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# Confronting and Understanding Factors of Teacher Turnover: A Deep-rooted Phenomenon Employing an Autoethnographic Perspective

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CONFRONTING TEACHER TURNOVER

CONFRONTING AND UNDERSTANDING FACTORS OF TEACHER TURNOVER:

A DEEP-ROOTED PHENOMENON EMPLOYING AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC

PERSPECTIVE

by

Elizabeth G. Hill

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

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Doctor of Education

in

Teacher Leadership for Learning

Early Childhood Education

in the

Bagwell College of Education

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2017

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# CONFRONTING TEACHER TURNOVER

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To my dog, Teddy – thank you for letting me snuggle with you at all hours of the night and for being my small, furry, adorable, best friend.

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my favorite professor, mentor, and friend,  
Dr. Mary M. Chandler.

She was an associate professor of educational leadership at KSU. In her past, she was a principal and assistant principal, and a managerial coach. But, she was more than all of that to me. She was a sharp woman – well-dressed, well-spoken, and well-versed in the ways of education. She was a leader, and as such, an inspiration to me. I adored her. She saw my confidence shine through in my graduate work and growth of my family. In difficult times, she became the person I trusted. She was attentive and kind, and she provided sound advice. She was with me every step of the way. She encouraged me to stand up for myself and fight for what I was working for and what I believed in. And, I did. In formulating this dissertation, I was comforted by the thought of her presence. I will continue to think about all that she had said, written, and bestowed upon me.

Mary, I will continue to do my best in all my pursuits, because I know that was what you expected of me and what I want for myself. You were right - it was darkest before the dawn. Now, there is eternal sunshine for us both.

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## ABSTRACT

### CONFRONTING AND UNDERSTANDING FACTORS OF TEACHER TURNOVER: A DEEP-ROOTED PHENOMENON EMPLOYING AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

by

Elizabeth G. Hill

This qualitative autoethnographic study explores the phenomenon of teacher turnover as it relates to the researcher's specific contexts and personal experiences. Through the acts of journaling, coaching, and narrative writing, teachers can better understand influences of culture on their beliefs, values, attitudes, and decisions – especially in regards to actions of movement from one setting to another. The findings indicate that beliefs, values, attitudes, and decisions are learned through a school's culture, and they can change depending on perspective. The findings also indicate that there is power in dialogue – even for teachers who never felt they had influence or a voice at all.

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**PROLOGUE**

*Germination*

*I shall begin this narrative by describing something very precious to me, something of great importance. As a young girl and an adolescent, I recall how reading assigned texts and writing homework were repugnant, and how much I disliked trips to the library. However, the pendulum swung the other way the moment I set foot on my alma mater's campus. I found academia to be irresistible, and I excelled in all areas. It was not until I worked as a nanny during my core courses that my affection for children and acquisition of knowledge about them were realized and intertwined. Subsequently, I applied for the early childhood education program. My mind, body, and spirit were absorbed by scholarship and practicum opportunities. The comprehension of literature, application of theory, and aspiration to be in a classroom setting served as a rationale for attainment of a bachelor's degree in early childhood teaching. Ever since, educating children has been my goal.*

*Magnolia Grandiflora*

*The southern magnolia, or magnolia grandiflora, is truly a magnificent tree. Common to warmer areas of the southeastern United States, it provides the state flower of Louisiana and is the state tree of Mississippi. This beautiful species of evergreen flourishes in sunshine and moist soil and is resistant to most pests or diseases. Its eight-inch waxy green leaves are so abundant; they often conceal the dark brown trunk*

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*underneath. The looming canopy serves as a shroud from sunlight while the twelve-inch ivory flowers permeate the air with an intoxicating scent.*

*Despite its beauty, size, and strength, the southern magnolia has shortcomings. It must have plenty of garden space to accommodate the complicated root system that can be problematic for nearby structures. Additionally, the shallowness of the roots in combination with the low-lying branches prevents the growth of other vegetation. In tandem, the toughness of the leaves and their year-round accumulation take an inordinate amount of time to naturally decompose.*

*Aside from the problematic roots and leaves, the additional advantages far outweigh the nuisances. The lumber is considered to be the most durable of the magnolia species and is used in the production of goods such as furniture, blinds, and boxes. The mound of collapsed foliage protects the underlying roots and supplies valuable nutrients. Finally, the cone-shaped center fruit of the flower and its crimson-colored seeds are consumed and spread by many woodland creatures.*

### *An Ever-blooming Endeavor*

*For this narrative, I use a metaphor to illustrate the similarity between two objects. Thus, an autoethnographic perspective lends to this approach because “a large part of self-understanding is the search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 233). The personal metaphor of the southern magnolia best describes my ten-year venture in the field of early childhood education.*

*At the onset, the seedling of teaching grew during my education program and further evolved after I graduated college. The trunk of the tree is a representation of my*

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*physical being; the brownish-gray bark is smooth when young and becomes hard and bumpy as it strengthens. Thirty seven concentric circular-shaped rings show the chronologic years of age. The rope-like roots that grow horizontally, and four times the width of the canopy, exemplify numerous support systems: family, friends, previous teachers, university professors, and my closest comrades in graduate college. The roots take in nutrients from earth that is acidic and peaty; thus, my pursuits in university schooling, reading literature, completing assignments, and composing thoughts help to provide nourishment. Extending upward beyond the soil and outward are the branches. These limbs portray the various classroom settings I have observed, participated, or served as an educator. Copious amounts of leaves that remain green all year long personify my memories of colleagues and parents of students. Most significantly, the white fragrant blossoms symbolize the sweet wholesome children with whom I have become acquainted.*

*Just as the southern magnolia progresses through seasonal change, so does a teaching year. In the spring, the oldest leaves descend making room for new growth. Summer is a prime time for blooms to mature, and fall gives way to the cultivation of fruit. Lastly, the veil of leaves warmly shelters birds and wildlife from the bitter cold winter. Each new teaching year brings forth new children, relationships with families, curriculum possibilities, and occurrences to improve upon established practices.*

### *Inclement Climate*

*The radiance of the southern magnolia is celebrated by arborists, horticulturists, landscapers, gardeners, and outdoorsmen. Throughout the shifting seasons, the southern magnolia stands in small groups called copses or large groups categorized as forests.*

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*Common habitats throughout the United States include the southern and southeastern Appalachian states and coastal plains. Irrespective of specific environmental conditions such as rainfall, temperature, wind, soil, disease or pollution, the sturdiness of the southern magnolia prevails. Yet, there is one detrimental circumstance: wildfire. The three combined factors of heat, oxygen, and fuel can ignite an all-consuming inferno that has the potential to devastate several thousands of acres of land. Sadly, thousands of wildfires occur in the United States on a yearly basis, and alarmingly, a majority is caused by people.*

*On the other hand, wildfires that occur in nature are not completely disadvantageous. Overgrowth is cleared to allow sunlight to penetrate the ground. The ground soil receives new nutrients. Destructive vegetation and damaging pests are destroyed. Thus, this is the integral circle of life for trees found in nature, especially the radiant southern magnolia.*

*When a tree suffers from a forest fire, it has the potential to be completely eradicated. Otherwise, the tree survives with apparent injury. Fresh wood grows over the scarred layer, but the disfigurement is etched permanently. Scientifically, the dendrochronologic method of dating a tree takes into consideration the rings of the tree and the environmental conditions that affect it year after year. Therefore, it's possible to determine environmental conditions based on the width and narrowness of tree rings as well as if and when particular events (drought, abundant rainfall, fire, etc.) occurred.*

### *Trying to Survive*

*In the realm of education, I metaphorically view teachers as trees. We are found all over the world. We come in countless varieties. We are strong and sturdy. We bend with the*

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*wind. We are able to withstand many elements of nature. Once rooted, we grow and mature from seedlings to statuesque beings. We enhance the earth with beauty and are of great necessity.*

*Many of us are subjected to the inclement climate that occurs in nature – specifically in the field of education. Whether or not we endure what comes our way is a testament to our strength and commitment. The possibilities of being uprooted are always possible, and the new setting in which we are transplanted may not be suitable for maximum prosperity.*

*More often than not, many are incapable of efflorescence. Perhaps the causes are a lack of planning, insufficient nourishment, ineffective placement, or unstable conditions. In a matter of time, those that are vulnerable and powerless either wither, are hastily weeded out, or are expunged. This eradication – or turnover – results in a reduction of the population. As noted earlier, the preponderance of greenery eradication is caused by humans, as is teacher turnover.*

### *Erosion*

*Now we have come full circle. Using an autoethnographic lens and the metaphor of the southern magnolia, I will present the erosion – or wearing away – of my mind, body, and spirit regarding my position on teaching and my decision of whether or not to remain in the field. A complete eradication in teaching is what I consider to be turnover. In this dissertation, I will examine definitions and literature on turnover as they relate to teachers and my own experience in the hope of shedding new insight into a prevalent and deep-rooted situation.*

## CONFRONTING TEACHER TURNOVER

*I present this study, not only as a researcher and participant, but as someone who wishes to provide insight and direction on how to properly grow a “teacher tree.” Each of the 6 chapters begins with specific gardening tips that are in bold print, followed by observations, knowledge, methods, experiences, wisdom, and advice. Whether you are a horticulturalist or a tree, it is my hope that you appreciate the importance of maintaining such an essential symbiotic relationship in the garden of education.*



**CHAPTER ONE**

**INTRODUCTION**

**Gardening Tip Number One: Observe the garden environment of teaching by watching and carefully listening to what is happening.**

As long as I can recall, I tried to survive and flourish in the world of education. Since my teenage years, education has been a continuous priority for me in terms of wanting to learn and wanting to help children learn. While my undergraduate and graduate coursework assignments were uncomplicated and pleasant, my career as a teacher has been quite the opposite. My many successes as an early childhood and elementary teacher have increased my knowledge, skillset, and effectiveness with communication and practices. However, those successes have become obscured from my own and others' vision due to an overwhelming amount of difficulties in my teaching environments. As someone who has viewed teachers, professors, and education in high regard, I have undergone varying shifts in perspective based on the obstacles I have tried to overcome.

As a matter of fact, my educational experiences were not uncommon. What I witnessed or faced as a teacher left me feeling perplexed and isolated. In conversations with other teachers, we mutually discovered that some of our queries and situations were similar and equally distressing. I began to wonder why this was happening. Moreover, I started forming a belief contrary to what my heart has always felt; maybe, I was not destined to be a teacher after all. My self-talk was evenly damaging to my self-esteem as a person and to my morale as a teacher. The more that occurred, the less I felt motivated to continue in my

environment or any other teaching setting. The thought of leaving teaching, although petrifying, became appealing.

My soul was conflicted. How could I bear to switch settings or depart teaching when I had spent so many years perfecting my craft and investing in my profession by going to graduate school? Of course, my curiosity transitioned into a personal quest. I turned to educational research to better understand my own beliefs, values, and attitudes toward teaching. When I started reviewing the existent literature, the results confirmed something I suspected all along; many teachers faced challenges in their environments that prompted change in their positions or professions. Those changes were referred to as turnover.

### **What is Turnover?**

Historic and recent research explained several forms of turnover spanning the field of education (Boe, Cook, Sunderland, 2008). According to Billingsley (1993), *turnover* was synonymous with the terms *exit* or *transfer*, and the confusion had impeded those who wished to further investigate its causes and effects. To phrase it simply, teacher turnover referred to movement. Some researchers quantitatively defined turnover as the rate of how often and at what time teachers depart (Macdonald, 1999), while others asserted that turnover was an umbrella term indicating variation in teaching assignment (Boe et al., 2008). Whether turnover occurred during a school year (Cassidy, Lower, Kintner-Duffy, Hegde, & Shim, 2011; Hale-Jinks, Knopf, & Kemple, 2006; Whitebrook & Granger, 1989) or from one school year to the next (Boe, Bobbitt, & Cook, 1997a), it represented a loss.

Keeping in mind the notion that the meaning of turnover depended on time and place, I conducted further reading to find out how to define my career turnover. Similar to Billingsley (1993, 2004), I best understood teacher turnover to be separate actions of *staying*, *transferring*, or *exiting*. Upon further research, I learned those concise labels were superficial in comparison to their components. Nevertheless, they enhanced my self-perspective. I was someone who, at some point, had stayed in a setting, transferred from one setting to another, and considered exiting teaching altogether.

### **Metaphoric Examples of Turnover**

Through the years, there have been several attempts to characterize the causes, effects, or components of teacher turnover. Parts of speech such as metaphors and idioms are very helpful in trying to visualize and interpret the viewpoints of researchers.

Heyns (1988) made use of the phrase “double-edged sword” when describing that replacements of the finest teachers who leave are mediocre. That is to say that turnover causes positive and negative results. Another popular expression is that the teaching profession is a “revolving door” meaning general education and special education teachers are constantly leaving and the school climate is frequently changing (Boe et al., 2008; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004a; Ingersoll, 2001, 2002, 2003). Ingersoll (2001) argued that school staffing issues stem from a revolving door of continuous teaching changes, and scores of educators are leaving the profession prematurely (Ingersoll, 2002). Undoubtedly, those that are hired are beginning teachers who may succumb to a “sink or swim” situation (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

Even though several of all these attempts are useful, one in particular seems most logical; if one imagines a bucket with holes in the bottom one would notice water seeping

out. “Pouring more water into the bucket will not do any good if we do not patch the holes first” (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003, p. 33). This suggests that hiring more teachers to replace those that are departing cannot and will not solve the issues within the culture and organization itself; rather, problems within the school that cause teachers to leave need to be addressed immediately so the cycle does not continue.

Finally, the metaphor in this dissertation compares teachers to trees and suggests that trouble in the education field erodes their interest in the profession. I was young, educated, and somewhat experienced. I needed to find out why I perceived teaching to be so challenging. Just as wildfire had the power to damage entire forests, the fact that teachers turned over by the thousands was striking.

### **Statement of the Problem**

My ten years of teaching experiences were comprised of many movements. Thus, I had been directly affected by movement that was both voluntary and involuntary (Brenneman, 2015). I already knew turnover’s effects, but I became curious about its causes. Teachers’ turnover levels, including my personal instances, were increasing and becoming a more prevalent phenomenon. Although Ingersoll (2002) discovered that nearly two decades ago, recent national statistics showed that teachers from public and private sectors left teaching in droves (NCES, 2012-2013). Over time, studies have specified factors related to turnover (Billingsley, 2004; Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006), and researchers have made predictions of who leaves teaching based on teachers’ individual feedback (Ingersoll, 2001). Were my circumstances comparable to anyone else’s? It turned out that my demographics (Billingsley, 1993), ideology (Marlow, Inman, & Betancourt-Smith, 1995), school context (Haynes, Maddock, & Goldrick, 2014), sense

of community (Ingersoll, 2001), professionalism (Heyns, 1988), and administrative leadership (Boyd et al., 2011) were indeed possible factors of turnover. Whether turnover was beneficial or detrimental, I shared similar concerns that other teachers had mentioned in turnover studies.

Problematically speaking, the turnover literature lacked balance. Decades ago, there were few studies, narrow conceptual models, and limited methodologies about teachers' movement and its origins (Billingsley, 1993, 2004). Scholars offered several suggestions about the circumstances, methodologies, and directions of future turnover research (Farber, 1984; Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1982; Heyns, 1988; Marlow, Inman, & Betancourt-Smith, 1995; McKnab, 1983). Years later, an abundance of quantitative turnover research has been widely reported as statistical information (Bailey, 1976; NCES, 1987-2012; Research Triangle Inst., 1977; Riccobono, Burkheimer, & Place, 1981; Sebring et al., 1987; Tabler, 1977). It was frustrating to know that a majority of studies relied on teachers' self-reports given on questionnaires and surveys based on the emotions felt at the time of turnover (Boe et al., 1997a, Boyd et al., 2011). Quantitative data collection needed to "...track teacher transfers across schools, districts, and state boundaries, across public and private sectors, across teaching specializations, and out of the teaching profession" (Boe et al., 1997a, p. 373).

It was my view that a later discovery of a teacher's feelings about his or her career path, as indicated by his or her willingness to share thoughts, was too late. By the time an individual's data were collected and reported, it was possible that the teacher transferred or left the field. There was little research that highlighted teachers' interviewed or journaled sentiments revealing their explanations of turnover. Applying a qualitative lens

would allow academics to employ approaches of survival analysis, event history, or in-depth case studies (Willett & Singer, 1991). Researchers could clarify terminologies, question teachers who have experienced temporary career interruptions (Macdonald, 1999), consider how to improve school leadership (Boyd et al., 2011), or investigate influences affecting teacher retention (NCES, 1996).

### **Purpose of the Study**

My study sought to explain the phenomenon of teacher turnover by asking meaningful questions, describing relevant literature, telling my narrative, and interpreting the findings. It took into account the complexities of teachers' career decisions (Macdonald, 1999), as well as the importance of administrative support and its actions on influencing teachers to stay or leave (Boyd et al., 2011, p. 329). The purpose of this research was to develop a context-based understanding of teacher turnover using an autoethnographic approach. I was both the informant and analyst of my behavior. As such, I composed an ethnographic description of career decisions and movement through my lens as an elementary and early childhood education teacher. I chronologically discussed both the successes and challenges of teaching in both public and private education systems. Via reflection on my own experiences as a teacher juxtaposed with the current literature related to teacher turnover, I gained an understanding of the nuanced complexities that motivate teachers to either stay in, transfer, or exit the field of education. By doing so, I learned how to express opinions that would be personally liberating and potentially relevant to people in education.

### Framework

In order to better understand teacher turnover, three leading theories informed my study. The first, *Organization Theory*, put forward the assertion that specific factors within the organization influenced its function and performance (Barnard, 1938; Fayol, 1949; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Mayo, 1945; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Michels, 1962; Pfeffer & Salinik, 1978; Taylor, 1911). Thus, specific to my study, teachers encountered various factors in their teaching settings (Billingsley, 1993; 2004; Ingersoll, 2001). The second, *Contingency Theory*, postulated that the situational settings and style of leadership impacted the effectiveness of the group (Fiedler, 1971). Consequently, teachers' efficacy of a school environment was contingent upon the principal's situational leadership approach. The third, *Theory of Reasoned Action*, proposed that, generally, people underwent a causal chain of using their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and intentions to arrive at a particular decision and action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). While the theories were distinct, they were interrelated and indirectly influenced one another. Thus, teachers experienced situational factors in the settings they taught. Based on those factors, they formed beliefs, attitudes, and decisions about their careers.

More specifically, the relationships between the theories underpinned my investigation of teacher turnover in an empirical and personal manner. I conceptually intended to relate my experiences to particular factors highlighted in literature in order to further explain my resolution of conflict about education. The direction for the study required a qualitative approach combining the aforementioned theories and a method that allowed me to speak subjectively. Hence, an autoethnographic approach was appropriate. As the researcher and participant, I could conduct an examination of my social and

cultural experiences by describing my feelings, values, and beliefs (Custer, 2014; Starr, 2010). I began by posing open-ended questions, gathering data, and analyzing information. My personal interpretations were assembled using common qualitative practices of interviewing, transcribing, and journaling. Finally, I planned to look for emerging patterns to develop themes that best captured my reflections.

### **Research Questions**

By addressing the aforementioned problem that past and current turnover studies lacked in specificity, this study explored the circumstances of turnover and how they personally related to my own exposure to teaching. The following questions guided this work:

1. What factors in my career have influenced my decision to leave or remain in the teaching profession?
2. In what manner has administrative support contributed to my decision to leave or remain in the teaching profession?
3. How have my beliefs about being a teacher been shaped during my experience in the field of early childhood and elementary education?

### **Local Context**

The context of this autoethnographic study covered several settings. As outlined in the fourth chapter of the dissertation, four particular environments chronologically played a part in shaping my passion, curiosities, assumptions, and convictions about the field of education. Each context was located in the southeastern part of the United States.

School 1 was a public elementary school that served kindergarten through fifth grade students. During my experience there, the staff relocated from an older smaller



school to a newer and larger campus. School 2 was an older public elementary school adjacent to a railroad. In both locations a principal and assistant principal governed the large staff of nearly 70 people, and the surrounding neighborhoods were rural and developing commercially.

School 3 was a nontraditional private school located in a suburban community. Unique to that private school setting was the extension from preschool through middle school grade levels and a director who oversaw the small staff of employees. School 4, the most recent site, was a traditional private school that spanned preschool through middle school grade levels. The administrative head of school and principal managed the large staff of personnel. Both locations were situated near numerous homes and local businesses.

### **Significance of the Study**

My dissertation was noteworthy because I asked questions about myself as a person, as a researcher, as a classroom teacher, and as a professional in the realm of education. My study highlighted substantial events in my career that warranted reasoning and discussion. In my previous pilot studies, I focused on others' and my approaches to classroom teaching. However, while my classroom teaching remained stable and prosperous, my mind, body, and spirit became worn. My experiences of movement and situational responses resulted in a crossroad. Would my unrelenting passion as a teacher be sufficient to continue as a teacher, or would my weariness trigger the culmination of the career I had worked so hard to achieve? By shedding light on my personal thoughts, my study added to the literature on teacher turnover, especially in the field of autoethnography.

### **Relevant Terminology**

- Administrative Support: “The extent to which principals and other school leaders make teachers’ work easier and help them to improve their teaching” (Boyd et al., 2011, p. 307).
- Attrition: A component of turnover that specifically addresses teachers who temporarily or permanently depart from the teaching profession.
- Autoethnography: a method of qualitative research of which a researcher acts as the main participant in order to study his or her own culture (Duncan, 2004).
- Elementary School: A school typically spanning grade levels kindergarten through fifth grade that serves children ranging from four to eleven years old.
- Facilities: “The physical spaces where teachers work as well as the resources available to them – such as textbooks, pacing guides, and periodic assessments” (Boyd et al., 2011, p. 308).
- Involuntary Career Decision: A teacher’s decision to move or leave an environment related to the teaching profession that occurred without their decision or intention.
- Leadership Style: a task-oriented or relationship-oriented approach to managing organizations (Fiedler, 1971).
- Preschool: An environment that serves children ranging from several months to five years of age. Specific to this study, preschool refers to the grade level prior to kindergarten.
- Retention: The teaching profession’s abilities to employ and keep teachers.

