamp et al., 2017; Reaves & Cozzens, 2018; Watson, 2018). Oder and Eisenschmidt (2018) found that people's perceptions of school climate are crucial when it comes to their actions, as such actions are seen as being directly connected to their own perceptions (Abbas & Saad, 2020; Back et al., 2016). For instance, when teachers interact with other professionals outside of the classroom in a specific climate, their relationships with each other can directly influence their actions, feelings, perceptions, and decision making. This is because the teaching profession is a relational one. It was found that variables such as diversity of students, staff, and school system operations can lead to negative or unhealthy relationships among the school staff (Newberry et al., 2018). In conclusion, school climate studies commonly have focused on assessing the strengths and weaknesses through quantitative measures (Hoffman, 2018) and have not included qualitative measures to further explore these areas, and identify specific practices and strategies that could help improve professional relationships and teacher retention. It is crucial for school and district leaders to identify and implement actions and strategies that foster healthy professional relationships that have positive effects on the overall school climate and teacher retention.

There is a gap in the literature regarding research on school climate that has focused specifically on the role of professional relationships in middle school teacher retention, and instead has focused on assessing school climate as a whole (including all six categories and 14 dimensions). By only focusing on the dimension of professional relationships, this research study

will add to the literature and will draw the attention of school and district educational leaders and policy makers on the importance of professional relationships when it comes to teacher retention.

Most school climate studies have been conducted using the quantitative research design, usually by a survey that gathered data showing strong or weak areas (Hoffman, 2018). Several recommendations from school climate research studies encourage the use of a qualitative strand to further investigate areas of strength and weakness. This exploratory research study helps move the current literature beyond the quantitative studies by exploring teachers' perceptions on the role of professional relationships in middle school teacher retention. In addition, the study also sought to identify teachers' reasons for staying in their current positions. The goal of this research study, besides highlighting the importance of professional relationships in middle school teacher retention, was also to identify specific actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships and assist other middle schools that desire to improve professional relationships and to increase teacher retention rates. This exploratory study will not only serve to advance the research in this field but will also provide practical, concrete recommendations to foster healthy professional relationships among teachers and staff.

Overview of Research Methods

For this study, qualitative methods were selected, so the voice of teachers could be captured and added to the literature regarding professional relationships and its role in teacher retention. Specifically, this study used an exploratory research design to explore the perceptions of teachers on school climate in the area of professional relationships and to identify their reasons to stay in their schools, as well as to identify actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships that positively impact middle school teacher retention. Exploratory design allowed the researcher to conduct research that answered the research

questions and contribute to a lack of research identified by the researcher (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 434).

This study utilized semistructured interviews and document review (School Climate Survey data) that Polk County Public Schools (PCPS) collected from their staff regarding school climate. The researcher conducted a document review of the 2018–2019 school-year and the 2020–2021 school-year School Climate Survey results for PCPS in order to capture teachers' perception in the area of professional relationships. The School Climate Survey for staff provided information in three areas: basic demographic information, staff perception of the PCPS and staff perceptions of a specific school (middle school). The survey was developed in-house and aligned with specialty literature on school climate, as well as with the requirements set forth by the district's accreditor, Cognia.

The research study was conducted on three selected middle school campuses in Polk County in Central Florida with “low,” “medium,” and “high” retention rates as shown in the teacher retention report for PCPS. For this study, the researcher purposefully selected nine teachers using purposeful sampling. She invited the participants via an email. All nine participants received an informed consent. After the interviews, the researcher read aloud a debrief statement to each participant. The researcher also informed participants that she was available for follow-up interviews via phone, through email, or in person if there were additional questions.

The researcher developed a set of 16 interview questions for teachers. The questions were formulated in order to capture teachers' perceptions of their school climate as they related to professional relationships, reasons for staying in their current positions, as well as to actions and strategies that positively influence professional relationships and teacher retention.

Qualitative research methods used the inductive process in the collection, exploration, study, analysis, and interpretation of teachers' perceptions of professional relationships and for identifying patterns of commonalities and differences that existed in participants' responses. The researcher analyzed data in two stages: "within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis" (Merriam, 2009, p. 204). Interview responses from nine middle school teachers were analyzed by sorting responses by hand, using coding commonalities and categorizing participants' responses into emerging themes.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Introduction

The organizational climate is defined by the sum of employees' reactions and perceptions to all daily events that take place regarding operations, decision making, and interactions with others (Rudasill et al., 2018; Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019). Experts in organizational behavior identified a connection between people's perceptions about themselves and their actions, intentions, motivations, and determination (Reaves & Cozzens, 2018; Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019). The school staff's perceptions on school climate are crucial, as their actions are explained as the result of their own perceptions. Educational researchers have studied school climate to identify strategies to improve overall school effectiveness (Özgenel, 2020; Propper, 2019) and teacher retention (Dicke et al., 2020).

Albeit there is a high number of quantitative research on school climate studies, there is limited qualitative research on the specific school climate dimension of professional relationships and its role in teacher retention. This could be because this category was created in 2016 and is still new (Hoffman, 2018), and also because school climate components are mostly assessed together rather than separately. In addition, school climate studies usually focus on assessing strengths and weaknesses through quantitative measures and do not necessary include qualitative measures to further explore these areas and identify specific practices and strategies that could help improve these relationships and teacher retention.

This literature review provides an overview of the school climate as it relates to professional relationships and teacher retention. When discussing school climate, close attention has been paid to the following areas: description of the school climate and its role, professional

relationships dimension of school climate, and school climate improvement strategies as found by previous research studies. The literature review explores teacher retention topic and its connection to professional relationships by looking at the following areas: (a) statistics of teacher retention, (b) reasons for teachers staying and leaving their schools or teaching profession, (c) the importance of the professional relationships dimension of school climate in middle school teacher retention, and (d) strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships and teacher retention.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework has an important role in the research study as a basis for methods, observations, concepts, research designs, interpretations, and the process involved in a study (Hean et al., 2016). According to Kivunja (2018), a theoretical framework provides a solid structure and guides the research by pointing to what to look for in the data, the connections between the elements of the study, and the findings based on the existing theories.

The theoretical framework for this research study derived from the description of school climate as identified by Emile Durkheim, a sociologist who studied the social engagement process and its connection to education. Durkheim found in the early 1900s that the process of learning is not based only on gathering knowledge but also includes a social element, as students are part of a learning community, and learning is a social act (Prius, 2011). The studies on school climate were continued by the National School Climate Center in the 2000s with the development of six categories with 13 dimensions of school climate (Hoffman, 2018). An additional dimension called “social inclusion” was added in 2020 under “Institutional Environment” (see Appendix A for categories and 14 dimensions). Out of all dimensions, “professional relationships” dimension was the focus of this study. Besides professional

relationships of school climate, the focus of this study was also teacher retention. The job embeddedness theory was chosen as the theoretical framework to explore the element of teacher retention in this study, due to its focus on reasons people decide to stay in their position rather than focus on the psychological process of people quitting their jobs (Mitchell et al., 2001; Watson, 2018). Using a theoretical framework directs the focus of the study toward particular aspects while disregarding other areas, which results in a coherent and “doable” study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Theoretical framework has been described as the sum of theories identified by the experts in the field they plan to research, and it is seen as the structure of the concepts and theories resulting from previously tested knowledge. Once these concepts and theories are gathered, they are synthesized to create a basis for interpretation and data analysis (Kivunja, 2018). When looking at the school climate’s dimension of professional relationships at the middle school level, there is a gap, so the purpose of this study was to explore teachers’ perceptions of school climate as it relates to professional relationships and teacher retention to identify the reasons teachers stay at their schools, as well as to determine strategies and actions that contribute to healthy professional relationships that have a positive effect on teacher retention.

The framework of this study was grounded on the studies of Durkheim (1903) on the role of social interaction that naturally takes place in schools. Discovering that the educational process is also a social act as the students interact with teachers and peers in order to learn, Durkheim’s theory of the importance and impact of the social environment on school and students’ learning resulted in educators realizing there are nonacademic factors that impact the students’ learning (Prius, 2011). The social aspect of education relates to students interacting with each other, students interacting with their teachers, and teachers interacting socially with

their peers and leaders in the school setting. According to Prius (2011), Durkheim viewed educational theories that focus only on the individual as inadequate and highlighted the importance of focusing on the community. In conclusion, this theory provided insight that professional relationships among teachers have an impact on students' learning, as the learning process is also a social act.

Halpin and Croft (1963) continued the research of these concepts and created the Organizational Climate Descriptive Questionnaire survey in order to measure the interpersonal relationships in school settings. In the last 100 years, several researchers have studied school climate and documented comprehensive measures of school climate in order to assist with assessing the quality and character of school climate in different schools and educational organizations (Olsen et al., 2018). For instance, the Organizational Climate Descriptive Questionnaire, developed by Halpin and Croft, includes eight dimensions of the school climate and focuses on teachers' and principals' perceptions on the school's interpersonal relationships. Other school climate assessments used by researchers to measure school climate are the Classroom Environment Scale, developed by Moos and Trickett in 1974 (based on the conceptualization of the individual–environment relationship); the School Climate Survey, which contains seven dimensions of the school climate (based on students' perceptions such as achievement motivation, fairness, order and discipline, parental involvement, sharing of resources, student interpersonal relationships, and student–teacher relationship); the Charles F. Kettering Ltd. School Climate instrument, which includes four sections (for teachers, administrators, and students); and the Effective School Battery, which has two versions, one for students, another one for teachers (Cocoradă & Clinciu, 2009).

National School Climate Center continued the research of school climate in the 2000s, and created six categories of school climate with 14 dimensions by 2020 (see Appendix A for categories and dimensions). “Professional Relationships” dimension was the focus of this study. The National School Climate Center developed six school climate categories for school leaders to consider when monitoring and analyzing the school climate of their schools. Professional relationships is the 14th dimension of school climate. According to the National School Climate Center (2020), a school’s strengths and weaknesses can be identified in six main areas (components) and a total of 14 dimensions: Safety (rules and norms, sense of physical security, sense of social–emotional security), Teaching and Learning (support for learning, social and civic learning), Interpersonal Relationships (respect for diversity, social support–adults, social support–students), Institutional Environment (school connectedness and engagement, physical surroundings), Social Media (social media), and Staff Only (leadership, professional relationships).

The focus of this study was the professional relationships dimension of school climate. Professional relationships are defined as “positive attitudes and relationships among school staff that support effectively, working and learning together” (NSCC, n.d., para. 12). The National School Climate Center has recommended schools and districts leaders who want to identify the strong and weak areas of their schools, to conduct studies of their stakeholders’ perceptions on school climate and to gather data that help identify these areas (NSCC, n.d.).

The theory of job embeddedness originated from the field of economics and applied psychology to provide a better understanding of the reason employees remain in their current positions or jobs than theories based on job satisfaction and alternatives (Kiazad et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2001). Holtom et al. (2013) believed that job embeddedness increases over time

as individuals make more connections and spend more time in their current jobs, and as a result, the longer they stay at a job, the more embedded or ingrained they become, which makes it difficult for them to leave that job. For instance, Watson (2018) found that when looking at the new teachers' retention from the perspective of job embeddedness, there was a connection between retention and employees' levels of job embeddedness.

Previous research studies have shown that theory of job embeddedness was used in researching employees' retention in order to predict their job retention, and in developing surveys and quantitative measurements to fit a variety of contexts and rationales. In addition when looking at the existing literature, it seems that this theory was used more as prediction of embeddedness in job surveys rather than as interventions or solution for employee retention (Shah et al., 2020; Siedlok et al., 2015; Sun & Huang, 2020).

The main components of job embeddedness are Fit (the level of comfort and compatibility of an individual into the organization), Links (formal and informal social connections and relationships, including friends, family, and coworkers, as well as religious aspects and other interactions), and Sacrifice (the perceived cost of material or psychological benefits (Holtom et al., 2006; Larkin et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2001; Watson, 2018). Within the job embeddedness context, the first two components of Fit and Links are defined in a positive sense, as related to existing and identifiable indicators. However, the Sacrifice component of job embeddedness is defined in a negative sense due to its association with potential loss once an individual leaves his or her job (Larkin et al., 2021).

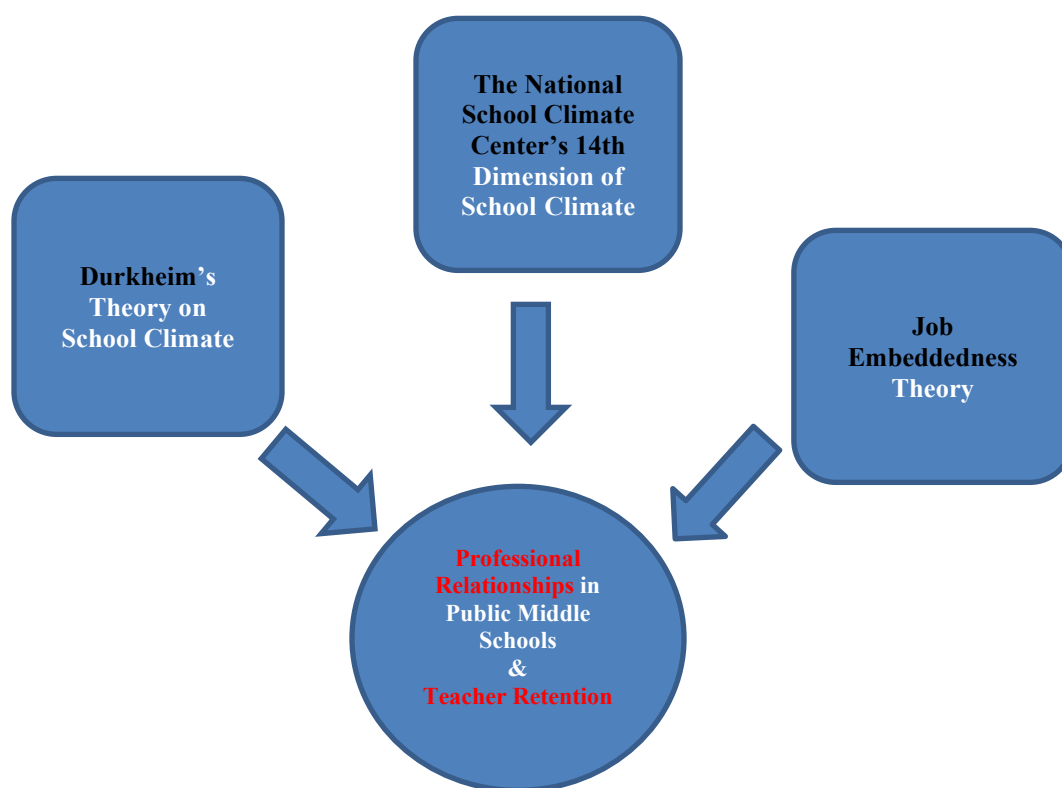
Statistics show that 12% of new teachers leave the teaching profession in the first two years, 3% leave the profession in the first five years, while in terms of the subject areas, math, science, and special education positions are more difficult to fill (Watson, 2018). Goldring et al.

(2014) found that during the 2011–2012 school year, over 15%, almost a half-million, of all public school teachers either left the teaching profession or took a new position. Statistics show that 50% of all teachers leave within their first five years of employment (Gray & Taie, 2015). When looking at school grade level, a significant number of staff turnover has been recorded at the middle school level as compared with elementary school and high school levels (Dupriez et al., 2016; Shindler et al., 2016).

Within the field of educational research, there has been a great focus on the reasons people leave teaching (Ingersoll & May, 2012; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Rinke, 2014; Saka et al., 2013) rather than stay in their positions, and studies have identified the following variables that contribute to teacher attrition: student behavior, lack of administrative support, lack of leadership opportunities and autonomy, and socialization. In addition, the following major factors were found responsible to impact employee retention: interpersonal relationships, job satisfaction, personal reasons, and financial motivation (Fulbeck & Richards, 2015; Ingersoll & May, 2012). The job embeddedness theory focuses on the reasons people stay in their current jobs and on how embedded individuals are within their place of employment (Larkin et al., 2021).

This research study was framed within the context of school climate and teacher retention based on Durkheim's studies on the importance of the school community (including relationships among teachers in the learning process), the 14th dimension (professional relationships) of school climate as found by the National School Climate Center, and job embeddedness theory as related to teachers' reasons for staying in their current job. Figure 1 shows the influences affecting professional relationships and teacher retention.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework

Note. Visual representation of the theories guiding professional relationships and teacher retention.

A high number of middle schools across the country have been experiencing challenges due to difficulties in teacher retention. The National School Climate Center developed six specific categories of school climate that can assist school leaders in identifying the health of their school climate, along with actions and strategies that foster healthy professional relationships and have positive effects on teacher retention. In order to retain teachers, schools need to improve their professional relationships. For this reason, relationships between teachers and school staff were examined through the lens of the professional relationships dimension of

school climate. The job embeddedness theory guided the process of identifying the reasons teachers decided to stay in their current positions.

Characteristics of School Climate

Organizational climate is defined by the sum of employees' reactions and perceptions to all events that take place daily regarding operations, decision making, interactions with others, and also includes a series of characteristics based on the perception of the staff working in that place (Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019). The organizational climate is also connected to people's perceptions on the school climate and their actions, attitude, and work related behavior (Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019).

The National School Climate Center (2012) defined school climate as “the quality and character of school life” (p. 1). School climate is a multidimensional concept that includes the values, interpersonal relationships, goals, teaching practices, learning outcomes, the environment of learning, safety, and organizational structures of a school community (Özgenel, 2020).

Previous studies have shown that it is difficult to define the school climate because the climate is composed of many interrelated elements, and because of this, improving the school climate can impact important factors directly related to students' success. For this reason, it is recommended that school leaders and school staff start working on the school climate to improve school effectiveness (Özgenel, 2020).

Rudasill et al. (2018) found that despite a significantly high number of school staff who viewed the school climate and student achievement as separate components, the school climate and student achievement are highly related and connected. The quality of the climate is the most critical factor when predicting student achievement (Rudasill et al., 2018; Shindler et al., 2016). A positive school climate not only motivates staff to teach but also focuses on the

physical, social–emotional, and intellectual development of the students. It also focuses on the conditions of students’ learning and helps to reduce the students’ learning difficulties (Özgenel, 2020).

School climate is considered an essential feature of the school that can influence positive behavior and students’ academic achievement, as well as students’ social–emotional skills (Borkar, 2016). For instance, a school with a positive school climate is described as a place where the students feel welcomed, appreciated, safe, and are taught by caring teachers with whom they build relationships of trust. A positive school climate also refers to positive emotions shared by all individuals in the school, such as students, teachers, administrators, and parents (Borkar, 2016; Özgenel, 2020). School climate has a great impact on students’ learning, social–emotional development, and behaviors, and because of that, it is crucial what the students think about their school climate. Besides students, other stakeholders are affected by the school climate, such as teachers’ morale, productivity, and staff retention (Reaves & Cozzens, 2018; Propper, 2019). In conclusion, school climate is the result of the collaborations and actions of administrators, teachers, parents, and students (Yuner & Burgaz, 2019).

The U.S. Department of Education has recognized the importance of school climate and highlighted the importance of fostering a positive, safe, and respectful school climate in schools, as shown by a multitude of research studies on school climate (Kathleen et al., 2018; Kor & Opare, 2017; Tekel & Karadağ, 2017). When closely looking at the existing literature, some conceptual and theoretical confusion was observed, as well as a need for clarification of concepts related to school climate. For instance, although the school climate is described as a complex concept, it is often measured as a unidimensional concept only (Kathleen et al., 2018). In order to maintain healthy school climate and identify the areas of needs, school leaders are encouraged to

conduct yearly school climate surveys among teachers, parents, staff, and students (Hoffman, 2018).

Professional Relationships

Although most of the teachers' work takes place in the classroom, they also interact with other professionals outside the classroom in a specific climate that can directly influence their actions, feelings, perceptions, and decision making (Alqarni, 2020; Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018). When looking at a school staff's intentions toward their professional relationships, such intentions are critical to facilitate building strong relationships of trust. Trust can be instilled by displaying vulnerability to others and encouraging behaviors that foster trust among the school staff, such as honesty, benevolence, competence, and reliability (Dekawati et al., 2020; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

According to the National School Climate Center (2020), a school climate includes six main components and 14 dimensions. The six main components are: Safety, Teaching and Learning, Interpersonal Relationships, Institutional Environment, Social Media, and Staff Only. The National School Climate Center was created by Columbia University in 1996 with the purpose to equip educational leaders with the necessary leadership skills, provide teacher resources and support, advocate for educational policy, and improve student learning and development (NSCC, n.d.). In 2002 four categories were developed related to school climate studies: Safety, Teaching and Learning, Interpersonal Relationships, and Institutional Environment (NSCC, n.d.). All school climate categories have subcategories (see Appendix A for a full list of subcategories). Next, in 2017 the sixth category, Social Media, was added. In 2020, a new dimension, Social Inclusion was added under Institutional Environment. The last component of school climate includes two dimensions: Leadership and Professional

Relationships. The focus of this study was the professional relationships dimension of school climate described as “positive attitudes and relationships among school staff that support effectively, working and learning together” (NSCC, n.d.). Professional Relationships became the 14th dimension of school climate after Social Inclusion dimension was added under Institutional Environment component in 2020.

A school staff's routine behaviors and attitudes are important to address when discussing school climate (Alqarni, 2020). It is very important to consider the social and emotional elements of the work of teachers when discussing fostering effective, supportive professional relationships. The lack of supportive relationships can affect many teachers, especially new teachers, by taking away the support they need to be successful (Akar & Çelik, 2019; Newberry et al., 2018).

Experts in the field of organizational behavior have identified a connection between employees' perceptions of themselves and their actions, intentions, motivations, and activities (Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019). For instance, people's perceptions of school climate are crucial to understanding the impact their perceptions have on their actions. Previous studies have shown, if individuals shared negative perceptions about their schools where they worked, their actions and behaviors aligned with their perceptions (Akar & Çelik, 2019; Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019; Thomas et al., 2016).

The relationships within the school represent the most important aspect of school climate because these relationships offer support, belongingness, and collaboration (Kathleen et al., 2018). They reflect the values of school community members and have an impact on people's decisions, the way they act, and the way they perceive their school climate (Kathleen et al., 2018; Nixon, 2016). For instance, a strong collaborative relationship among school staff will have a

positive effect on students' achievement and on the ways the students and staff perceive the school climate (Kathleen et al., 2018).

According to Newberry et al. (2018), there are three types of teacher relationships: casual relationships, contrived relationships, and evaluative relationships. Casual relationships start when the teachers, despite their limited time to interact with their colleagues, seek emotional support, for example, when they share stories about the stressful circumstances associated with students' behaviors or the high number of tasks they must complete during a limited time. Contrived relationships form when teachers often meet during team meetings, staff meetings, and professional learning community meetings. These types of relationships lack the emotional depth that teachers need in their everyday job. Contrived relationships usually have an agenda and are created to support the beliefs, goals, and values of the school community. Some of the teachers might have difficulties building relationships during such meetings due to disagreement over the strategies they use when working with students, which results in teachers not sharing their ideas and/or beliefs. The last type of teacher relationships are evaluative relationships that take place when the teachers are under evaluation. Sometimes, teachers have concerns regarding their teaching, which can result in vulnerability. Instructional leadership with a focus on the mission of the school and empowering teachers, creates opportunities for teachers to engage and build strong relationships. In conclusion, the ideal relationships among teachers would be the relationships that foster emotional and professional support (Dekawati et al., 2020; Newberry et al., 2018).

Two components of school climate related to professional relationships are professional teacher behavior and collegial leadership. Professional teacher behavior shows respect for colleagues' experience and qualifications, commitment to students' success, willingness to

collaborate, and commitment to self-assessment. Collegial leadership refers to school leaders and the relationships they build with their teachers, expectations, schools' goals, and support school leaders offer to teachers according to their needs (Yuner & Burgaz, 2019).

School leadership plays an important role in managing relationships within the school community and fostering healthy professional relationships. Promoting trust, collaboration, cooperation, and transparency in interactions among school staff, including students, teachers, and administrators, is an example of the type of interaction in a school with a positive school climate (Kathleen et al., 2018). The way school leaders manage accountability and commitment in their school is very important when building relationships and fostering a sense of community within the school (Shirrell, 2016; Watson & Bogotch, 2016).

Previous research has shown that school leaders are highly successful in influencing teachers with their leadership behaviors (Akdemir, 2020). In terms of the types of leadership that foster healthy professional relationships, responsible leadership is a leadership theory that includes a series of leadership approaches in educational organizations (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2019). This leadership theory is important because it highlights the characteristics school leaders need to possess along with their willingness to make a positive impact in their learning communities. A leader who embraces responsible leadership shows support to teachers and staff, assists them in finding solutions to their problems, and acts by showing dedication, a caring attitude, and the motivation to succeed (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2019).

Trustworthy leadership is about empowering work and investing in relationships with other school members in the school community (Freire & Fernandes, 2016). A school wide culture of trust, and especially trust in the principal, has been found to be an important factor for the development of professional learning communities. Also it was found that when teachers

trust their principal, they are likely to act with professionalism (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). To best support teachers in their development as professionals, it is important to create professional communities in their schools and disciplines. These professional communities function best, when they are defined by trust and teamwork (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

Transformational or visionary leadership focuses on setting vision for team members, and refers to actions leaders do to inspire followers rising above current expectations when it comes to achievement and performance. It doesn't only enable teachers to identify their work values, but also helps with increasing their sense of self-efficacy and reduces teacher burnout (Tsang, 2018; Tsang & Teng, 2022). In addition, transformational leadership behaviors such as developing a vision for employees, focusing on goals, using problem-solving techniques, having a sense of purpose, and providing adequate training for team members, were found to likely impact employee retention (Amankwaa & Anku-Tsedee, 2015; Tian et al., 2020; Van der Vyver et al., 2020).

A sign of unhealthy professional relationships is self-sabotage, described as failing to complete duties, making complaints, intentionally performing poorly, and coming up with excuses (Abbas & Saad, 2020; Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019). In contrast with self-sabotage, healthy professional relationships are when people display positive attitudes among each other, support, work and learn together (NSCC, n.d.). This occurs especially when the perceptions of stakeholders of the school climate are considered by the district leaders when planning for school climate improvement activities (Propper, 2019). Also when the perceptions of positive organizational climate increase in educational institutions, the self-sabotaging behaviors of school staff decrease (Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019; Winn & Dykes, 2019).

When looking at the quality of school climate per grade level, it has been demonstrated that the quality of school climate decreases as students move from the elementary to the secondary school level, and this result is directly linked to school climate (Shindler et al., 2016). It has been also demonstrated that when a school has a growth mindset, the team members work in a way that supports each other (Hanson et al., 2016). For example, a higher level of support and a growth mindset were found at the elementary level as compared with the secondary level, which was characterized by less support and lack of a common vision when it comes to students' success (Hanson et al., 2016). When all the school staff and stakeholders collaborate well, and when the equality, accountability, and transparency in schools increase, the climate of the school becomes more positive. Also, when they perceive the school climate to be more positive, teachers believe more in their leaders' support and effectiveness (Yuner & Burgaz, 2019).

Creating a positive school climate and healthy professional relationships start at the administrative level and require building relationships with teachers, which impact students' academic, social, and emotional growth. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) found that teachers were more likely to act with professionalism when they had trust in their leaders, which positively impacted students' learning and school climate.

These relationships will have a critical impact on students' progress, relationships among staff, and on school climate in general: if the staff morale is low, it will have a negative impact on the entire school community (Warner & Heindel, 2017). In addition, a common approach to school improvement states that building relationships and commitment with staff are two critical components necessary to ensure school improvement. The following characteristics have been found critical for school success and positive school climate: (a) dedication, (b) caring attitude toward teachers, (c) openness for assisting staff, (d) diligence, (e) taking ownership, and (f)

leading by vision and values (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2019). This is because an educational system characterized by effectiveness and work ethics has a strong foundation to ensure learning success.

School Climate Improvement Strategies

The school climate improvement process is an intentional and team-oriented effort, including all stakeholders in the following practices: (a) team decision making; (b) team planning by using stakeholders' input; (c) improvement activities based on the needs of students and learning community; (d) professional development (PD) to improve team skills; (e) using a research-based curriculum; (f) interventions and instruction; and (g) improvement regarding policies, procedures related to learning environments, and school operations (NSCC, 2012; Tekel & Karadağ, 2017). The participation of all stakeholders is critical in the school climate improvement process and requires the collection of stakeholders' input by using quantitative data, such as surveys, and qualitative data, such as interviews and focus groups, when it comes to decision making and planning (NSCC, 2012; Özgenel, 2020).

School climate assessment usually includes assessing the following aspects: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and environment. Previous study found that school leaders face numerous difficulties when attempting to continually and properly assess the perceptions of their schools' stakeholders of their school climate (Propper, 2019). In order to improve their school climate, a high number of schools have used positive psychology interventions to address school climate issues and to increase the well-being of the staff and students through positive thinking and behaviors (Borkar, 2016). Besides positive psychology, positive education has been crucial for a positive school climate and academic success (Borkar, 2016). For instance, creating a coaching culture and using positive education in schools promoted a school climate that

efficiently met the well-being of the students and staff and led to academic success.

Implementation of positive education strategies promoted a coaching culture that benefited the mental and emotional well-being of students and staff (Borkar, 2016). Academic mindsets are built on the following components: the person's belief of belonging, the belief that personal growth occurs through effort, the belief that the person can succeed at the classroom tasks (Hanson et al., 2016).

A study conducted by Oder and Eisenschmidt (2018) showed that there was no connection between a traditional teaching approach and school climate. In addition, strong connections between school climate and effective teaching approaches were found. For instance, where the school climate was cooperative and strong collegial relationships existed, the teachers used effective interdisciplinary knowledge and skills with positive effects on students' learning (Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018).

By identifying and addressing the issues through a systematic method of data collection and analysis, including all stakeholders' perceptions, school leaders can come up with an efficient action plan for improvement that will include stakeholders' input (Propper, 2019). In addition, increasing the perception of a positive climate will decrease self-sabotaging behavior in schools. Leadership has been found to play an important role in school climate, with a positive effect on decreasing the self-sabotaging behaviors (Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019). In order to prevent toxic behaviors, school leaders must build resilience at the organization and department level by using a model that includes establishing a public set of values or a moral code (Winn & Dykes, 2019). It is important to understand how the supervisor's perception of a school leader correlates to that of the teachers' perception, as a clear understanding of these correlations in school settings can help principals and assistant principals adjust their leadership practices to

better meet the needs of their teachers, which might prevent teachers from leaving their profession due to a perceived lack of administrative support (Brown & Wynn, 2009; Singh & Townsley, 2020).

Sertel and Tanriogen (2019) recommended implementing the following strategies to improve the school climate: (a) create a mentoring system for teachers and administrators, (b) encourage self-efficacy, (c) foster a collaborative leadership style along with support and tolerance, and (d) assist staff in improving their self-perceptions and perceptions about the school. Trusting relationships are essential for a healthy and positive school climate (Nixon, 2016; Nowack & Zak, 2020). Trust is also considered a critical element in successful, well-performing schools, and it is defined as the willingness to show personal vulnerability to others by believing that others are honest, open, reliable, competent, and have good intentions (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Once trust is established, confidence in others increases with positive effects on the willingness to take risks and fulfill their job responsibilities. Because relationships and expectations can change overtime, trust is considered a dynamic construct (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). In conclusion, the following factors play an important role in creating a positive school climate: the quality of communication of the school community, the culture of the school, environmental factors, academic performance, school safety, and the degree of trust and respect of the staff in the school (Özgenel, 2020).

School Climate and Teacher Retention

Teacher retention continues to be an issue as teachers leaving the campus, or their profession, is on the rise (Dahlkamp et al., 2017; Tuan, 2020). Although teacher retention has been studied multiple times in the past, more research is needed due to current teacher shortages. At the time of this study, a teacher shortage was observed across the country (Tuan, 2020). The

reason for such a shortage was mainly linked not to the lack of graduates eligible for teaching, but the inability of the educational system to retain the teachers (Dupriez et al., 2016; Koedel & Xiang, 2017) and due to an increase in the workload and students' behavioral issues (Barmby, 2006). When looking at the duration of teaching experience, the new teachers are most likely to leave the profession of education just after few months or few years (Dupriez et al., 2016; Orzea, 2016). Despite teachers' qualifications, studies have shown that the teachers who have the most advanced status are the most likely to leave (Dupriez et al., 2016).

The teaching profession is seen as a relational one. Thus, teachers' professional relationships can be very difficult due to the variety of school staff and members, the goals, and the way the system is operating (Newberry et al., 2018). The number of teachers leaving the educational profession and those teachers who dislike the profession have increased due to an increase in accountability and requirements that teachers have to face daily, which forces them to choose between staying in the profession or looking into a new career path that values them and their students (Dunn, 2015; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2003), 621,000 elementary and secondary teachers left the educational profession due to a negative school climate, negative teachers' perceptions, and safety issues related to the school environment (Reaves & Cozzens, 2018). In addition, according to the National Center for Education and Regional Assistance (ED) et al. (2020), there is a strong connection between school climate and teacher turnover. Previous research by Watson (2018) showed that a high number of new teachers were leaving the educational profession in the United States, especially during the first three years.

Statistics show that 12% of new teachers leave the profession in the first two years; 23% leave the profession in the first five years. In terms of the subject areas, math, science, and

special education positions are more difficult to fill (Watson, 2018). Also, severe shortages of math, science, and special educators were found in different parts of the country for economically disadvantaged students (Reitman & Karge, 2019; Tuan, 2020). Looking at statistical data from a 2012 schools and staffing survey and a 2013 teacher follow-up survey, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) found that science, mathematics, and special education teachers were more likely to leave teaching professions than those in other fields. A study by Dupriez et al. (2016) found that the rate of teachers leaving the profession was higher during the first year but showed a decrease afterward. The rate of leaving is also much higher in secondary education than elementary education. Research also has shown that teachers with training in education are much more stable in their profession than their peers without teacher qualification (Dupriez et al., 2016). This has a negative financial impact, as it is estimated that more than \$7 billion is spent on teacher turnover annually (Reitman & Karge, 2019; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).

When looking at the reasons why teachers leave their jobs, a study by Dunn (2015) found that the reason behind their decision was not money related (Koedel & Xiang, 2017) but related to not feeling appreciated. Teachers stated that the teaching profession devalued them and their students and negatively impacted their morale (Dunn, 2015). Although a high amount of research has been conducted on teacher retention, few connections have been made between education and politics or the economy; as a result, it is imperative to know how educational policies and practices are affecting teachers who face many challenges today and especially how to affect teacher retention (Dunn, 2015; Propper, 2019). In addition, looking at the reasons behind low teacher retention and high turnover, a negative, hostile school climate plays an important role

along with teachers' dissatisfaction related to school environments (Nowack & Zak, 2020; Reaves & Cozzens, 2018).

Another difficulty that affects teacher retention and school culture is student behavior in schools with staffing challenges. Teachers who often deal with students' behavioral issues, such as defiance, disruption of the classroom environment, use of inappropriate language, confrontations, disrespect and insubordination, and physical altercations, are likely to face high stress and leave the school and/or their profession (Holmes et al., 2019; Ramos & Hughes, 2020). According to Watson (2018), the most frequent reasons for leaving educational professions are workplace conditions, students' behaviors, and personal reasons related to different circumstances. The reasons for staying in the profession are trust in the administration, effective mentoring, relationship with colleagues, and useful PD. A study conducted by Dupriez et al. (2016) found that schools with large socially disadvantaged populations and low-academic-performing students had a higher rate of staff turnover in the United States and in several European countries. For instance, data on teacher retention in Texas showed that despite teachers' years of experience, teachers moving into other schools or attrition occurred usually in schools with a high level of low-performing students and a high percentage of African Americans and Hispanic students (Dupriez et al., 2016).

According to Holmes et al. (2019), teachers left challenging schools due to the following reasons: lack of principal effectiveness, weak administrative structures, student discipline issues, lack of district support and high demands, unstable school culture, low-performing students, and poor salary. When the administrative structures in challenging schools are weak, the teachers leave the profession at a high rate, and parents worry about their children's learning. At the same time, students' achievement decreases and the learning process is disturbed (Holmes et al.,

2019). A study by Barmby (2006) found that workload increase had negatively impacted teacher retention, resulting in many teachers leaving their current teaching positions and choosing different careers with a more manageable workload. When it comes to students' behavior, many teachers have indicated that disrespectful, aggressive student behavior would be at the top of their list for leaving. The study concluded that in order to improve teacher retention, the issues related with workload and student behavior should be addressed by the school leaders (Barmby, 2006; Ramos & Hughes, 2020). However, regarding students, one of the most frequent reasons mentioned by teachers when looking at reasons for staying in their schools was related to students (Battles & Looney, 2014; Collie et al., 2011).

The teachers' perception of the school climate is associated with age, teaching experience, location of the school, and grade level they teach (Orzea, 2016). Previous research conducted by Reaves and Cozzens (2018) found that a positive school climate was usually associated with high student academic achievement, high graduation rates, decreased behavior and discipline issues, and high teacher retention rates. Findings of this study indicate there is a connection among teachers' perceptions about school climate, motivation, and self-efficacy (Reaves & Cozzens, 2018). For instance, a teacher who feels safe and supported will display higher motivation and self-efficacy in all actions that will have positive effects on the school climate. According to Krommendyk (2007), teachers who can contribute to a healthy school climate have the following characteristics: willingness to support their colleagues, trustful relationships with their principals, satisfaction with their work, ability to keep up with the job demands, fewer student discipline problems, and ability to control decisions that impact their teaching.

A previous study by Dahlkamp et al. (2017) showed that although the results indicate that a relationship does not exist between principal self-efficacy and teacher retention or principal self-efficacy and school climate, the findings suggest a relationship between teacher retention and school climate. As a result feeling safe and supported, teachers demonstrated higher motivation and self-efficacy than the teachers who did not feel safe and supported. The findings of the study also show that clear expectations had a positive impact on motivation, while administrators support had a positive impact on self-efficacy (Nowack & Zak, 2020; Reaves & Cozzens, 2018). A previous study conducted by Orzea (2016) showed that when looking at age, teachers 41–50 years old saw the school climate more positively in general as compared with teachers who were less than 30 years old. In terms of results, the teachers who were over the age of 50 scored higher than the younger teachers. There were no gender differences when it came to the school climate perspective. When analyzing the factors of school climate according to teachers' age, there was a difference between teachers under the age of 45 and those who were over the age of 45 in their perception of school climate. Teachers who were over the age of 45 demonstrated an increase in positive school climate than those who aware under the age of 45 (Orzea, 2016).

Regarding the professional relationships dimension of school climate and its connection to teacher retention, Dupriez et al. (2016) stated that building relationships and promoting a positive school climate are two important components with a positive effect on teacher retention. A study by Pepe et al. (2017) on public school teachers found that teachers' job perceptions and attitudes were directly impacted by the work environment and relationships in the environment. Teachers who believe that they can positively impact their students' learning usually have a positive perception of school climate (Guo & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2011). The lack of social

skills and empathy has a significant and meaningful effect on interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Nowack & Zak, 2020). Toxic leadership behavior also has a strong negative impact on the workplace's climate, employee's performance, motivation, and attendance due to increasing harassment among the teams and bringing negativity into the workplace (Abbas & Saad, 2020).

Beginner teachers stated that early support such as mentoring, PD activities, collegial relationships, pedagogical knowledge, and reflection had a great role in their decisions to continue to remain in their profession (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Reitman & Karge, 2019). According to Grayson and Alvarez (2008), school climate can increase or decrease teachers' feelings of being valued, motivation, exhaustion, and determination to stay in the current job. The following factors were identified as the most important when it comes to teacher satisfaction: school climate, communication, leadership, structure, involvement, and job satisfaction (Crisci et al., 2019).

According to Reitman and Karge (2019), when beginning teachers receive effective support and PD in areas of noticed concerns (assistance with lesson planning, cultural diversity, curriculum differentiation during the first five years of teaching), there is a high possibility the teachers will remain in the educational profession. First-year teachers consider their collegial relationships when making retention decisions (Miller & Youngs, 2021). Also, innovative schools can assist teachers, particularly new teachers, to feel like a part of the community and have a positive effect on teacher retention (Glennie et al., 2016). In addition, the teachers who are connected to their school community are more likely to stay in their positions as compared with teachers who are not connected. In order to comply with the high demands of the curriculum, teachers should include activities in their everyday work that promote cooperation

with their colleagues (learning from each other, sharing experiences, and being involved in decision-making processes) that create a positive school climate for teachers and students (Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018). The conclusions of this study show that retention is related to factors beyond the influence of teacher preparation programs or school administrators (Reitman & Karge, 2019).

In addition, when provided with comprehensive support implemented with fidelity, the number of teachers staying in the profession increases. To improve retention, school leaders must invest time and effort in providing the beginning teachers with the effective support they need during the first five years of their careers (Miller & Youngs, 2021; Reitman & Karge, 2019). This is because job satisfaction is defined as a positive emotional state due to a higher level of appreciation. Job satisfaction has been correlated to work performance, and it has been found that the teachers who experience a high level of job satisfaction also have shown more success in teaching their students (Crisci et al., 2019).

In order to increase teacher retention, principals should focus on activities that promote connectivity on campus, build relationships and collaboration among school staff (Watson, 2018), and address the two issues of workload and student behavior (Barmby, 2006). Also, according to Nauman (2018), teachers need a school environment that promotes strong relationships, supports their autonomy, and provides them with the resources they need in the classroom to meet the needs of all their learners. When discussing staff retention, the following components were found critical: providing staff with clear expectations and responsibilities and giving staff the opportunity to grow by providing them with the necessary support (Huang & Cho, 2010; Özgenel, 2020).

To support teachers in their development as professionals, it is important to create professional communities in their schools and disciplines. These professional communities function best when they are defined by trust and teamwork. A schoolwide culture of trust, and especially trust in the principal, has been found to be an important factor for the development of professional learning communities (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Providing effective, comprehensive early support at the beginning of their careers is critical for school staff to grow professionally and to remain in their professions for the benefit of their students and the school community (Reitman & Karge, 2019).

Conclusion

In this chapter, research was presented to identify characteristics of school climate as it relates to professional relationships and teacher retention. The literature review explored the topic of teacher retention and school climate's professional relationships by looking at the following aspects: (a) statistics of teacher retention, (b) reasons for staying and leaving their teaching profession, (c) the importance of a school climate's professional relationships in middle school teacher retention, and (d) strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships and teacher retention.