- Teacher: Any full-time or part-time instructional leader whose main assignment is teaching in any levels of preschool or of grades kindergarten through 12.
- Teacher Beliefs: A teacher's credence of epistemology, philosophy, knowledge, and practices regarding the teaching profession.
- Teacher Influence: "Teachers' autonomy in their classrooms and their ability to affect school policies and practices" (Boyd et al., 2011, p. 306).
- Turnover: The movement of teachers throughout their careers in the teaching profession.
- Staff Relations: "Teachers' professional and social relationships with other teachers" (Boyd et al., 2011, p. 307).
- Voluntary Career Decision: A teacher's deliberate decision to stay in, move, or leave an environment related to the teaching profession.

### **Organization of the Study**

In Chapter 1, I provide an introduction to my autoethnographic study that exhibits research questions, my purpose, and local contexts in which the narrative takes place. I also include a list of terms germane to turnover research. In Chapter 2, I present my review of literature on teacher turnover. I begin by expanding the theoretical framework that sets the foundation for the study and then delineate causes and effects of turnover. In Chapter 3, I outline my qualitative autoethnographic research paradigm by describing the premise of autoethnography, pertinent studies showcasing teachers' perspectives, and procedures for gathering, interpreting, and presenting data. In Chapter 4, I share my story and my chronology of teaching years in four settings. In Chapter 5, I uniquely summarize my experiences using a metaphorical narrative style, and I reveal themes from the data. In

Chapter 6, I convey the discussion of my findings in relation to my fundamental research questions. I also relate my findings to relevant literature and offer implications for schools and the wider educational community. Finally, I provide recommendations to the field based on my autoethnographic research and findings of teacher turnover.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Gardening Tip Number Two: Cultivate deeper knowledge of the surroundings by becoming more familiar with the world of teaching.**

Employing an autoethnographic approach, I sought to create an ethnographic description of teacher movement through my lens as an early childhood and elementary education teacher. To best critically examine and analyze my experiences as researcher and teacher, it was necessary to provide the foundation, or theoretical framework, within which the study was situated. To begin, I presented a symbiotic relationship between three distinct ideas: factors in teaching settings' organizations impacted teachers, the leadership style and response to situations were significant to effectiveness, and teachers' deliberate decisions were dependent upon what happened in their environments. Next, I examined the multi-faceted topic of teacher turnover from both experts' perspectives and my own. Then, I intertwined my thoughts with former and current research of teacher turnover. Finally, I concluded the review with a summary of the review's main points and the significance of an autoethnographic study to better understand the complexity of teacher turnover.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

My theoretical framework for this autoethnographic study on teacher turnover brought together the three perspectives of *Organization Theory*, *Contingency Theory*, and *The Theory of Reasoned Action*. Simply put, the factors relating to my settings'

organizational structure and style of leadership influenced my process of career decision-making. Although they were separate topics in the field of research and education, I viewed them as significantly reciprocal.

### **Organization Theory**

*Organization Theory*, put forward the assertion that specific factors within the organization influenced its function and performance (Barnard, 1938; Fayol, 1949; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Mayo, 1945; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Michels, 1962; Pfeffer & Salinik, 1978; Taylor, 1911). The phases of organizational theories evolved over the last century and indicated shifts in perspectives (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2016). In the early 1900's, organizations in work environments focused on production and a bureaucratic arrangement of control (Walonick, 1993). Decades later, there came about a human relations effort that prioritized employees' needs as fundamental in impacting productivity (Walonick, 1993). Thus, organizational factors in teaching settings impacted schools' cultures, teachers' efficacy, and turnover (Billingsley, 1993; 2004; Ingersoll, 2001).

Upon examining turnover research, my overall impression was that teachers' thoughts were captured through exit interviews or surveys, which were then transformed into local, state, and national statistics. Some agreed that turnover was instigated by increased student enrollment, illness, homemaking, a spouse's move, retirement, or death (Boyd. et al., 2011; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987, 1997; Harris & Adams, 2007; Snyder, Hoffman, & Geddes, 1997). However, I agreed with Ingersoll's (2001) assertion that those were not the main factors that precipitated my turnover. My deeper inquiry of

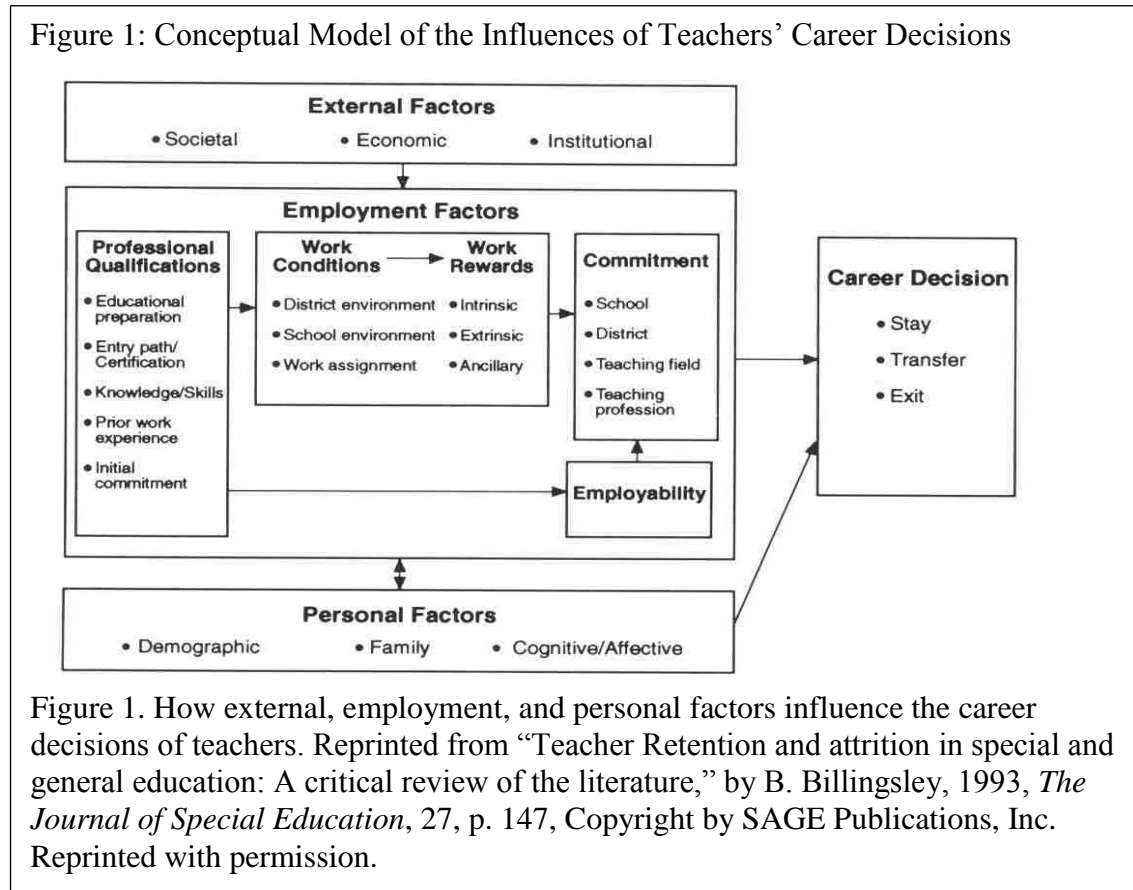
turnover resulted in supplementary organizational factors that indicated teachers' considerations of:

- The transition from a university setting to a classroom environment (DePaul, 1998; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Weiss, 1999).
- The school building's proximity, functionality, cleanliness, population, transiency level, or class sizes (Di Carlo, 2015; Ingersoll, 2001; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; Macdonald, 1999; Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Shen, 1997).
- The manner of compensation for their work in terms of salary or benefits (Curbow, Spratt, Ungaretti, McDonnell, & Breckler, 2000; Kagan, Brandon, Ripple, Maher, & Joesch, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Hewitt, 1993; Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Whitebrook & Granger, 1989; Whitebrook & Sakai, 2003).
- The unpredictable stimuli of paperwork, responsibilities, amount of teaching time, student participation, or parental support (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Hewitt, 1993; Heyns, 1988; Loeb et al., 2005; Marlow & Inman, 1993; Tye & O'Brien, 2002).
- The administrations practices of policies regarding resources, discipline, evaluation, professional development, or resolution of conflicts (Boe, Barkanic, & Leow, 1999; Boe et al., 2008; Boyd et al., 2011; Carter, 2000; Ingersoll, 2001; Tye & O'Brien, 2002).
- The school's culture in terms of effective capacity, staff input, or program productiveness (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Hewitt, 1993; Ingersoll, 2001, 2002, 2003; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

The listed factors were evident in several researchers' analyses, and as I read and reflected more, it was easier to comprehend which aspects hastened my movement in the field of education.

I best grasped and connected with the declarations and schematic representation that Billingsley (1993, 2004) put forward (see Figure 1). Billingsley named broad categories of external, employment, and personal factors that indirectly or directly affected the turnover or retention of teachers. Rather than considering just economic, institutional, or working conditions as factors of turnover, there were factors of commitment, employability, professional qualifications, and work rewards. Furthermore, there were additional characteristics of teachers that pertained to their demographics, family, and ways of thinking and feeling. Although teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices varied, I had finally found research that considered teachers as whole people. It resonated with me because even though my teaching career was distinct from my personal life, one affected the other.





The research that experts conducted (Billingsley, 1993, 2004; Hewitt, 1993; Macdonald, 1999), was instrumental in elucidating why I decided to stay, transfer, or exit. Despite their formation decades ago, their claims were enhanced by others in relaying how teacher turnover transpired for many professionals in the field of education. Aside from these factors was a conceptualization of the effect leaders had on their organizations.

### Contingency Theory

The second, *Contingency Theory*, surfaced in the 1970s as part of the human relations movement, and postulated that the situational settings and style of leadership impacted the effectiveness of its group (Fiedler, 1971). Those in leadership positions rejected the “one best way” scientific management theory (Taylor, 1911), and adopted a

new approach to using variations of leadership styles according to the situational context. According to Fiedler (1967, 1971, 1986), a clinically trained psychologist, leaders characteristically leaned toward either a relationship or task-oriented style that affected group performance.

A leader that was task-oriented was thought to be controlling via mandates of task responsibilities, whereas a relationship-oriented leader was lenient, amicable, and caring (Seyranian, 2010; Wong-Mingji, 2013). Moreover, the leader's group of subordinates was considered to be either interacting and cooperative or independently co-active (Fieldler, 1971). Depending on the dimension of the group, a leader could affect performance as he or she influenced staff relations, task structure, and the authority of power in a position (Fieldler, 1964). Therefore, a favorable situation for both leaders and subordinates involved trust, clarity, feedback, direction, and evaluation (Wong-Mingji, 2013).

The theory became highly renowned and was applied to empirical studies about varying professions, including educational administration. It led to additional theories of contingency that I became familiar with during my graduate leadership courses such as situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969), path-goal (House, 1996), normative decision-making (Vroom & Jago, 1995), and transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1994). One interesting qualification of Fiedler's thought was that a leader's style was unchanging (Heller, 1973), something I came to dispute during my most recent teaching year.

**Theory of Reasoned Action**

The third, *Theory of Reasoned Action*, proposed that, generally, people underwent a causal chain of using their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and intentions to arrive at a particular decision and action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). As an adult, teacher, and researcher, my procedural manner of making decisions happened moment by moment as I encountered available information in and beyond my classroom settings. Those decisions varied from automatic to mindful. Whereas playing music in my classroom was an automatic or habitual practice, the ways I composed lesson plans, designed research proposals, or transitioned in my career were deliberate. After reading research on how people arrived at their decisions, my self-knowledge enlarged in lucidity. A person underwent a series of steps before making decisions. Those steps were: 1) gathering knowledge, 2) forming a belief, 3) developing an attitude, 4) having an intention, 5) arriving at a decision, and 6) carrying out a behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The forty-year-old theory seemed so simple and practical, and had since been visually demonstrated by Bauch (1984) (see Figure 2) and others (Chaiken & Trope, 1999, Chankong & Haimes, 2008; Saaty, 2012).

Figure 2. Relationships between Beliefs, Attitudes, Intentions, Decisions, Behavior, and Available Information



Figure 2. How beliefs are formed by available information, and other formations as a causal chain. Reprinted from “The impact of teachers’ instructional beliefs on their teaching: Implications for research and practice,” by P. Bauch, 1984, Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, p. 3, Copyright by The Catholic University of America. Reprinted with permission.

Keeping this in mind, I related the decision-making process to my behaviors as a teacher and to the behaviors of others as colleagues, principals, or professors. Beliefs that pertained to my profession included epistemology, philosophy, knowledge, and practice (Isenberg, 1990). Many of my beliefs originated during my childhood and teenage years, and they propelled my viewpoints. Throughout the coaching process, I learned those beliefs were considered to be agreements that I had created in my mind about my identity and how it had been influenced by the opinion of others (Ruiz & Mills, 1997). Some examples of my personal beliefs agreements were:

- Teachers working together proficiently communicate their expectations and feelings.
- Leaders and those in authority positions were always right, could be trusted, and always knew what they were doing.

- I had to have a job and earn money in order to feel successful.
- I saw myself as a fallen teacher, and leaders were not failures.

What may be obvious assumptions to you, the reader, were not to me for many years. I believed those statements to be true, regardless of validity. Thus, when I encountered factors in my learning and teaching settings that mismatched my beliefs, internal conflict ensued. That conflict lasted throughout my early adulthood and had recently been somewhat hindered.

In an attempt to learn about other teachers' beliefs, I discovered empirical research that spanned decades (Anning, 1988; Burgess, Lundgren, Lloyd, & Pianta, 2001; Bussis, Chittenden, & Amarel, 1976; Kagan, 1992; Wen, Elicker, & McMullen, 2011). Like those before me, teachers possessed beliefs encompassing several topics, and those beliefs materialized with education and experience. My specific beliefs were situated in context, content, and person, and they directly influenced my classroom instruction (Kagan, 1992).

Similar to other early childhood and elementary teachers, my beliefs correlated with my classroom practices despite my satisfaction of my schools' programs, but my methodology of instruction fluctuated between a basic-skills or child-centered approach depending on the environment in which I worked (Stipek & Byler, 1997). Comparable to Kelly's (1998) study, I understood that even though I was aware of quality preschool standards, there existed an improbability that those standards would translate to others' teaching practices. Interestingly, my variance of child-initiated or teacher-directed learning methods was quite common (Wen, Elicker, and McMullen, 2011), especially since my actions differed from what I espoused (Burgess, Lundgren, Lloyd, & Pianta,

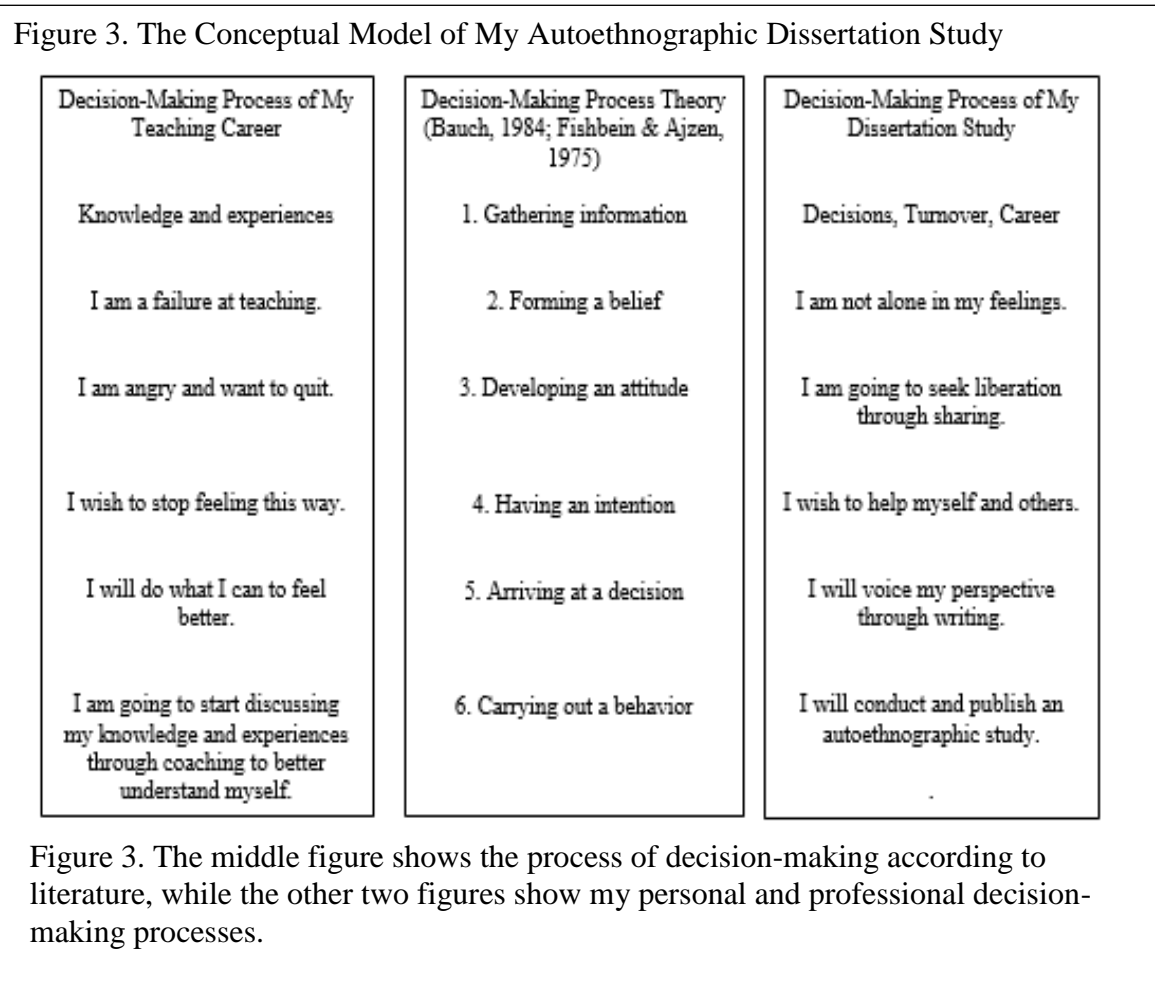
2001; DeFord, 1985). What was prevalent to me were others' actions being different from what my undergraduate and graduate courses espoused. Unfortunately, my aforementioned inner conflict stimulated thoughts of doubt in my identity and career.

### **Revisiting the Conceptual Framework**

As a teacher, I encountered factors in my teaching settings, and I underwent many decision-making processes in my classroom. But, when the organizational and contingency factors presented problems, I had to make weighty decisions about my movement in and out of my teaching settings. It was no longer about my classroom practices – it had become personal and life-altering. My prominent conclusion from all of my research was that teachers acted as thinking and reasoning individuals because they based their career decisions on needs, wants, and context (Chapman, 1983; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Morvant & Gersten, 1995).

Despite the gamut of belief-capturing methods including questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, Likert-scales, teacher logs, tapes, documents, or experimental records, teachers rarely went in depth to reveal the reasoning behind their turnover. I saw my ability to verbalize my thoughts as invaluable to my practices, teaching contexts, and the field of research (Isenberg, 1990). I agreed with the notions (Isenberg, 1990, Kagan, 1992, Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta, & LaParo, 2006; Wen et al., 2011) that my teaching and career sentiments or behaviors were complex to articulate, and that supported my need for reflection through coaching. By combining the three aforementioned theories, I could verbalize how my beliefs, experiences of factors in teaching settings, and additional factors directly influenced my classroom decisions and career decisions.

Thus, an autoethnographic approach to my dissertation study went beyond a data set of surveyed thoughts or opinions. My first-person narrative captured how my career path and shift in thinking were multi-step processes (see Figure 3). It conveyed the importance of my beliefs about self-efficacy, curriculum, program goals, instructional approaches, and classroom practices by showing their influence on my own turnover and retention over a period of years.



I had experienced the decision-making process of my career and dissertation frameworks, and I needed to gather more applicable facts on turnover. However, the more I read, the more confusing it became. There were ranges of patterns in public versus private sector

turnover that depended on the scope of data analyzed through researchers’ lenses or the sampling frames (Ingersoll, 2001; Macdonald, 1999), particularly in respect to the career decisions of special education teachers in comparison to general education teachers (Boe et al., 1997a; McLeskley, 2005).

**Aspects of Turnover**

The literature alludes to turnover as an umbrella phrase for teachers who were in a state of movement inside or outside the teaching profession (Boe et al., 2008). Turnover could be broken down into different components depending on the type of setting or action (see Table 1). In the literature, teachers were referred to as *movers*, *transfers*, or *migrants or reassignees*.

Table 1: The Three Types of Turnover Particular to the Educational Setting	
<p>Childcare Setting</p> <p><b>Job Turnover</b> leaving a facility</p> <p><b>Position Turnover</b> moving to a different classroom in the same setting</p> <p><b>Occupational Turnover</b> leaving the field</p> <p>(Whitebrook &amp; Sakai, 2003)</p>	<p>General and Special Education Setting</p> <p><b>Teacher Migration</b> relocating to a different setting</p> <p><b>Teaching Area Transfer</b> shifting from special education to general education</p> <p><b>Attrition</b> leaving teaching employment</p> <p>(Boe, Cook, Sunderland, 2008)</p>

As shown above, job turnover and teacher migration involved changing places altogether, while position turnover or teaching area transfer suggested reassignment or a request for change.

Reassignment, in a workplace environment, involved giving an employee a different job or arranging for an employee to work in a different place. In the same manner, a *reassignee* was moved from one grade level to another or from one school to



another in the same district (Boe et al., 1997a; Boe et al., 2008; Gray & Taie, 2015; Ingersoll, 2001, 2002; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Loeb et al., 2005; Shen, 1997; Yesil-Dagli, 2012). A key point with reassignment was that it was either voluntarily or involuntarily (Boe et al., 1997a).

Another component of turnover was attrition (see Table 2). Occupational turnover and attrition signified a complete change in vocation (Boe et al., 2008; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Ingersoll 2001, 2002; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). In the literature, teachers who departed temporarily or permanently were referred to as *leavers* or *exiters* (Billingsley, 1993; Boe et al., 2008; Loeb et al., 2005; Shen, 1997; Yesil-Dagli, 2012).