First, teachers' perceptions on school climate and professional relationships were discussed. In a school with a positive school climate, each member of the school community works together to accomplish a shared school vision and teams up to achieve common school goals (NSCC, 2012). School climate is influenced by a variety of factors, especially by the collaborations and actions of teachers, administrators, parents, and students (Yuner & Burgaz, 2019). Staff perceptions are important because they facilitate building strong relationships of trust that have positive effects on school climate (Dekawati et al., 2020; Tschannen-Moran &

Gareis, 2015). Teachers' perceptions of school climate are crucial because their actions are explained as the result of their perceptions. When individuals share negative perceptions about their schools, their actions and behaviors are more likely to align with their perceptions (Akar & Çelik, 2019; Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019; Thomas et al., 2016).

Second, school climate improvement strategies were discussed with a focus on the dimension of professional relationships. Creating a positive school climate starts at the administrative level and requires building relationships with the teachers, which impacts students' academic, social, and emotional growth, as well as teacher and principal retention (Warner & Heindel, 2017). The following improvement strategies were identified in order to foster healthy professional relationships: (a) creating a mentoring system for teachers and administrators, (b) encouraging self-efficacy, (c) building trusting relationships, (d) fostering a collaborative leadership style along with support and tolerance, and (e) assisting staff in improving their self-perceptions and perceptions about the school (Nixon, 2016; Nowack & Zak, 2020; Sertel and Tanriogen, 2019).

Third, the connection between professional relationships and teacher retention was discussed. Teachers want to work in a positive working environment where they can build strong relationships with their coworkers. Building strong, trustful relationships is critical because there is a connection between the professional relationships dimension of school climate and teacher retention, where building relationships and promoting a positive school result in higher retention (Dupriez et al., 2016). In conclusion, the following characteristics were found critical for school success, teacher retention, and positive school climate: (a) dedication, (b) caring attitude toward teachers, (c) openness for assisting staff, (d) diligence, (e) providing differentiated support, (f) collaborative culture among school leaders, (g) taking ownership, (h) trusting relationships, (i)

professionalism, and (j) being led by vision and values (Cieminski, 2018; MacTaggart & Lynham, 2019; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). A positive school climate and healthy professional relationships have great impact on school staff (NSCC, n.d.) and teacher retention (Cohen et al., 2009). Further research is needed to uncover the role of school climate professional relationships in the retention of middle school teachers.

Chapter III

Design and Methodology

Introduction

The focus of this qualitative study was to uncover teachers' perceptions and experiences about the professional relationships dimension of school climate and fill the gap in the literature regarding the role of these relationships in middle school teacher retention. This chapter explains the qualitative design and semi-structured interview methodology utilized in researching middle school teachers' perspectives on professional relationships, reasons for staying in the current positions, and actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships that positively influence middle school teacher retention.

Teachers desire to work in a growing, positive, and supportive school community where they build strong relationships (Aldridge & Frasier, 2016; Dupriez et al., 2016). They do not want to work in negative, hostile school environments (Akar & Çelik, 2019; Belschak et al., 2018; Berg & Cornell, 2016; Newberry et al., 2018; Reaves & Cozzens, 2018). A school climate study is based on the perceptions of the community members of the school community or organization (Alqarni, 2020). School climate studies explore the perceptions of the community members to assist the community leaders to identify areas of strength and weakness (Abbas & Saad, 2020; Back et al., 2016). The definitions for school climate are diverse and many, and the instruments for its assessment are numerous.

The school climate has been assessed with several instruments such as the Organizational Climate Descriptive Questionnaire, developed by Halpin and Croft (1963), which includes eight dimensions of the school climate based on the perspective of the teachers and the principal. Other school climate assessments used by researchers to measure school climate are The

Classroom Environment Scale, developed by Moos and Trickett in 1974 (based on the conceptualization of the individual–environment relationship); the School Climate Survey, which contains seven dimensions of the school climate (based on students’ perceptions such as achievement motivation, fairness, order and discipline, parental involvement, sharing of resources, student interpersonal relationships, and student–teacher relationship); the Charles F. Kettering Ltd. School Climate instrument, which includes four sections (is given to teachers, administrators, and students); and the Effective School Battery, which has two versions: one for students, another one for teachers (Cocoradă & Clinciu, 2009).

Usually, school climate studies place emphasis on assessing the strengths and weaknesses of school climate using quantitative measures and do not include qualitative measures to explore these areas. This exploratory study explored the role of school climate professional relationships dimension in middle school teacher retention. Specifically, this study identified actions and strategies that contribute to healthy, strong professional relationships among middle school staff and also have positive effects on teacher retention in public middle schools. Identifying the actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships will assist other schools that desire to improve professional relationships in order to increase their teacher retention rate. An assumption of this study was that the professional relationships dimension of the school climate influences teacher retention.

The purpose of this qualitative investigation was to find answers to the following research questions:

1. How do middle school teachers perceive the school climate of their schools, as it relates to professional relationships and teacher retention?
2. What reasons do middle school teachers identify for staying in their schools?

3. What actions and strategies contribute to strong, healthy professional relationships and positively impact retention of middle school teachers?

This chapter brings forth the research design and the methodology used in this study to collect perceptions of middle school teachers in PCPS on professional relationships at their schools. Next, information in reference to the role of the researcher and rationale used to determine the location for data collection and how middle school teachers were selected to participate in the study will be revealed. Then, data collection and analytical methods will be described and explained. Finally, the reflections of ethical considerations and limitations to the study will be provided.

Research Design

This current study used an exploratory research design in order “to generate a theory that explains, at a broad conceptual level, a process, an action, or an interaction about a substantive topic” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 434). The study examined one school climate dimension in depth to capture the role of professional relationships in teacher retention from which others may glean information for their own school environments. Exploratory research design was selected for this study because professional relationships dimension of school climate was not thoroughly investigated before. Though a thorough review of current literature was conducted, there was no qualitative study exploring the role professional relationships dimension of school climate in middle school teacher retention. This could be due to the reason that the professional relationships dimension of school climate was created in 2016 and due to school climate components being mostly assessed together rather than separate. Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated that the strength of qualitative studies should be displayed for exploratory research and that emphasizes the importance of context, setting, and participants ‘characteristics. The

researcher used exploratory type of research to have a better understanding of the role of professional relationships in teacher retention.

The researcher used semistructured interviews and document review as methods to collect data for this study. The researcher used the semistructured interviews to identify teachers' perceptions on the professional relationships dimension of school climate, the reason they stay in their schools, and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships that positively impact teacher retention. Marshall and Rossman (2011) explained that "human actions cannot be understood unless the meaning that humans assign to them is understood" (p. 91). They explained that a semistructured interview method provides a better understanding of the impact of everyday experiences on people by asking questions in a specific order (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Besides interview, the researcher also reviewed documents, such as survey data, that PCPS collected regarding staff's perception on school climate. The researcher used document review to analyze the School Climate Survey results related to professional relationships to further explore these areas and triangulate findings gathered from interviews.

Participants

Before data gathering, the researcher obtained permission from Northwest Nazarene University's Human Research Review Committee (Appendix B). The researcher also obtained permission from the school principals overseeing the middle schools selected to participate in the study and the district's permission to conduct research in the PCPS (Appendix C).

In terms of sampling, the researcher used purposeful sampling for this study. Creswell (2007) described purposeful sampling as a recruitment technique where the researcher "selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (p. 125). A purposeful sample of nine

participating middle school teachers were invited to participate in the interviews from middle schools with low, medium, and high teacher retention rates as shown by the PCPS teacher retention report for the 2018–2019 school year and the 2020–2021 school year.

The participants in the interview section of the study were teachers from three middle schools in Polk County with low (between 0%–49%), medium (between 50%–70%), and high (71%–100%) teacher retention rates according to the teacher retention report. To rule out the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher looked at retention rates when selecting the sites during the pandemic (2020–2021 school year) and before the pandemic (2018–2019 school year).

Table 1

PCPS Teacher Retention Report

	Yearly Retention Rates	
	2018–2019	2020–2021
<i>Site 1</i>		
Initial Cohort	86	69
Returned	48	48
Difference	38	21
Retention Rate	56%	70%
<i>Site 2</i>		
Initial Cohort	35	35
Returned	26	28
Difference	9	7
Retention Rate	74%	80%
<i>Site 3</i>		
Initial Cohort	59	50
Returned	28	18
Difference	31	32
Retention Rate	47%	36%

Nine middle school teachers from three different middle school campuses (three from each campus) were selected to participate in semistructured interviews, in a public setting, face-to-face or online, using a platform such as Skype, Zoom, or Microsoft Teams. The interviews were 15–30 minutes in length. All interviews were scheduled with flexibility for participants in

mind and with no disruption to the instructional process. All interviews took place in person during teachers' planning periods, before-school programs, and after-school programs, based on each participant's convenience, availability, and preference.

For recruitment purposes, the researcher sent an email to all teachers from the three middle school campuses to invite to participate in the interviews. The researcher sent the email after permission to conduct the study in the PCPS was granted (Appendix D). The first three teachers from each middle school who responded to the invitation were selected to participate in the study. The researcher made arrangements for in-person interviews with the teachers who expressed a willingness to participate in the interview. Initially, to ensure participation in interviews, the researcher prepared an invitation letter to send, in case there were not enough participants responding to the initial electronic invitation sent via email. However, enough participants (nine teachers) responded, and no invitation letter was necessary to send.

The researcher interviewed all nine teachers in person after scheduling the interviews at their school campuses, according to each teacher's preference. The researcher offered a \$10 gift card incentive to each participant in the interview. She had informed them about the gift card incentive via the invitation to participate in the interview email. The researcher offered the gift card along with a thank-you note at the end of each interview to show appreciation for participants' time and willingness to be part of this research study.

An informed consent form was given to all participants (Appendix E). After the interviews, the researcher read aloud a debrief statement to each participant (Appendix F). The researcher also informed participants that she was available for follow-up interviews via phone, through email, or in person if there were additional questions. The purpose of sharing the debrief statement was to thank participants for participating in the study and to inform them that after the

data were reviewed and analyzed, a follow-up email would be sent in order to ensure the results accurately reflected the interview questions.

Data Collection

As part of preparing to be an ethical researcher, specific training and certifications were conducted through the National Institute of Health to comply with the ethical research requirements (Appendix G). The researcher received permission from the PCPS to conduct the interviews and to analyze the School Climate Survey results. Consent was also granted by the Institutional Review Board at Northwest Nazarene University prior to beginning this study (Appendix B).

For this study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews and document review as research methods to collect data. The researcher used a phone recorder to record the interview data. She conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant to identify middle school teachers' perception of professional relationships within the school climate, reasons they stay in their schools, along with actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships that positively impact teacher retention. The semi-structured interviews were 15–30 minutes in length. The interviews took place as requested by the participants at their current location, using flexible scheduling. The researcher scheduled the interviews by ensuring to accommodate all interviewees. She used member checks to review the themes and outcomes via email (Appendix H; Maxwell, 2013).

The interview questions sought in-depth responses and details to reflect trustworthiness (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher developed a set of 16 interview questions for teachers. The open-ended questions were formulated to capture teachers' perceptions of their school climate as related to professional relationships, reasons for staying in their current positions, as well as the

actions and strategies that positively influence professional relationships and teacher retention. The researcher drafted the interview questions for the interviews. She piloted the interview questions with two teachers from a different school site to verify for satisfactory answers and for questions' clarity and accuracy. The duration of the two pilot interviews was different for each teacher: the first pilot interview lasted 9 minutes and 56 seconds, while the second interview lasted 22 minutes and 59 seconds. According to the pilot interviews, the clarity of the questions was found appropriate. Also the answers were satisfactory and aligned with the type of information needing to be gathered, according to the study's three research questions.

The researcher conducted a document review of the PCPS School Climate Survey results from the 2018–2019 school year and the 2020–2021 school year in order to find out if there exist a connection between teacher retention rates for the mentioned school years and teachers responses scores in the area of professional relationships. Specifically, the researcher wanted to find out if the school with “high” retention rate scored “high” in the area of professional relationships, if the school with “medium” retention rate scored “medium” in the area of professional relationships, if the school with “low” retention rate scored “low” in the area of professional relationships according to PCPS School Climate Survey. The School Climate Survey provided information in three areas: basic demographic information, staff perception of the PCPS, and staff perceptions of a specific school (middle school). The survey was developed in-house and aligned with specialty literature on school climate, as well as with the requirements set forth by the district's accreditor, Cognia.

The School Climate Survey was administered one time per year by the PCPS and contained 32 items that fell under four categories: Staff (seven items), School (12 items), Media (five items), and District (eight items). The School Climate Survey results were broken down by

individual items. The researcher identified several survey items related to professional relationships (that fell under Staff and School categories of the PCPS School Climate Survey) and linked them with the teacher interview questions used during the interviews. To rule out the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher compared and analyzed the results of both surveys (one taken during the pandemic and one taken before the pandemic) by looking at the weighted scores by school.

Analytical Methods

The researcher analyzed qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews comprised of 16 open-ended questions (Appendix I) administered to nine middle school teachers from three different middle schools with low, medium, and high retention rates. The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions on the professional relationships dimension of school climate, their reasons for staying in their schools, and to identify which actions and strategies contribute to healthy professional relationships that positively impact middle school teacher retention. Using a one-on-one semi-structured interview method motivated teachers to express their experiences in detail, along with perceptions of professional relationships at their schools, and how such relationships impact teacher retention. The researcher used a semi-structured interview method in order to collect data to answer Research Question 1, Research Question 2, and Research Question 3. The responses for Research Question 1 were analyzed separately, per each school sites and then compared to identify what school sites had in common, as well as what attributes about each school site were unique. The researcher analyzed the responses for Research Question 1 separately, per each school site, to better capture any connection between teacher retention rates and middle school teachers' responses regarding professional relationships. Specifically, the researcher intended to find out if the teachers'

responses regarding professional relationships matched the low, medium and high teacher retention rate for the selected school sites. In order to keep focus on the reasons why middle school teacher stayed in their positions in general, the researcher decided to analyze the responses to Research Question 2 altogether for all three sites instead of referring to reasons for staying per each school site. A similar rationale was applied to Research Question 3 by analyzing participants' responses to this question as a whole instead of dividing them per each school site. The researcher wanted to put a strong emphasis on the actions and strategies that contribute to professional relationships in general, and because of that, the responses to this questions were analyzed collectively instead of separating them per school site. The researcher felt that an analysis of responses per each school site (for Research Question 2 and Research Question 3) by looking at similarities and differences among school sites, could diminish focus on the reasons teachers stay in the profession, and on the actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships.

All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. First, the researcher transcribed the interview data and then conducted the data analysis. Interview responses from nine middle school teachers were analyzed by sorting responses by hand, using coding commonalities and categorizing participants' responses into emerging themes. The transcribed interview responses were coded, and pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants. The transcripts were coded manually based on themes, similarities, and differences. After transcription and reading through the data, the researcher coded the data. Margin notes were created for initial codes (Creswell, 2007). The researcher used in vivo codes and process codes to code the data collected via interviews, "as these types of codes suggested a brief narrative trajectory of action for analysis" (Saldana, 2016, p. 78).

In order to ensure a coder reliability, all the transcripts were read and reviewed several times. Coded interviews responses were rigorously checked for specific trends, and no issue related to coding was found to require resolving or using a consensus (Wang et al., 2020). After reading the transcripts multiple times, Microsoft Word was utilized to determine common actors and to help organize into categories and then into schemes or subcategories. The researcher created categories starting with the data, then clustered the data together to create a theme.

Qualitative research methods were used in the inductive process for the collection, exploration, study, analysis, and interpretation of teachers' perceptions of professional relationships and for identifying patterns of commonalities and differences that existed in participants' responses. The researcher analyzed data for Research Question 1 in two stages: "within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis" (Merriam, 2009, p. 204). The responses from each of the three school sites were analyzed separately per school, and then compared to identify what school sites have in common, as well as what attributes about each school site are unique.

Analysis of data occurred through four stages: transcribing the data, axial coding to highlight commonalities and identify categories (by hand), identification of themes, and inviting participants to review the final draft of common themes (member checking). In coding the data, the researcher used two coding cycles: first cycle coding methods and second cycle coding methods. According to Saldana (2016), the purpose of the first cycle coding is to summarize parts of the data during the initial stage, while the second cycle coding refers to grouping those summaries obtained during the first cycle into a reduced number of themes and concepts.

During the first coding cycle, the researcher used in vivo and process codes, while during the second coding cycle, she used focused coding and axial coding. The purpose of focused coding is to develop categories without considering their characteristics, based solely on the most

frequent and significant codes in the study, while axial coding's purpose is to identify the most important and less important codes in the study (Saldana, 2016). The most and less important codes in the study were decided based on how the categories and subcategories related to each other, by "frequently searching for causal explanations for events and interactions" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p.19). In addition, such decision was also based on study's research questions and what the study intended to find out. Initial coding began with codes that were anticipated to emerge based upon a lengthy review of the literature, such as professional relationships, teacher retention, teacher satisfaction, reasons for staying, and actions and strategies that promote healthy professional relationships. Data were subsequently organized by key factors that aligned with each research question. During the second cycle coding, the in vivo codes (for instance, "we get along well", "our administrators are supportive", "within our department they are great", "we assist each other", " feels like you are in a family", "relationships are good" etc.) and process codes (such as "helping each other" , "providing coping strategies for teachers", "lacking working rapport", "leaving school due to negative relationships" , "collaborating with each other within the same department", "planning better", "showing more flexibility and understanding etc.) generated during the first cycle were reorganized according to similarities and characteristics of categories (focused and axial coding). Focused coding allowed researcher to compare newly constructed codes, while axial coding extended the analytical process conducted previously by linking categories with subcategories and showing how they relate with each other (Saldana, 2016).

In addition to semi-structured interviews, the document review method was also used to answer Research Question 1 pertaining to middle school teachers' perceptions of the school climate professional relationships dimension of their school. The researcher looked at staff's

School Climate Survey responses for the three school sites selected for the purposes of this research study. The selection of the three school sites (Site 1, Site 2, and Site 3) was also done using the document review method by analyzing the PCPS retention rate report. The three schools were selected based on low, medium, and high retention rates.

To identify if professional relationships within the school climate influence teacher retention, the researcher looked at the weighted scores for each school site, comparing participants' responses recorded under Staff category of the PCPS School Climate Survey, in order to find out if there was a connection between these scores and teacher retention rate per each school site. The following survey items were listed under the Staff category:

1. I believe quality professional development opportunities are available to me.
2. I believe data are readily available to help me make informed decisions.
3. I believe up-to-date technology is available to me.
4. I believe quality resources are available to me.
5. I believe opportunities to collaborate with colleagues are provided to me.
6. I believe district administration clearly communicates expectations and deadlines.
7. I believe I am supported by the district administration.

Initially, the researcher planned to also include in the weighted scores per school site four survey items listed under the School category (Item 13: I believe I am welcome and respected at this school; Item 17: I believe school administration clearly communicates expectations and deadlines; Item 18: I believe I am supported by school administration; and Item 19: I believe this is a good school), as the researcher believed they were related to professional relationships. However, these items could not be included because Site 2 and Site 3 did not have answers recorded under these four items.

The researcher triangulated the recurring themes in two methods, such as document review and interviews, to be considered valid. Survey data gathered through document review was used to find out if there was a connection between teachers' responses related to professional relationships and teacher retention rate. Triangulation using document review occurred after participants' responses gathered through interviews were analyzed. The researcher employed member checking with each participant, sharing with them the themes that emerged from the study (see Appendix H) and asking their input on the findings. Member checking was conducted at the conclusion of the study.

Role of the Researcher

Researchers are not without bias. The researcher has worked for many years in school districts with low teacher retention rates and has paid close attention to professional relationships and how these relationships impacted school climate. Working for 12 years in K–12 at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, not as a classroom teacher or a school administrator but as a support staff employee (coordinator, local education agency facilitator, and director), the researcher had the opportunity to observe the interactions and relationships among teachers, as well as between teachers and administrators. This provided the researcher with a “feel” of the school (Hoy & Adams, 2016), as well as the feel of professional relationships and how these relationship affect the climate of a school.

By closely observing professional relationships among school staff in the schools where the researcher worked, she noticed that schools with positive professional relationships were more likely to retain a higher number of staff as compared with schools with at-risk or negative professional relationships. That experience led to a firm belief that professional relationships within a school climate influences retention and should be given more attention and

consideration. Although research has indicated that staff retention is seen as an important indicator of an effective school (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016), the researcher firmly believes a stronger emphasis should be placed on professional relationships within a school climate to promote teacher retention, especially in an era highly affected by a pandemic, with alarming nationwide, low teacher retention rates. During the data collection, she kept a journal to keep track of “thoughts, musings, speculations, and hunches” as preparing the data for analysis (Merriam, 2009, p. 174). This measure was used to protect research from being tainted with researcher bias and ensure reflexivity.

The role of the researcher was that of observer, earnestly seeking information from experts in the field, who were those middle school teachers who chose to participate in this research study. However, it is important to note that the researcher had no previous interactions with the participant group.

Limitations

There were few limitations related to this study. The first limitation was the researcher’s belief that professional relationships influence teacher retention. Working for 12 years in K–12 as support staff (not a teacher or administrator) at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, the researcher had the opportunity to observe the relationships among school staff, especially between teachers and administrators. This gave the researcher a feel of how professional relationships among middle school staff affected school climate and the retention of teachers.