Table 2: The Types of Attrition According to Literature	
<p>Terminology for People</p> <p><b>Exiter</b> a teacher who exited the profession completely (Billingsley, 1993)</p> <p><b>Leaver (definition 1)</b> a teacher who departed temporarily or permanently (Boe et al., 2008; Loeb et al., 2005; Shen, 1997; Yesil-Dagli, 2012)</p> <p><b>Leaver (definition 2)</b> a teacher who ceased public school teaching to teach in a private school setting or to teach prekindergarten (Boe et al., 1997a)</p>	<p>Terminology for Actions</p> <p><b>Teacher Attrition</b> leaving the vocation of teaching completely (Ingersoll, 2001, 2002)</p> <p><b>School Attrition</b> departing from a specific school location (Boe, Cook, Sunderland, 2008)</p> <p><b>Exit Attrition</b> leaving teaching completely to see out other careers (Boe et al., 1997a)</p>

The literature posed exit attrition as the most prevalent dilemma because it represented a decrease in the teaching force and required an increase of replacement teachers” (Boe et al., 1997a). Furthermore, one researcher used the term *wastage* to refer to the turnover’s outflow of vacating teachers (Macdonald, 1999). No matter how disconcerting the term was, I agreed. I was someone who invested several years of

education and experience into my career, and it was entirely possible that I planned to exit before retirement age (Macdonald, 1999).

It was evident that teacher turnover in schools was inevitable, but how schools responded seemed extremely significant. Schools were either reactive by responding upon occurrence, or they were proactive in how they prepared ahead for the turnover of teachers (Cassidy et al., 2011). Whereas reactive schools took immediate steps to hurriedly secure new employees to replace those that left, proactive schools had systems in place to resolve turnover or attrition issues while still maintaining stability. In reactive situations, some teachers were employed with emergency certificates or waivers (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004), while proactive schools focused on quality when exploring potential employees (Whitebrook & Granger, 1989). Other reactive approaches included switching to year-round “multi-track” schooling (Loeb et al., 2005), reducing services for special needs students (Billingsley, 1993), redistributing remaining teachers or utilizing substitute teachers (Cassidy et al., 2011) or appointing teachers with invalid bachelor’s degrees (NCES, 1996). Conversely, proactive courses of action involved applying programs to support current teachers during the course of their careers (Haynes et al., 2014) or creating initiatives for newly-hired teachers such as signing bonuses, student loan forgiveness, or tuition reimbursements (Ingersoll, 2001). In sum, ill-prepared schools faced higher rates of turnover than anticipatory schools (Cassidy et al., 2011), and some went into panic mode when the process of losing and replacing teachers became extremely costly.

### **Perceptions of Turnover**

Cost was just one of the reasons why some regarded turnover as negative. It was disruptive (Ingersoll, 2001, 2002), and the instability of schools was problematic (Boe et al., 1997b; Boe et al., 2008; Whitebrook & Granger, 1989). Its effects adversely impacted the functionality of the school, the success of the students (Loeb et al., 2005), and the camaraderie of the remaining staff (Haynes et al., 2014; Macdonald, 1999). Thus, turnover was perceived as an impediment to schools and communities. There echoed a chain reaction that transpired in the school itself, such as lack of instructional continuity, curriculum expertise, a foundation for mentoring, and capital costs (Loeb et al., 2005). I definitely observed and felt the challenges that were associated with teachers' exodus and influx in school environments.

Since my transition to preschool teaching, I was interested in how research reflected a rippling effect for everyone involved. Turnover had indeed affected me, but I felt children were also at the forefront of the turnover dilemma. Research indicated unsettling effects regarding low instructional quality that resulted in a substandard education (Jalongo & Heider, 2006; Shields et al., 1999). The majority of staff members in centers or programs serving the youngest of children were either uneducated (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006) or inexperienced (Loeb et al., 2005), and some staff members experienced a "learn as you go" training approach (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009). In early learning settings, infants and toddlers seem to be most affected (Whitebrook & Granger, 1989) because of severed relationships between the children and departing teacher (Cassidy et al., 2011). This was a definite effect for my son in his preschool settings because I was charged with mitigating his reactions when his teachers left.

Cassidy, Lower, Kintner-Duffy, Hegde, & Shim (2011) qualitatively captured peoples’ perceptions of turnover’s effect in preschool settings and indicated evidence of its complexity for the students, parents, teachers, and administrators (see Table 3).

Teachers’ Perceptions	Parents’ Perceptions	Administrators’ Perceptions
-turnover creates challenges	-trust issues	-reorganization of staff
-increased stress and workload	-ineffective communication	-effect on morale
-lack of assistants	-changes in teaching style	-difficulty finding substitutes
-new coworker does not know the routine	-heightened concern for welfare of children	-using time to find and interview new hires
-changing lesson plans	-quality of instruction	-working in rooms alongside others to cover ratios
-establishing relationships with new coworkers	-forming new relationships with the teachers	-understanding that money, benefits, and lower ratios would alleviate turnover, but inability to make changes
-confusion for the children	-children’s anxiety about attending school	

Conversely, others saw turnover as a constructive opportunity (Whitebrook & Sakai, 2003). For instance, not enough turnover of staff lead to stagnancy (Ingersoll, 2001, 2002; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Macdonald, 1999). That meant the school was not progressing with current resources or methods, or the teachers were complacent, incompetent, dispassionate, or overworked (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006). If turnover occurred at an unchanging school, then new teachers provided different ideas, materials, and approaches to a possibly resistant school community (Billingsley, 1993; Chapman, 1994).

I had to consider both views of turnover juxtaposed to my own. In relation to all the terminology, I had been a *migrator*, a *leaver*, and a *reassignee*. I had relocated to several settings, left teaching on a temporary basis (both voluntarily and involuntarily), and had been reassigned twice. And, while some movements were traumatic, others

ended up being incredibly beneficial. Perhaps turnover in the teaching field, especially low turnover (Ingersoll, 2001, 2002), was just a natural progression (Boe et al., 1997a; NCES, 1996). I also learned that while my turnover was not necessarily favorable, the efficacy of the staff hinged on the competence and effectiveness of the residual teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008).

My dissertation was an appropriate time for real quality data collection because no one had ever taken time to initiate a conversation with me about my career decisions. It was true that the only universal agreement of conclusions stemming from turnover research was that it directly or indirectly affected people. So, my research on the predicament of teachers moving or leaving education created a fresh occasion to seek and understand the phenomenon of turnover.

### **Related Studies**

During the last few decades, researchers have studied the phenomenon of teacher turnover. Basically, teachers change jobs, move jobs, or quit the profession. New teachers replace those who have left. Administrators, districts, and researchers take notice of this perpetual cycle and start asking questions. The answers to posed questions form national and state data (Boe et al., 1997b). Scholars pinpoint and better explain thoughts and behaviors of teachers in hopes of decelerating and preventing future turnover or attrition. Originally, turnover research came about during the 1980's due to an increase in student enrollment and a shortage of teachers (Schofer & Duncan, 1986; Smith-Davis, Burke, & Noel, 1984). What follows are past approaches to research on turnover of teachers and analyses of results.

**National Longitudinal Study**

Data collection during the 1980's and 1990's preceded technology, so researchers assembled information of general and special education teachers via mailed questionnaires, telephone interviews, and data tapes across the United States (Billingsley, Bodkins, & Hendricks, 1993; Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Brissie, Hoover-Demsey, & Bassler, 1988; Dangel, Bunch, & Coopman, 1987; Farber, 1984; Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1982; McKnab, 1983; Platt & Olsen, 1990; Raschke, Dedrick, Strathe, & Hawkes, 1985; Singer, 1993).

One approach by Heyns (1988) was to examine the fifth wave of a longitudinal survey titled, National Longitudinal Study (NLS-72). The first survey was given in 1972 and repeated years later (Bailey, 1976; Research Triangle Inst., 1977; Riccobono, Burkheimer, & Place, 1981; Sebring et al., 1987; Tabler, 1977). These studies were quite unique in that data collection spanned 14 years of career paths of high school students to discover who turned out to be teachers. The national examination of over 1, 000 graduating students consisted of initial interviews, a survey, and re-interviews concerning demographics, personal experiences, and work histories. By investigating data, Heyns discovered soaring rates of turnover and attrition for beginning teachers, male teachers, and secondary teachers while the retention rate for women and young teachers had improved. A majority of respondents who became teachers claimed they were satisfied with their jobs, especially elementary and private school teachers. Yet, rates of attrition were higher in private schools, suburban schools, small schools, and secondary schools. Conclusively, Heyns conveyed working conditions was “the single most important reason for high rates of teacher attrition” (1988, p. 29-30).

**Marlow Hierlmeier Profile**

Marlow, Inman, and Betancourt-Smith (1995) desired to look outside of demographic and attitudinal factors to study environmental factors that cause turnover. 602 kindergarten, elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers were participants from nine Southeast, Midsouth, and Southwest states. Over half of the participants worked as secondary school teachers with varying years of teaching experience. They completed the Marlow Hierlmeier Profile (unpublished), a survey designed to collect teachers' ratings of their current teaching level, years of classroom experience, expected professional prestige, pupil ideology, principal support, school culture, and intellectual stimulation. Results indicated a majority of the 602 respondents were disappointed with the minimal amount of respect and professionalism towards teachers. Two-thirds of them felt their ideologies comparable to colleagues' and that the culture of the school was reflective of their own. Worthy of note were how a preponderance of the participants felt their principals fluctuated between encouraging new or established ideas. The authors established that participants were far removed from previous studies showing several environmental factors to be causes of turnover – which lead to profiles of those who were most likely to leave the profession.

**Schools and Staffing Survey**

In the late 1980's, the National Center for Education Services developed a system of related questionnaires that provided statistics of elementary and secondary education in the United States. The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) has had seven cycles to date: 1987-1988, 1990-1991, 1993-1994, 1999-2000, 2003-2004, 2007-2008, and 2011-2012 (NCES, 1987-2012). SASS data appeal to persons in the field of education

including researchers, journalists, legislators, and educators. Stratified probability samples of schools, principals, teachers, districts, and library centers in public and private sectors provided national, regional, or affiliation levels on elementary and secondary schools. Over the years, many survey questions have remained the same while formatting has varied from mailed questionnaires to telephone interviews to computer-based surveys. Each of its four components span the topics of characteristics and perceptions of staff, school conditions, student populations, remuneration, and recruitment and retention procedures, and have remained constant to search for trends.

One component of the SASS, the Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS), has also had seven cycles to date; 1988-1999, 1991-1992, 1994-1995, 2000-2001, 2004-2005, 2008-2009, and 2012-2013. It tracks the mobility of teachers the following year of the SASS (NCES, 1988-2013). It is a combination web-based and paper survey that has been directed toward beginning teachers, current teachers, former teachers, and teachers who have left the profession.

Boe, Bobbitt, and Cook (1997a) explored the first SASS data from 1987-1988 and the 1988-1999 TFS. They found that special education teachers had transferred from or left their assignments more frequently than their general education counterparts. Those who transferred changed locations within the district or from one state to another, suggesting teacher migration did not represent a national loss. Two thirds of the respondents claimed they planned to return to teaching at some point, while the remaining never intended to return. Using the same data, Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, and Weber (1997b) found district size, changes in teachers' demographics, age, and



characteristics highlighted potential turnover. However, both articles concurred that transfer and attrition of teachers had declined.

Shen (1997) and Ingersoll (2001, 2002) observed trends evident in the 1990-1991 SASS and 1991-1992TFS. While Shen focused on voluntary movers, Ingersoll looked at both voluntary and involuntary movers and leavers. From Shen's sample of 3,612 teachers, 2,233 were stayers, 695 were movers, and 684 were leavers. Ingersoll's sample of 6,733 teachers showed 3,343 stayers, 1,428 movers, and 1,962 leavers. Right away, one can see the differences when involuntary actions were accounted for. Ingersoll's perspective pointed to schools' organizations as a cause of turnover rather than showcasing only individual teachers' characteristics. This means analysts must consider schools' effectiveness, character, and conditions. Whereas Shen found distinctions between stayers, movers, and leavers, Ingersoll reasoned that organizations affected the motivation, commitment, and turnover of teachers.

As the years progressed, more data were available for investigation. Ingersoll (2002) and Boe, Cook, and Sunderland (2008) studied data using multiple years of information provided by the SASS. Boe and his colleagues continued to compare the turnover of special education and general education data from the first three versions of the SASS and TFS. What they discovered was higher mobility of special education teachers and a steady increase in attrition of both specializations. Alarming, the numbers of those who abandoned public school teaching were in the thousands and did not secure better employment. Further, in his review of the first four cycles of the TFS, Ingersoll maintained that school staffing cutbacks, and not retirement, was a major factor of teacher turnover.

**Other Studies**

Using a phenomenological perspective, Sumison (2001) designed her investigation of turnover on an Australian case study. Sumison followed one female teacher, Sarah, from her teacher preparation program at 18 years of age through her eighth year of teaching. The chronological collection of data captured Sarah's responses to conversational interviews and drawings depicting her experiences as she taught prekindergarten, first, and second grade. Through the use of metaphors, Sumison described Sarah's "blossoming and wilting of an early childhood educator's career commitment and her eventual decision to leave the field" (Sumison, 2001, p. 869). During the study spanning seven years, Sarah used reflective practices to identify and comprehend her strenuous experiences of maneuvering challenges, growing self-confidence and competence, pursuing passion and ideology, recognizing isolation and disappointment, and finally submitting to defeat.

In an effort to examine turnover and its relation to teacher, student, and organizational dynamics, Loeb, Darling-Hammond, and Luczak (2005) compiled data collected by Louis Harris Associates in 2002. Over 1, 000 California teachers engaged in telephone interviews about their schools' working conditions. Additionally, school-level data and district salary scales were added. They found that a combination of the teachers' ratings of their schools' conditions (physical, access to technology, availability of textbooks, etc.) when combined with student demographics was a strong predictor of teacher turnover. Moreover, the strongest predictors of turnover were teachers' reports of poor working conditions and a multi-track schedule. They also examined the difficulties

in filling school vacancies and found the two most predictive elements were schools with large class sizes (33 students or more) and low beginning salary levels.

Cassidy et al. (2011) employed a mixed-methods approach to studying North Carolina teachers', directors', parents', and children's experiences as turnover in preschools occurred. Qualitative techniques included semi-structured interviews with all participants, and field notes were written about turnover transitions whereas quantitative data measured quality ratings of centers using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998) and the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS; Pianta, 2001). Foremost, two distinctions were identified about how centers responded to turnover. The qualitative results explained: (1) teachers' difficulties related to instructional changes, classroom management, and children's behavioral changes, (2) directors' descriptions of turnover as a domino effect and an increased workload, and (3) parents' adjustments to relationships and communication. Quantitative data demonstrated how classroom atmospheres were jeopardized during times of turnover, and that departing teachers and children had stronger relationships as compared to replacement teachers and children. Thus, the study made evident how turnover negatively affected everyone involved.

To reveal relationships between working conditions and teacher attrition, Boyd, Grossman, Ing, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2011) incorporated varying data from first-year teachers working in New York City. In the spring of 2005, over 4,000 participants completed a survey (Lankford et al., 2005) consisting of previous SASS questions and additional questions about preparation, school characteristics, practices, and goals. A year later, participants were given one of two follow-up surveys depending

on their continuation or discontinuation of teaching. This extended prior research using SASS data (Grissom, 2011; Ingersoll, 2001; Shen, 1997; Weiss, 1999) by reducing bias found with self-reports and by directing attention toward several school context elements. The follow-up surveys yielded less than 1, 600 responses, and of those, 368 left the profession. The most prominent factor of attrition or consideration of attrition was job dissatisfaction, and more specifically, dissatisfaction of support from administrators was the primary factor that influenced that decision. Ultimately, the study determined the importance of school leadership and its effect on teachers.

The Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Survey, (BTLS) (NCES, 2011), gathered nationally representative data on beginning teachers in elementary and secondary public schools in the United States. Gray and Taie (2015) summarized questionnaire and web-instrument information provided by nearly 2, 000 respondents and retrospective respondents. Beginning with 2007-2008, the authors presented five waves of data collection spanning the teaching years of 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, 2010-2011, and 2011-2012. Teachers' characteristics, attitudes, and mobility, as well as school characteristics were collected. There were slight percentage increases in those who left or took positions outside of the classroom, and a moderate increase of movement based on involuntary actions or nonrenewal of contracts. Staying in schools slightly decreased and earning advanced degrees showed no differences. Notably, those who earned a base salary of \$40, 000 or more and who were assigned first-year mentors continued teaching.

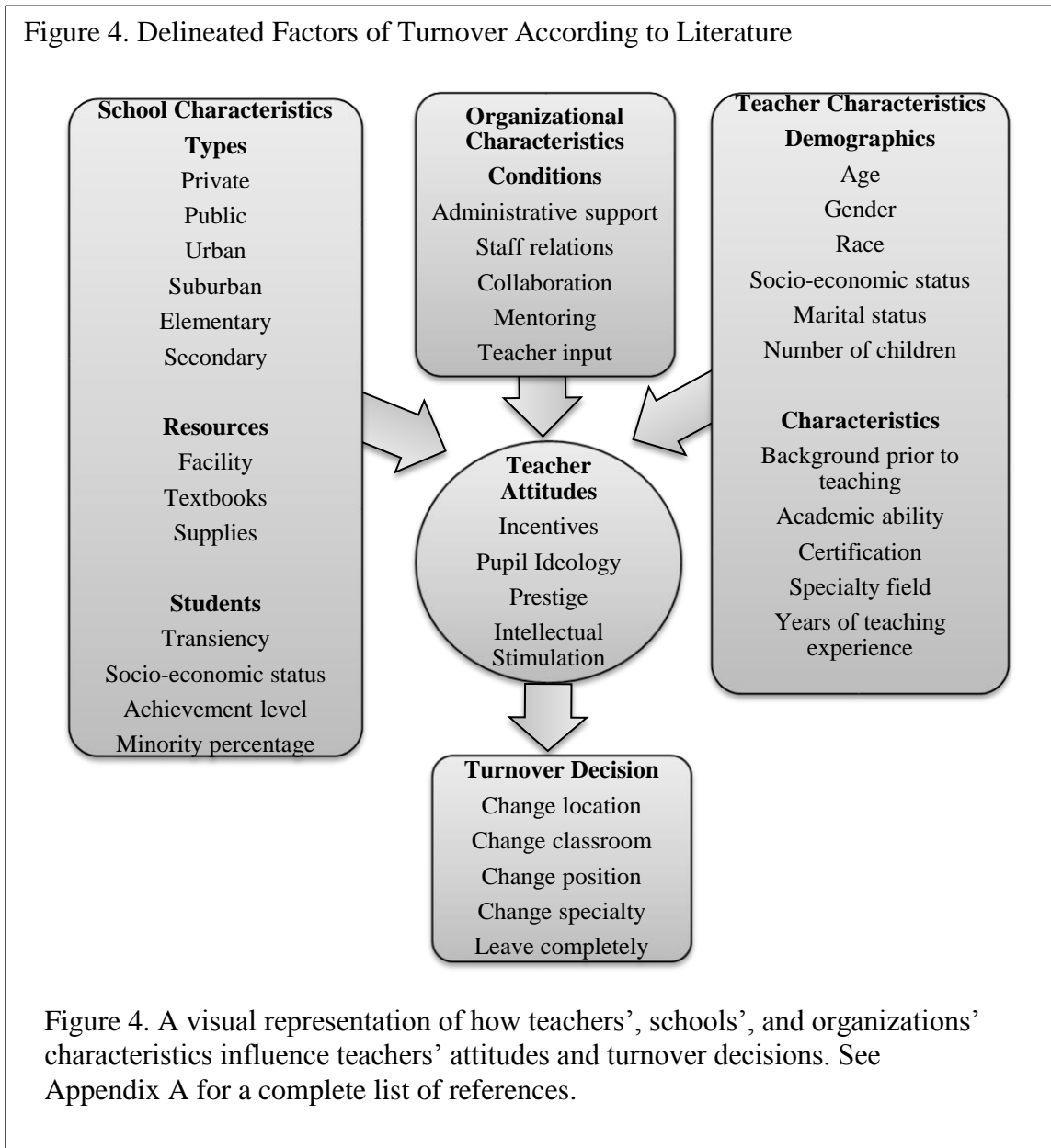
Years later, and most currently, the examinations of the SASS and TFS tell a different story. Consistent with prior research (Keigher, 2010; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Liu, 2007; Liu & Ramsey, 2008; Loeb et al., 2005; Mau, Ellsworth & Hawley, 2008;

Strunk & Robinson, 2006), Yesil-Dagli's (2012) inquiry of teacher factors, school factors, and student factors, proved to be predictors of turnover in the 2003-2004 SASS and 2004-2005 TFS years. Yet, there were contradictions to previous studies arguing specific teacher characteristics of gender, race, age, experience, certification, education, and work conditions such as school climate, remuneration, satisfaction, and student characteristics influenced turnover. While this was most likely due to the small sample size of 210 participants, her overall conclusions indicated teachers were satisfied with their jobs and not suffering from burnout. Additionally, Di Carlo (2015) found turnover to be stable during 2004-2005 and afterward TFS years compared to the previous 15 years of continuous escalation. Further, Long (2015) highlighted the current survival rates of beginning teachers as being lower than predicted, which is a surprise to experts.

### **Factors Related to Turnover**

The following research contributes to Billingsley's (1993) *Conceptual Model of the Influences of Teachers' Career Decisions* and others' theories and models (Chapman, 1983; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987) by further explaining variables that influence the turnover of teachers. Whereas the aforementioned representation discusses attrition and retention, this illustration focuses only on delineated factors of turnover, and uses additional literature to support the theoretical framework of this autoethnography. Conceptually, the career change of educators was first based on teachers' attitudinal and demographic factors (Marlow & Inman, 1993). Thereafter, environmental factors were considered as well (Marlow et al., 1995). Subsequently, schools' organizational conditions were introduced into the teaching turnover discussion (Ingersoll, 2001), as well as student characteristics (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Namely, the following visual

aid depicts three groups of turnover predictors: teacher characteristics, school characteristics, and organizational conditions (Ingersoll, 2001), and further relates them to attitudinal factors (see Figure 4).



### **Those Most Likely to Turnover**

In the previous section (Factors Related to Turnover) the visual aid illustrated three groups of turnover predictors (Ingersoll, 2001) as they related to attitudinal factors. A significant amount of research has been done to discover types of teachers who are transferring schools or exiting the profession. Whereas the previous chart provided predictors in general terms, this next chart relies solely on specific school, student, and teacher characteristics as they relate to certain perceptions of teachers who are contemplating a change (see Figure 5). At first review, the most telling characteristics of teachers who leave are predetermined by teachers' gender, age, years of teaching experience, and level of education. Thus, a female teacher (Guarino et al., 2006; Marso & Pigge, 1997; Murnane, Singer, Willett, Kemple, Olsen, 1991; Stinebrickner, 1998, 2002) who is either really young or middle-aged (Allensworth, Poniscieak, & Mazzeo, 2009; Boe et al., 1997b; Guarino et al., 2006; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Keigher, 2010; Liu, 2007; Strunk & Robinson, 2006; Yesil-Dagli, 2012), has taught less than ten years (Adams, 1996; Boe et al., 1997b; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004b; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Marlow & Inman, 1993; Marlow et al., 1995; Marvel, Lyter, Peltola, Strizek, & Morton, 2006; Stinebrickner, 1998, 2002; Yesil-Dagli, 2012), and has an advanced degree (Adams, 1996; Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Hanushek et al., 2004b; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Stinebrickner, 1998, 2002; Yesil-Dagli, 2012) is the most likely target for turnover or attrition.

Figure 5. Those Most Likely to Transfer or Leave According to Literature

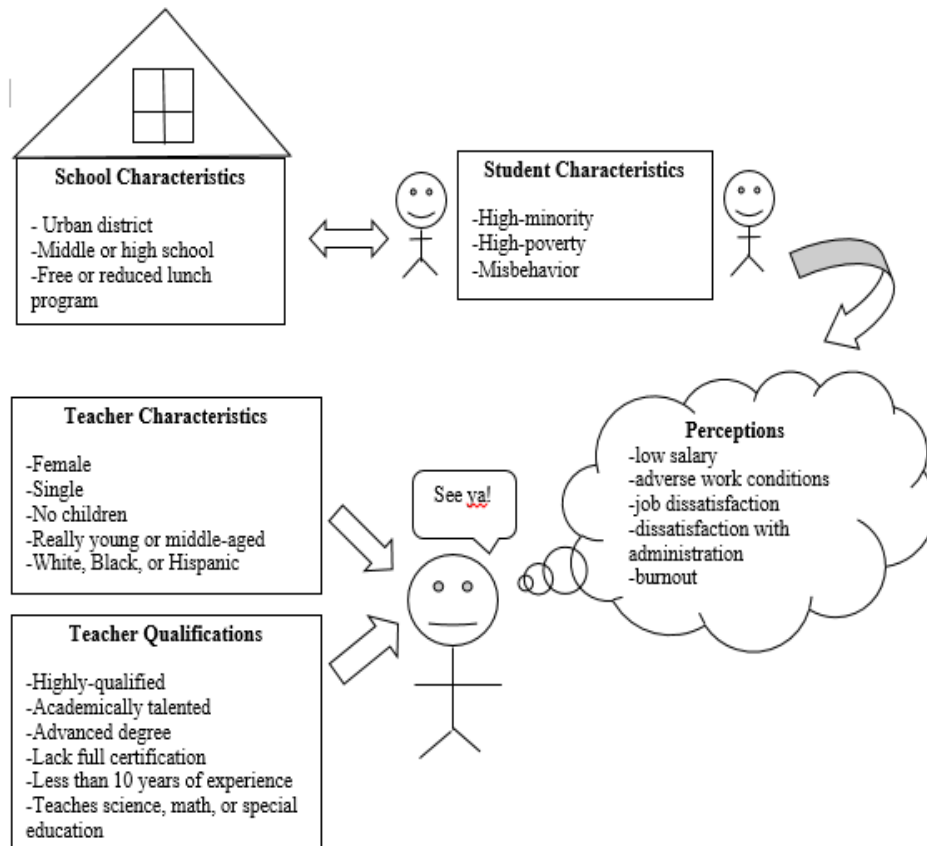


Figure 5. The specific characteristics of a school, student population, and the teacher contribute to a teacher's perceptions of satisfaction and possibly turnover.

### Amount of Time before Leaving

Sadly, teachers contemplate and act upon the decision to leave the teaching field entirely. In childcare settings, it is more common to find teachers leaving prior to the school year's end and with little notice (Cassidy et al., 2011). In elementary and secondary fields, the attrition of teachers early in their career is widespread (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). This formative period often resulted in increased turnover (Haynes et al., 2014) for nearly one out of four teachers (Boe et al., 2008). Shockingly, recent statistics



indicate that schools lose virtually half a million teachers every year due to retirement, transfer, or attrition (Boyd et al., 2011). There have been extensive attrition figures that have reported teachers' attrition after their first year (Brenneman, 2015; Gray & Taie, 2015; Heyns, 1988; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003), third year (Boe et al., 2008; Heyns, 1988), fifth year (Bobbitt, Faulpel & Burns, 1991; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Brenneman, 2015; Ingersoll, 2002; Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014; Long, 2015), seventh year (Hewitt, 1993), and tenth year (Arnold, Choy, & Bobbitt, 1993). Conclusively, attrition research denotes a U-shaped curve that illustrates when in age teachers depart (Bobbitt, Leich, Whitener, & Lynch, 1994; Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Barkanic & Maislin, 1998; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987, 1991, 1997; Hafner & Owings, 1991; Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1988). If one imagines the letter U, the top of the letter represents high attrition. Here one would see young teachers on the left and older teachers on the right. The bottom of the letter signifies low attrition of middle-aged teachers. This data supports the earlier claim that turnover strongly affects beginning teachers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003), and that unequivocally demonstrates a serious quandary.

### **Summary of the Literature Review**

As shown in my review of research, there have been extensive investigations into the topic of teacher turnover. Turnover is a multi-faceted concept with several components. The review explains that teacher turnover is inevitable, and that it can be perceived as positive or negative depending on a person's lens. Most important, turnover does not affect just the one teacher who leaves. It affects the teacher's family, colleagues, school, principal, and students. While a majority of quantitative literature centers on

questionnaire or survey responses given by teachers, qualitative and mixed-method studies have also taken place.

However, there is a lack of teacher voice in turnover research. Of the turnover literature I read, I best related to Sumison's (2001) phenomenological research study. She captured her participant's experience through interview transcripts, use of metaphors, and narrative approach. The study of her participant's chronological teaching years strongly influenced the way I saw myself as a teacher and my dissertation study. I could relate to the exact sentiments of entering the field with enthusiasm, encountering challenges, and diminishing satisfaction (Sumison, 2001). Her participant, Sarah, eventually resigned and left the field of teaching – and, this is what I referred to in my tree metaphor as a *complete eradication*. She was young, passionate, strong-willed, and only taught for eight years before exiting the field completely. It was almost like reading about my own professional experiences as an early childhood and elementary teacher. Two differences between our stories are that I have survived beyond 8 years of teaching, and I still feel passionate about being a teacher.

Teachers' voices, like mine, personalize the detailed thought processes of turnover. Our narrative stories are a crucial aspect of turnover literature, and they should be more prevalent. While Sumison's study focused on Sarah's story of turnover, I present my own story of turnover through autoethnography. As shown in later chapters of this dissertation, my voice as a researcher and participant shine through in my use of metaphors, interview transcripts, and narrative approach. My autoethnographic study aims to bridge the gap of qualitative voices in turnover literature because it provides a unique and necessary approach to further understanding this phenomenon.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Gardening Tip Number Three: Encourage natural propagation by allowing the ideas of qualitative research and autoethnography to progress.**

Early in my master's degree program, over 10 years ago, I realized I was partial to qualitative research methods over quantitative. Both approaches have merit in educational research because investigators use systematic collection to reach conclusions about their queries (Vogt, 2007). From the completion of my master's degree onward, I learned that quantitative methodology did not resonate with me. I have never been attracted to working with numbers unless it was related to managing my bank account. I am a thinking, feeling person who prefers watching, listening to, and reading about others' perceptions. Whereas quantitative research requires statistical analysis and detachment as an observer, qualitative methodology allows for flexibility in the research process and immersion in naturalistic settings (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). Thus as a qualitative researcher, I do not believe that facts and feelings can be separated (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Recognizing my proclivity to understanding social phenomena through narrative description, I have carried out several explorations in an inductive manner.

#### **Qualitative Research**

Inherent to the description of this study, as well as my role as a qualitative researcher, is the concept of my worldview (Guba, 1990). I am proudly a social

constructivist; meaning I seek further understanding of the world in which I inhabit (Creswell, 2009). I ask questions and then solicit answers by reading, observing, and interacting with others to construct meaning. This falls in line with the qualitative research methods of asking open-ended questions, collecting data through interviews and observations, analyzing data by finding themes, and writing narrative texts. In the past, my early childhood research pursuits focused on case studies of young children's perceptions of literacy in elementary classroom settings. I engaged in conversations with children, parents, and teachers to express holistic accounts of the appearance of literacy in public and private settings and its impact on motivation and interests of young learners.

Currently my stance on research holds firm, with recent interest and understanding of additional qualitative values and quests. The interpretivist framework that supports my assumptions, research purposes, approach, and role has expanded to now include autoethnography. Rooted in the larger tradition of ethnography and associated with anthropological and sociological origins, autoethnography centers on the self in relation to a broader sociocultural environment (Glesne, 2011). My emic perspective (Merriam, 2009) as an insider of the teaching world is crucial, and I can move beyond a broader scope to concentrate on a narrow set of questions (Hatch, 2002). However, the questions are not about children or classroom literacy perspectives, both topics of familiarity. This unfamiliar style of autoethnography contrasted with my prior case study methodology by allowing me to introspectively examine my past and present teacher self.

My passion for learning about teachers' literacy foundations and tactics surrounding literacy led to a realization of inconsistencies between theory and practice, thus intensifying my need to examine my own beliefs, thoughts, and actions in my classroom. What began as an interest in early childhood literacy resulted in an epiphanic moment – one in which I began to question my beliefs, thoughts, actions, and self as a teacher. Autoethnography opened the door for this new level of intrigue, and soon I was on a relentless quest for answers and new possibilities (Hoppes, 2014). For this reason, a qualitative approach was appropriate because of its flexibility, my ability to focus on the research process and incorporate that into my findings, and the openness for new questions to emerge from the data. The three questions that guided my inquiry were:

1. What factors in my career have influenced my decision to leave or remain in the teaching profession?
2. In what manner has administrative support contributed to my decision to leave or remain in the teaching profession?
3. How have my beliefs about being a teacher been shaped during my experience in the fields of early childhood and elementary education?

### **Ethnography**

The qualitative term of ethnography merges the Greek words *graphein* and *ethnoi*, which means to write about others (Erikson, 2011). Originated by anthropologists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, ethnography focuses on social inquiry (Erikson, 2011). An ethnographer immerses himself or herself into the natural setting of a particular culture, acts as a participant-observer, collects behavioral or perspective data, and composes a written holistic account (Hatch, 2002; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). Merriam (2009) defined

ethnography's emphasis on culture as "beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behavior patterns of a specific group of people" (p. 27). Whether the researcher has an insider's perspective or an external perspective of the particular culture, he or she explains everyday life using detailed description in order to capture "transient examples of shaped behavior" (Geertz, 1973, p. 10). Frankel and Wallen (2009) point out ethnography's biggest benefits – the strength of accurate portrayal and depiction of subtleties.

Examples of historical and worldly ethnographies abound. Durkheim (2008) investigated Aboriginal religion in 1912, Malinowski (1922) explored tribal life in the Trobriand Islands, Mead (1928) studied adolescents in Samoa, Redfield (1930) researched Mexican communities in Morelos, Evans-Pritchard (1940) studied lineage systems of pastoralists in the Sudan, Leach (1954) studied Kachin social structures of Burma, and Latour and Woolgar (1979) recounted scientific work in a United States neuro-endocrinology lab. Recent decades of ethnographies shed light on the voices of Islamic women (Abu-Lughod, 1986), the impact of poverty on Brazilian mothers and their children (Scheper-Hughes, 1992), and the effects of pervasive policing on disadvantaged neighborhoods (Goffman, 2014).

In short, ethnography is both a process and product (Merriam, 2009; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). Its phenomenological and naturalistic nature provide varying research techniques that can be applied to numerous settings, especially in educational organizations (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009).

### **Autoethnography**

The approach of autoethnography derived from ethnography (Pepper & Thomas, 2002; Starr, 2010), similar to how a new plant is produced from a parent plant – the act of propagation. Ethnography and autoethnography are related in terms of a constructivist approach and research process (Starr, 2010). The main difference between the two, Duncan (2004) asserts, is the researcher’s inside perspective on his or her own culture. The investigator is both the researcher and participant (Duncan, 2004). Thus, as a scholar with several years of early childhood and elementary teaching experience, I was the paramount source of data (Duncan, 2004; Pichon, 2013). Grounded in post-modern philosophy, autoethnography challenges traditional methods in how knowledge is obtained and disseminated (Neville-Jan, 2003; Starr, 2010; Wall, 2006).

Autoethnography has gained incredible momentum in recent years (Sikes, 2013) as an emerging genre of qualitative research (Burdell & Swadender, 1999; Cook, 2014; Hoppes, 2014; Pichon, 2013). Originated by Hayano (1979), autoethnography presents the researcher’s social and cultural experiences and describes his or her feelings, values, and beliefs (Custer, 2014; Starr, 2010). Each of these components accompany the heuristic elements of “self-research, self-dialogue, and self-discovery” (Moustakas, 2015) and are evident in this autoethnographic dissertation study.

Described below are several characteristics of autoethnography. It is necessary to situate these characteristics in the wider context of teaching, as this study is a personalized account drawing on my experiences as a teacher, researcher, and author. Therefore, the attributes I find inherent in teacher autoethnography are teacher subjectivity, generating change, narrative writing, and analytic autoethnography.

**teacher subjectivity.**

Autoethnography is situated within the category of self-study (Starr, 2010). Self-study welcomes subjectivity (Clough, 2000; Duncan, 2004; Pitard, 2016) because it allows the researcher to systematically study his or her own practices and beliefs (Smith & Engemann, 2015). As mentioned previously in this chapter, my prior studies focused on the practices and perspectives of others. However, my epiphanic questioning of my teacher-self required more than objectivity. Through the process of systematic sociological introspection (Ellis, 1991), I was able to infuse my identity, bias, and subjectivity into my research approach (Wall, 2006). This type of qualitative inquiry resonated with me in particular as I examined my past decisions and teaching environments (Pithouse, Mitchell, & Weber, 2009; Loughran & Russell, 2002) to affect my future (Capel, 2012). Teacher or practitioner inquiry (Clarke & Erickson, 2006; Weber, 1990), referred to as reflective practice or action research (Pithouse, Mitchell, & Weber, 2009), is an invitation for me to continue conducting and disseminating research (Vasconcelos, 2011); however, this autoethnography asserts what I know is significant (Wall, 2006).

**generating change.**

One attribute of autoethnography is the opportunity for creating change (Hoban, Butler, & Lesslie, 2007; Starr, 2010). Educators engage in self-reflection (Bochner, 2012; Ellis, 1999) within their social context (Capel, 2012; Reed-Danahay, 1997) to “become more conscious of and thoughtful about aspects of their teaching practice they have previously not noticed or perhaps avoided thinking about” (Pithouse et al., 2009, p. 54). It required a commitment to be radically honest with myself (Custer, 2014) and to hone the



skills of recognizing humanness and absolution (Hoppes, 2014). Starr (2010) asserts a “cycle of enlightenment, reflection, and action” takes place during autoethnographic inquiry and has the power to transform the researcher and impact the reader (Starr, 2010). By creating a dialogue with myself, I have the potential to create catalytic change (Jones, 2005).

In keeping with the traditions of qualitative strategies, this study is informed by the study of how human society functions and the study of lived experiences - sciences known as sociology and phenomenology. In an attempt to interconnect the self and social (Chang, 2008, Reed-Danahay, 1997), an autoethnographic technique is appropriate to the field of educational research. An overarching purpose of this research is to deconstruct and contextualize my experiences (Cook, 2014). By doing so, I can uncover my feelings (Custer, 2014), create meaning (Bochner, 2012; Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001), prompt original solutions and share them with others (Pithouse et al., 2009).

Consequently, I intend to make my accounts visible and accessible (Van Manen, 1990) as a means of contributing to the collective professional knowledge (Hoban, 2004) of teachers who have undergone turnover. My single voice may “validate, affirm, connect, support, and empower” others in the teaching profession (Smith & Engemann, 2015, p. 164) and provide ways to translate similar concerns into action (Pithouse et al. 2009) as a means of social change (Starr, 2010).

### **narrative writing.**

Through the avenue of narrative writing (Mendez, 2013), I showcase my questioning of internal conditions while investigating my teaching experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This dissertation captures what Reed-Danahay (1997) and

Ellis and Bochner (2000) maintain is the “auto- (self), -ethno- (the sociocultural connection), and -graphy (the application of the research process)” components customary to such a unique qualitative approach. Because autoethnography blends ethnography and autobiography (Pace, 2012), I wished to share my story in an analytic manner rather than employing an evocative approach (Cook, 2014). While elements of this dissertation may elicit readers’ emotive responses (Ellis, 1997), the main premise is to couple my experience with existent literature (Holt, 2001; Sparkes, 1996; Wall, 2008).

**analytic autoethnography.**

Five essential characteristics apply to analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006). These include: (1) complete member researcher, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher’s self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson, 2006, p. 378). According to Adler and Adler (1987), I am an opportunistic researcher because I am knowledgeable through my occupational participation as a teacher in various elementary educational settings. An analytic reflexivity perspective permits me to understand and reflect upon the reciprocity between myself and others (Anderson, 2006). In contrast to traditional ethnography, my thoughts, feelings, experiences, and their transformations are visible to the reader (Anderson, 2006) despite my intentions to compose an “author-saturated text” (Geertz, 1988). Similar to Karp (1996), my self-examinations and comprehensive conversations with a licensed career coach are combined to serve not only as collected data, but also as dialogue that further engages with others inside and outside the field of education. Finally, moving beyond describing personal experience evidenced in evocative

autoethnography, this analytic dissertation contributes to the realm of literature linking career decisions of educators and social reasons influencing their mobility or exit.

Each of Anderson's (2006) characteristics of an analytic approach further underlie the foundation for this study and supports the notion that "individuals do not exist apart from their social context" (Wall, 2008, p.49). What follows are significant examples of teacher analytic autoethnographies that are relevant to this dissertation study.

### **Educator Autoethnographies**

Included in the vast array of literature that elucidates autoethnography (Bochner, 1997; Denzin, 2006; Ellis, 1999; Hayano, 1979; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Spry, 2001) or details personal studies of autoethnography (Holt, 2001; Sparkes, 1996, Wall, 2006), there exist inquiries that focus on the field of education. As such, several are relatable to my interests as an educator.

Vasconcelos (2011) initially felt confidence and found pleasure in her role as a teacher. Shockingly, the students in her class informed her of rote and impersonal teaching practices. She felt overwhelmed as a new teacher in an unfamiliar environment and confused by her students' quiet dispositions. Consequently, she engaged in a caring dialogue (Noddings, 2002) with her students to jointly work through differences and construct knowledge. In this dissertation study, I have examined my own identity as an introverted teacher and graduate student that has left me with a "renewed understanding of the inherently relational aspects of teaching and learning" (Vasconcelos, 2011, p. 434).

Pitard (2016), an educator with 27 years of experience, recounted her initial encounter as a first-time teacher of international students from an underdeveloped country. Her good intentions of developing students' storytelling and listening skills

welcomed a powerful and heartbreaking story from one student. She felt unprepared and unqualified as he revealed his tale of loss and post-traumatic stress, and her panicked response of ending the activity left her distressed. The group as a whole enjoyed the commonplace activity and were confused by her reaction. Reflexively, she was able to understand how her childhood upbringing and social conditioning contributed to her reaction, and she adopted a strategy of avoiding such powerful discussions until rapport and time allowed for them. By the same token, I have become attached to those I encounter in my work environments and have learned how our differences have contributed to my personal and professional understandings. These understandings facilitate my “strategies to move forward as a teacher” (Pitard, 2016, p. 14).

Hoban, Butler, and Lesslie’s (2007) account of two teachers’ pursuits in self-study helped them to form models of their learning and the process of change. One participant recognized her all-consuming approach to learning, overcame her feelings of worry, set small goals for change, and inquired with colleagues when trying new strategies. The second participant acknowledged her perfectionist tendencies and independent learning style of systematically trying something and reflecting. Comparably, I reflect on my own learning, recognize that implementing change takes several attempts over a period of time, and appreciate that social support is necessary for change to occur.

Bair, Bair, Mader, Hipp, and Hakim’s (2010) study considered teachers’ analyses of their own emotions. During focus meetings, five teachers discussed their personal experiences and reflections in classroom settings. Their emotions varied on their comfort of content expertise, how race, gender, or sexuality affected their relationships with

students. Their focus on emotional management in normed settings (Hochschild, 1979; Isenbarger & Zemblyas, 2006) was quite significant in contributing to my understanding of how teachers' emotions affect success (Nias, 1996; O'Conner, 2008, Oplatka, 2007). I am able to grasp how my own individual factors (Nias, 1996) and my chosen profession of teaching (Hochschild, 1983) have influenced my emotional responses to situations.

Reading Smith & Engemann's (2015) collaborative self-study brought forth memories of being a beginning teacher over a decade ago. The vignettes written by participants recounted their feelings of doubt, low confidence, isolation, exclusion, and challenges of instructional adaptation – all of which are emotional states I have experienced. These visible and accessible experiences of teachers (Van Manen, 1990) shed light on how entering the field of education can be emotionally strenuous for new teachers – and in my case, experienced teachers.

Another eye-opening study documented one principal's transition in leadership style (Pepper & Thomas, 2002). Her emotions of frustration and inadequacy in a high teacher-turnover context propelled her to reexamine her methods of management in the hope of constructing a positive climate. She began building rapport with teachers, facilitating positive discipline with students, and encouraging open dialogue with colleagues about school improvement. Not only did this account demystify the thought processes of an effective leader, it underscored the potential for school climate change by beginning change and growth with oneself (Fullan, 1988).

As shown above, each of these studies conveys teachers' abilities to reflect before, during, and after their experiences. In a metacognitive manner, they were able to expand on their self-knowledge and agency in how they responded to situations and how

they regulated their emotions (Fairbanks et al., 2010). Additionally, teachers have also adopted approaches to their emotional responses, as Capel (2012) did in her self-study. She faced her feelings of uncertainty and anxiousness about exiting the teaching profession by embracing a mindfulness approach of consistency, positivity, and warmth (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2002). As detailed in this autoethnographic dissertation study, I have enthusiastically welcomed a mindful approach to become “more conscious and more involved” in my everyday actions as a person and teacher (p. 675).

### **Research Design**

In this study, I am reflecting upon myself and my experiences to better understand how my personality, skill set, emotional makeup, and personal insights are instrumental in making professional decisions. Building on a link between beliefs and behaviors (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) and educators’ career decisions (Billingsley, 1993), my positionality supports the rationale for an autoethnographic approach as well as the theoretical framework and research design for this study. What follows are the specific methods to this autoethnographic strategy of inquiry.