Reflexivity is being aware of the writer’s values, biases, and past experiences that may impact the writer’s perception of the qualitative research study (Creswell, 2015). To protect against bias, the researcher wrote a reflexive passage in a memo before conducting the research to identify her preconceived ideas about the study. Reflexivity was used in this study as a way to

keep the researcher accountable and to ensure valuable research. In conclusion, the researcher was a dynamic part of the qualitative process and did not unintentionally influence the outcome of the study.

The second limitation was that a teacher retention report for the current 2021–2022 school year would only be available in the summer of 2022, after the completion of this research study. The three school sites selected for this research study were selected based on the low, medium, and high rating scales, according to teacher retention reports for the 2018–2019 school year and the 2020–2021 school year. Specifically, the retention rates reflected the school year during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), and the school year before the COVID-19 pandemic (2018–2019), while teachers were interviewed during the current 2021–2022 school year. It will be interesting to find out if teachers' perceptions interviewed at the three school sites (Site 1, Site 2, and Site 3) during the 2021–2022 school year, along with changes in school leadership at Site 2 and Site 3, will be reflected on the teacher retention report for these school sites that will be available in the summer of 2022.

Other limitation of this study was that some of the School Climate Survey items related to professional relationships were unanswered for Site 2 with a high retention rate and for Site 3 with a low retention rate. The PCPS School Climate Survey contained a total of 32 items that fell under four categories: Staff (seven items), School (12 items), Media (five items), and District (eight items). The researcher identified several survey items related to professional relationships (that fell under staff and school category of PCPS School Climate Survey) and linked them with teacher interview questions used during the interviews. However, four items listed under the School category (Item 13: I believe I am welcome and respected at this school; Item 17: I believe school administration clearly communicates expectations and deadlines; Item 18: I believe I am

supported by school administration; and Item 19: I believe this is a good school) could not be included when calculating a weighted score per each school site to identify if there was a connection between scores and teacher retention rates.

When the researcher reached out to the district and asked why survey items under School were not answered by the survey respondents, a representative of the district's Assessment, Accountability and Evaluation Office explained that items missing on the report indicate there were zero responses. Items with an asterisk (*) indicate there were less than 10 responses. He also mentioned they suppressed all information with less than 10 responses to protect anonymity and because they believed that a rating should not be based on such sparse data. The district representative also explained school campuses did not receive an overall school climate rating, but the survey results were only broken down by individual items. Albeit the survey results did not come in the form of a narrative by school, the district representative believed that a weighted score could be calculated based on the data gathered via the School Climate Survey based upon answered responses. Because of this, when the researcher calculated a weighted score per each school site, only items under Staff were considered, as all three school sites received answers in this survey category.

The last limitation to this study is related to participants who volunteered and the small sample size when it comes to generalizing findings. Nine middle school teachers from three different schools in Polk County Public Schools in Central Florida volunteered to participate in the research study. The researcher selected the school sites based on teacher retention report (low, medium, and high). However, due to the small sample size and the exploratory type of research used for this study, while the findings provided a better understanding of the role of professional relationships in teacher retention, the results may have limited generalization.

Ethical issues in research do not cease when the interviews are concluded or when the transcripts are coded. Such practice must be addressed seriously. This is because “ethical practice is ongoing” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 48). There should be an ongoing effort to ensure confidentiality and fair treatment of all participants, and accurate data interpretation that must be done in accordance with the findings.

Chapter IV

Results

Introduction

Teachers and school staff members are part of the social context of schools and have great influence on a school's climate, as they carry valuable, unexplored perspectives about how a school climate influences their work and experiences at school (Borkar, 2016; Capp et al., 2020). Albeit teachers' work occurs in separate classrooms, they are not isolated professionals and interact with others outside of the classroom in a specific climate that can directly influence their actions, feelings, perceptions, and decision making (Alqarni, 2020; Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018). The lack of positive, supportive relationships impact many teachers, especially new teachers, by limiting their opportunities to be successful (Akar & Çelik, 2019; Belschak et al., 2018; Berg & Cornell, 2016; Newberry et al., 2018).

Although the teaching and educational field constitute one of the most meaningful career paths for individuals to invest in, several school districts and learning communities continue to face a human resource shortage and high staff turnover (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012; Dunn, 2015; Dupriez et al., 2016). Also, when looking at the quality of school climate per grade level, the quality of school climate decreases as students move from the elementary to the secondary school level, and such a result has been directly linked to school climate (Berg & Cornell, 2016; Shindler et al., 2016).

The focus of this study was the professional relationships dimension of school climate. Professional relationships are defined as "positive attitudes and relationships among school staff that support effectively, working and learning together" (NSCC, n.d., para. 12). The purpose of this exploratory research study was to explore the role of the professional relationships

dimension of the school climate in middle school teacher retention and their reasons to stay in their schools. This study also sought to identify the actions and strategies that contribute to strong professional relationships in middle schools that have a positive effect on teacher retention rates. Identifying the actions and strategies that contribute to strong, healthy professional relationships will assist other schools that desire to improve professional relationships in order to increase their teacher retention rates.

This chapter provides overall findings gathered from semistructured interviews that were analyzed to answer each of the following research questions:

1. How do middle school teachers perceive the school climate of their schools, as it relates to professional relationships and teacher retention?
2. What reasons do middle school teachers identify for staying in their schools?
3. What actions and strategies contribute to strong, healthy professional relationships and positively impact the retention of middle school teachers?

These three research questions guided the study on the role of school climate professional relationships in middle school teacher retention. Also, these research questions were used to guide the collection and interpretation of data.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, the document review method was also used to answer Research Question 1 pertaining to middle school teachers' perceptions of the school climate of their school. The researcher looked at the staff School Climate Survey responses for the three school sites selected for the purposes of this research study. The selection of the three school sites (Site 1, Site 2, and Site 3) was also done using the document review method by analyzing the PCPS retention rate report. The three schools were selected based on low, medium, and high retention rates.

Current literature revealed there was a need for a study exploring the role of professional relationships in middle school teacher retention (Kesici & Ceylan, 2020; Hammonds, 2017). According to the National School Climate Center (2014), school climate includes six main components and a total of 14 dimensions. Professional relationships is the 14th dimension of school climate and falls under the Staff Only category. Since this category was created in 2016, this is an under-researched area of school climate studies. This study is important because it could lead to a better understanding of what type of professional relationships influence teacher retention. This may provide crucial insight into the reasons teachers decide to stay in their current positions. In addition, identifying the actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships will assist other schools that desire to improve professional relationships and teacher retention.

In Chapter IV, the researcher presents the findings pertinent to each of the three research questions. Findings were obtained utilizing qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews comprised of 16 questions administered to nine middle school teachers from three different middle schools, with low, medium, and high retention rates. Using a one-to-one semi-structured interview method motivated teachers to detail their experiences and perceptions of professional relationships at their schools and how such relationships impact teacher retention.

Qualitative research methods were used in the inductive process in the collection, exploration, study, analysis, and interpretation of teachers' perceptions of professional relationships and for identifying patterns of commonalities and differences that existed in participants' responses. The researcher analyzed data in two stages: "within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis" (Merriam, 2009, p. 204). Interview responses from nine middle school

teachers were analyzed by sorting responses by hand, using coding commonalities and categorizing participants' responses into emerging themes.

In coding the data, the researcher used two coding cycles: first cycle coding methods and second cycle coding methods. According to Saldana (2016), the purpose of the first cycle coding is to summarize parts of the data during the initial stage, while the second cycle coding refers to grouping those summaries obtained during the first cycle into a reduced number of themes and concepts. During the first coding cycle, the researcher used *in vivo* and process codes, while during the second coding cycle, she used focused coding and axial coding. The purpose of focused coding is to develop categories without considering their characteristics, based solely on the most frequent and significant codes in the study, while axial coding's purpose is to identify the most important and less important codes in the study (Saldana, 2016). Data were subsequently organized by key factors that aligned with each research question. Participants described their perceptions of professional relationships and their viewpoints on how such relationships impact or do not impact teacher retention. During interview sessions, teachers were asked to discuss their perceptions on school climate as it relates to professional relationships, and reasons for staying in their current school, as well as actions and strategies they believed would contribute to healthy professional relationships and would positively impact the retention of middle school teachers. Pseudonyms were provided to ensure anonymity for all participants as suggested by Creswell (2008) and Marshall and Rossman (2011). Table 2 describes the demographics of the participants in the order they were interviewed.

Table 2

Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Years of Experience at Current School	Content Area	School Site's Retention Rate Before Pandemic 2018–2019 SY	School Site's Retention Rate After Pandemic 2020–2021 SY
Julia	3 years	Reading	Medium	Medium
Alistair	1 year	Special Education	Medium	Medium
Leonardo	5 years	Social Studies	Medium	Medium
Michaelis	3 years	Robotics	High	High
Solomon	10 years+	Social Studies	High	High
Lisa	10 years+	Languages	High	High
Cassandra	9 months	Math	Low	Low
Sage	3 months	English Language Arts	Low	Low
Olivia	3 months	Music/Band	Low	Low

Participants expressed their perceptions on the school climate at their schools as it related to professional relationships. They described the type of relationships they had with other staff members, as well as the help they offered to each other when assistance was needed. Participants mentioned various aspects of professional relationships and shared personal current and past experiences on the matter. A few participants overwhelmingly expressed how a lack of healthy professional relationships made them leave previous schools. Many teachers expressed gratitude for working in places that fostered positive professional relationships.

Results

In this qualitative study, the researcher sought to gain insight into middle school teachers' perspectives regarding the school climate at their schools as it relates to professional relationships and middle school teacher retention. Therefore, the first research question presented

in this study asked: How do middle school teachers perceive the school climate of their schools, as it relates to professional relationships and teacher retention?

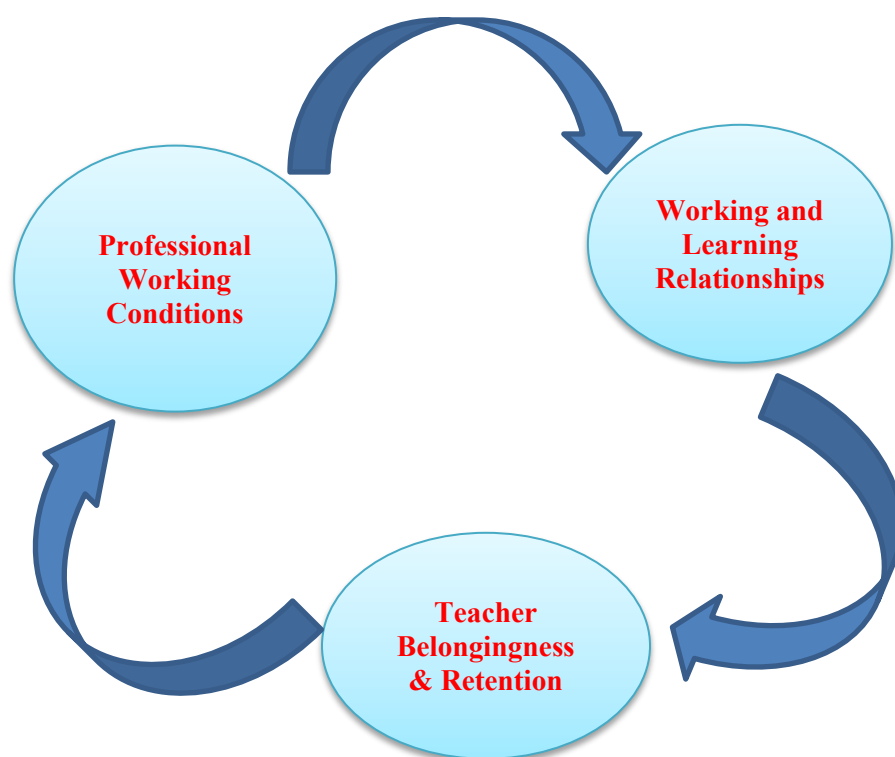
Experts in the field of organizational behavior have identified a connection between people's perceptions of themselves and their actions, intentions, motivations, and determination (Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019). For instance, people's perceptions of school climate are crucial when explaining how their perceptions affect their actions. In addition, if individuals shared negative perceptions about their schools where they worked, their actions and behaviors aligned with their perceptions (Akar & Çelik, 2019; Sertel & Tanriogen, 2019; Thomas et al., 2016).

Research Question 1

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the overall themes that emerged from qualitative data through one-on-one interviews to describe the perceptions of the middle school teachers on professional relationships at their schools.

Figure 2

Themes from Interview Data Regarding Teachers' Perceptions on Professional Relationships and Teacher Retention



Note. In this diagram, all parts influence each other to create positive professional relationships.

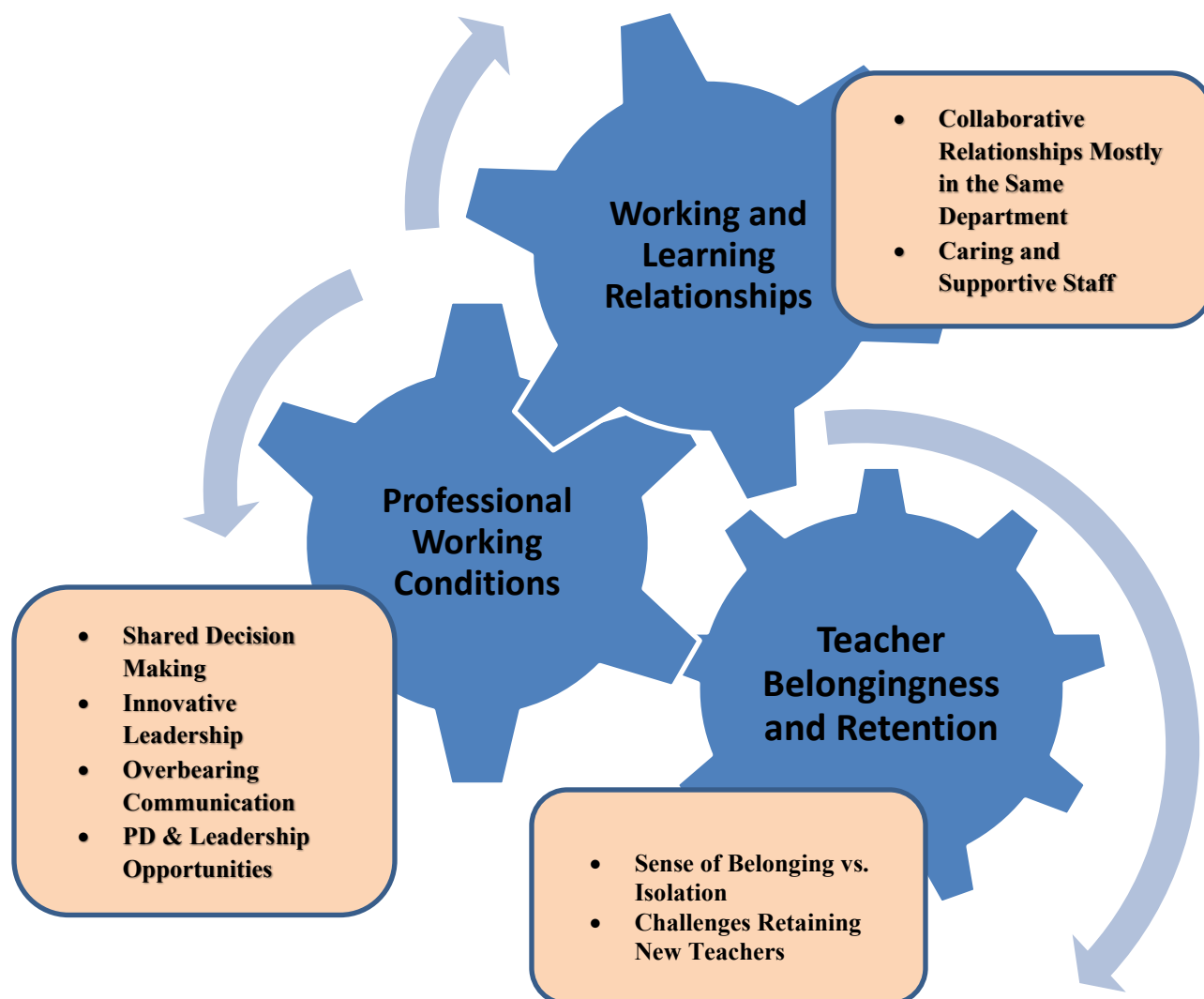
Three themes emerged to describe the perceptions of middle school teachers on their school climate as it relates to professional relationships: (1) professional working conditions, (2) working and learning relationships, and (3) teacher belongingness and retention. These themes were analyzed separately for each school site.

Site 1

Figure 3 is a visual representation of the themes that emerged from the interview data for Site 1 with a medium retention rate.

Figure 3

Themes from Interview Data Regarding Teachers' Perceptions from Site 1



The first theme refers to professional working conditions in place at this school site (Site 1) as related to professional relationships. Findings indicate that overall, several factors were currently in place to foster healthy, positive professional relationships. For instance, in terms of sharing decision making, teachers at this site stated they were involved in decision making to some extent, but it was based on each decision, and they agreed that “sometimes the changes

may be directed from above” (Julia).

Regarding the school’s leadership, the participants at this site described it as being supportive and caring for teachers’ well-being. For instance, Julia stated about their principal that “he is willing to try new things” and that “he is very progressive in his ideas.” In addition, one teacher (Leonardo) explained that their principal had shared with them coping strategies and ideas “of how to not break or get lost in hard work.” In conclusion, based on the overall teachers’ responses from this school, the leadership seemed to be compassionate and innovative.

Looking at the teachers’ interview responses, the researcher concluded that the communication at this school was overbearing and lacked clarity. Leonardo shared that “there is too much information thrown at us that is hard to decipher.” However, teachers stated they appreciated the intention of the leadership team to keep them informed. Other teachers shared they received too many emails per week that were hard to keep up with.

In terms of PD activities, the teachers at this school shared that they have a multitude of opportunities to learn and attend PD sessions. Leonardo stated that “our school constantly is offering this PD or that PD.” The teachers expressed interest in attending PD sessions on topics related to the subject matter they taught. Besides PD opportunities, the teachers also mentioned leadership opportunities were offered at their school. Julia stated that staff at this site were given the opportunities “to pick and choose” from different leadership roles available at their school.

The second theme refers to teachers’ perceptions of the staff they interact and work with at their schools. Most teachers interviewed at this site stated that the staff they worked with were caring. Julia described that anytime she needed help with something in her class, her coworkers have been more than willing to help: “I need help and somebody will run in there.” In addition, according to the same teacher’s statement, the staff at this school were not only caring but also

supportive. Alistair who had worked at this school site for a year also stated that the staff working there were caring, supportive, and honest. She said, “We’re supportive; we say ‘hi’ to each other. If someone needs help, everyone’s willing to help.” Most of the teachers at Site 1 described the staff as caring and honest. Leonardo stated the following about the staff at this school: “Overall, pretty good. The administration here is pretty good at getting those people out who should not be here.” Overall teachers’ perceptions of staff’s attitudes and attributes were positive. The staff at Site 1 stated that they helped each other when they needed it. Most of the help the teachers offered to each other was related to covering classes and help with managing students’ behavior. Regarding helping each other, during the interview, Alistair noted:

For instance, today I’m getting pulled to cover a classroom, and I know the one class period is going to be extremely tough. So I asked my coworker if she would sit in the classroom with me, and she agreed. So obviously, I can’t like we’re not paying her to do that, but she’s just doing that because she’s being a good coworker. And you know, if the shoe was on the other foot, I would do the same thing. I would try to help my coworkers, you know, however possible.

Even though there were positive comments and attitudes toward the staff, participants in the interview mentioned a close connection only with people in their department. Leonardo stated about professional relationships: “Within our department, they are great.” He continued further and shared that “you become isolated in your own bubble”, referring to the fact that teachers mostly connect with people in their departments.

The third theme that emerged refers to teachers’ sense of belongingness and their perceptions of how professional relationships impact teacher retention at their school. Participants’ responses from Site 1 revealed a sense of belongingness with people in the same

department and a sense of isolation with the people outside their department. Two of the three teachers interviewed at this school expressed their satisfaction for working in this place. They shared past experiences related to negative professional relationships and how they left because of them. One teacher found the present school a little challenging as compared with her previous school.

When asked about teacher retention, participants believed that teachers left their school due to burnout as the top reason. Although they believed that good teachers were retained at Site 1, the participants shared they had witnessed many new teachers leave their school mostly due to feeling “drained” or due to lack of classroom management skills. Julia noted that “our principal is also really good about trying to find the right ones.” However, difficulties retaining new teachers were reported at this site. All teachers interviewed at this school site shared they believed professional relationships influence teacher retention, and building positive, trustful relationships with the staff makes a great deal of difference when it comes to staff deciding whether to stay or to leave their current positions and schools. When asked if professional relationships impact retention, Leonardo exclaimed:

Absolutely! If you don’t have a good working rapport with your fellow teachers, you are going to feel so incredibly isolated, that you are going to not want to stay. You have to have like I said earlier, teachers talking each other off the ledge right now. If not quitting, you know when you are having that day to be able to go to another colleague and just be able to vent or let them vent to you. And she is seeing that we are both experiencing the same problems. That allows us to feel like okay, it is not just me. It’s not just what is going on in my little bubble.

Two participants at this school shared they left their previous schools due to negative

professional relationships. All three teachers at this school stated they might not continue in the current position if facing negative professional relationships. As Julia explained,

That makes it much harder. Um, I personally, am kind of a person, when I go to a school, I take heart in it. And so I don't run easily. But I have worked at many places, not this school but I have worked at other schools that was very difficult. The staff was not as you know, professional or as friendly. And it did make it difficult to stay. And I've even know many friends that left, because they felt that way at that particular school. So yes, it makes a big difference.

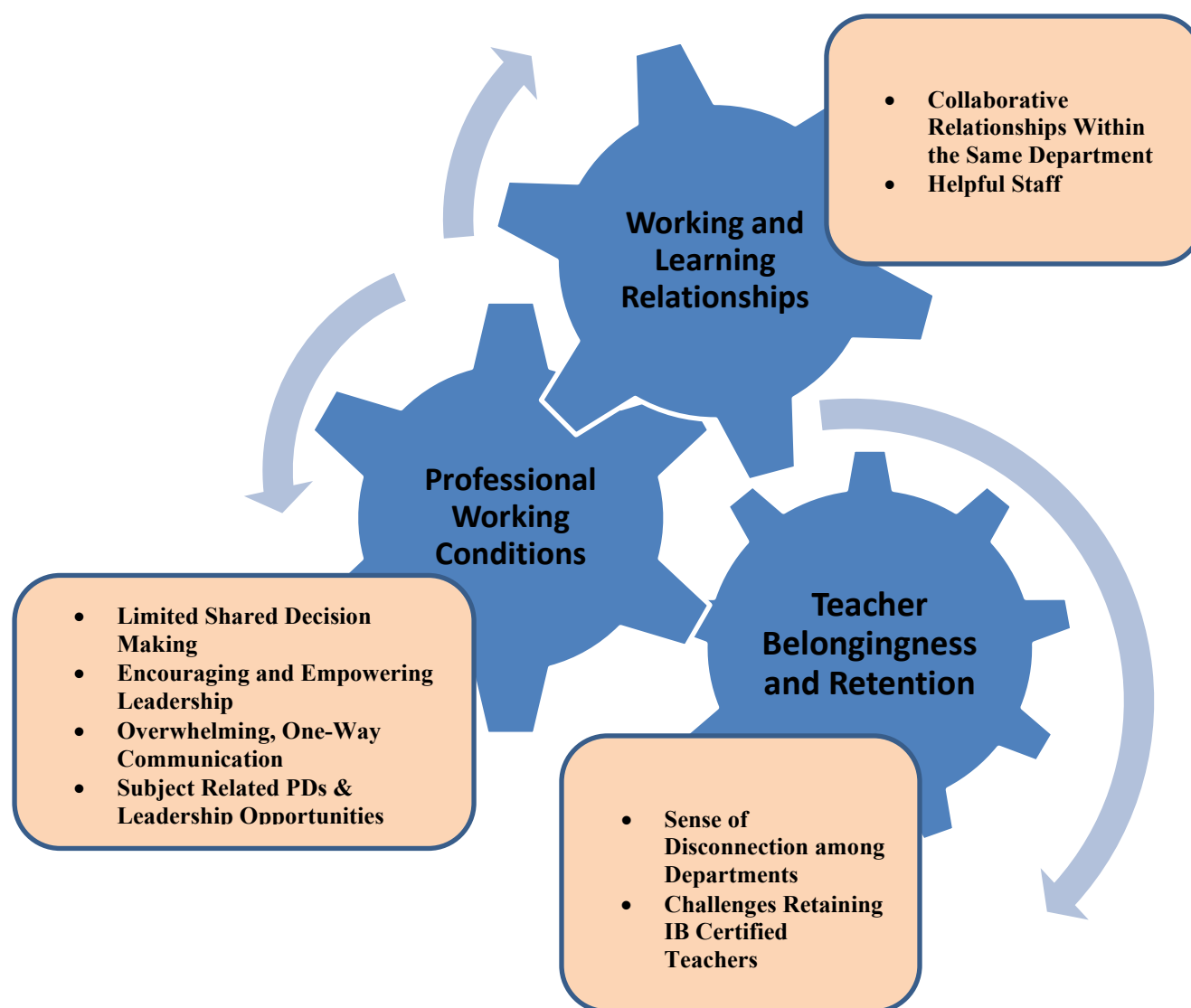
In conclusion, the teachers' perceptions at Site 1 were positive in general. Two areas were found as needing improvement: communication between staff and staff's interactions with people outside of their department. Recommendations will be made in Chapter V to address these areas of need.

Site 2

Figure 4 is a visual representation of the themes that emerged from the interview data for Site 2, which had a high retention rate.

Figure 4

Themes from Interview Data Regarding Teachers' Perceptions from Site 2



The first theme refers to professional working conditions in place at this school site (Site 2) related to professional relationships. Findings indicate that overall, several factors were currently in place to foster positive, healthy professional relationships. However, in terms of sharing decision making, teachers at this site stated that most of the time they were not involved in decision making. One teacher (Solomon) stated, “They don’t want input, they don’t ask for

it... But it's going to be largely whoever they think say yes, and will go with whatever." Lisa stated about decision making being made on teacher input: "I think so. I would say 70% yes."

The teachers described this school's leadership as being encouraging and empowering toward teachers. However, they shared that they did not know where the school's principal went, and that the assistant principal was filling the principal's role at the time the interviews were conducted. For instance, Lisa stated about their school's leader: "We are currently looking into a shift of administration, and our vice principal, she brings light, and she is very sparkly. And she's very encouraging." In addition, Solomon stated their principal had provided them with immediate, positive feedback any time she came to visit their classes and described her as being "extremely good with encouraging people." In conclusion, based on the overall teachers' statements interviewed at this school, the leadership seemed to be encouraging and empowering.

Looking at the participants' interview responses regarding communication at this site, the researcher concluded it was an overwhelming, one-way type of communication. Michaelis shared about communication at his work site as being "constant hyper; there's always an email." In addition, Lisa described communication at their school as "a platform where they are authority and we are on the bottom, not as we are equal." However, the teachers acknowledged the need to be informed, albeit believing "the district is throwing too much at them" (Solomon).

In terms of PD activities, the teachers at this school shared that they were being provided with opportunities to learn and attend PD sessions. However, the teachers expressed interest in attending PD sessions on topics different than the subject they taught. For instance, Michaelis shared he would like to learn more about the psychological aspects of learning and teaching. Lisa also shared she would like to learn how to read body language in order to better manage her classes. Besides PD opportunities, the teachers also mentioned leadership opportunities were

offered at their school. For instance, Lisa shared that their assistant principal encouraged them to take leadership roles.

The second theme refers to teachers' perceptions of the staff they interacted and worked with at their school, as well as their work with other teachers. Most teachers interviewed at this site stated that the staff they worked with were willing to help whenever someone needed it and asked for help. The teachers offered help to each other by sharing effective strategies and resources and materials they found useful.

Collaborative relationships seemed to occur within separate departments and groups. Lisa described working relationships as "a split; you can see who is basically affiliate or basically associated with other teachers." Michaelis explained that working relationships at their school were "related to the teacher and how outgoing they are to make relationships with other teachers." Overall, teachers expressed that collaboration among staff occurred but was mostly limited at the departmental level:

For the most part, particularly within the departments, mostly. This is a good department.

Departments generally don't have that much to do with each other. There is little collaboration outside of departments, but realistically, we don't have a lot to deal with (Solomon).

The third theme that emerged refers to teachers' sense of belongingness at school and their perceptions of how professional relationships influence the retention of middle school teachers. Helpful staff and collaboration among teachers within the same departments were evident; however, participants in the interview also mentioned a sense of disconnection and minimal collaboration among departments.

All three teachers interviewed at Site 2 expressed their satisfaction for working at this school. One teacher stated, “That’s a lot of work. It’s challenging. It’s probably better than other schools.” One main reason was mentioned related to feeling supported and receiving the necessary assistance they needed:

I enjoy it. The staff is very supportive, administration is very supportive. Me being a new teacher and working outside of my subject area, I’ve had a lot of questions. And they helped me every step of the way (Michaelis).

When asked about teacher retention, participants stated that best teachers were retained at this school. Difficulties retaining IB (International Baccalaureate) teachers and finding highly qualified teachers were reported at this site. Michaelis stated, “There’s not really much turnover that I’ve seen with the teachers at this school, and a lot of people are on tenure. They have been here for a very long time.” Solomon explained that the reason most of the teachers left was related to issues regarding their International Baccalaureate certification. Lisa expressed concerns related to the school district hiring staff for teaching positions who did not have teaching preparation programs or any experience in education:

Truth to be told, our county actually does welcome people just with bachelor degrees that are not prepared. So I don’t think we have the best setting. And I say this because I’ve worked in other schools where I saw active coaching and co-teaching to stimulate new teachers and to guide them, because this is not an easy profession.

All participants interviewed at this school site believed that professional relationships influence retention. They also stated that collaboration among staff, administration support, and being provided with the necessary resources and learning opportunities play a critical role when deciding whether to stay or to leave their current positions. As Michaelis explained,

If the teachers didn't feel like they were developed, or if they didn't have access to adequate resources, they would not be here. And it's just a matter of time before they would leave, because it will feel like we are out here by ourselves. And with no support, it doesn't feel like that at all.

One teacher (Lisa) shared that she experienced negative professional relationships at her school but decided to stay because her students: "I'm still here, and I went through that. So it's hard. It is, it shadows, you know, what you come to work. And that's why I say that the kids are the essence of everything." Solomon shared that he would stay, "as long as I have a good relationship with my administrator." Michaelis answered,

I'll probably not for long. I would definitely give it a chance to see that, you know, if it's just a season. And to see how we bounce back from that. But if I see no progression in it, I'll definitely be out.

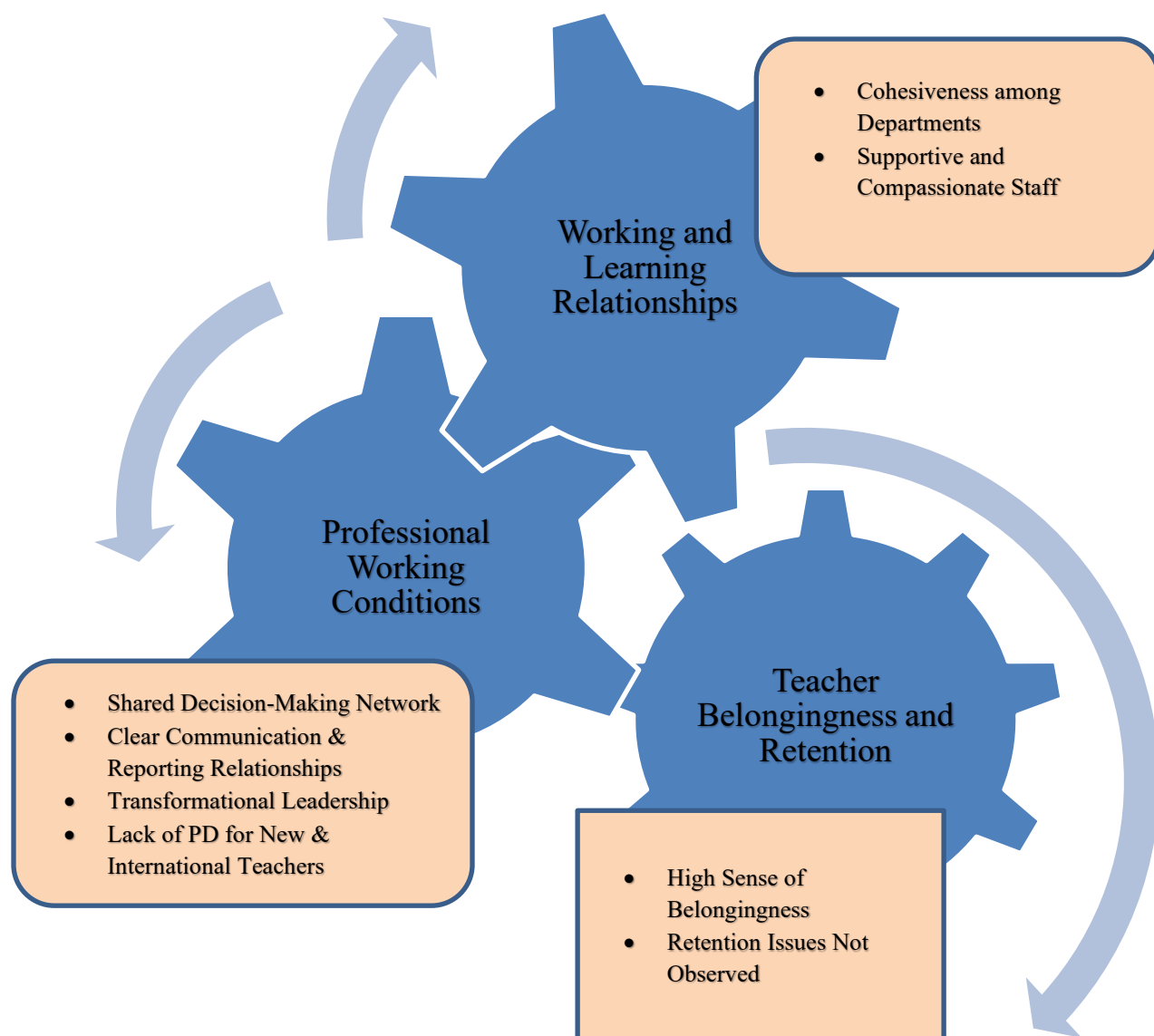
In conclusion, the teachers' perceptions at Site 2 were positive in general. Three areas were identified as needing improvement: shared decision making, communication among staff, and collaboration among staff outside their departments. Recommendations regarding these areas of needs will be made in Chapter V.

Site 3

Figure 5 is a visual representation of the themes that emerged from the interview data for Site 3, which had a low retention rate.

Figure 5

Themes from Interview Data Regarding Teachers' Perceptions from Site 3



The first theme refers to professional working conditions in place at this school site (Site 3) as related to professional relationships. Findings indicate that several factors were currently in place at this site to foster positive professional relationships. In terms of sharing decision making, all teachers at this site shared they were involved in decision making and were given

several opportunities to provide their input. Cassandra stated, “It’s not like one person is making all the decisions. Everyone is actually giving their input.” Olivia stated that their principal “has a board for suggestions that anyone can suggest if they have an idea or meet with her one-on-one as far as having an appointment with her. There is a network that is very organized.”

The teachers described the school’s leadership as being highly supportive, helpful, energetic, and caring. For instance, Olivia stated about their principal:

She does a really good job. And we see her quite a bit: she walks in, visits classrooms, and I feel she knows what we are doing in our classrooms. I think they are just doing a really good job here.

In addition, the same teacher explained that their principal went above and beyond to inspire and make teachers feel appreciated:

Principal just went completely out, and she took us all over the city, and she had arranged for different people and organizations in the city to honor the teachers, and that was really extraordinary. I’ve never been a part of anything like that. So it was really incredible.

Based on the overall teachers’ statements interviewed at this school, the leadership seemed to be transformational.

Looking at the teachers’ interview responses regarding communication at this school, the researcher concluded that it occurred both ways, clear communication with transparent reporting relationships. Staff seemed to know to whom to report when they sought assistance or had questions. Cassandra shared that in terms of communication, “Our principal gives us a newsletter every day. Our deans are directly linked between us and the principal and assistant principals. The deans are a great resource, and we work with them every day.”

Sage shared that communication was good and in a timely manner:

Each time you are updated. Before Sundays, the principal, Dr. H., should ensure that she sends out the agenda for the week, so we actually know what we are coming into since Sunday. And throughout the day, we will get messages if anything changes.

The teachers at this school shared they had a multitude of opportunities to learn and attend PD sessions. The teachers expressed interest in attending PD sessions on topics related to the subject they teach. However, two teachers shared there was not enough training for new, first-year teachers and for international teachers coming to teach in the United States. Besides PD opportunities, the teachers shared that leadership opportunities were also being offered at their school. They explained they were encouraged to take initiatives and received principal support in taking leadership roles: “They will say, come with a plot and show me something. They want to see a plan in place. So you bring it on paper; you explain how it works” (Sage).

The second theme refers to teachers’ perceptions of the staff they interact and work with at their school as well as their work with other teachers. Most teachers interviewed at this site stated that the staff they work with were helpful and compassionate. Cassandra described that anytime she needed help with something in her class or outside of school, her coworkers had her back at all times: “Everybody is wonderful. Whenever you see them, they seem happy, even if they are sad. They will say, ‘Let’s talk if you need anything.’”

Besides compassionate and helpful staff, everyone was treated equally. Sage stated that at this school, “everyone is treated like family. You don’t know the difference between a custodian and other staff member, because everyone is treated equally.” The teachers shared that they checked on each other daily and intervened if there was a need. Cassandra shared there were

times when her colleagues came to check on her in the class, when they heard something unusual: “They will come inside and ask what is happening here? You can do this!”

The teachers at this school site stated they helped each by observing each other’s class and providing quick feedback. Regarding helping each other, during the interview, Sage noted, “In terms of guidance, when needed, a teacher might walk and observe, as we have different walkthroughs, when they actually come and look at whether or not you are teaching the correct information in the class.” In terms of professional relationships, participants in the interview mentioned close connection and collaboration with people in their department as well as outside their departments (grade-level teams).

The third theme that emerged refers to teachers’ sense of belongingness at their school and their opinions on how professional relationships impact teacher retention. All teachers interviewed at Site 3 expressed satisfaction with working at their school. Besides compassionate and helpful staff, a feel of family and high sense of belonging was noted.

All three teachers interviewed at this school expressed their satisfaction for working at their schools. Olivia shared past experiences related to negative professional relationships and the reason she left her previous school:

I wanted to get out of my last situation because I did not feel supported and I felt and I had tried to stay there a long time. And I just didn’t see myself continuing finishing my career in that kind of environment. So I was very glad to get this new opportunity.

When asked about teacher retention, participants stated that professional relationships impact the retention of teachers. Cassandra shared,

It definitely does. Because if you know you have a staff that supports you 100%, then it makes work easier for you to just come in and actually do what is required than just

coming in and feeling stressed, frustrated, because that will just take away from teaching.

Cassandra also shared that she heard one colleague saying, “I’m here because my colleagues are very good. I don’t want to leave this team because my team is good.” All teachers interviewed at this school site shared they believed professional relationships influence retention and that being there for each other and helping as much as they can really made a difference when deciding whether to stay or to leave their current positions.

In conclusion, the teachers’ perceptions at Site 3 were positive in general. One area needing attention was lack of provision of more intense, specialized training/PD sessions for first-year teachers and international teachers, who were in their first year of teaching in the United States. Recommendations regarding this area of need will be made in Chapter V.

Connection between Professional Relationships and Teacher Retention as Shown by Data Collected Through Document Review Method

The researcher used the document review method to check if there was a connection between schools’ retention rates for all three school sites and schools’ ratings on the School Climate Survey items (Staff Only) related to professional relationships. The School Climate Survey was administered one time per year by the PCPS and contained 32 items that fell under four categories: Staff (seven items), School (12 items), Media (five items), and District (eight items). The survey results were broken down by individual items. The School Climate Survey was developed in-house by the PCPS and was based on ratings 0–5. It was aligned with the requirements set forth by PCPS’s accreditor, Cognia, as well as with the specialty literature on school climate. The researcher identified seven survey items related to professional relationships (that fall under Staff and School categories) and linked them with the teacher interview questions as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Link Between Climate Survey Items (PCSI) and Interview Questions (IQ) to Research Questions (RQ)

RQ #1: How do middle school teachers perceive the school climate of their schools, as it relates to professional relationships and teacher retention?		
RQ #2: What reasons do middle school teachers identify for staying in their schools?		
RQ #3: What actions and strategies contribute to healthy professional relationships and positively impact retention of middle school teachers?		
PCSI School Climate Survey Item	Interview Question (IQ)	Research Question (RQ)
SCSI #1: I believe quality professional development opportunities are available to me.	IQ #3: What kind of professional development would you like to receive in order to learn and develop your professional skills?	RQ #1
SCSI #2: I believe data is readily available to help me make informed decisions.	IQ #10: Is the decision making at your school based on professional input?	RQ #1
SCSI #3: I believe up-to-date technology is available to me.	IQ #2: How do you think about working at your school?	RQ #1
SCSI #4: I believe quality resources are available to me.	IQ #16: What other factors would you like your administrators to demonstrate that you feel would strengthen and improve professional relationships?	RQ #1, RQ #3
	IQ #15: Besides what we have already discussed, what factors do your administrators demonstrate that you feel help to strengthen and improve professional relationships at your school?	RQ #2, RQ #3
SCSI #5: I believe opportunities to collaborate with colleagues are provided to me.	IQ #7: How are the working relationships with each other of the staff at your school?	RQ #1
	IQ #8: How do the staff at your school assist and support each other when needed?	RQ #1

	IQ #12: What factors (such as trust, integrity, honesty, communication, etc.) do you feel you demonstrate that strengthen and improve professional relationships?	RQ #1
SCSI #6: I believe district administration clearly communicates expectations and deadlines.	IQ #6: How is the communication between administrators and teachers?	RQ #1
SCSI #13: I believe I am welcome and respected at this school.	IQ #2: How do you think working at your school?	RQ #2
	IQ #14: Would you continue in your position, if you will experience negative professional relationships?	RQ #1
	IQ #5: Do you think that the teachers at this school are treated and respected as educational professionals? Give examples.	RQ #1
SCSI #17: I believe school administration clearly communicates expectations and deadlines.	IQ #6: How is the communication between administrators and teachers?	RQ #1
SCSI #18: I believe I am supported by school administration.	IQ #9: How is the staff at your school?	RQ #1
SCSI #19: I believe this is a good school.	IQ #4: Do you think the best teachers are retained at this school?	RQ #1
	IQ #11: What do your fellow administrators or teachers do to help you become a better leader?	RQ #1
	IQ #13: Do you think the professional relationships impact retention of teachers? How?	RQ #1

Not all three school sites selected for this study received responses for all PCPS survey items. Only Site 1 received participants' responses for all survey items listed under the four categories for the 2018–2019 school year and for the 2020–2021 school year. Site 2 had missing

“School” completed survey items for both school years: the 2018–2019 school year and the 2020–2021 school year. Site 3 had missing “School” completed survey items for the 2020–2021 school year. Due to missing responses, the researcher could only consider weighted scores for the response items listed under the Staff category of the School Climate Survey.