### **Strategy of Inquiry**

My approach to inquiry is and has always been qualitative. When I contemplated the idea of a dissertation study, I was initially compelled to seek information on literacy practices in preschool classrooms. Although my teaching expertise was with second graders, I had been reassigned to a preschool classroom and was trying to make sense of what I interpreted as a lack of literacy instruction. In reality, I was having difficulty reconciling my sentiments about being reassigned, relating my reassignment to emotions of past teaching experiences, and feelings of navigating a different teaching context. I

took notice of my concealed thoughts and began discussing them openly with my dissertation committee. Through those conversations of frustration, I realized that instead of choosing a story to tell, my story chose me (Hoppes, 2014). It was finally time for me to acknowledge the origins of my emotional responses and seize the opportunity for self-interrogation and self-improvement using a personal narrative approach. Such epiphanies have been documented in the literature as illustrated in the following passage:

The more I sat around trying to decide what to write about, the more a particular story came to the forefront of my mind. No matter what I did to try to clear my thoughts, my mind seemed to always go back to it. I felt like I had to get this story out and let everyone know what I had gone through. I needed to release myself from the emotions of this story and this autoethnography was just the outlet to do it. (Hoppes, 2014, p. 68)

Most specifically, this study employs an autoethnographic strategy of inquiry. As mentioned throughout this study, autoethnography allows researchers to look inward and study themselves (Vasoncelos, 2011) within a cultural context (Reed-Danahay, 1997) for the purpose of increasing sociological cognizance (Sparkes, 2000, 2002). Relevant to this dissertation study, it includes and draws attention to the “processes, emotions, complexities, nuances, values, cultural templates, embodiment, and the political and social contexts of teaching” (Pithouse et al., 2009, p. 44). An autoethnographic approach: shapes the types of questions I ask of myself, guides my data collection and analysis of selected data sources, and dictates the style of my final narrative.

### **Research Questions**

Although research of teacher educators' self-studies (Loughran, 2002; LaBoskey, 2007; Loughran & Russell, 2002; Samaras, 2011) and studies of teachers' emotions (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Lortie, 1975; Jeffrey & Woods, 1996; Nias, 1989; Noddings, 1992; Zembylas, 2007) are existent in the literature, there are few studies that autoethnographically address the teaching and learning of teachers (Vasconcelos, 2011), particularly in regards to teachers' emotions related to career decisions. There is little literature that captures the beliefs, thoughts, and emotions of teachers who have considered or undergone turnover.

I set out to mollify my emotions and seek clarity on an incoherency of past and current turnover literature that highlighted teachers' maneuvering of their professional and personal contexts. Accordingly, to interpret my own subjective feelings about my experiences (Creswell, 2009), I began by asking well-articulated research questions (Hoppes, 2014). This study explores the circumstances of turnover and how they personally relate to my own exposure to teaching. The following questions guide this autoethnographic work:

1. What factors in my career have influenced my decision to leave or remain in the teaching profession?
2. In what manner has administrative support contributed to my decision to leave or remain in the teaching profession?
3. How have my beliefs about being a teacher been shaped during my experience in the field of early childhood and elementary education?



**Procedures**

Upon realizing that my story chose me, I started asking myself many questions along the way (Ellis, 1999). To put it mildly, I was questioning my career as a teacher and myself as a person. To answer these questions, I positioned myself as the researcher and participant, because I am the most qualified person to accurately describe my own history as a teacher and reflect upon it as a research participant (Wall, 2006; Pitard, 2016). I decided to confront my thoughts and emotions head on in a mindful manner (Capel, 2012). Sternberg (2000) refers to mindfulness as inferring conclusions by reasoning, paying attention to similarities and differences, having an awareness of people and situations, understanding varying viewpoints, and concentrating on the current period of time. By using this mindfulness approach, I wanted to recognize and better understand my own behaviors (Ritchhart & Perkins 2000) in order to form new perceptions and interpretations (Langer, 1997) about the sociocultural world of teaching. Perhaps these new perspectives would lead to a positive change in my environment (Langer, 1989). Through the process of autoethnography, I explored critical events of my teaching career through interviews, journaling, and developing my narrative.

**Data Collection**

To best capture my research process, I first gained permission from my Institutional Review Board to conduct an autoethnographic study on factors of teacher turnover. Since I was introspectively reflecting on my personal teaching experiences, I was the main participant involved in the research study. Upon approval, I combed through existing literature on autoethnography, belief formation, career-decision processes of teachers, and turnover. I synthesized all of my notes from the literature into

a document. I also began journaling about my experiences as a teacher in the field of education. I contacted a career coach, Janice (pseudonym), whom I had been a client in the past and invited her to participate in the study. After she provided her consent, we set a schedule for conducting sessions and began meeting on a consistent basis to discuss my past teaching experiences and new career goals. I transcribed the audio-recorded data from our sessions and completed tasks assigned by my coach. Therefore, data included in this study were journal entries, coaching session transcripts, and documents for or review or completion assigned by the coach. The entire data collection process of weekly journaling and coaching sessions spanned five months.

The concept of coaching dates back many centuries. Coaching has mainly occurred in sport settings, but the technique is now being employed in education and workplace settings. Simply put, coaching is “unlocking people’s potential to maximize their own performance” (Whitmore, 2002, p.10). The term coaching has been synonymous with mentoring, as one leads or guides another for the purpose of planning, problem solving, and becoming more effective at a given skill or task. This type of relationship occurs between two people in a sport context, such as instructor and athlete. In a workplace setting, it would appear as a manager and employee, and in a teaching environment a coaching endeavor may take place with an administrator and teacher. In relevance to this study, coaching took place between Janice – a professional coach, and me – a teacher and researcher. The nature of coaching focuses on the coachee’s ability to overcome obstacles within, examine and redefine self-beliefs, create change, and maximize performance. The coach puts forward effective questions and listens while the coachee meaningfully reflects and answers. The bond between Janice and me was unique

in that our ethical roles of client and coachee were respected and transcended. Our fruitful discussions were so productive and meaningful, and she helped me to focus on “future possibilities, not past mistakes” (Whitmore, 2002, p. 9). Her role as a coach was to help me identify goals and take steps to reach them while exploring challenges and options. My role as her coachee was to commit to participation, communicate honestly, be accountable and open to feedback, and be responsible for my decisions and actions. Most importantly, Janice and I set goals specific to my work environment, and also to my life (Stoltzfus, 2008).

### **Data Sources**

My journal entries centered on past and current events in various teaching contexts. They highlighted my emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and decisions that occurred before, during, and after situations. Journal entries are common in studies of ethnography and autoethnography (Bair et al., 2010; Hoban et al., 2007; Mayan, 2001; Morse & Richards, 2002; Pitard, 2016; Smith & Engemann, 2015; Duncan, 2004, Patton, 2002, Wall, 2006) and are sometimes written in a narrative format (Duncan, 2004, Patton, 2002; Pitard, 2016). Similar to Wall (2008), I composed my entries by memory recall of lived experiences and created titles for each entry (Duncan, 2004). Additionally, Wall (2008, p. 45) pointed out the significance of using memories in autoethnographic literature (Coffey, 1999; Ottenberg, 1990; Lederman, 1990; Sanjek, 1990; Mead, 1928; Yang, 1978), and I view them as a means of reconstructing my subjective experiences and bringing them to life (Vasconcelos, 2011).

Another typical data type found in ethnography and autoethnography is interview material (Duncan, 2004; Ellis, 1998; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Hoban et al., 2007; Mayan,

2001; Morse & Richards, 2002; Smith & Engemann, 2015). The coaching sessions provided an opportunity to discuss my emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and decisions with someone who was trained to listen and guide when necessary. Since Janice was familiar with my past self-inquiries related to teaching, a rapport had already been established. It was as if we were able to pick up where we left off years earlier in order to discuss my latest teaching context as well as past and current crises. Together, we explored events, reactions, and epiphanies that were becoming critical turning points for me as a person and educator. Bullough & Pinnegar (2004) assert that participating in conversations with others permits a viewpoint beyond one's self, and this perspective supported my mindfulness approach of bonding with Janice and those around me for interpersonal and social benefit (Ali & Ndubisi, 2011; Matanda & Ndubisi, 2011).

Completed or reviewed documents assigned by my coach occasionally developed after a session as a 'homework' assignment. I completed a questionnaire about my commitment to the coaching process, career goals, and designing areas for change. We also reviewed a model of growth that allowed me to consider my goals, reality, options, and will (Whitmore, 2002). I filled out a survey about my work climate (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). Often times our conversations resulted in questions to ponder and reflect such as things I desired in a work environment, defining happiness, or exploring identity beliefs. Other times we developed plans for me to compose, practice, and review documents for a subsequent session. One example of this was a template for conversations with others in teaching contexts. Every session ended with setting new goals.

## **Data Analysis**

### **organization of data.**

The aforementioned data sources of journal entries, transcripts of coaching sessions, and coaching documents underwent careful analyses during and after the data collection process. Each data source took place simultaneously, meaning there was not one step that occurred before the other. Data sources were saved as electronic documents. Before my coaching sessions began, I started journaling about my career thoughts for one month. Sometimes the journals varied from daily to weekly depending on my feelings, the turnover literature I read, or the events at the time. Upon commencement of the sessions I transcribed interviews and continued journaling, all of which were stored on my personal password-protected computer. I organized my journal entries by month and saved them in a file titled *Career Journaling* (for a section of my career journal, see Appendix B). I kept a list of journals written each month for reference. During the last three months of sessions, I decided to keep a gratitude journal, which were weekly entries saved in a different folder titled *Gratitude Journaling* (for a section of my gratitude journal, see Appendix C). My sessions with Janice and all of my coaching-related documents were saved in a file titled *Coaching* (for a section of my coaching session, see Appendix D). The session files contained the audio-recordings and transcripts for each session, and the coaching-related documents were completed by hand and uploaded as scanned documents.

### **data analysis procedures.**

Throughout the data collection process, it seemed some of data collection and analysis occurred at the same time by guiding further session questioning and journal

writing (Bair et al., 2010; Kirby & McKenna, 1989). I organized the journal entries, transcripts, and coaching documents into one complete document that totaled 302 pages. The data-corpus was separated into three columns with the text in the first column. This left room for codes in the second and third columns (Saldana, 2013). I reviewed my materials with care, jotted down ideas and thoughts in the margins, listed topics, and created codes (Tesch, 1990) using color code schemes in a Microsoft Word program (Creswell, 2009). My preliminary jottings and notes were manually completely in colored pencil and later transferred to an electronic file. I set out to answer each of my research questions in a heuristic manner by developing awareness and meaning from the most remote to the most recent event connected to my teaching experiences (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 2015).

My first-cycle codes were affective in nature, meaning they focused on my emotions, values, attitudes, and beliefs (Saldana, 2013). My autoethnographic approach allowed me to use the actual language written, or In Vivo codes. I used colored pencils to color-code the document, and recorded them in my codebook (see Table 4). As I focus coded, I noticed particular themes that reappeared such as feelings, actions, and metaphors. Before moving onto the second cycle of coding, I code mapped the central themes and concepts into a different electronic document. From there, I performed axial coding by copying elements from my data corpus into the code-mapped document. This helped me to identify the dominant and minor codes and the relationships therein. The last stage of my data analysis process involved finding my primary theme and subthemes, and some of them were directly from my coaching sessions. By doing so, I revealed

influential factors of my career decisions, elucidated my experiences with administration in teaching environments, and discovered how my beliefs of teaching evolved.

Code	Definition	Color
Emotion	Affective state of consciousness	Positive = Blue Negative = Red
Value	Importance attributed to someone or something	Green
Belief	Opinion or conviction about something	Purple
Attitudes	Thinking of feeling about someone or something	Copper
Action	Process of doing something	Curriculum = Orange Colleagues = Navy Leadership = Peridot
Support	Assistance, encouragement, interest	Yellow
Neglect	Failure to care for or do something	Grey
Emotional intelligence	Awareness of my personal and social competence	Personal = Eggplant Social = Peace
Questions	Doubts or curiosity about myself or environmental situations	Bronze

### **synthesis of data.**

By combining portions of my data sets, I set out to create my findings in a narrative manner (Bochner, 2012; Ellis, 1999). While some autoethnographers have used a vignette or anecdote format (Pitard, 2016; Smith & Engemann, 2015), others preferred a movie script format (Forber-Pratt, 2015), or photo album approach (Vasconcelos, 2011). After much deliberation, I decided to use a story approach (Capel, 2012; Duncan, 2004; Ellis, 1999; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Wall, 2008). I compiled all of my thoughts and actions about my teaching career and chronologically discussed them in Chapter 4. Then, I began Chapter 5 with a metaphorical narrative that captured the weathering conditions and development of my southern magnolia self and teaching career. My key assertions were colored and centered in the final report to show significance and to help the reader identify salient ideas.

**Validity of Interpretation (Quality or Credibility)**

Terms consistent with research such as reliability, validity, and generalizability take on different meanings under a qualitative umbrella. Creswell (2009) mentions qualitative reliability, qualitative validity, and qualitative generalization. However, autoethnography yields differing terms to show the researcher's findings are believable and precise.

Verisimilitude, according to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) replaces validity in that the resulting narrative is plausible. The manner in which my narrative is presented represents real people, subjects, detailed and descriptions. This is the most critical component of my dissertation because I wish to invite readers into my teaching world in an honest and compelling way.

Credibility replaces reliability (Ellis et al., 2011), meaning readers see me, the researcher, as being convincing, believable, and trustworthy. Inherent in this autoethnography are my explicit exposures of uncertainties and vulnerabilities – neither of which I am proud to disclose. Frankly, I am quite introverted by nature, and my teaching experiences have only increased my feelings of self-consciousness and disconcertion.

However, what is generalizable about my self-investigation is that the world of teaching is beautiful and complicated, and that all teachers have beliefs and emotions about their professions and practices, especially if they have experienced turnover. In autoethnographic research it is possible for practitioners in similar situations to determine generalizations (Ellis, 1999; Frankel & Wallen, 2009). Wall (2006) stated, “an individual is best situated to describe his or her own experience more accurately than anyone else”



(p.3). Thus, I have demonstrated my commitment to myself, my educational institution, and my profession by pursuing a study that is heartfelt, fact-based, analytic, intriguing, cathartic, and above all, empowering.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The limitations of my autoethnographic study were different than other qualitative studies in that the central focus was on me and my experiences from the past. Composing a personal narrative about those experiences implicated me and possibly others in my work (Ellis et al., 2011). Despite my use of pseudonyms, there was no intention to personally compromise people or locations. Even though this study incorporated an introspective approach, there was a sense of uncertainty in voicing it. I had maintained a degree of privacy about my teaching turnover issues, and perhaps that was more to protect myself from further self-deprecation or a feeling of being blacklisted from the teaching community. I also had no way of knowing if readers' feelings would be unpleasantly affected (Bochner & Ellis, 1996). Most importantly, the largest limitation of my study was that the data corpus consisted of recalled memories from ten years ago. However, the delimitations of clarifying my personal and professional self through self-study dominated any other possible qualitative approach. By writing an autoethnography, I explored issues that were essential to my future well-being and that might translate to my professional practice or the collective professional knowledge of others.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The purpose of this study was to use an autoethnographic approach to create an ethnographic description of teacher mobility through my lens as an elementary and early childhood education teacher. I acted as both researcher and participant in order to analyze

my thoughts and emotions related to my successes and challenges of teaching and connected them to current literature.

To best protect locations of my work environments, I used the pseudonyms of School 1, 2, 3, and 4. To best protect the identity of those in leadership positions in those work environments, I removed their genders and referred to them as principals, assistant principals, directors, or as administration. To best protect the identity of others in the study (colleague, coworker, parents, etc.), I minimized gender reference. As previously mentioned, I protected my coach's identity by using a pseudonym.

My licensed career coach, Janice, helped me to gain a better understanding of influential career factors and beliefs of teaching. Her consent to participate was provided at the outset of the study on the grounds of anonymity and confidentiality through the use of a pseudonym during data collection, analysis, and final narrative presentation. It should be noted that I attended counseling sessions as a client who paid the regular client fee for my coach's services. Our relationship was based on mutual respect. Janice understood my interest as a researcher, the purpose of my research, the questions I was hoping to answer through our conversations, and the need to audio-record our sessions for transcription purposes. I understood her capacity as a coach, and she sometimes clarified her role as time progressed.

### **Closing**

In sum, my methodological choice of writing an autoethnographic dissertation fully supported my worldview as a social constructivist. By asking questions and formulating careful responses, I was able to relate my experiences to others', examine my

own beliefs, and explore a new avenue of qualitative methodology that suited me best for where I was in my life at the time.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CHRONOLOGICAL TEACHING SETTING & YEARS

**Gardening Tip Number Four: Tolerate varying seasons of growth and change by allowing teachers to experience the environment and its challenges.**

Thus far, I have presented my observations and knowledge about teacher turnover and how both led to my motivation of capturing my experience through autoethnography. As mentioned in the prologue, I figuratively portray teachers as trees – particularly myself as a southern magnolia (for a complete list of my dissertation metaphors, see Appendix E). Prior to reading the metaphorical narrative and analyzed themes in Chapter Five, it is first necessary to learn the evolving story of my growth and change. This chapter discusses the detailed chronology of my teaching career with references to elements of my metaphorical narrative. Symbolically, the descriptions of my teaching years in each of my four settings are represented as the uppermost branches of a southern magnolia tree. I begin with my first teaching year at School 1 and progress to my teaching experiences at School 2. Then, I explain my period of dormancy and short interval of being an assistant at School 3. Later, I present occurrences from School 4 that led to my resignation. Finally, I conclude the chapter with specifics of my most recent career decision.

One note of significance that must be explained is my decision to include elements of my personal life weaved in with aspects of my professional life. Teaching as a career has been a very personal endeavor for me. As such, successes and challenges of university coursework and environmental conditions of teaching settings indirectly affected my motivation and zeal towards any other life event afterward. In hindsight, I wish there had been a way to separate the two (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. The Intertwining of My Personal Self and Career of Teaching



Figure 6. The larger font displays my name, while the smaller font displays my career, both weaved together into one.

While the main aspect of my dissertation study is teacher turnover, the elements of my personal life have been included to show that I am a whole person. This speaks to one of the notions that Billingsley (1993, 2004) asserted – that there are also personal factors (demographic, family, cognitive/affective) that contribute to the career decisions of teachers. What is essential to grasp in this portion of the dissertation is that while I encountered unexpected personal life issues, I never considered them to be a factor in my career turnover. My personal issues of health or loss never affected my passion, ability, or longing to teach, because I viewed teaching as my sanctuary. However, I had somehow misplaced the power of my career to affect everything else that I achieved inside or outside of the classroom walls. My autoethnography was a crucial first step of change that enabled me to seize control of my mind and emotions that would disentangle my professional and personal life. What follows is my story told from my perspective.

**CHRONOLOGICAL TEACHING SETTINGS & YEARS****School 1****Teaching Year/Southern Magnolia Branch 1**

I remember my graduation from college with my bachelor's degree in elementary education and feeling the excitement of beginning my teaching career. I was newly and happily married, and the world was my oyster. I received a phone call from a principal requesting an interview for a kindergarten position. Of course, I was elated. After the interview and position acceptance, I hit the ground running. I was a new teacher with an opportunity to prove my skills. I used the resources provided by the school, as I had not yet amassed many of my own materials. My walls were slightly bare. I tried to appear knowledgeable and poised. I learned about developing routines, writing lesson plans, and designing activities for the children as I went along. I was also learning how to create relationships with students, parents, my team members, my mentor, and the administration. I participated in team meetings, and I visited my principal on occasion to establish a connection. I also met with my assigned mentor who served as one of the EIP teachers in the elementary school.

Nevertheless, things started becoming tricky. My attempt in trying to collaborate with my assistant (paraprofessional) resulted in conflict. I had not yet acquired the skills of constructing and delegating tasks for another person to complete, and perhaps that led to what I suspect was a sense of feeling undervalued. I knew I had a lot to learn and that my assistant could share insights and previous teaching experiences as a manner of mentorship. Instead, my assistant maintained the viewpoint of being inferior, and little input was shared. I confidentially approached a trusted team member to discuss how to

improve the relationship. Unfortunately, my team member felt caught between me, a new colleague, and my assistant, a longtime colleague and friend. Any attempts I made to amend the relationship with my assistant were futile. While I felt successful in teaching the curriculum and forming relationships with students and parents, I was somehow failing in communicating with my colleagues. There reached a point where the situation became uncomfortable, so I asked the principal how I should proceed. The principal welcomingly mediated a meeting between my assistant and me so we could openly discuss our thoughts and feelings. Afterwards, our relationship and the school year did improve.

Another tough situation surfaced at the end of the school year with the assistant principal. I had a death in the family, and I requested to depart early during the post-planning period in order to attend the out-of-state funeral. We met and reviewed my post-planning checklist. I had completed every task. Then, in an intimidating manner, I was asked to display my students' grades. I was caught off guard. After turning red in the face and feeling reprimanded, I explained that kindergarten students did not earn letter grades at the time, and that their developments were captured through periodic formative performance assessments. My assistant principal remained firm until I repeated myself several times. Consequently, my assistant principal finally understood and dismissed me. I realized that I was the first of the teaching staff to meet with the administration, and perhaps there was an obscurity of understanding the differences in grading throughout the varying age levels in the school. It was during the walk to my car when I thought I had done something right by avoiding my assistant principal the entire school year.

While there were challenges, I considered my first year of teaching to be fruitful because of my improvement in teaching skills and satisfactory performance evaluations. At the end of the school year, my principal informed me of a reassignment for the upcoming school year. I was told I that a new teaching year, grade level, and team might be more suitable.

### **Teaching Year/Southern Magnolia Branch 2**

At the start of the year, the staff moved into and opened a brand new school. The environment was absolutely gorgeous. It was large, open, clean, and had a sensible floorplan. I recall an enormous sense of excitement in meeting my second-grade team members, touring the school, and setting up my classroom. To approach this year, I relied on the experience and materials provided during my university second-grade student-teaching experience. The school welcomed a new assistant principal, and I was overjoyed. It felt like a fresh start, and I felt more self-reliant.