When the researcher inquired about the missing survey items under the School category for Site 2 and Site 3, one of the district’s representative of the Assessment, Accountability, and Evaluation Office explained, “Items with an asterisk (*) indicate there were less than 10 responses. We suppress all information with less than 10 responses to protect anonymity. Also, we don’t feel that a rating should be based on such sparse data.” Table 4 is a visual representation of the PCPS School Climate Survey overall ratings per school site received for each of the three school sites during the 2018–2019 school year and during the 2020–2021 school year.

Table 4

PCPS Climate Survey-Staff Overall Ratings per School Site

School Sites	School Rating 2018–2019 SY	School Rating 2020–2021 SY	Retention
Site 1	3.40	3.65	Medium
Site 2	3.41	3.74	High
Site 3	3.20	3.90	Low

Looking at each school site’s overall rating scores, it can be observed that Site 2 with the highest retention rate scored the highest (average score of 3.41), Site 1 with the medium retention rate scored in the middle (average score of 3.40), and Site 3 with the lowest retention rate scored the lowest (average score of 3.20) before the pandemic during the 2018–2019 school

year. However, looking at the year during the pandemic, the 2020–2021 school year, Site 3 with the lowest retention rate scored the highest (average score of 3.90), Site 2 with the highest retention rate scored in the middle (average score of 3.74), and Site 1 with the medium retention rate scored the lowest (average score of 3.65).

The researcher looked at these results for two different school years, for 2018–2019 school year (before COVID-19 pandemic) and for the 2020–2021 school year (after COVID-19 pandemic) to rule out the impact of the pandemic on teacher retention. According to the rating scores obtained before and after the pandemic, the ratings were lower before the pandemic, albeit there was a small difference between the ratings per each site. Also it can be observed that the rating scores correlate with the teacher retention rate only during the 2018–2019 school year, the year before the pandemic. Survey data listed in Table 4 show there was a connection between professional relationships and teacher retention during the 2018–2019 school year. The school site with the highest retention rate scored the highest, the school site with the medium retention rate scored in the middle, and the school site with the lowest retention rate scored the lowest on the items listed under the Staff category of the School Climate Survey.

All teachers participating in the interview stated they believed that professional relationships impact teacher retention at their schools. Table 5 includes all participants' statements of their opinions about professional relationships' influence on teacher retention.

Table 5

Sample Quotes from Interviews Regarding Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of Professional Relationships on Teacher Retention

Participant	Sample Quotes
Julia	"Yes. We all talk about how much we're good together and how kind everybody is. This is a difficult school as far the students are concerned; it's very low poverty income area. And so the teachers, we really build each other up and make each other feel like we're worth being together."
Alistair	"Yeah, definitely. You know, those relationships have to be there. If you don't have those qualities such as trust, honesty, communication, then there is poor leadership, and no one wants to stay if the administration is not doing their job, or if you feel unwelcomed or unwanted, or you know, unsupported. So I think it's really important for both leaders and for staff members to have it. And when there is all this stuff, then it kind of helps retention."
Leonardo	"Absolutely. If you don't have a good working rapport with your fellow teachers, you're going to feel so incredibly isolated that you're going to not want to continue to stay."
Michaelis	"Yes, because if the teachers didn't feel like they were being developed, or if they didn't have access to adequate resources, then they wouldn't be here, and it's just a matter of time before they would leave, because it will feel like we're out here by ourselves."
Solomon	"Yes, and the issue is, and this is what I've seen in this district. This district doesn't know the difference between administration and leadership. There are leaders, you have to inspire them to create vision. Once you've tried to administer leaders, they will ball up and then you risk losing your buy-in. If you lose the buy-in, it's almost impossible to ever get back those people as soon as they get a better opportunity."
Lisa	"Yes. It is just the development, PDs, or you know, anything extra that a teacher can get. It is knowledge of what you know being shared with that person that might be struggling. And I would say that in sessions or classes, I feel that instead of just you have to do this, let's pair teachers together, so they can work together."
Cassandra	"I do have, and I also I heard from one teacher saying that 'I'm here because my colleagues are very good.' I don't want to leave this school because my team is good."

- Sage “Yes, it definitely does. Because if you know that you have a staff that supports you 100%, then it makes work much easier for you to just come in, and actually do what is required than just coming in and feeling stressed, frustrated, because that will just take away the joy of teaching.”
- Olivia “I think they do, and cognitively because if someone does not feel well, like they’re not being appreciated or not treated fairly, and if they can’t trust, then they won’t stay in that toxic environment.”
-

Six out of nine interviewed teachers have shared that they would not continue in their current positions if facing with negative professional relationships at their work site. One teacher from the site with high retention rate explained she decided to stay because of her students. However, the same teacher who mentioned struggling relationships with her colleagues, shared positive thoughts about relationship with her school leader. Two teachers from the site with low retention rate stated they would continue in their current positions albeit negative professional relationships due to passion for their profession and determination to overcome negativity. As Sage explained,

Well, in life, in this world you have good and evil, right? Both of them co-exist. When you are in an environment with negative energy, you will have to just put that aside and know that you have to be professional, right? The work you are doing here is for a purpose. So you have to put your own feelings aside, put away that negativity, and focus on the positive side. So you can eventually progress. Just look on the bright side.

In addition, Cassandra also highlighted the importance of staying positive and not giving up when facing negative relationships:

Yes, sure, because this is my passion. Whatever comes, even if there is negativity, there is something positive to find, right? So I’m trying to always find something positive but still, negativity affects us a lot. But we learn from that something new. If negativity is

pushing you out, catch the positivity, and get in and get inside. As I told you, I love teaching...

Two teachers out of the six teachers who stated they are mostly to leave if facing negative professional relationships, expressed their willingness to give it a chance for improvement before considering leaving their positions. Table 6 is a visual representation of teachers' statements regarding professional relationships' impact on teacher retention.

Table 6

Teachers' Statements on Professional Relationships Impact on Teacher Retention

Q #13: Do you think professional relationships impact retention of teachers at your school?		
Teachers	School Site	Response
Julia	Site 1	Affirmative
Alistair	Site 1	Affirmative
Leonardo	Site 1	Affirmative
Michaelis	Site 2	Affirmative
Solomon	Site 2	Affirmative
Lisa	Site 2	Affirmative
Cassandra	Site 3	Affirmative
Sage	Site 3	Affirmative
Olivia	Site 3	Affirmative

Research Question 2

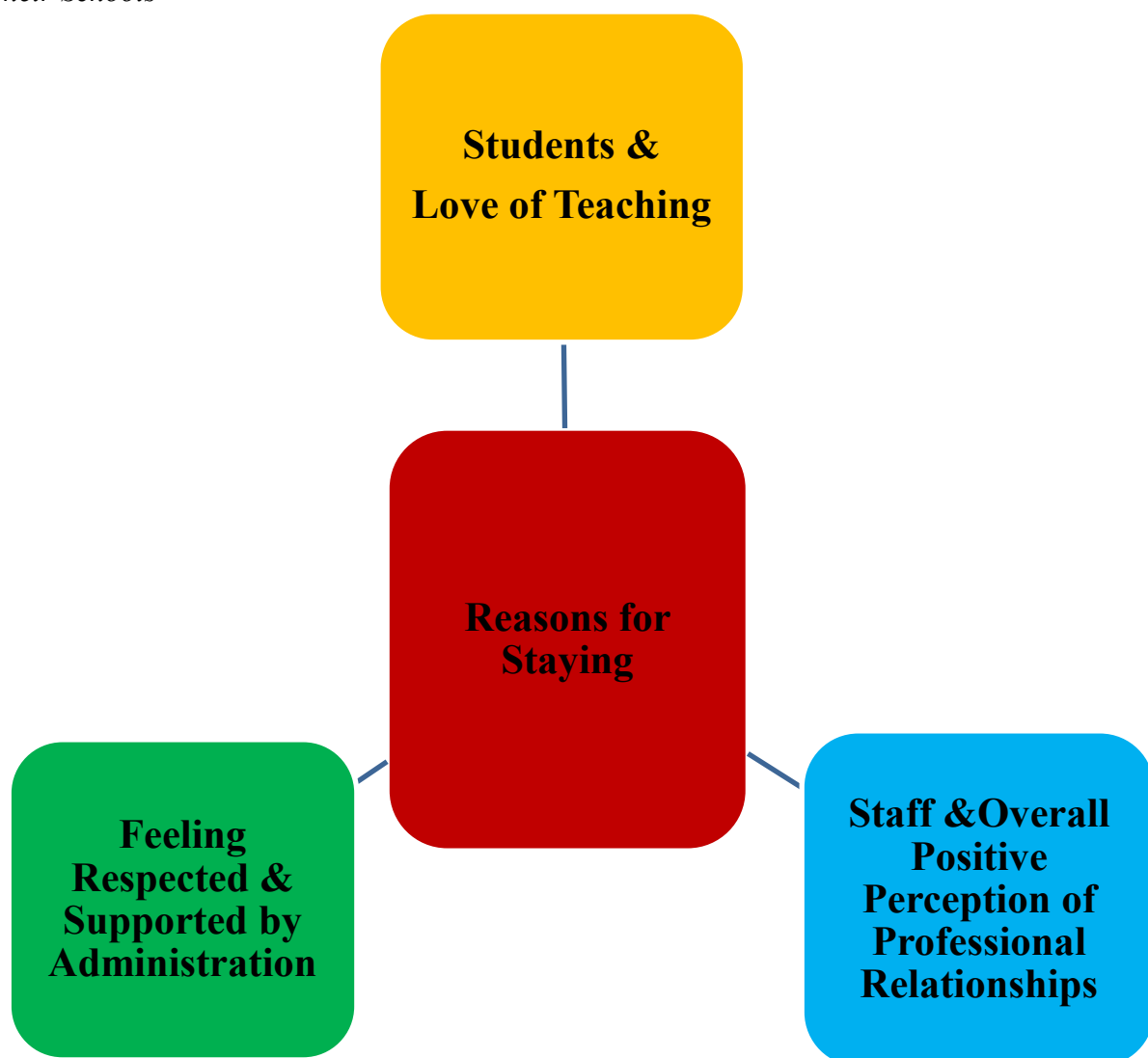
The most frequent reasons for leaving the education professions are workplace conditions, students' behaviors, and personal reasons related to stress and not feeling appreciated (Holmes et al., 2019; Ramos & Hughes, 2020), while the most frequent reasons for staying in the profession are trusting relationships with the administration, effective mentoring, relationships

with colleagues, and useful PD (Watson, 2018). In order to keep the focus on the reasons for middle school teachers staying in their positions, the researcher decided to research this question as a whole for all three sites instead of showing differences in teachers' reasons for staying in

Research Question 2 of this research study asked: What reasons do middle school teachers identify for staying in their schools? Figure 6 is a visual representation of the reasons middle school teachers identified for staying in their schools.

Figure 6

Themes from Qualitative Data Regarding Reasons Middle School Teachers Identify for Staying in Their Schools



Three themes emerged regarding reasons middle school teachers identified to stay in their schools: (1) students and love of the teaching profession, (2) staff and overall positive perception of professional relationships, and (3) feeling respected and supported by the administration.

Students and Love of the Teaching Profession

One of the most frequent reasons mentioned by teachers for staying in their schools was related to students. Julia stated, “I will always say the students. I think that the heart of every teachers is the students. And that’s what makes you come to work even when you don’t feel like it.”

Besides students, a love for the teaching profession is another reason that seems almost inseparable from students:

This is my passion. I started loving to teach Math because my Math teacher encouraged me to teach Math. Also regarding others, I am talking about doctors, engineers, and every others: we are the one creating those teachers, doctors, engineers. I’m very happy to work at this school. I love the teaching profession, so I’m here happily. (Cassandra)

Staff and Overall Positive Perception of Professional Relationships

In terms of a reason for staying at their schools, a collection of participants’ responses revealed that teachers are more likely to stay due to staff and overall positive perception of professional relationships at their school. Teachers described the importance of having caring and helpful coworkers, especially when dealing with tough situations. Julia shared that besides students, “There is another good thing here at our school, and this is the staff. They are just the most wonderful.”

Being a new teacher might be challenging. However, things become more bearable when the staff are supportive, and teachers can build trustful relationships with their peers: “I have a

strong support here in terms of the teachers, for example Mrs. R.V. She always walks in and she checks on me. Also Mr. W. L. gives me a lot of support.”(Cassandra)

Despite difficulties they face daily, having each other makes a great deal of positive difference: “I think that we get along really well, actually. You know, there is always going to be someone that has difficulty, but for the most part, this is a very friendly staff” (Julia).

Feeling Respected and Supported by the Administration

Teachers shared that working in a place where they feel respected, appreciated, and supported by the administration is another reason for staying in their schools. They also stated that working in places where they are respected and supported gives them a sense of belonging. Julia explained that her administration team was always there to assist and support, and that made a great difference in the way she felt: “And that’s a nice feeling, because almost you feel like you are in a family, as they really do care. And each one of them makes your life much easier.” Olivia shared she felt she could go to her administration team with any problem professionally or personally:

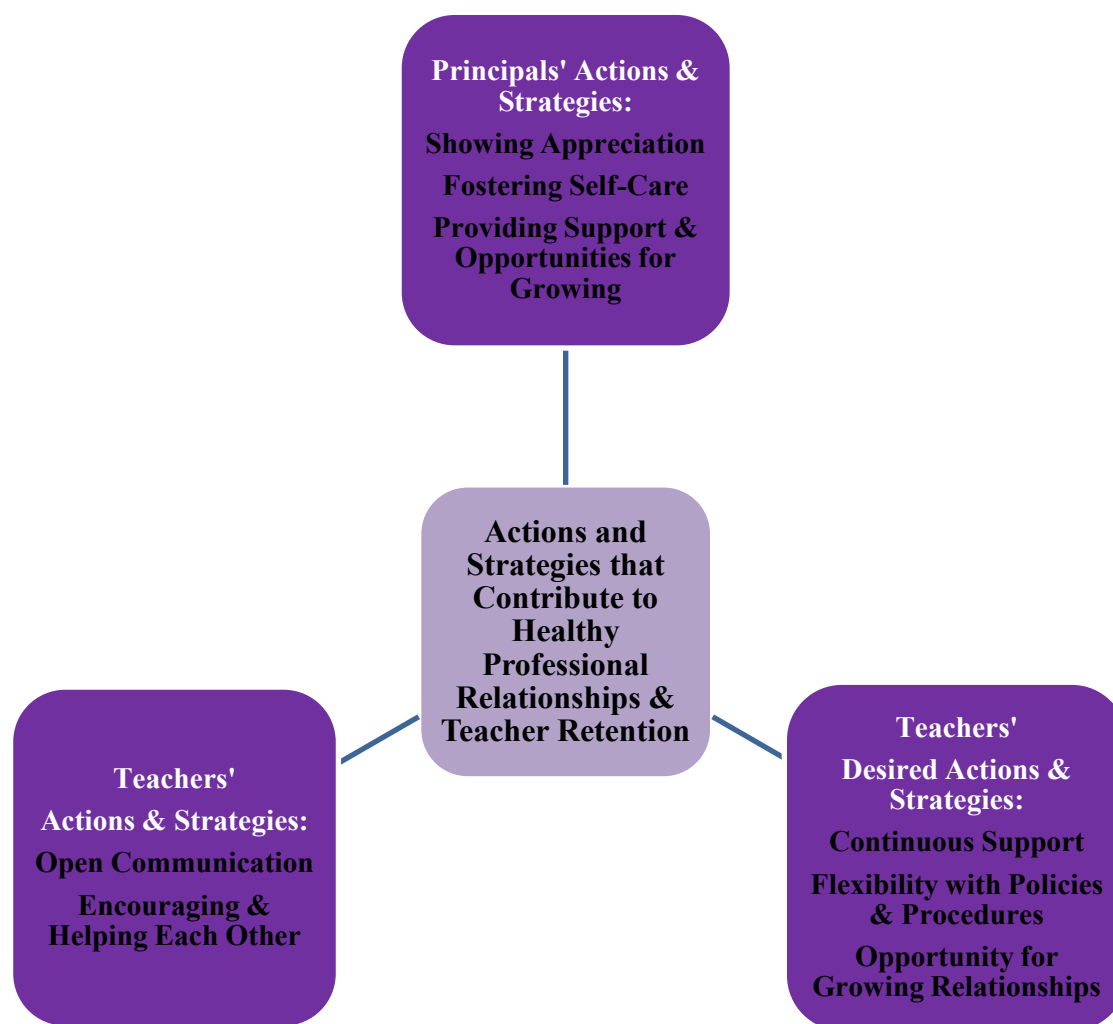
I think they are very honest and supportive. And if there’s a problem with a student, it’s addressed with administration. My principal is very caring and understanding. I feel like I could go to her with any problem professionally or personally. And she’s very open, and I enjoy the staff.

Research Question 3

Three themes emerged regarding the actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships and positively impact the retention of middle school teachers: (1) principals’ actions and strategies, (2) teachers’ actions and strategies, and (3) teachers’ desired actions and strategies, as show in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Themes from Qualitative Data Regarding Actions and Strategies That Contribute to Healthy Professional Relationships and Positively Impact Retention of Middle School Teachers



Principals' Actions and Strategies

A collection of participants' responses revealed teachers found the following actions and strategies as helpful to contribute to healthy professional relationships and to have a positive impact on teacher retention: principal showing appreciation and fostering appreciation activities

for staff, principal being caring and encouraging self-care, and principal providing support and opportunities for learning.

Principal Fostering Appreciation Activities for Staff. Feeling appreciated is a way to build healthy and trustful professional relationships that positively impact retentions. Appreciation not only makes staff feel good about what they are doing but also provides positive, constructive feedback. Appreciation is important for teachers to feel respected as educational professionals and to motivate them to stay in their positions. Julia, a teacher who left her previous school due to not feeling appreciated and supported stated, “Our principal thanks us all the time, tells us all the time how much he appreciates us.” Olivia, who had just started a new position at one of the school sites selected for this research study shared:

Principal just went completely all out and she took us all over the city and she had arranged for different people and organizations in the city to honor the teachers and that was really extraordinary. I’ve never been a part of anything like that. So it was really incredible.

Teachers mentioned activities the principals do to show appreciation, like thank-you notes, small surprises for teachers, staff outings, and community building with teachers. Alistair mentioned that such activities “just build that bonding which does help improve the professional relationships as well.”

Principal Being Caring and Encouraging Self-Care. Teachers shared they are more likely to stay in a school where the principal shows that he or she cares for them and encourages self-care for the staff. The following self-care actions conducted by school principals were mentioned by teachers during the interviews: giving them ideas on how to prioritize work, establishing boundaries of not taking work home, and finding something they enjoy doing

outside of school. Leonardo stated, “He’s advocating self-care for us and giving ideas every single week of things that we can do to provide us with self-care.”

Displaying a caring attitude will help to strengthen professional relationships and instill a feeling of belonging. Julia stated, “And that’s a nice feeling because they really do care. And each of them makes your life easier when they show that concern.” Michaelis believed that creating a sense of bonding will help to “ease the tension” and strengthen and improve professional relationships with a positive effect on retention.

Principal Providing Support and Opportunities for Growing and Learning.

Teachers’ responses also indicated that principals providing support to staff as well as opportunities for growing and learning are actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships and positively impact teacher retention. Working and learning together requires teachers to communicate, collaborate, and trust each other. Teachers mentioned weekly professional learning community meetings as valuable opportunities to meet, plan, and learn together. One teacher stated that when they meet weekly for the professional learning community, they meet by grade level or by department, “so by that we are developing the relationships that is done by the administration side” (Cassandra). Sage stated that during these planning and learning opportunities, “we sit down and plan so we can ensure that we build ourselves while building the students as well.”

Teachers’ Actions and Strategies

A collections of participants’ responses revealed teachers found the following actions and strategies as helpful to contribute to healthy professional relationships and to have a positive impact on teacher retention: using open communication with each other and encouraging and helping each other when needed.

Open Communication. Most of the teachers who participated in the interview mentioned communication as the most important action teachers use to strengthen and build healthy relationships. Teachers believed that open communication helps them to connect to each other and provide help when needed. Cassandra stated about communication that “it’s very important” and “if a word goes wrong means everything goes wrong.” Communication is important not only because it connects staff but it also helps problem-solve when facing confusion or uncertainty: “If I have an idea about something, I can go to either the vice principal or the coach and speak to them about it, and then everything will eventually turn over.”(Sage)

Encouraging and Helping Each Other. Teachers expressed that encouraging each other is what they do when they face a challenging situation. Leonardo mentioned that the current school year was a very difficult one due to COVID-19 and due to students missing too much instruction while attending school online or through distance learning. He shared that the teachers in his department encouraged each other not to give up:

We talk each other off the ledge of quitting all the time. This year is probably the most challenging here of all the years. We would have thought that it was last year having to teach online and at home but now, we’re faced with the reality of all those kids who didn’t learn.

Teachers mentioned actions they used to help each other when needed: watching and covering each other classes when needed, sharing with each other strategies that work regarding the subject matter they teach or classroom management, and listening to each other when down or concerned.

Teachers' Desired Actions and Strategies for Principals to Implement

When asked about what actions and strategies they would like to see implemented in their schools, the teachers mentioned several that fall under three categories: provision of continuous support, focus on school vision, and opportunities to develop relationships outside the school.

Provision of Effective, Continuous Support. Teachers mentioned the need for more assistance with students' behavior and discipline. They also mentioned the need for more support for first-year teachers. Sage stated that some tutorials regarding basic procedures or school policies would be helpful for new teachers and international teachers who were in their first year of teaching or first year of teaching in a foreign country with totally different standards and procedures.

Flexibility with Policies and Procedures. Teachers stated they would like for the administration to show more flexibility with policies and procedures as it pertained to students, as well as with tasks teachers had to complete. Lisa explained there were some days when they were required to do certain tasks that were not a priority. She used as an example the requirement to attend a PD session during a time when grades were due. She pointed the need for more flexibility coming from the administration team when facing such situations.

Michaelis talked about flexibility with the policies and procedures for students. He used as an example the need for flexibility when addressing students' dress code. He explained that sometimes students did not have what was required in terms of dress code, and that made it harder for students and teachers.

One teacher shared he would have liked for the administration to be guided by a common vision as a general direction of learning and growth. Solomon stated the school's leaders "need to focus more on vision. They need to understand the five levels of leadership."

Opportunities to Grow Relationships Outside of School. In addition to desired actions mentioned earlier, teachers also stated they would like to be presented with opportunities to grow relationships outside of school. They stated as an example teachers being able to participate in fun, community activities that would help with building even stronger relationships. Cassandra explained that simply going to a park and talking about subjects outside teaching professions “might help to build a little more relationships.”

Conclusion

Three themes related to Research Question 1, describing the perceptions of middle school teachers on their school climate, as it relates to professional relationships were found: (1) professional working conditions, (2) working and learning relationships, and (3) teacher belongingness and retention. These themes were analyzed separately for each school site. Looking at the results analyzed earlier, it can be concluded that teachers’ perceptions of professional relationships at all three sites were positive in general. Two areas were found as needing attention at Site 1 with a medium retention rate: communication between staff and staff’s interactions with people outside of their department. At Site 2, the school site with a high retention rate, three areas were identified as needing attention: shared decision making, communication between staff, and collaboration among staff outside their departments. At Site 3, the school site with a low retention rate had one area that needed attention. There was a lack of providing more intense, specialized training/PD sessions for first-year teachers and international teachers who were in their first year of teaching in the United States. Recommendations regarding these areas of needs will be made in Chapter V.

A collection of participants’ responses at Site 3 with the lowest retention rate revealed an overall, unexpected positive teachers’ perception, which the researcher believes must be

connected to a change in leadership that took place recently at this school. A leadership-related change was also noticed at Site 2 with the highest retention rate. However, more areas of needs were identified at this school site as compared with the other two sites. The participants at this site (Site 2) revealed that their principal has left, and no one knew where she was. Her place was temporarily filled by the assistant principal. It will be interesting to find out at the end of the school current year if such change in leadership and teachers' perceptions will be reflected in the teacher retention report.

Looking at each school site's overall School Climate Survey's rating scores related to professional relationships, it can be observed that Site 2 with the highest retention rate scored the highest (average score of 3.41), Site 1 with the medium retention rate scored in the middle (average score of 3.40), and Site 3 with the lowest retention rate scored the lowest (average score of 3.20) only during the 2018–2019 school year, the year before the pandemic. Survey data listed show there was a connection between professional relationships and teacher retention only during the 2018–2019 school year, the year before the pandemic.

Chapter V

Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to allow the voices of middle school teachers to be heard through a qualitative exploration of the role of professional relationships component of school climate in teacher retention, in public middle schools. Extensive research demonstrated that a healthy school climate is crucial to student development, academic achievement, graduation rates, and teacher retention (Geier, 2010; Thapa et al., 2012).

Despite numerous research studies, teacher retention continues to be a topic of high interest, due to a rise in the number of teachers leaving their schools or even their professions (Dahlkamp et al., 2017, Tuan, 2020). In addition, a teacher shortage was observed across the country, and the reason for such shortage was mainly linked to inability of the education system to retain the teachers (Dupriez et al., 2016; Koedel & Xiang, 2017, Tuan, 2020), as well as due to increase in the teachers' workload and student discipline issues (Barmby, 2020). Other frequent reasons for leaving the teaching professions were related to workplace conditions, including relationships with other staff members (Nowack & Zak, 2020; Reaves & Cozzens, 2018; Watson, 2018). This is because, albeit most of the teaching work takes place in the classroom, teachers also interact with other staff members, developing relationships outside of the classroom, in a specific climate that can directly influence their perceptions as well as the decision to stay or leave their current positions (Alqarni, 2020; Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that started in early 2020 continues to be felt across the world in almost all aspects of people lives, including teacher retention. In terms of general unemployment many lost their jobs due to businesses being shut down or decreased activity to comply with public safety requirements. Public schools in the U.S. were also greatly impacted, as

most districts in the United States had replaced by April 2020 in-person classes with distance learning for the remainder of the school year (Education Week, 2020).

In this qualitative study, the researcher utilized Durkheim's theory of the importance and impact of the social environment of school in order to highlight the importance of community and relationships among school staff (Prius, 2011) as it sought to explore the role of professional relationships in teacher retention.

According to National School Climate Center (2014) we can identify a school's strengths and weaknesses in six main areas (components) and a total of 14 dimensions: Safety (Rules and Norms, Sense of Physical Security, Sense of Social-Emotional Security), Teaching and Learning (Support for Learning, Social and Civic Learning), Interpersonal Relationships (Respect for Diversity, Social Support- Adults, Social Support- Students), Institutional Environment (School Connectedness/Engagement, Physical Surroundings), Social Media (Social Media) and Staff Only (Leadership and Professional Relationships). The focus of this study is "professional relationships" dimension of school climate. Professional relationships are defined as "positive attitudes and relationships among school staff that support effectively, working and learning together" (NSCC, n.d., para. 12).

In this qualitative study, the researcher also utilized the framework of job embeddedness, used in economics and applied psychology, in order to help a better understanding of the reasons for teacher retention as it sought to explore the role of professional relationships in middle school teacher retention. According to Job Embeddedness Theory, when employees are more embedded within their organization, they are less likely to quit (Holtom et al., 2013; Kiazad et al., 2015).

As teachers share their perceptions on the role of professional relationships in teacher retention, findings from this study will offer school leaders, principals, and human resource district's personnel additional insight into teachers' perspectives and their views regarding

actions and strategies that can be used to improve school climate as it pertains to professional relationships, and help retain more teachers. In this chapter, the researcher provides a summary of the findings revealed in this study, concluding statements regarding findings, recommendations for further research, and proposed implications for professional practice.

The questions investigated in this study were:

1. How do middle school teachers perceive the school climate of their schools, as it relates to professional relationships and teacher retention?
2. What reasons do middle school teachers identify for staying in their schools?
3. What actions and strategies contribute to healthy professional relationships and positively impact retention of middle school teachers?

Chapter V includes the review of how this research study on the role of professional relationships contributes to the body of knowledge, on the subject of the role of professional relationships in middle school teacher's retention, the theoretical foundations that guided this study's findings, themes related to the teachers' perceptions of professional relationships, reasons for staying in their current positions, and actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships, that positively impact retention of middle school teachers.

Summary of the Results

This exploratory research study examined the role of the school climate, professional relationships dimension, in middle school teachers' retention. A series of semi-structured, audio recorded, and transcribed interviews with teachers from each site was designed to determine perceptions of professional relationships and teacher retention, reasons for staying at their jobs, and actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships in middle school with a positive effect on teacher retention.

Research Question 1

The researcher asked the first research question to capture teachers' perceptions on school climate, as it pertained to professional relationships and their insight regarding teacher retention at their schools. Following an analysis of data, three themes emerged to best describe the perceptions of middle school teachers on their school climate, as it relates to professional relationships: professional working conditions (1), working and learning relationships (2), and teacher satisfaction and retention (3). These themes were analyzed separately for each school site.

The first theme refers to professional working conditions in place at each school site (Site 1, Site 2, and Site 3), related to professional relationships. Findings indicate that overall, several factors were in place, to foster healthy professional relationships at all three sites. Four subthemes related to professional working conditions emerged from teachers responses to the interview questions: Shared Decision Making (1), Communication 2), Leadership (3), Professional Development and Leadership Opportunities for Teachers (4).

Shared Decision Making

Shared Decision Making is an important aspect to consider when looking at working conditions that foster healthy professional relationships. Study participants at Site 1 shared they were partially involved in decision making at their school. However, a different situation was found at Site 2 with teachers at this site sharing that most of the time, they were not involved in shared decision making. Next, at School Site 3, teachers' responses revealed they had a rigorous shared decision making process in place, where all teachers were involved in decision making process and were given several opportunities to provide their input.

Shared Decision Making empowers teachers to work together to make decisions and

select strategies and actions that influence students' learning and school' success. Overall, teachers' responses from Site 2, indicated that shared decision making did not involve all staff but only the ones who would have agreed with decisions already proposed. Interview respondents at Site 2 with "high" retention rate, also indicated that shared decision making did not occur consistently at their school.

Communication

A collection of participants' responses revealed teachers at Site 1 found communication as overbearing and lacking clarity. Teachers shared they receive excessive amount of information daily, usually via numerous emails, that become difficult to keep up with. Study participants at School Site 2, concluded communication was overwhelming and was sometimes, a one-way type of communication. Similar to teachers at Site 1, teachers at Site 2 explained they received way too many emails and because of that, they didn't always have time to follow through with their duties and responsibilities. However, at School Site 3, teachers' interview responses indicated that communication at this school was clear, concise, in a timely manner, involving transparent communication relationships.

Two school sites out of three indicated communication via email as overwhelming due to high numbers of emails they receive daily. In addition, they shared the tone of some emails was highly imperative. Teachers felt that there should be a manageable number of emails per week and such emails should be directed to staff they were intended to, and not shared with the entire staff.

Leadership

Participants' responses at Site 1 indicated the leadership at their school was compassionate and innovative, focused on fostering teachers' wellbeing. Teachers at this site,

believed their principal as willing to try new things, having many progressive ideas, and wanted to teach the staff coping strategies to overcome stress and burnout associated with teaching profession. Participants at School Site 2 described the leadership at their school as encouraging and teacher empowering. However, the teachers shared their principal had left with no word and they did not know where she went. They stated the assistant principal was filling the principal's role at the time the interviews were conducted. Teachers at School Site 3 described the leadership at their school as being transformational. They reported the principal made often visits their classrooms, shared vision, and offered support any time they needed. In addition, teachers expressed that principal went above and beyond to inspire and make teachers feel appreciated by involving organizations in the community to recognize and honor the teachers at their school.

Professional Development (PD) and Leadership Opportunities (LO) for Teachers

The third subtheme of professional development and leadership opportunities was reported to be different from site to site, as follows: teachers at School Site 1 shared that they had a multitude of opportunities to learn and attend PD sessions offered at their school. They expressed interest in attending professional development sessions on topics related to the subject they teach. Participants at Site 2 also shared they were provided with opportunities to learn and attend PD sessions. However, the teachers expressed interest in attending professional development sessions on topics different than the subject matter they taught. Participants at Site 3 shared that they have a multitude of opportunities to learn and attend PD sessions at their school. The teachers expressed interest in attending professional development sessions on topics related to the subject they taught. Teachers' responses revealed there was not enough training for new, first year teachers and for international teachers coming to teach in the United States. Beside PD opportunities, teachers at all three school sites shared that leadership opportunities

were being offered at their schools, along with a level of encouragement provided by the leadership team.

The second theme relates to teachers' perceptions of the staff they interact, learn and work with at their schools. Study participants at Site 1 and Site 2 shared the staff they worked with were supportive and caring, and helped each other when needed. Participants interviewed at Site 3 described the staff they worked with was helpful and compassionate. In terms of the type of help teachers offered to each other, the following were mentioned: covering classes, sharing resources, and sharing strategies for managing students' behavior.

Teachers at two out of three school sites (Site 1 with medium retention and Site 2 with high retention) expressed that collaboration occurred but was mostly within the same department. They mentioned people in the same department collaborate and help each other when needed. However, participants' responses revealed a lack of collaboration among people from different departments. Teachers at Site 3 reported collaboration and cohesiveness among all departments at their school. The responses indicated connection and collaboration with staff in their departments as well as outside their departments (grade level teams).

The third theme that emerged across all interviews relates to teachers' sense of belongingness at their schools and their perceptions of how professional relationships influence the retention of middle school teachers. Teachers' responses from Site 1 revealed a sense of belongingness with people in the same department and a sense of isolation with the people outside their department. However, all three teachers interviewed at this school expressed their satisfaction with working at this school. A collection of participants' responses at Site 3 indicated high collaboration with staff in their department as well as outside their departments. All teachers interviewed at Site 3 expressed satisfaction with working at their school. Besides

compassionate and helpful staff, a feel of family and high sense of belonging was noted.

Regarding teacher retention, study participants from all three school sites believed professional relationships impact teacher retention. In addition they believed that being there for each other, supporting as much as they could, made a difference when deciding whether to stay or to leave their current positions. Teachers' responses at Site 1 revealed difficulties retaining new teachers. Difficulties retaining qualified and IB certified teachers were reported at Site 2. No teacher retention difficulties were mentioned at Site 3.

Research Question 2

The second research question sought a better understanding of the reasons middle school teachers identified to stay in their schools. Three themes emerged regarding pertaining reasons middle school teachers identified to stay in their schools: (1) students and love of teaching profession, (2) staff and overall positive perception of professional relationships, and (3) feeling respected and supported by the leadership team. Most participants expressed that students are the main reason for them coming to work every day. In addition, besides students, a love of the teaching profession and being able to achieve their professional goals was another reason teachers mentioned for staying in their profession. Other reason participants' responses revealed that teachers stay in their positions due to staff and overall positive perception of professional relationships at their school.

Teachers described the importance of having caring and helpful coworkers when dealing with tough situations, especially when being a new teacher. Other reason for staying reported by teachers was related to working in a place where they feel respected, appreciated, and supported by their leadership team. They explained that when working in a place where they feel respected and supported, it gives them a sense of belonging.

Research Question 3

The third and final research question in this study explored the actions and strategies teachers found helpful to contribute to healthy professional relationships and have a positive impact on middle school teachers' retention. Participants in the study reported the following actions and strategies as helpful in contributing to healthy professional relationships and having a positive impact on teacher retention: principal showing appreciation (such as sending thank-you notes, providing small surprises for teachers, organizing staff outings and community involvement to recognize and honor teachers, and fostering appreciation activities for staff); principal being caring and encouraging self-care (such as giving staff ideas on how to prioritize work, establishing boundaries of not taking work home, finding something they enjoy doing outside of school); and principal providing support and opportunities for learning.

Participants in the study found the following teachers' actions and strategies as helpful to contributing to healthy professional relationships and having a positive impact on teacher retention: using open communication with each other, and openness to encourage and help each other when needed. Middle school teachers would like to see the following actions and strategies implemented in their schools: provision of continuous support, flexibility with policies and procedures, and opportunities to grow relationships outside the school. In terms of support, teachers mentioned more assistance needed with students' behavior and discipline, as well as more support for first year teachers.

In this study, document review data provided insight into teacher retention rate for each school site (Site 1, Site 2, Site 3), as well as School Climate Survey results pertaining to professional relationships, for the three schools sites selected for the purpose of this study. In order to rule out the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher compared and analyzed

the results of both surveys (one that was taken during the pandemic and one survey that was taken before the pandemic) by looking at the weighted scores by school.

The researcher conducted a document review of 2018–2019 school year and 2020–2021 school year PCPS School Climate Survey's results, in order to find out if there exist any correlation between teacher retention rates for the mentioned school years and teachers' responses scores in the area of professional relationships. Specifically, the researcher wanted to find out if the school with a high retention rate scored high in the area of professional relationships, if the school with a medium retention rate scored medium in the area of professional relationships, if the school with a low retention rate scored low in the area of professional relationships according to the PCPS School Climate Survey. Looking at each school site's overall rating scores, it can be observed that Site 2 with the highest retention rate scored the highest (total average score of 3.41), Site 1 with the medium retention rate scored in the middle (total average score of 3.40), and Site 3 with the lowest retention rate scored the lowest (average score of 3.20) before the pandemic, during 2018–2019 school year. However, looking at the year during the pandemic, the 2020–2021 school year, Site 3 with the lowest retention rate scored the highest (total average score of 3.90), Site 2 with the highest retention rate scored in the middle (total average score of 3.74), and Site 1 with medium retention rate scored the lowest (total average score of 3.65).

Conclusion

The researcher in this study sought to explore the role of the school climate professional relationships dimension in middle school teacher retention and the reasons teachers remain in their positions. This study also sought to identify the actions and strategies that contribute to strong professional relationships in middle school with a positive effect on teacher retention

rates. The study was anchored to the theory of Durkheim as it explored teachers' perceptions of their school climate related to professional relationships at their schools. Durkheim's theory on importance and impact of the school's social environment on students' learning was based on the fact that the social aspect of education is also related to how teachers interact socially with their peers and leaders in their schools (Prius, 2011). Findings allowed the voice of middle school teachers to be heard as they related to expressing their perceptions regarding professional relationships at their schools and the role of these relationships in teacher retention.

Professional Relationships is a subcategory of Staff Only category of school climate, as identified by the National School Climate Center. Looking at the findings related to Research Question 1, the researcher concluded that teachers' perceptions of professional relationships at all three sites were positive in general. Two areas were found as needing improvement at Site 1 with a medium retention rate: communication and collaboration among staff (related to limited interactions with people outside of their department). At Site 2, the school site with a high retention rate, three areas were identified as needing improvement: shared decision making, communication, and collaboration (among staff outside their departments). At Site 3, the school site with a low retention rate, one area was found as needing improvement related to lack of provision of intense, specialized training/ PD sessions for first-year teachers and international teachers who are in their first year of teaching in United States.

When comparing responses from each school site, participants' responses at Site 3 with lowest retention rate, revealed an overall, highly positive teachers' perceptions, which the researcher believes must be connected to a change in leadership that took place recently at this school. A leadership related change was also noticed at Site 2 with the highest retention rate. However, more areas of needing improvement were identified at this school site as compared

with the other two school sites. The participants at Site 2 reported their school principal left the school, but the staff at this school did not know anything regarding the reason why and where she left. The principal's place was temporarily filled by the assistant principal. This study findings support research showing the importance of leadership on school climate and teacher retention (Abbas & Saad, 2020; Brown, 2016; Brown & Wynn, 2009). In order to increase teacher retention, the principals' focus should be on activities that promote connectivity on campus, building relations and collaboration among school staff (Kathleen et al., 2018; Watson, 2018).

The study was also anchored to the theory of job embeddedness, commonly used to study voluntary turnover in the workplace, which emphasizes the reasons teachers stay in their positions rather than focusing on their reasons for leaving (Holtom et al., 2006; Mitchell et al., 2001). Holtom et al. (2013) explained that job embeddedness increases over time as employees have more interactions and spend more time in their current jobs, and therefore, the longer they remain at a job, the more embedded or entrenched they become, and more difficult it is for them to leave that job. Looking at participants' amount of experience per each school site, the school with the highest retention rate has the most experienced teachers, respectively two teachers who have more than ten years of experience working at the current school, and one teacher who has 3 years of experience at the school. Theory of embeddedness can be used to explain why teachers at Site 2 continues to stay in their current positions despite negative feedback. These are entrenched teachers who have been embedded in their current positions for so many years. These teachers decided to continue working at the same school despite some of their perceptions were partially negative.

On the other hand, when looking at teachers' years of experience in the low retention site, Site 3, they have only been in their positions for less than a year. In addition, two out of the three teachers interviewed at this site were not even in the school when the PCPS climate survey was filled out. Their overall positive feedback despite the low teacher retention rate recorded for two school years at this school, might be justified by the fact that teachers were fairly new and did not have enough time to fully experience professional relationships at this school.

Overall, the researcher noted middle school teachers perceive professional relationships as an important reason for staying in their positions. Looking at the findings related to Research Question 2, middle schools teachers identified the following reasons for staying in their schools: (1) students and love of teaching profession, (2) staff and overall positive perception of professional relationships, and (3) feeling respected and supported by the leadership team. One of the most frequent reasons mentioned by teachers when asked about reasons for staying in their schools was related to students, which supports existing research (Battles & Looney, 2014; Collie et al., 2011). In addition, besides students, a love for the teaching profession and being able to achieve their professional goals was another reason teachers mentioned for staying in their profession, which supports existing research (Battle & Looney, 2014). However, two out of three categories of reasons are directly related to professional relationships.

Middle school teachers explained that tough situations become more bearable when the staff is supportive, and teachers can build trustful relationships with their peers. In addition, they shared that albeit difficulties they face daily, being able to rely on each other makes a great deal of positive difference. When looking why the high retention school had negative feedback and the low retention school had positive comments, collaboration among school staff was one important reason. The teachers at Site 3 with low retention rate seemed to collaborate well not

only with the staff in their department but also with staff outside their department, while teachers at Site 2, conversely, lacked such collaboration.