Before the school year commenced, my husband and I formulated a plan to buy our first home. My forty-five minute commute to and from work, lengthy after-work hours of classroom preparation, and my master's degree coursework were strenuous. I remember calling my principal one afternoon to excitedly share our tentative plan of moving closer to the school. After receiving my principal's confirmation that I was secure in my job, my husband and I proceeded. We purchased a new home within five minutes of my school setting.

A few weeks into the school year, a conflict with a parent developed due to a child's misbehavior. When I informed the parent of my observations, the situation seemed amicable. The parent offered to visit the classroom, help prepare some classroom



materials, and observe the child. I later learned that the parent's assistance was merely an attempt to observe me more than the child, which resulted in the child's swift removal from my classroom and reenrollment in another.

My team mandated me to serve as an early intervention math teacher to help children who were at risk of not reaching or maintaining academic grade level. I had no input in the decision-making process, and I was confused as to why another team member who used to be an EIP specialist had not been considered. Not only was I learning how to adjust to a new building, team, curriculum, materials, and a new set of children and parents; I was now supposed to somehow provide additional instructional resources to help children reach grade level in a short amount of time. For math, my higher-level children were distributed among my team members' classrooms, and they in turn, sent the lower-achieving children to my room. The school's EIP specialist visited my classroom during the math portion of my school day to assist with small group instruction. Even with the EIP specialist's presence, I was incredibly perplexed as to how to maintain the scripted and rigid math program that taught new mathematical concepts every day while constantly reviewing old concepts. It became overwhelming. I initiated meetings with a trusted friend and colleague, the school improvement specialist. The school improvement specialist invested time to individually meet with me, explained the premise behind the EIP program, and introduced some helpful strategies (that even the EIP specialist in my room did not recommend). I incorporated many of those strategies into my instructional math period and felt pleased with my progress as a teacher and the children's progress.

I wanted to contribute more to my school setting and collect data for my master's degree pilot study, so I offered to help instruct an afterschool tutoring program designed to reinforce and strengthen reading and mathematics skills. This also provided an opportunity to work with some of the same children from my EIP math class. I tutored 2 days a week for nearly half of the school year. From the commencement of the program until its completion, I hypothesized whether the effect of the children's participation in the program affected their overall attitude towards school and their academic success. By administering pre- and post-program surveys to each of the dozen second-grade children, I was able to understand their viewpoints toward the program's activities, their self-perceptions as learners, and a concept they better grasped. I researched strategies, designed projects, and employed various grouping and independent learning structures. On a smaller scale, I witnessed the improvement in my homeroom children's reading grades and confidence. Intrinsicly, I felt deeply rewarded by being with children, witnessing their growth, and honing my teaching skills. It was an eye-opening opportunity because it initiated my curiosity about students' perceptions in every study I have conducted thereafter.

As the year progressed, my principal informed me that several of the teachers were concerned about their low-achieving-students' progress. The team of people that I worked with were very good friends before I joined them, and it was difficult for me to acculturate. I didn't understand why they had not approached me or what more I could do. To make matters worse, they began to shun me. I felt isolated, and my coping mechanism was to retreat and refrain from eating lunch with them. Regardless of the new attempts I made with improving the EIP and afterschool tutoring program, I received the

same complaint from my principal about the team's dissatisfaction in their children's headway. I felt incredibly frustrated with my team's lack of camaraderie, support, and communication. In an irritated manner, I approached them during lunch one day and firmly demanded to know the reasoning behind their actions. They sat quietly and provided little response. My principal conveyed continuing disappointment. I explained my feelings and perceptions. I was forced to apologize to my team members, and I did so by writing out my sentiments and humbly reading them aloud during a team meeting. I remember sharing that I could only control what I said and did.

To make matters worse, one parent from the afterschool tutoring program privately approached the principal to relay some concerns. There was the perception that the parent's children disliked the subject and instruction of math and they felt negative about themselves and the afterschool tutoring program. Although I had been instructing them for months, there was no indication of unease from the children, the parent, or teacher until early spring. After disregarding to provide adequate notice, information, or guidance, the principal hosted a conference with the upset parent and me. When the meeting took place, I learned the parent had written and given a letter to the principal voicing a list of concerns. I felt blindsided. I listened to the concerns and did my best to relieve the parent's frustration, but it was met with the threat that the parent and spouse planned to make a call to the school board regardless of the meeting's outcome. My principal stated it was the parent's right to phone the school board with concerns, that the issue could be resolved within the school, and that the focus needed to remain on the children and not the adults. The parent's later decision to leave the children in the school day EIP math class and remove them from the afterschool tutoring program was

personally unsettling. I remember initiating a conversation with the parent a few weeks after the conference. I acknowledged the parent's distress, shared my confusion, and wished wonderful things for the children. The parent was more receptive than before. We apologized to one another for what had happened, and there was a sense of kindness and relief for us both.

Professionally, these unforeseen strains in teaching prompted emotions of doubt and confusion about my chosen profession, while I was personally struggling with news of my mother's terminal cancer prognosis. Once the team learned about my mother, there was a slight upgrade in communication. However, it was not enough to prevent the further decline in the year to come. That teaching year was even more challenging than my first, but I continued to earn satisfactory performance evaluations. While I felt successful with my attempts to assist and instruct students, I felt I failed at obtaining a sense of reception and belonging from my team.

At the end of the school year, my principal notified me of the decision to place me on a PDP (Professional Development Plan) to address my "body language, facial expressions, maintaining a positive attitude, avoiding becoming defensive, concerning myself with only the information I need to complete my job, using good judgment and common sense at all times, having confidence in my decisions, and interpersonal relationships with team members, staff, peers, students, and parents" (as worded on the document). The document also stated that "the purpose of a professional development plan is to provide [the teacher] direction in correcting the areas of improvement" that were mentioned, and that the criteria and expectations of the PDP would be covered in detail a week later. I willingly accepted the decision and what I thought would be my

principal's support. At the time, I didn't understand it was a probationary measure. I just thought it was a strategy suggested by my principal to help me grow professionally. The specific objectives were "improved interpersonal and communication skills" and "improved classroom management and instructional practices." I was instructed to read and reflect on 4 books (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollack, 2001; Posner & Kouzes, 2003; Wong & Wong, 2004), create summaries of each chapter, watch some instructional DVDs, meet with my principal monthly. The criteria to measure my progress were "classroom observations, feedback generated at administrative conferences, integration of practices outlined in the required readings, and completion of assigned activities and reflection logs" (as worded on the document). Also, there were two areas on the form to record my participation in the recommended activities and to record my performance on specified criteria – but there were no specific criteria. I began the plan and eagerly completed the assignments over the summer.

### **Teaching Year/Southern Magnolia Branch 3**

Having familiarity with the curriculum, the school, and my colleagues supported the foundation for an excellent teaching year. I believed I had the support of individually constructing knowledge with my principal and the new wisdom of managing my second-grade classroom. My fondest memory was welcoming a newcomer to our team. I was determined to show good hospitality, something I had not received or earned from the existent team the year before. I learned this person had experience as a reading specialist. I was welcomed and shown the classroom room, the leveled book bins, and approach to literacy. It was as if a whole new world existed. I viewed this newest team member as a welcomed blessing to a divided team, and there was a mutual interest in collaboration. I

was introduced to children's literature, reading and writing strategies, and the texts of prominent literacy experts. This was the first time in my career that anyone really showed passion toward children, teaching, using proven strategies, or partnership. I was awestruck and motivated to transform my practices.

Since I lived close to the school, I started working in the afternoons and evenings to perfect my classroom. With my own money, I purchased clear plastic bins, dozens of paperback and hardcover children's books, and tall bookshelves. The books were placed in their bins according to titles. Additionally, I covered each wall in my classroom with state standards, posters, and student work samples for each subject area. The outside of my door and hallway area were covered with children's work and art. My curriculum was enhanced with a new perspective, and I created themed literacy projects. My teaching and interactions with children became more personally rewarding, and I was blossoming in more ways than one.

I became pregnant. At the time, I felt I had everything I had ever hoped for: a loving husband, a beautiful home, a secure job, my master's degree, a baby on the way, and an improvement in my mother's health. There was so much to celebrate. Unfortunately, there were few people around me who seemed to care. My team members had become even more cliquish, and they continued to ostracize me. My principal met with me for our first few sessions and did not follow through on the rest, even after my polite reminders. My principal failed to detect or acknowledge the alliance with my newest team mate, and my principal never mentioned or recorded specific criteria to measure my progress or record of participation for my PDP. I was baffled. In my PDP, I was instructed to read about showing mutual respect, recognizing accomplishments,

encouraging and motivating others, and being a good leader. However, my principal's actions were proving to be the complete opposite.

I forged ahead by concentrating on my own goals. I took pride in my classroom achievements and close relationships with the children's parents. I reveled in the bonds I had formed with them and the compliments they bestowed upon me. I purchased more books and refined the techniques of centers and guided reading groups. I felt like I was making progress by doing what I was supposed to do in my classroom and for my PDP. In the winter, I remember the principal saying the situation in second grade wasn't improving, and there was the potential for reassigning me again to a fourth or fifth grade position. I was allowed time to visit and observe some of the classrooms to see what it was like and if that was something I was interested in. I observed for a month, became familiar with the grade levels' teachers, and embraced the idea of a change.

I tried to spend more time with my team members by rejoining them during our common lunch period. When I tried to contribute to social conversations, I was ignored. I was sometimes teased or called names. I felt unwelcome, and I didn't know how to make it better. Our grade level was participating in a series of literacy workshops, and my team decided to test children's introduction to new knowledge with a mastery-designed assessment – a clear inconsistency for me. I shared my difference of opinion during a team meeting. One team member summoned me to the classroom and lectured me, so I quickly and awkwardly left the room. Another time, my team agreed to host their classroom Valentine parties on the same day, whereas I could not due to a lack of cards sent in by the children. It was important for me to understand what my classroom parents were capable of and for my children to acknowledge one another, even if they needed

time to hand-make cards from construction paper. The team leader visited my room following my belated Valentine party. I was scowled at and told that I was insubordinate. Regardless of my explanation, my team leader threatened to tell the principal. I was at a loss.

Days later, I was working in my classroom after school. Teaching contracts had been distributed and teacher evaluations were being conducted by the administration. My principal called down to my room and asked me to visit the office. It was the first time I had done so in months. When I walked in to the office, I saw my principal seated next to the assistant principal. It was explained that I recently received a satisfactory teaching evaluation. I was thrilled! And then, I was told that my principal was not renewing my teaching contract. How could 6 satisfactory teaching evaluations for 3 years in a row, productive work toward a PDP, an effective relationship with a new team member, and month-long observations of a different grade level result in a nonrenewal? I was stunned. All I could do was reveal that I was pregnant. My principal offered congratulations and told me that I could resign in lieu of termination. I left the office feeling confused, devastated, and worried.

At the time, I didn't realize that a resignation from my school equated a resignation from the entire county. Naïve of that fact, I foolishly attended a county job fair and accepted another principal's offer for a fourth-grade position at a different school. But after speaking with my administration, that principal left me a voicemail rescinding the job offer with no explanation. I didn't know who to turn to. I felt humiliated and ashamed. My team members had caught on to the news of my job fair attendance and talked about me behind closed doors (where sadly, other colleagues could



overhear them). The strongest memory I have of this time was waking up in the mornings and crying before going to work. I started to despise myself, my job, my colleagues, and most particularly, my principal.

Sadly, the last few months of my teaching year were spent that way. I did my absolute best to conceal my sadness in front of anyone I knew. The ridiculing and gossip from my team members continued, and other colleagues became aware of my team's misbehavior and my future departure. A month before the school year ended, I could no longer stand it. I approached the principal in the office. I told the principal that if the team's deriding did not stop, I would no longer come to work. I also assertively told my principal that it would be documented that I passed the requirements of my PDP. I did everything I was asked to do without my principal's cooperation or support. My principal sat at the desk quietly, as if silently admitting guilt. I continued by stating there was awareness on the administration's part of the existing situation with my team members, my struggles to make things better, and a complete lack of guidance. I expressed outrage over my nonrenewed contract due to my team's blatant misbehavior. My job, livelihood, career, and personal life had all been affected because of situations in my work environment that seemed beyond my control. After that conversation with the principal, my team members' rudeness immediately ceased. I finished out the school year, I packed up everything in my classroom to be moved home, and I never again received communication from my principal or team members.

## School 2

### Teaching Year/Southern Magnolia Branch Four

I spent the summer interviewing for teaching jobs in a neighboring county. I was visibly pregnant and concerned it would affect my employability. After three interviews, each at differing schools, I accepted a second-grade teaching position at an elementary school in a northern county. The principal attempted to reach School 1's principal numerous times. Eventually, I had to provide a home phone number so feedback could be obtained and I could officially be offered the job. What used to be a five-minute commute turned into thirty minutes, and the beautiful school building and classroom I had become accustomed to, was now an old trailer. But, none of that really mattered to me. I was still able to work with children, teach, maintain health insurance, and earn an income for my growing family. I was with a new team of colleagues, a new school staff, and new children. I was grateful to have the self-reliance, familiarity, and experience of teaching second grade. While it was another fresh start, it was one of my most strenuous teaching years.

The principal was kind, and the school environment was very relaxed. I was surprised to learn that my principal planned on retiring at the end of the year, but that did not deter me from enjoying our newly forming relationship. Compared to School 1, School 2 had a macro-management approach. There weren't forced weekly team meetings or monthly staff meetings. My team members welcomed me, and I adjusted to their social culture. I developed a close relationship with my trailer mate. We used to laugh and trade stories. The staff celebrated my pregnancy with a surprise baby shower in the media center. I felt loved.

In the fall of the school year, I gave birth to my daughter. Beforehand, I had invested my efforts and energy into organizing weeks of lesson plans and copies, so I felt prepared and comfortable taking time off work to be a new mother. I remember being in touch with my supply teacher and how she complimented my classroom, my students, and my organized materials. I returned from maternity leave a few days before the holiday break in order to spend time with my students.

My struggles that year were (thankfully) not as much professional as they were personal. In winter, I became increasingly ill and weak from a developing bone tumor in my femur. I called upon on the same supply teacher and made classroom preparations ahead of time. I had to have a swift surgery before the tumor broke the bone. A rod was hammered into my leg and a pin held it in place. I remained in the hospital for a week. In the two weeks thereafter, I was completely dependent on my husband and mother-in-law for my care as well as that of my infant daughter. I attended physical therapy and progressed from being in a wheelchair to walking with crutches. Despite feeling physically exhausted, I still maintained contact with my supply teacher and attended school conferences to meet with all the children's parents.

By spring, my mother's health deteriorated, and she passed away. For the third time in the school year, I had to be absent. I helped my father with the arrangements, and my team was very supportive in their attendance of the funeral. I returned a few days later and continued on with the school year. One child, whose parent occasionally substitute taught for the school, became increasingly disruptive. The child would often challenge me and tell classmates that there would be things done to get me fired. I professionally handled it by mentioning it to the parent, and it eventually discontinued.

A few weeks later, my husband lost his job. I was the sole-provider of income for our family, and my husband stayed home with our daughter. I earned satisfactory teaching evaluations and a contract renewal. To make up for lost income, I helped teach a summer reading and math enrichment program with a centered theme of Egypt. I enjoyed every moment of it. Finally, a positive teaching year had taken place.

### **Teaching Years/Southern Magnolia Branches 5, 6, 7**

These years are grouped together because I have forgotten most of them. But similar to the growth of a tree, I also experienced evolution in several areas. Each teaching year presented new opportunities to meet children and parents, form relationships with varying team members, and perfect my teaching skills. I had become good friends with the influx of trailer mates. I was comfortable and social with other colleagues when I saw them in the hallways. I enjoyed good rapport with the administration and replacement principal, and I earned consistent satisfactory teaching evaluations. My professional life had finally settled down after all of the obstacles from my earliest teaching years.

I intended to create a more collective environment in which I wanted to be connected and belong. I adopted the attitude of being pleasant with everyone and an understanding that not everyone would like me. I engaged in therapy sessions with a clinical psychologist to discuss my prior teaching experiences and how to move forward. In an effort to free my emotions from the past, I destroyed all of my journals and written documents from School 1.

My classroom practices flourished. The school used a computerized program that quizzed children over the books they read and their comprehension. I spent dozens of hours researching and labeling the hundreds of books in my book collection. I acquired more resources and materials to guide student learning. I held myself accountable for each subject area of language arts, math, science, and social studies. I became proficient at managing the classroom routines, student behavior, and using assessment to guide literacy groups. During my second year at School 2, I designed informational brochures for parents that introduced them to me, the school's grading scale, newsletter information, classroom expectation, homework policies, and behavior incentives. I requested and received parents' detailed feedback about their child's classroom experiences through the use of a questionnaire. I became so well-versed in my environment that I loved being there all the time.

The most rewarding component was the bond formed with children. It was not just a classroom with a teacher and students; we were a family. There were few conflicts between children because we learned to communicate positively with one another and celebrate one other's accomplishments. One practice most favored by the children was writing compliments. Each Friday, the children would select a tiny piece of construction paper labeled with a classmate's name. They would take a few moments to express in writing something special about their friend. My students learned that a compliment was deeper than a thought about someone's appearance or a generalized statement about someone's personality. The children's kindness and sincerity strengthened with each effort. They said nice things about how hard their friends worked in class or how much they liked being good friends. What surprised me were the acknowledgements they

would give to friends about their own observations of others' handwriting, reading aloud, helping with projects, or sharing.

The years had their share of challenges, too. I underwent additional surgeries and physical therapy for the removal of the rod and regrowth of the tumor in my femur. There were rare parent conflicts that ultimately resulted in a student being moved out of my room and into another team member's classroom. Although the school's atmosphere was very relaxed and autonomous, there were traces of unkindness or chatter that spurred clashes with colleagues. One team member started ignoring me because I refused to adopt similar religious views. An upper-grade teacher started badmouthing me in front of the students, even though I barely knew or encountered that teacher. It upset one child so much, the child found me afterschool one day and informed me of what had been occurring. Upon notice, I let the administration know of the situation. Then, I swiftly and effectively addressed that teacher without the need or threat of the administration.

My overall wonderful experience at School 2 came to a crashing halt in the spring of the school year. After sharing with colleagues my recent motivational strategy of handing out candy during standardized testing, one reported me to the principal. I was approached by the assistant principal and principal who initially shrugged it off and instructed me never to discuss testing actions. Later that day the school district personnel summoned me to the office and accused me of lying and cheating. I denied their claim of malpractice. I felt insulted, frightened, and badgered. So, I panicked. It is hard to remember what was said to me. In a whirlwind, my principal left the room, typed a resignation letter, and returned with it in hand. The principal comforted me as I cried uncontrollably and distraughtly signed the resignation letter.

I drove home that afternoon in a trance. My husband was very understanding and supportive. Days went by without communication from the school or the district, so I initiated calls to seek out information. Finally, my assistant principal told me I had done the right thing by resigning because I was eventually going to be terminated. I was told I could meet an administrator at the school to pick up my belongings, that I should look into career counseling, and that I should move in a different direction. Appalling and untrue rumors began circulating through the school and county saying that I used the colors of candy to signify to students which test answer to select, that I allowed and instructed students to erase and change test answers, and that I had been escorted off campus by police. I received harassing text messages from a stranger. A substitute was hired for the remainder of my school year, and a letter was sent home by the school citing my resignation was for personal reasons. A short time later, a colleague informed me that my classroom materials were being pilfered through by another teacher under the permission and approval of my principal. My husband and I immediately rented a U-Haul, drove to the school to meet the principal, and retrieved my belongings from my room and the other teacher's classroom.

My life had been completely turned upside down. I had everything going for me. I had the entire school year planned out and a notebook of copies placed in the office to be made for the next teaching year. I was awaiting acceptance to a specialist and doctoral program at a local college. I had picked out a preschool for my daughter to attend. I was planning on getting pregnant. I had my home, insurance, and a steady income. My career that I had worked so hard to achieve was at a standstill.

In a matter of weeks, I was faced with making difficult financial decisions. With my last paycheck, I hired an attorney who specialized in educational law. The attorney helped answer my questions and guided me through communication from the state's standards commission. My husband and I went without health insurance, ceased receiving outside care for our daughter, sold off a majority of our furniture, and listed our home on the market. I had to adjust to a huge life change of being unemployed. I turned to my dad for support. My husband, my daughter, and I moved in with my father. I felt grief-stricken, demoralized, and denounced. It was the lowest I have ever felt.

### **Dormancy from Teaching**

Once we moved back to my father's home, I tried to start over. I worked part-time at a retail store, but I was bitter about not using my college degrees and skills. I was afraid to apply for a teaching job. I isolated myself from my family and friends, stopped going outside of the house, and cried all the time. I remember weeping in the living room to my dad and saying how sorry I was, that I was a loser, and I had no worth. All the confidence I gained working in the classroom swiftly vanished. I was a stay-at-home mom who tried to stay busy, despite the sadness and tears. I remember feeling so upset and guilty that I couldn't be a better mother to my daughter. Days and months of her life could have been better if I had been feeling better about myself and my life.

I underwent fertility treatment and surgeries, and my grandmother passed away. I became persistent about having children because being a mother brought me the greatest happiness in life. Despite several emotional and costly procedures that lasted a full calendar year, we were unsuccessful. After exhausting time, money and effort, my husband and I had given up hope of adding to our family. The arduous experiences made



me feel even more like a failure. We decided to give up and leave it to chance. One burden that was lifted occurred when my husband and I finally sold our home that had been on the market for a year. All of the time at home allowed me to think about what I wanted out of life.

When I was accepted to the graduate program, I called a past professor who still worked at the college. I explained my challenging teaching background and my concern of attending the program without being an active teacher. I was advised to keep it to myself and not share it with anyone. I tried to be collegial with classmates even though I felt ashamed and reserved. I poured my heart into learning and tried to rebuild myself without revealing my secret. I continued the sessions with my psychologist to alleviate the pain from my past experiences, and I slowly started gaining confidence. It was as if someone somewhere knew I needed an opportunity to improve myself.

Nearly a year after my lawyer helped me maneuver communication from the state's standards commission, I received news of a hearing. I filed an open records request, obtained all the documentation related to my case, and reviewed every bit of it thoroughly. I had the choice to fight, but I settled for financial and emotional reasons. Thus, I accepted a certificate suspension. The suspension was retroactive because I had resigned and was no longer teaching in a public school classroom. The denunciation was professionally and personally damning. It was as if I had been knocked back down again.