Teachers also stated that having the support and assistance of their leadership team has makes a huge difference in the way they feel about working at their school. These data support findings from an earlier quantitative study on teacher retention that revealed the reasons for staying are trusting relationships with the administration, effective mentoring, relationships with colleagues, and useful professional development (Watson, 2018).

Teachers found these actions and strategies contributed to healthy professional relationships with a positive impact on middle school teacher retention: (1) principal showing appreciation and fostering appreciation activities for staff, (2) principal being caring and encouraging self-care, and (3) principal providing differentiated support and opportunities for learning. A collection of participants' responses revealed teachers found the following teachers' actions and strategies as contributing to healthy professional relationships and having a positive impact on teacher retention: using open communication with each other and openness to encouraging and helping each other when needed.

Teachers in the study believed that open communication helped them to connect with and help each other when needed. They also stated that communication is important due to its problem-solving function when facing confusion or uncertainty. Being able to communicate and interact with each other any time needed also provided the opportunity to build professional relationships with each other. Findings in this study support research on the actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships, such as effective communication, principal providing differentiated support especially for new teachers, openness to helping colleagues, and principal being caring and assisting staff to find solutions to problems (Crisci et

al., 2019; DuFour & Burnette, 2002; Krommendyk, 2007; MacTaggart & Lynham, 2019; Ozgenel, 2020; Reitman & Karge, 2019).

This qualitative study explored the role of the 14th dimension of school climate, professional relationships, as described by the National School Climate Center, in middle school teacher retention. Themes from semistructured interviews found teachers from public middle schools perceived professional relationships as having a significant role in teacher retention.

Findings of this study reveal that nine out of nine middle school teachers (100% of teachers) who participated in the study believed that professional relationships impact teacher retention and that healthy professional relationships will help retain teachers. Several teachers described past negative professional relationship experiences, for which they decided to leave their previous schools. In terms of reasons for staying, teachers also mentioned professional relationships. In addition, six out of the nine teachers interviewed stated they would probably leave their current positions if facing with negative, unhealthy professional relationships.

The overall findings of this study point to the fact that the professional relationships dimension of school climate plays a significant role in teacher retention. Though a thorough review of current literature was conducted, albeit a high number of quantitative research on school climate studies, there were no qualitative studies exploring the role professional relationships dimension of school climate in middle school teacher retention. This could be due to the reason that the professional relationship dimension was created in 2016 and due to school climate components being mostly assessed together rather than separate. The experiences of middle school teachers add to the literature as they advocate for healthy professional relationships in their schools, with positive effects on embedding teachers to their jobs, and teacher retention. More than ever, especially during the global COVID-19 pandemic, such

relationships are crucial when it comes to teacher retention.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study has led to the creation of several recommendations for future research. These recommendations are as follow:

- The findings of this qualitative study indicate that professional relationships play an important role in teacher retention. However, an important observation this study revealed, when looking at past School Climate Survey results related to professional relationships for the 2018–2019 school year and the 2020–2021 school year, that the overall survey scores did not corroborate with the school retention rate for the 2020–2021 school year, the year during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also when looking at the survey scores and teacher retention rate for the 2018–2019 school year, although corroboration exists, there is not a significant difference between the survey scores for each of the three school sites. Regarding the latter, the researcher concluded that was the case because some of the questions on the School Climate Survey related to professional relationships were unanswered for Site 2 with a high retention rate and for Site 3 with a low retention rate. It could be that teachers avoided responding to questions listed under the School category of the survey, which resulted in missing questions related to professional relationships. The School Climate Survey contains 32 items that fall under four categories: Staff (7 items), School (12 items), Media (5 items), and District (8 items). In terms of the School Climate Survey results, they were broken down by individual items. The researcher identified several survey items related to professional relationships that fall under Staff and School categories of the PCPS School Climate Survey Climate Survey. For future research involving

professional relationships, the researcher recommends using a School Climate Survey that contains a well delimited professional relationships component, or a professional relationships survey.

- Complete a study for a larger number of middle schools in a larger urban school district in various parts of the United States (Moolenaar & Slegers, 2015; Urton et al., 2014).
- Duplicate this same study for principals and other school staff (other than teachers) who are in similar schools, with low, medium, and high teacher retention rates, in order to find out their perceptions on professional relationships and how such relationships impact retention. Different staff perceptions would provide new perspectives and understanding of the role of professional relationships on teacher retention.
- Compare middle school teachers' perceptions of professional relationships in urban versus rural and public versus charter schools. Locations and environment may have a crucial role in teacher retention.

Implications for Professional Practice

As a result of this study, the following recommendations can be offered to school and district leaders that build from teachers' interviews and literature to improve professional relationships and teacher retention rates:

- Encourage school staff to answer all questions of a school climate survey when targeting the professional relationships component, especially when the survey does not contain a well delimited category labeled "professional relationships" and

questions related to this particular category might fall under categories like Staff, School, and so on.

- Develop strategic practices to foster and improve professional relationships within each individual school site based on the responses of the teachers' interviews. Areas of strengths and weaknesses should be highlighted and monitored with fidelity. By focusing on these areas, school leaders can ensure consistency in terms of implementation and also ensure teachers' needs are being met.
- Develop a School Climate Improvement Plan where staff are encouraged to share and submit proposals and ideas for improvement (including the professional relationships component of school climate) to school administration. Allow the administration team to review and provide feedback for each initiative. Establish a school climate committee that will meet periodically to review, monitor, and continuously assess the plan's implementation and its effectiveness.
- Provide PD training that addresses the needs of both beginning (including international teachers) and veteran teachers on topics related to the subjects they teach, as well as topics that help teachers to better understand students' developmental stages, as well as academic, social–emotional, and behavioral needs.
- School leaders should limit sharing information via email with the entire staff, if such information is intended to be shared with specific department or team. This will save teachers the time from reading something they don't need and will help them perceive communication as less overbearing.
- Encourage two-way communication among staff that involves some type of feedback, especially when dealing with significant matters. This not only allows the sender to

know the message was received accurately but will give teachers the opportunity to share their ideas or concerns.

- Provide opportunities for and facilitate shared decision making by creating a board (electronic or physical) or scheduled special meetings where teachers can share their opinions on crucial matters taking place at their school or in their learning community.

There is limited research conducted on the role of the professional relationships dimension of school climate (NSCC, n.d.) in teacher retention. The results of this study will be helpful to any school district and local education agency to acknowledge the importance of the professional relationships dimension when it comes to teacher retention, as well as to assist them with implementing actions and strategies that foster healthy professional relationships with a positive effect on overall school climate and teacher retention. Better understanding of professional relationships will assist school leaders to plan accordingly and be proactive when it comes to building positive, strong, healthy professional relationships.

First, findings may inform hiring practices. High expectations in terms of professional relationships may be addressed as early as during the hiring process of staff, including teachers and administrators. By tailoring a job interview's hiring questions to a district/school Continuous Improvement Performance Plan's indicators related to professional relationships, staff will actively and proactively address professional relationships. For instance, using hypothetical scenarios during interviews may provide meaningful information on how candidates will respond in a situation involving professional relationships, such as collaboration with each other, working and learning together.

Second, findings may inform school reform. Administrative leaders along within

teachers in schools with low retention rates must advocate for practices that will lead to an improvement in professional relationships and an increase in teacher retention rates. Successful school reform uses strategies that include teachers' input, perspectives, experience, and expertise. Teachers must be the source of information that administrative leaders can draw from to guide the actions within the school reform effort. It is imperative for administrators to involve teachers and rely on their experience and expertise when it comes to teacher retention.

Third, principals may benefit from creating a plan for building and fostering professional relationships in their schools. Such a plan should include the opportunity to reflect on the school goals, vision, and mission, and how professional relationships will be employed to increase effective collaboration among teachers and teacher retention. By creating a plan of action that includes measurable actions and strategies that foster professional relationships, the principals will assist teachers to develop strong and healthy relationships with a positive effect on teacher retention.

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Appendix A

The 14 Dimensions of School Climate Measured by CSCI



The 14 Dimensions of School Climate Measured by the CSCI

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DIMENSIONS	MAJOR INDICATORS
SAFETY	
1. Rules and Norms	Clearly communicated rules about physical violence; clearly communicated rules about verbal abuse, harassment, and teasing; clear and consistent enforcement and norms for adult intervention.
2. Sense of Physical Security	Sense that students and adults feel safe from physical harm in the school.
3. Sense of Social-Emotional Security	Sense that students feel safe from verbal abuse, teasing, and exclusion.
TEACHING AND LEARNING	
4. Support for Learning	Use of supportive teaching practices, such as: encouragement and constructive feedback; varied opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and skills; support for risk-taking and independent thinking; atmosphere conducive to dialog and questioning; academic challenge; and individual attention.
5. Social and Civic Learning	Support for the development of social and civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions including: effective listening, conflict resolution, self-reflection and emotional regulation, empathy, personal responsibility, and ethical decision making.
INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS	
6. Respect for Diversity	Mutual respect for individual differences (e.g. gender, race, culture, etc.) at all levels of the school—student-student; adult-student; adult-adult and overall norms for tolerance.
7. Social Support—Adults	Pattern of supportive and caring adult relationships for students, including high expectations for students' success, willingness to listen to students and to get to know them as individuals, and personal concern for students' problems.
8. Social Support—Students	Pattern of supportive peer relationships for students, including: friendships for socializing, for problems, for academic help, and for new students.
INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT	
9. School Connectedness/Engagement	Positive identification with the school and norms for broad participation in school life for students, staff, and families.
10. Physical Surroundings	Cleanliness, order, and appeal of facilities and adequate resources and materials.
11. Social Inclusion	Acceptance of students with disabilities as members of the school community, including enhanced opportunities for socialization, extracurricular activities, leadership, and decision-making.
SOCIAL MEDIA	
12. Social Media	Sense that students feel safe from physical harm, verbal abuse/teasing, gossip, and exclusion when online or on electronic devices (for example, facebook, twitter, and other social media platforms, by an email, text messaging, posting photo/video, etc.).
STAFF ONLY	
13. Leadership	Administration that creates and communicates a clear vision, and is accessible to and supportive of school staff and staff development.
14. Professional Relationships	Positive attitudes and relationships among school staff that support effectively working and learning together.

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Approval

From: Joshua Jensen
To: Niculina Howard
Subject: Status update from Northwest Nazarene University
Dear Niculina,

The IRB has reviewed your protocol: 0281: A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE IN TEACHER RETENTION IN PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOLS. You received "Full Approval". Congratulations, you may begin your research. If you have any questions, let me know.

Northwest Nazarene University
Joshua Jensen
IRB Member
623 S University Blvd
Nampa, ID 83686

Appendix C

PCS Approval Letter to Conduct Research

Muscalu Letter.pdf - Adobe Acrobat Reader DC (32-bit)

File Edit View Sign Window Help

Home Tools Muscalu Letter.pdf x

Sign In



**POLK COUNTY
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
ASSESSMENT ACCOUNTABILITY
& EVALUATION

Sandra Riley-Hawkins
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October 12, 2021

Re: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Role of School Climate- Professional Relationships on Teacher Retention Rate in Public Middle Schools

Dear Niculina Sorinela Muscalu Howard,

The Office of Assessment, Accountability, and Evaluation has **approved** your request to conduct research. Your research activities are effective from October 12, 2021 through April 30, 2022. Should you desire to continue your research efforts beyond the aforementioned period, you must submit a request for an extension no later than March 31, 2022. Any significant changes or amendments to the procedures or design of this study must be approved by resubmitting a request for research that clearly identifies these methodological changes.

In the interest of continued research benefits and the coordination of research interests, we ask that you mail one copy of your finalized research product and a one-page executive summary for our research webpage at the conclusion of your study. This information, and any other relevant information you may have, will be filed in our research library and added to the annotated listing of research projects. We look forward to reading the results of your study and any suggestions they may offer toward improving academic services for students.

If you have any questions, or if I can be of any further assistance, please contact me or Dawn Robertson.

Best wishes on your research endeavors.

Sincerely,


Sandra Riley-Hawkins
Senior Director
Polk County Public Schools

Appendix D

Interview Invite via Email

Email text

Good Afternoon,

My name is Niculina Howard and I am a Doctoral Student at Northwest Nazarene University studying the role of the school climate, professional relationships dimension in middle school teachers 'retention. This study also seeks to identify the actions and strategies that contribute to strong professional relationships with a positive effect on teacher retention in public middle schools. You are receiving this email because you have been identified as a teacher working at a middle school in Polk County Schools.

I am seeking teachers who will be willing to complete a 16 questions interview on school climate. The interview will be between 15-30 minutes. The questions will refer to your beliefs and experience in regard to school climate and its importance for teacher retention.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please reply to this e-mail and provide your contact information. I know how busy teaching profession is, and I strongly believe that your time is valuable. Because of that, a \$10 gift card will be offered to each participant who will participate in the interview.

Thank you so much for your time and willingness to participate in this study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me via e-mail at [REDACTED] or at nmuscaluhoward@nnu.edu

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Niculina Muscalu Howard, doctoral student, in the Department of Graduate Education at Northwest Nazarene University is conducting a research study related to the role of school climate, professional relationship dimension in teacher retention in public middle schools. We appreciate your involvement in helping us to explore the role of professional relationships in middle school teachers' retention.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a healthy volunteer, over the age of 18.

B. PROCEDURES

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

1. You will be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form, volunteering to participate in the study.
2. You will meet with the primary researcher to participate in an interview about your perspective on school climate and teachers' retention. This interview will be audio recorded and is expected to last approximately 15-30 minutes.
3. You will be asked to read a debriefing statement at the conclusion of the interview.
4. You will be asked to reply to an email at the conclusion of the study asking you to confirm the data that was gathered during the research process.

These procedures will be completed at a location mutually decided upon by the participant and principal investigator and will take a total time of about 30 minutes.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

1. Some of the discussion questions may make you uncomfortable or upset, but you are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to answer or to stop participation at any time.
2. Confidentiality: Participation in research may involve a loss of privacy; however, your records will be handled as confidentially as possible. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications that may result from this study. All data from notes and digital recordings will be kept in a secure, password-protected folder on the principal investigator's school computer. In compliance with the Federalwide Assurance Code, data from this study will be kept for three years, after which all data from the study will be destroyed (45 CFR 46.117).
3. Only the primary researcher and the research supervisor will be privy to data from this study. As researchers, both parties are bound to keep data as secure and confidential as possible.

D. BENEFITS

The researcher will offer a \$10 gift card to each participant in the study. In addition, the information you provide may help school leaders, educators, educational agencies, teachers to better understand the role of school climate – professional relationships on teacher retention rate in public middle schools.

E. PAYMENTS

There are no payments for participating in this study.

F. QUESTIONS

If you have questions or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the investigator. Niculina Muscalu Howard can be reached via email at nmuscaluhoward@nnu.edu, via telephone at [REDACTED] or by mail: Niculina Muscalu Howard, [REDACTED]

Should you feel distressed due to participation in this, you should contact your own health care provider.

G. CONSENT

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. Your decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on your present or future status as a professional.

I give my consent to participate in this study:

Signature of Study Participant

Date

I give my consent for the interview and discussion to be audio recorded in this study:

Signature of Study Participant

Date

I give my consent for direct quotes to be used in this study:

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

THE NORTHWEST NAZARENE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE HAS REVIEWED THIS PROJECT FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH.

Appendix F
Debrief Statement

Dear Participant,

Thank you for participating in this study. I will be reviewing and analyzing the data over the next eight weeks. After doing so, I will follow up with you and ask for your feedback, to ensure that the results accurately reflect your responses during the interview. This study will conclude by March 30, 2022.

If you have any question, please do not hesitate to contact Niculina Muscalu Howard via email at nmuscaluhoward@nnu.edu or via cell phone at [REDACTED]

Thank you again for your participation.

Sincerely,

Niculina Muscalu Howard

Niculina Muscalu Howard
Doctoral Student
Northwest Nazarene University
IRB Application#

Appendix G

ACRP Certification



Certificate of Completion

This is to certify that

Niculina Muscalu Howard

has successfully completed

NO CREDITS - Ethics and Human Subject Protection: A Comprehensive Introduction

Date of completion: Jan 20, 2020

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jim Kremidas", is written over a horizontal line.

Jim Kremidas — Executive Director

Appendix H

Member Checking Email

Date: 03/1/2022

Dear Participant,

This is a follow-up to the interview we had in November, 2021. Thank you for your participation in my study entitled *The Role of Professional Relationships of School Climate in Teacher Retention in Public Middle Schools*. I hope you are having a great school year. The purpose of this email is to share some of the themes that emerged as a result of our interview (see below). Please review these statements and let me know if they accurately reflect your responses. If you have any suggestions for modifications, or any questions, please let me know by March 7th, 2022.

The purpose of this exploratory research study was to explore the role of the school climate -professional relationships dimension in middle school teachers' retention, and their reasons to stay in their schools. This study also sought to identify the actions and strategies that contribute to strong professional relationships in middle school with a positive effect on teacher retention rates. Identifying the actions and strategies that contribute to healthy professional relationships, will assist other schools who desire to improve professional relationships in order to increase their teacher retention rates.

The research questions for this study were:

4. How do middle school teachers perceive the school climate of their schools, as it relates to professional relationships and teacher retention?
5. What reasons do middle school teachers identify for staying in their schools?
6. What actions and strategies contribute to strong, healthy professional relationships and positively impact retention of middle school teachers?

Many themes were evident based on the responses gathered during the interview. After reading and coding transcripts, results show that several factors are currently in place, to assist and foster positive professional relationships at this school. Regarding **Research Question 1**, four subthemes related to professional working conditions emerged from teachers responses to the interview questions: Shared Decision Making (1), Communication 2), Leadership (3), Professional Development and Leadership Opportunities (4).

Site 1 Only

Professional Working Conditions. The following were found in place: Shared Decision Making, Innovative Leadership, Overbearing Communication and PD & Leadership Opportunities.

Working and Learning Relationships. The following were found: Collaborative Relationships and Supportive Staff.

Professional Relationships and Teacher Retention. The following were found: Sense of Belonging vs. Isolation, and Challenges Retaining New Teachers. Participants shared despite positive attributions and attitudes of staff, they made close connections mostly with people in their department.

Site 2 Only

Professional Working Conditions. The following were found in place: Inconsistent Shared Decision Making, Encouraging & Empowering Leadership, Overbearing/One-Way Communication and Subject related PD & Leadership Opportunities.

Working and Learning Relationships. The following were found: Collaborative Relationships within the Same Department and Helpful Staff.

Professional Relationships and Teacher Retention. Disconnection among Departments, and Challenges Retaining IB & Certified Teachers.

Site 3 Only

Professional Working Conditions. The following were found in place: Rigorous Shared Decision Making Process, Transformational Leadership, Clear Communication & Reporting Relationships, Limited PDs for New & International teachers, Leadership Opportunities.

Working and Learning Relationships. The following were found: Cohesiveness among Teams and Compassionate Staff.

Professional Relationships and Teacher Retention. The following were found: High Sense of Belonging, Highly Engaged Staff.

Regarding Research Question 2, three themes emerged regarding reasons middle schools teachers identified to stay in their schools: students and love of teaching profession (1), staff and overall positive perception of professional relationships (2), and feeling respected and supported by the leadership team (3).

Regarding Research Question 3, the following actions and strategies as helpful to contribute to healthy professional relationships and to have a positive impact on teacher retention: principal showing appreciation and fostering appreciation activities for staff; principal being caring and encouraging self-care; principal providing support and opportunities for learning. The following teachers' actions and strategies were found helpful to contribute to healthy professional relationships, and to have a positive influence on teacher retention: using open communication with each other, and encouraging and helping each other when needed. Middle school teachers would like to see the following actions and strategies implemented in their schools: provision of continuous support, focus on school vision, and opportunities to develop relationships outside the school. In terms of support, teachers mentioned more assistance

needed with students' behavior and discipline, as well as more support needed for first year teachers.

If these ideas do not reflect your responses shared during the interview, or your experiences, please reply to this email, or contact me at the number below. Thank you again for your support with this dissertation study.

Sincerely,

Niculina Muscalu Howard

Niculina Muscalu Howard
Doctoral Student
Northwest Nazarene University
nmuscaluhoward@nnu.edu

Appendix I

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your position here.
 - a. What do you do?
 - b. How long have you been here?
 - c. What makes you like coming to work?
2. How do you think about working at your school?
3. What kind of professional development would like to receive in order to learn and develop your professional skills?
4. Do you think that the best teachers are retained at this school?
5. Do you think that the teachers at this school are treated and respected as educational professionals? Give examples
6. How is the communication between administrators and teachers?
7. How are the working relationship with each other of the staff at your school?
8. How the staff at your school assists and support each other when needed?
9. How is the staff at your school? (caring, supportive, honest? etc.)
10. Is the decision making at your school based on professional input?
11. What do your fellow administrators or teachers do to help you become a better leader?
12. What characteristics (such as trust, integrity, honesty, effective communication, etc.), do you feel you demonstrate that strengthen and improve professional relationships?
13. Do you think the professional relationships impact retention of teachers? How?
14. Would you continue in your position, if you will experience negative professional relationships?
15. Besides what we have already discussed, what actions and strategies do your administrators demonstrate that you feel help to strengthen and improve professional relationships at your school?
16. What other actions and strategies would you like your administrators to demonstrate that you feel would strengthen and improve professional relationships?

Thank for taking time to meet with me. Your information will be extremely helpful to my research study.