I tried to press ahead. I was an outsider to the teaching world, and I desperately wanted to gain readmission. I summoned the courage to apply to a local school district for various teaching positions, but never received responses. Although I was without a teaching position, I understood it was to my benefit. Several of my cohort colleagues

managed their teaching jobs and graduate coursework, and they also occasionally mentioned feeling strained. I formed a few close friendships with them, and I became less guarded. I learned to trust them, and I divulged my tainted teaching history. At times I felt peace.

To our surprise, my husband and I discovered my pregnancy. It seemed miraculous. My hesitancy in sharing anything with others, such as my emotions, thoughts, wishes, or happenings, was an aftereffect of all that had occurred in my teaching career. We desired to keep the news to ourselves until my physical appearance changed. I protected myself from anyone or anything that could have jeopardized my longed-for blessing. My university coursework was the perfect distraction.

My graduate studies rekindled an interest in learning about children's self-perceptions as readers. In the spring, I conducted an eight-week pilot study at a nearby public school. The study focused on a first-grade teacher's literacy perceptions and classroom practices as well as the students' self-perceptions and attitudes toward reading. My observations and field notes showcased the teacher's thorough lessons, established classroom routines, behavior management strategies, organization, and creativity. Our transcribed interviews captured the teacher's viewpoints of literacy activities that motivated students and the teacher's perceptions of the individual students' attitudes towards reading. The study afforded me opportunities to participate in a public school setting, work with children, form a connection with a teacher, employ literacy instruments from my graduate courses, and learn new instructional strategies. A salient aspect of the study was when I contributed to students' reading motivation by discussing their interests, paying attention to their books requests, and fulfilling their expectations by

bringing books on a weekly basis. I felt extremely rewarded and fulfilled when they expressed excitement toward seeing me and my crate filled with books.

In the summer, I graduated with my specialist degree. I was 7 months into my pregnancy, and I felt wonderful. I felt like a princess when I waddled across the stage with my giant stomach and pink glittery converse tennis shoes. It was an unforgettable high point of my life, and I cherished every moment.

Following a one-on-one independent study course with a university Montessori specialist, I desired to understand and witness a constructivist learning environment. I returned to the preschool I had attended as a little girl to observe the specific practices described in texts. I marveled at the materials, the capabilities of the young children, and the setting. There was a sense of optimism about learning something new and unfamiliar. I could pursue education and certification in the Montessori approach if I wished, and it might have opened what appeared to be closed doors in traditional teaching.

I submitted another research proposal to the university, this time to investigate literacy practices, autonomy of children, and perceptions of students and their teacher in a nontraditional setting. The pilot study was similar to my first pilot study because I interviewed the teacher, students, and administered the same reading motivation instruments. However, it was on a much smaller scale and in an entirely foreign environment. The study lasted for nine consecutive weeks, and my field notebook became filled with interview transcripts, observations of work times, and photographs. I polished my skills of transcribing, report writing, and thematic analysis and interpretation. Most of all, I had a first-hand glimpse at how students' reading for pleasure materialized. This was a stark contrast to my previous exposures of requiring

reading and comprehension as method of assessment. Other main distinctions included the student-directed learning, the absence of worksheets, paintings and floor-to-ceiling windows, and the ability to travel to an outside public library to conduct research on topics of interest. Similar to my first pilot study, a noteworthy event was the students' curiosity and attraction toward the books that I carried with me to and from my visits. When I arrived during their quiet reading portion of the day, they would scoot closer to my observation spot, sit nearby, whisper to me, and dig through my satchel for a book to explore. My encounter was absolutely fascinating.

In the midst of the fall semester, I gave birth to my son. One week after my caesarian surgery, I eagerly returned to my graduate class. I missed seeing my colleagues, and I wanted to meet my goals of completing my study, my report, and the semester. Six weeks into his life, we spent several days and nights at a local hospital to oversee his unexpected pyloric stenosis surgery. Amidst my distressed condition, I blocked out the chaos. While my son was in surgery, I shared a phone conference with my professor to discuss my study's progress. My professor never knew where I was at the time or what I went through those few months until the semester was at an end. I didn't want anyone or anything to divert the progress I was making in my life.

A year later, I began my third year of graduate school. I took a conflict management course to satisfy an elective, and I learned the rationale behind conflict resolution. I was introduced to the concept of coaching, and I contacted Janice to begin sessions. I started working part-time as a literacy teacher at an enrichment center. Although features of my life were improving, there was still a great deal of depression that developed. My husband was the only person bringing home a decent income, and I

blamed myself for my career failures and lack of earnings. I had always had a job, and not working as a full time teacher made me feel like a loser. I was stressed, losing sleep, and absent from my daughter's soccer games.

The coaching sessions with Janice served as a platform to continue rebuilding my confidence as a professional and as a person. We met at a local bookstore to engage in informal discussions. She presented activities that challenged me to examine my overall beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. I engaged in personal reflection as I wrote about myself in the third person, created a template of how to balance my personal and professional life, and composed a list for my specific needs in a future work environment (for the complete work environment needs list, see Appendix F). I began to feel better about myself.

When I submitted my second pilot study to the nontraditional private school, the director offered me an assistant teaching position for the fall. I accepted. I continued my coaching sessions to aid in my transition of working full time again in a new setting. The overwhelming combination of a new fulltime job and unforeseen graduate school challenges proved to be absolutely draining, and the remainder of the year turned out to be one of fight and flight.

### **School 3**

#### **Assistant Teacher**

My assistant position was fairly easy. I joined the small staff by attending a weekend mountain retreat. We talked, ate, and participated in team building exercises. It was the first time in my career that an administration really focused on fostering new and established relationships among coworkers. I realized within the first few hours that I had

to overcome my introversion and distrust of colleagues. I opened up, asked questions, and sang in front of them. The event had the potential to impact my outlook on relationships in school settings.

My work hours were from seven o'clock in the morning to three o'clock in the afternoon, and I had a half-hour commute each way. I was very enthusiastic. My job description as an assistant seemed effortless compared to being a lone teacher of a public school classroom. However, the longer I worked there, the more it seemed the atmosphere contradicted my experiences of my second pilot study months earlier in the same setting. My past traditional teaching experiences, graduate course conceptions of distributed leadership, and textual understandings were inconsistent from my fresh perspective. Additionally, I learned there was a high assistant turnover rate. I felt conflicted.

Several features of the environment were positively undeniable. The lead teachers were well-versed in planning children's learning experiences. Best practices of arts integration and complex learning objectives were demonstrated in teachers' lessons and students' understandings. There were child-sized materials and equipment that were colorful and attractive in appearance, especially for visual and kinesthetic learning of exploring abstract concepts using concrete objects. The classroom overflowed with students' communication as they listened to one another's presentations and designed projects together. Finally, the lead teachers made excellent use of portfolio assessment to help students monitor, record, and analyze learning over time.

Despite the existence of a staff handbook, the administration's vision was not an everyday focus, there were questionable leadership skills, and there was an undercurrent

of tension pulsing throughout the school. There were day-to-day occurrences that prompted my assistant colleague and me to ask questions.

There was a clear dividing line between lead and assistant teachers that prevented assistants from having a voice. I had little authority in the classroom, which became increasingly confusing when discipline or classwork incidents transpired. The lack of communication between lead teachers and assistants further perpetuated confusion as well as a feeling of isolation. There were unclear work expectations and a disinterest in assistants' abilities or potential contributions. In fact, the only aspect I had full clarity about was my need to take photographs of students' learning, work samples, and collaboration.

The classroom management was lacking, as there were occasional daily disruptions. Some students interrupted others' quiet work time or destroyed others' creations. It led to some tiring and frustrating days for me, mainly because it went unaddressed. I understood my background was in traditional teaching, but I had years of teaching experience and knowledge of working with children. I could have made suggestions or recommended strategies. Again, the aforementioned division between leads and assistants prevented opinions, even if they were warranted.

One instance that presented a conflict was when a child approached me for help one day. The child was struggling with a writing task because of misspellings. I sat down and listened to the child express frustration. I suggested use of the personal dictionary provided to all children at the beginning of the year. It had gone untouched for over four months, and this child had no idea what it was or how to use it. I explained its use, and the child immediately felt better. The child asked for further assistance about how to

write a story. So, I discussed elements such as characters, setting, a possible problem, and a resolution. Together, we related those ideas to his favorite movie. Through the discussion and our jottings of illustrations and words, the child was able to make connections to elements that could be in a pretend narrative story. A lead teacher noticed our conversation from across the room and rushed over to ask why I was writing the story for the child. The teacher was very firm with me in front of the child and indicated the children could only come to lead teachers for things like that. I was very embarrassed, and I sat quietly. The child looked up and told the lead teacher of the wish to keep working with me because it was fun. The lead teacher silently walked away. Quietly, I suggested that the child should work independently, and I gave a reminder that I would be present in the classroom if help was needed again.

Another example of conflict was the children's opportunity to help prepare meals for the class. The menu-planning and shopping were completely left to the class, who sometimes depended on the assistants for help. After some time, it became complicated. Children had little knowledge of cooking tools, preparation, or cooking in general. Sometimes, children were left feeling overwhelmed and disheartened. I tried mentioning it to my lead teacher, but I was ignored. I then discussed it with the administration. The principal told me to introduce the situation during a team meeting, and that a decision should appear as though it was made from the top-down. The principal facilitated a meeting, presented the cooking issue, provided fact-based information, and suggested the need to come to a sound decision. Everyone at the meeting was involved, and there was unanimous agreement that the meal-planning activity needed to end. Despite the initial



top-down approach, it took my observations, attention, and assertiveness to bring it to light.

In this school, I didn't enter with or want a perspective of isolation. I had enthusiasm, expertise, and information to share that could have strengthened the collective capacity of the classroom. To me, the relationship between my lead teacher and me should have transcended hierarchy so we could learn from one another and make decisions together to benefit the children. In fact, anytime lead teachers sensed conflict with assistants, they openly commented on how they wished one of the temporary employees would give a workshop specifically for assistants. Yet, my assistant colleague and I disagreed on needed training for simple tasks like cleaning, taking roll, and replenishing supplies. We felt our unclear practices depended on how well the lead teachers expressed their wants, needs, and concerns.

I appreciated the experience, but I also yearned for something more. After five months of working in the school, I concluded I was out of my element. I had been disenchanted by all of my total teaching experiences and career, and I had hoped that a nontraditional private school would be different. I wished for the experience to be more fulfilling and meaningful, and I also understood my capabilities and desire to lead my own classroom. Like some others who left during or at the end of that school year, I resigned and positively departed at midyear.

### **Graduate School**

Simultaneous to the emerging challenges of School 3, I was experiencing conflict as a graduate student. That fall semester, I enrolled for my final graduate course class.

Our course objective was take and pass an exam that synthesized our understandings with our school setting experiences, and it was to be written in a narrative format. My participation in a study group helped us to divide our work load, complete our portion of the work, and compare notes. I memorized heavyweight names and what they stood for in the field of educational research, and I wrote songs to help me remember them. I understood the importance of school change, how I could be of influence, and what an educator's perspective should be regarding best practices, instruction, and assessment. However, my overall perception of teaching was not very positive, and I had been without a teaching position and setting for several years. There was a mental disconnect that prohibited me from relating my well-informed graduate understandings to all of my previous experiences and settings. Sadly, I failed my comprehensive writing exam.

After failing my exam, I began to witness things that I did not understand. At that juncture of the program, it was explained that a graduate student's committee was there to support, guide, and provide assistance. Thus, I expected to have a committee that worked and met with me. My first committee was hardly in touch with me or one another. My chair and committee weren't sure what to do about my progression in the course. When I tried to ask for their help, they refused to talk to me. Further, the program director told me I could not speak to my committee at all and presented the ultimatum to retake the course or leave the program completely. I was crushed, and I considered quitting my doctoral pursuits altogether. The incident affected my morale as a graduate student and my faith in people I trusted.

Concurrent with the challenges at School 3, my morale as an educator was negatively impacted. I began asking myself why I was working as an assistant,

continuing the doctoral program, and pursuing a career in education. I felt increasingly upset and stressed, and it spilled over to my personal life. I was becoming angry with myself and the world of teaching again, and I distanced myself from my husband and children.

As a last resort, I turned to a trusted mentor and confided in her. She provided sound advice and encouraged me to channel my inner strength and fight. So right then and there, I decided to take control of whatever I could. I decided to replace my first committee. I refused to trust them a second time, especially when I had paid tuition for an unsatisfactory experience. I went to see an ombudsman on campus. I met with the ombudsman and presented the course syllabus. I discussed how I didn't have opportunities to show my writing for evaluation and feedback so I could understand the process and the final product. With the ombudsman's guidance and support, the college and I reached a resolution of retaking the exam with individual support.

I worked with the professor to formulate a plan for the spring semester. When we met, we set a new date for the exam and described our strategy for success. The professor had a better understanding of my struggles with relating my knowledge to experience. I was instructed to use my personal and professional awareness to construct a response based on my latest experience with School 3. I practiced my drafts and gained feedback for one month. I took the exam a month earlier than planned, and I passed! It was a huge sense of relief, and I was grateful for my perseverance in achieving my goal.

My second committee was then managed by a different group of familiar and trusted professors. Compared to my first committee experience, there was a definite improvement in communication. I completed a course toward online teaching

certification, essentially completed my reading endorsement, and wrote a literature review on how effective teaching transfers from higher educators to university students to children in educational settings.

After resigning from School 3, I decided to take a break from chasing teaching employment. Similar to how my husband and I had given up our fertility endeavors, I had given up on finding a job. For months, I became increasingly comfortable with not knowing what was to occur with my future career as an educator. I continued my part-time position as a literacy instructor at the enrichment center, and I maintained my coaching sessions with Janice.

I have heard that things happen when one least expects it. The saying has become a reality for me several times in regards to graduate school, my son, and the job offer from School 4. At the time, my daughter attended the school, and my resume had remained on file for over two years. Out of the blue one summer afternoon while I was shopping for groceries, an administrator from School 4 called and left a message asking me to come in for an interview. The minute I arrived home, I returned the call. Moments later, wearing my tennis shoes and a Hello Kitty t-shirt, I drove over to the private school in a flash. After a short conversation with the administration, I was offered a second grade position. I cannot describe the elation I felt because someone had finally wanted me to be a teacher at a school. To this day, I still have the saved voicemail message on my phone.

**School 4****Teaching Year/Southern Magnolia Branch 8**

Everything (graduate school success, obtaining a full time teaching job, earning an income, family life) was falling into place. I was looking forward to some stability, and I believed that I deserved good opportunities. I spent the last week of the summer transplanting all of my white classroom shelving, teaching files, and learning materials to my classroom. I bought loads of canvas organizers for the shelves and new bins for my children's literature. This was another chance to start anew, and it was going to be absolutely perfect! I was familiar with the children, families, and campus. Best of all, I knew how to teach second grade, I owned the materials, and I was more than ready to try out some new literacy strategies from my graduate courses.

While I was putting the finishing touches on my classroom, I detected a recognizable pain in my left femur. Having had surgery on it three times previously, I knew what to do. I requested an MRI and discovered another bone tumor had developed slightly higher than where it had been removed before. For the fourth time, I was facing another leg surgery. It was incredibly inconvenient to deal with it at the beginning of the school year, but nothing was slackening my momentum. I had the outpatient surgery on a Thursday and spent the next couple of days recovering. That Saturday, I painfully hobbled on crutches to a spot in the park to meet my students and their families for a special treat. My class had been studying an author who wrote children's books about a mastiff, and I asked my brother to bring his real pet mastiff to the park so the children could meet her. We all took photographs together, and it was worthwhile to see the smiles and hear the laughs.

I was making headway in all three environments (university, School 4, enrichment center). There was no mention of the state standards to guide the curriculum, so I was given complete autonomy. I relied on my prior knowledge and experiences. There were some classroom renewable materials, but I spent a considerable amount of off-campus time assimilating the social studies curriculum. The more I learned about the culture of the school, the more my internal concerns about teaching, administration, and schools simmered. There were no policies about anything: tardiness, absenteeism, homework, or discipline. Further, there were no formal teacher observations or evaluations. It seemed so *laissez-faire* compared to any environment I had encountered.

While there were some things I was confused about in School 4's environment, I did my best to adapt. My second graduate school committee allowed me to refocus my dissertation topic on enhancing children's literacy achievement rather than effective teaching. I tried a strategy with classroom children that I had never done previously in my career as an educator. In the fall, I met independently with every student during afterschool hours to get to know them and assess their literacy abilities. For the first time in my teaching career, I really knew my students because I invested my time to build rapport and document my discoveries. My efforts and teaching practices were lauded by the parents, and it was the most rewarded I had ever felt as an educator.

Nonetheless, it was not without sacrifice. I was spending more time at home working on grading, lesson planning, and collecting data than with my family. I was tired all of the time. Even though I was glad to have a teaching job, I felt overwhelmed. I realized how busy my life had become with two kids, a full time job, a part-time job, and

graduate school. I resigned from the enrichment center, and that allowed more time for other things.

I began experiencing hardships in the form of parent conflicts. One instance occurred when report cards were being prepared. Since the beginning of the school year, I had been averaging grades in subject areas. Nine weeks into the school year, my colleague explained that the subject area grades were weighted. I had no idea, and I felt frustrated that I was not properly briefed at the start of the year. That weekend, I researched, purchased, and downloaded a grade management program. I entered the children's grades according to the weight categories. Weighting portions of the grade lowered one of the children's averages by a letter grade. I was not sure what to do, so I asked the administration. I was instructed by the principal to assign the grade that represented the child's abilities and to inform the child's parents. When I phoned and explained the grading situation to the parent, I was met with anger. The parent explained disappointment and that the paid tuition should be met with individualized attention. Later the next month, the same parent complained to the administration that I was not visible during carline (I was excused from it because I was on crutches), there was a lack of rapport (even though there were rare visits to my classroom and minimal email communications), and there was concern about the curriculum being taught. The administration set up a meeting with the parent, and I was told I was obligated to attend. It was an hour-long meeting without a clear objective or outcome. While that meeting seemed to go well, there were additional instances that prompted the parent to be concerned about completing the school year. Unfortunately, the circumstances surrounding the situation left me feeling confused, shattered, and unsure about my tenure.

A second conflict with a different parent happened regarding behavior management in the classroom. The child's parents were unhappy with my approach, and their solution was to approach the administration and complain. Despite my attempts to contact them, I was ignored. After an impromptu visit a week later, we sat down together and expressed our thoughts. I described my classroom observations, and that I was happy to collaborate with to help the child succeed. We discussed potential strategies together, it seemed to be a productive conversation. Over time, the relationship and our communication improved.

The final instance during that school year was with a different parent separate from my homeroom. The parent frequently sent harassing emails to me and provoked other parents by causing unnecessary drama. The mistreatment did not stop there. My administration mentioned a meeting request by the parent. It was incredibly confusing that parents were allowed to approach the school's administration before first speaking to the classroom teacher. And, some of those meetings occurred without my knowledge or without me. I asked to attend the meeting with the administration and parent so that I could better understand the parent's concerns (and why the meeting was occurring in the first place). During that meeting, the parent told me that: I was rude, unprofessional, and poorly thought of by other parents (all of which were untrue). The parent also said that the tuition paid ultimately meant that I worked for the parents. On the inside, I felt outraged at hearing any of those statements, that there was no actual legitimate concern that warranted having a meeting, and that the administration did not defend me. I responded by calmly and firmly conveying that the parent's expected treatment of kindness would not be accomplished if unkind statements and harassing emails



continued. I explained my goals as a private school teacher, and that I would do whatever I could to help children succeed. After the parent claimed to be satisfied with our meeting, I discovered that the next day the parent and spouse met with the administration again. The following week, a colleague informed me that the parent had asked for a meeting. I didn't understand why this was happening, and I was becoming increasingly upset and uncomfortable coming to work. That parent's yearlong illogical complaints to the administration, misbehaviors with other parents, and mistreatment of me continued until the very last day of the school year.

I extensively pondered the administration's responses to each happening that year. My principal's general statement was to "fix it," without any objective feedback, suggestions, or support. It appeared as though the administration catered to nearly any parent's impulse, whether or not it was substantiated. My feelings of harassment and bullying had been ignored, and I was made to feel as though I was the cause of the problem. When the administration learned of attempts I made to resolve situations with a concerned parent or to help a colleague with her classroom management, it was quick to express disapproval and disappointment. I was repeatedly asked if I wanted to remain employed at the school. Rather than the administration being proactive and telling people ahead of time about communications and policies, my colleagues and I were spoken to once a mistake had been made. The three parent issues out of numerous content families were overgeneralized by the administration, which relayed to me that *several parents* were saying I was "bristly" and "unapproachable." After hearing comments like these with no idea who said them or why, I became reticent and less sociable around any adults

in my work environment. Thereafter, anytime I was approached by the administration, I remained worried I had done something else wrong.

The one realm that did prove to be successful was my classroom. By late spring, I had effectively accomplished all of my classroom goals for the year. I had taught each subject area using meaningful and interesting approaches. The children and I had formed trusting and caring relationships. Their growth and interest in literacy were evident in my final data collection of conversational interviews, work samples, and documentation. The children's abilities, assignments, presentations, and communications with one another excelled – and I was very proud of them and myself. Again, my teaching abilities were lauded by the children's parents, and I was inwardly celebrating my resurgence into teaching.

But, none of that seemed to matter to the administration. The happiness of the parents, the success of the students, and even my own classroom practices went unacknowledged. Toward the end of the school year, I was presented with an ultimatum to leave the school or accept a reassignment to teach preschool. I recall the administration expressing that the “coaching” they had done all year produced no results. There was no discussion about what I had achieved during the school year. Yet again in my career, I concluded that my beliefs, values, emotions, and skills as a teacher were of little importance. I was promised help and feedback (that I was told I critically needed) if I accepted the position, and it was suggested that I should take some time to think about things. I stayed at work that afternoon feeling completely devastated. I sat on the floor of my classroom, sobbed quietly, and wondered if I needed to continue being a teacher. I felt like a failure, that I had little guidance, and I could never do anything right. I was

emotionally and physically exhausted. Embarrassingly, I was surprised when the custodian walked in. There was genuine concern and encouragement to be strong and know that whatever the issue, it would pass.

Let it be known now (if it is not already evident in what has already been written) that mid-year negative discussions with teachers regarding their employability DO NOT increase morale, productivity, or self-esteem. In fact, those types of discussions make it even more challenging to get out of bed every day – especially when there are several weeks left in the school year. There was emotional difficulty in returning to work knowing that I felt mistreated, unwanted, and undervalued, while (for a second time in my career) having to pretend to students, parents, and colleagues that nothing was wrong.

At the end of my first school year, I had to clean out my classroom. I was so angry. I had to load my car with all of the shelves, bins, and materials that I had moved in 10 months prior. I became filled with negativity. Before considering the reassignment position, I met with the administration to ask some questions. The principal felt I needed a second chance, that I made a series of misjudgments, and that I had shown no growth in parents' eyes. My teaching year, as subjectively deemed by the administration, was unsuccessful. I needed to know what constituted a successful teaching year, so I asked. According to the administration's perception of me, a successful year meant, "no misjudgments and no parent phone calls or meetings." The administration put forth an agreement to reinstate me to a higher grade level if I had a successful upcoming year in preschool. I listened carefully to all that was said, and I expressed receiving little support. Having to tell a principal for the second time in my teaching career that there was a lack

of leadership support was unsettling for me. The entire conversation and notice of the upcoming severe decrease in my salary were infuriating, depressing, and demeaning.

In early summer, I heavily contemplated the option of the reassignment. Despite the pleas of those around me, I consented. Even though several weeks had passed, the administration's reaction to my acceptance was baffling. It was not a response of cheerfulness, reception, or warm encouragement. Instead, I was asked why I was even interested, and condescendingly told that I had significant improvements to make. When I retorted that I was looking to the administration for guidance and support, I was told, "Well, Elizabeth...you can lead a horse to water." At that moment, I silently vowed that I was not going to be spoken to like that again. When withdrawing our children from the school, my husband told the administration that he was aware of everything that had transpired over the year, and he hoped it would do anything in its power to ensure that my next teaching year would be better.

To make matters worse, there started to be issues at the university as well. Committee 2 was also proving to be unsuccessful. There was mismanagement and misdirection in several ways. I remained unaware, even past the point of my proposal defense, data collection, and commencement of data analysis. No one in the college was really aware of how far I had come in the process. Once all of it was brought to my attention, my progress in the program was halted a second time. My entire dissertation study of children's literacy was jeopardized. A year of my energy, money, time, and research efforts had been wasted. It was heartbreaking to experience hardships in both my work and university environments where I had started out feeling so confident and

successful. I felt shattered. I cried all the time. It took incredible strength to continue every day. I started taking sleep aids and an antidepressant.

I placed any bit of faith I had left in the same woman and mentor at the university. She provided advice and support already, and I realized this was a time when I needed it most. I was so grateful. I began to meet with the university to resolve the issues that were caused by Committee 2. It took over a month for my situation to be investigated and to have an idea of how to proceed. Most of the data I had collected was considered unusable. Once the situation had been examined, solutions were offered. I took on a third committee, and we decided to meet often during the fall to build rapport, set expectations, and make a plan to move forward.

I started to develop a new attitude that had been caused by anger and bitterness. After all of these upsetting teaching and university experiences, I had enough. From that point on, I was not going to take crap from anyone anymore. I was going to take control of my life and my career.

### **Teaching Year/Southern Magnolia Branch 9**

There really wasn't immersion or instruction with my new preschool reassignment position. Regardless of my knowledge and familiarity with teaching second grade, it was still a new grade level for me. Not only did I have to look at how to schedule my day, how to work with younger children, and how to understand the learning and activities that took place, I had to obtain or make nearly all the materials to do it. I was bitter and resentful for being reassigned in the first place, so I promised myself I would not bring in any of my own materials back to the school until I felt comfortable

again. Several times, I wondered why I was doing anything related to teaching. I had somehow accepted that where I was in my life and career was all I could ever expect then and in the future. This was as good as it was going to get. I had become a disappointment to myself.

That year, I had the opportunity to foster a special relationship with my teaching assistant. Given the challenges of working with as assistant during my first year of teaching at School 1 and as an assistant at School 3, I vowed to her and myself that I would be an excellent communicator. I cast the dividing line between lead and assistant teachers aside and put forth the attitude and agreement that we were equals. I wanted my assistant to feel completely comfortable in expressing ideas, managing classroom activities, and taking on teaching tasks. It was imperative to me that the children also viewed the lead and assistant relationship as evenly balanced. I placed my assistant's desk right next to mine. We developed a friendship, and we leaned on one another for laughs, support, and conversation.

All of my preschool colleagues became aware of my reassignment as soon as I joined the team. As time progressed, they voiced their awareness of my over-qualification and their curiosity about my future endeavors in the grade level or teaching in general. I started noticing subtle discrepancies in the relationships among the administration and preschool staff. It was incredibly obvious, especially to those it affected, that certain teachers were favored over others. Some teachers felt increasingly excluded and undervalued, and they explained that their morale and faith in the administration had been severely impacted. Because of my previous experiences with relationship challenges in

all four teaching environments, I was both sympathetic and empathetic during our discussions with those who confided in me.

I was navigating the adjustment of being a preschool teacher and learning about the appropriateness of classroom practices. A month into the school year, a parent approached me and asked if there would be more to the curriculum than what was initially presented by the school. It was a little awkward for me. However, the more time I invested in getting to know the children, I realized they were more advanced than what the curriculum offered. I felt like there should have been more. So, I did more, and it was to the parents' satisfaction, the children's readiness, and my self-expectations as an educator. Despite being told by a colleague that literacy instruction was not for preschoolers, I did it anyway – and with the knowledge of the administration. For me, it became a noteworthy conflict of relating theory to practice. The practices I read about, discussed in my graduate courses, or believed in were not evident in my setting. I asked my new committee chairs, who were preschool experts, for their insights. My thoughts, practices, and instincts about children's learning were validated.

I began researching strategies of literacy in preschool classrooms for my dissertation. I felt what I was doing in my classroom was appropriate for my first year of teaching preschool and for the children in my class. I thought more about what my children were capable of at that current point in time, not necessarily what was deemed “age-appropriate” based on a child's age or developmental level. As a budding preschool teacher, I remained confident in my observation and assessment practices and my communication with families.

When I attended a preschool conference in the spring, I heard a presenter mentioned an acronym that was unfamiliar to me. I looked at attendee sitting next to me and quietly asked about it. The attendee whispered, “You teach preschool and you don’t know what those are?” Embarrassed, I thought, wow, why don’t I know that? I was earning my doctorate degree in early childhood and elementary education, and I felt frustrated to be unaware of something as important as that. I reflected on my elementary teaching experiences and attributed this new discovery to being a novice preschool teacher. That instance increased my theory-to-practice disconnect and connected to my original feelings of uncertainty related to the teaching profession. The following weekend I printed standards, lesson plan templates, and anything else relevant to early learning standards. I believed these were things I should have been doing in my classroom all along, and maybe that was the origin of my internal conflict. I was also talking with my graduate dissertation committee about relating my knowledge of literacy to my recent preschool beliefs, values, and practices.

Right about that time, many things weren’t making sense to me. All the questions I had been wondering kept bothering me: Why was I in a preschool classroom in the first place? Was my private school program supposed to follow standards given by the state? Was the administration making good choices related to me, my colleagues, the children, the parents, and the school as a whole? Who was I looking to for leadership, and what should I expect from leaders? How did my perspectives make me feel as a teacher? Why were my internal conflicts happening? Then it hit me – I don’t need to be writing a dissertation about preschool literacy at all, especially if I didn’t completely understand it



comprehensively. I needed to be writing about my internal feelings of conflict about continuing in my job environment and staying in education.

My second year at School 4 as a first year preschool teacher went well. The children were well-behaved, eager to participate, and happy to learn. Their parents were generous, responsive, and helpful. Aside from one colleague's critiques of my literacy approaches, the others were understanding and encouraging. There was distance between the administration and me, which gave us space to heal and rectify the previous school year's predicament. I reached out a couple of times to gain specific feedback about my performance. At first I was ignored, but then I received somewhat positive feedback about my newsletters to parents and my performance. However, I was told I should be open to the other teachers' philosophies by accepting their help and learning from them. I was unsure of how that perspective had been formed given my enthusiastic commitment to the team. I was realizing that the administration did not intend to follow through on its agreement to reinstate me to a higher grade level, even though there were several open positions due to some teacher turnover. When I expressed that I wanted to earn a higher salary, the administration stated it would be happy to write a recommendation or reference letter on my behalf. Even though it was a civil conversation, I walked away feeling disappointed, expendable, and aimless. From that point on, it seemed the school or a teaching career might not have been the best option for me, and perhaps I needed to look somewhere else for something else.

### **Resignation**

When I rarely left my house or talked to others, my friends and loved ones asked about my graduate school progress or my teaching job. I was in a state of inner turmoil,

and I am sure it was reflected in my persona. I wanted to ask questions and find answers to help me better understand my experiences and my career motivations. I wanted to do better and be better. I met with all of those around me to gain information about employment and performance feedback. This new journey of discovery did not have a known destination. I still wanted to maintain control of my attitude and the direction of my career. But either way, someone else in a leadership position wasn't going to steer the car. It was going to be me in the driver's seat.

After researching the topic of teacher turnover and participating in several meetings with my graduate committee, I started journaling about my past experiences and engaging in coaching sessions with Janice. I was on a journey of self-discovery and improvement as I became more aware of my goals, realities, obstacles, and support systems.

I attended a district teaching job fair, submitted my teaching applications online, met with a recruitment spokesperson, pursued three school districts, and contacted the state's standards commission. The first district person was considerate. The person met with and interviewed me. We spoke for about an hour about my practices and beliefs. The competitive hiring process was explained as well as a suggestion of increasing direct communication to school principals and networking with others by substitute or supply teaching. There was an indication that was nothing on my application was of concern, and the person confirmed my employability. Even though the meeting took place, it was to no avail. Out of the dozens of jobs I applied for via the online electronic application system, there were no responses. It was distressing because I was close to completing my degree, and I naively assumed that a doctoral degree would be to my advantage.

The second district required teacher candidates to complete an online assessment about teaching and student data. Moments after completing the assessment, I received an email stating I did not meet the criteria. I had years of teaching experience, excellent classroom teaching evaluations, and two recent (in my eyes) successful teaching years, and three elementary education degrees. Which criteria were unsatisfactory? Despite their attempts to ignore my persistent communication, I finally reached an employee who explained I actually did meet all of the criteria. However, the employee firmly stated the district was only willing to “hire the best of the best, and people with certificate suspensions were not the kind of people that they were trying to hire or put in schools.” I explained that the suspension happened several years ago and would remain permanently affixed to my certificate. The callous response was that I needed to consider that when applying again in the future.

The third district employee was friendly and forthright. The human resources employee said principals tend to shy away from license suspensions, but there was no county policy to prohibit employment. It was explained that when there was a suspension on an applicant’s certificate, the district considered how long ago it was, the reason, how honest the applicant was about it, and teaching experiences since the suspension. The employee advised an addition of a special education certification to my license, to apply for positions and wait for replies, to send my resume directly to principals, or to start working as an office person, paraprofessional, or supply teacher. After we hung up, I thought, why should I have to return to a university (again) to keep adding endorsements or additional certifications in order to make myself more marketable? Doesn’t anyone

want me as I am? Isn't a doctorate degree – the highest obtainable teaching certification – prestigious? Why am I just not good enough?

My initial communication with the state's standards commission was very concise. There was no way to remove a certificate suspension. Following what seemed to be unmistakable employment rejection from two districts, I asked a state standard's employee what I supposed to do. I wanted to know how people with certificate suspensions regained employment. The employee explained that people who have had suspensions have made a mistake and should be able to work in any sector again. Furthermore, it was recommended that I contact my previous principals to ask for help, apply to smaller counties, or write a cover letter explaining my suspension. When I explained that my dissertation was on teacher turnover and that I was pondering leaving the teaching field, the employee said that was unfortunate because schools were in need of highly-qualified teachers. When we ended our conversation, I reflected on the employee's comments. I could just envision myself talking to another future principal or recruitment employee. "Hello. My name is Elizabeth, and I am looking for a teaching position at your school. Are you interested in hiring a teacher who has had a professional development plan, a non-renewed contract, and a certificate suspension? If so, I'm just the gal for you!"

Days later, I logged on to the third district employment site to peruse available teaching job positions. I noticed a yellow highlighted area spanning the top of the screen. It was a notification that I had been scheduled for an interview. OH MY GOSH, NO WAY!!! I quickly read the invitation, accepted, and jotted down the details. Then, I raced out of my home office to tell my husband. I couldn't believe it. For several years, I felt so

bad about myself, worried about rejection, and failed to earn an income that equated my worth. Maybe all of that was about to change. The same third district employee contacted me, assured me that the district felt I was employable, and discussed the interview process. When I asked about correspondence with the state's standards commission, it was explained that along with my certificate suspension information was an attached note. It read, "This person deserves an interview." A smile was etched on my face the rest of the day.

I set aside an entire day to create and practice a lesson that might impress the interview panel. The lesson incorporated technology, literacy, and math. I designed a packet for the panel that described the procedure, indicated standards, and assessed student knowledge. That afternoon, I gathered items to add to my teaching portfolio. It included my resume, teaching certificate, lesson plans, weekly newsletters, photographs of my classroom and materials, assessments, and photocopied work samples (excluding students' names).

The next day, I promptly arrived and showcased my lesson to some children and the interview panel. The children were engaged and responsive. I completed every portion of the lesson, and then I was asked to speak with some members of the panel in the office. I was asked about my perception of success with the lesson, about my teaching experience, if my references could be contacted, and if I would receive a good recommendation. The panel members were alarmed by my salary amount and the lack of official teaching evaluations from School 4. To this, they felt I needed a warning about the current public school teaching evaluation system. The overall sentiment they shared was that the evaluation system was sometimes very challenging for teachers, and some

had quit or become disheartened over it. When presented with an opportunity to ask questions, I inquired about things I had never thought to ask of in any previous teaching interviews. I wanted to know about mentoring, an induction program, the procedure of discipline, how the administration handled conflicts with parents, and their definition of a “good fit.” They explained, “A good fit was someone who was dedicated to the students of the school and who would go above and beyond what was expected.” The interviewers started shuffling around, playing with their phones, and leaving the room while one remained to tell me what to expect if someone was interested in hiring me. My overall impression of the interview was positive, but I left feeling a little slighted.

On the way home, I drove past my subdivision and toward a nearby elementary school located in the first district. I knocked on the school door and stepped inside. I mentioned my interest in obtaining employment at the school to the principal. We stood there chatting for fifteen minutes, and I conveyed my feelings of awkwardness in approaching the school directly. The principal laughed and admitted success in achieving a past teaching interview that way. Later in the afternoon, I wrote an email to the principal expressing my appreciation. Maybe for just a few minutes, we weren't principal and prospective teacher. We were just two people, greeting one another and exchanging introductions. I was a face with a name. A face before seeing the resume. A face before realizing the certificate suspension.

I continued journaling about my career and its influence on my personal life. I realized how much I treasured the positive memories from my childhood and the dream my mother and I shared about raising my children together. I recognized the higher degree of attention I gave to teaching and graduate school than my family. I remembered

how being a nanny for two children in my early-twenties inspired me to become a teacher. I better understood my reasons and motivations to pursue education and working with children. I reviewed my previous undergraduate and graduate degree journals and discovered that although the good occasions outnumbered the bad, the bad memories overshadowed my entire perception of teaching. Throughout the years, teaching was a sanctuary – an escape from varying feelings into a classroom where I could embrace the happiness that occurred when I could be my best and brightest self. I was able to ascertain my resilience, the need to prove to myself that I was a good person and good teacher, and my weakness in allowing the words and actions of others to negatively permeate my soul. It became more apparent that I started referencing recent teaching years as “good” or “bad,” because that was the generalization made by my current administration.

I reviewed my journals, wrote about teacher turnover, and tried to recover from all of the district employment conversations. Trying to find employment was deflating and infuriating. I was not ready to give up on teaching just yet. I kept thinking and telling myself, “I am a good person. I am an excellent teacher. I want to work. I have a lot to offer.” I never heard anything more from the school that interviewed me or the principal that I approached.

Unfortunately, many of my colleagues were voicing perspectives similar to my inner observations of the administration: a lack of accountability, unawareness of teachers’ feelings, ignorance of classroom practices, and unclear reasons behind decisions regarding conflicts, employment, and curriculum. Our shared realizations, my past

experiences, the way I saw myself, and the idea of returning to teaching became all-consuming.

One summer day, I reached my breaking point. A colleague called to chat about hesitancy in sharing feelings about the upcoming school year with the administration. The colleague was missing sleep and feeling stressed – an all too familiar feeling for me. I encouraged movement past any fears and to call the administration to talk. A different colleague and I corresponded later on that day, and we both expressed disappointment in the administration's disregard of our requests to move to a higher grade level. The colleague didn't feel valued and was afraid to list the school as a reference for fear of retaliation. Toward the end of the day, I called the principal that I had approached in person a few weeks ago. Teaching, paraprofessional, and supply positions were still posted on the district website, and I wanted to know if I could be considered for any of them. The principal offered to call the district human resources department. While I waited, I thought, "Here it was! My chance to connect with a public school principal, to be interviewed, and to be readmitted to a realm of education that I was most familiar." I reconnected with the principal moments later. When we started speaking, the principal flatly asked for an explanation about my certificate suspension. Ugh. Not this again! I gave a quick synopsis and waited for the reply. Instead, there was a moment of silence.

The principal said that at this time I was not going to be interviewed. How defeating. I asked if it was because of the suspension. Yes. I said it had happened several years ago. The principal replied there were several strong candidates to be considered at the moment. I asked what strong meant. Did it mean a strong educational background? Yes. It also meant the candidates had not had my certificate suspension situation. I felt so



awful. The principal explained being new to the county, and that the county charged principals with the duty of finding the “most fit” candidates to staff their schools. I asked about starting lower as a supply teacher or a paraprofessional. I was told not right now. I asked if that meant ever. No, not ever - just not this year. I thanked the principal and hung up my phone.

I quickly called the first district’s human resources department. The employee said I was an excellent candidate. I explained the conversation that had just take place with a principal. The employee said things like, “Oh, dear, bless your heart.” I asked what else I could do. I had applied for jobs since March. I went to the job fair. I had met with the human resources recruiter. I had applied for more jobs. The employee revealed to me that I had superior references, and it was rare for someone to have superior ratings. The employee suggested that I continue to apply for jobs, not to give up, and to pray about it.

I was speechless. I was feeling so many sentiments at once - mainly sadness, anger, frustration, and embarrassment. Not only had I put myself out there to speak with a principal, I also had this whole set of conversations in front of my daughter. She was hearing the disappointment in my voice and witnessing my rejection. I could tell she felt badly for me. That evening, I felt overwhelmed with emotion. Usually when I am upset, my reaction is to isolate myself. As I had done many times before, I crawled in bed, covered up with the sheets, and quietly cried. My husband slid over from his side of the bed and snuggled up close to me. He put his right arm around me, and I cried a little bit more. I told him that sometimes it was easier to be asleep than be awake and remember all of my upsetting and resurfacing teaching experiences. I just wanted the pain from

those experiences to stop. I did not want to cry about them or feel badly anymore. After I took a sleep aid, I fell soundly asleep.

I woke up the next morning and stood in the shower. I thought about who I was and what I wanted as the water splashed my hair. When I got out, I wrapped a towel around my body and sat down on the edge of the tub. I stared off into space and got lost in my thoughts. What if I just take a break from being a teacher for a while? Maybe some of my stress would disappear. Before long, it was time to take my children to their summer camps so I could work from home on my dissertation. In the car, I thought that whatever I envisioned the profession of teaching to be, or where it would take me, surely wasn't what I was or wanted to be experiencing. I drove down the street, pulled into the school parking lot, and parked my car. I got out of my car, and I could feel my heart beating a little faster. I wandered into the office and saw my principal at a desk.

I mentioned that I wanted to take a leave of absence in order to work on my dissertation. My principal wasn't sure what to suggest and said maybe it was best to resign. I was told that I was informing the administration at a proactive time and that my efforts of personally communicating were appreciated. It seemed unexpected. I explained that there were some concerns I had about returning for the upcoming year. I was concerned about literacy and the pressure from colleagues to avoid teaching it. The reply was that I had many creative ideas and there was an understanding that I wished to be in a situation that embraced that. I revealed my feelings were hurt when I was not reinstated to an upper-level teaching position when there were a few openings in the spring. I said that I would feel better knowing the reason. The principal did not feel confident in my abilities to handle conflict with parents, that my first year at the school was difficult for

the both of us, that we were unhappy, and there were several unhappy parents. I agreed with the first two sentiments and questioned the validity of the latter thought.

I reminded the principal of the administration's agreement to reinstate me to a higher grade-level and salary if I had a "good teaching year." The reply was that I did have a great teaching year, but that it wasn't an "amazing" teaching year. I asked what constituted an amazing teaching year, and the answer was that it was subjective. I was told that I had good potential and that I would work well in a place where I am looked at as one with authority. However, some parents saw themselves – and not teachers or administrators - as the authority. From there, I could probably expect a call from the administration later in the week. I stood up and expressed appreciation for my principal's time.

Would I say it felt good to resign? Absolutely and unequivocally not. I have never really been a quitter. I have always fought for things I believed in. Maybe resigning meant I just wasn't going to fight this school battle or the teaching battle anymore. That no matter what I learned during my extensive educational courses, or how I thought schools could or should be managed, there was not a damn thing I could do to change any of it. I was finally giving up on being a teacher leader. I drove out of the school parking lot and toward the grocery store. Hearing the things my principal said about the lack of faith in my interpersonal abilities solidified my conviction in resigning. It seemed apparent to me that I had indeed been punished by being reassigned to the preschool position. All school year I was under the impression that if I atoned for my sins by working for a lowery salary and different position, I would be in the administration's good graces again. It was similar to how I resigned and isolated myself after the testing

and motivation event at School 2, and how I thought I would be accepted back into the teaching field again. But both of those assumptions had proven to be incorrect.

All day, I thought about this dilemma. I talked about it with my dad and my husband. I finally realized all my turmoil centered on how I felt about myself. I felt good about myself when I worked with children. I felt confident in my classroom pedagogy and practices. I felt good about relationships that I developed with parents and colleagues. I DID NOT feel good when I thought about returning to my work environment, or any job for that matter. All of these 10 years, I kept thinking that fresh starts would improve me or my perspective, but I had become afraid to keep trying. No matter what, I promised myself that I refused to shed another tear over teaching. It had been a long summer for me in the sense that I had dealt with job hunting and a feeling of deflation when districts rejected me. The scarlet letter of my certificate suspension had dammed me, and I caused it. I could not change the suspension, but I could change my life. At that point, finishing my dissertation was going to give me more of a sense of accomplishment than allowing the teaching profession to steal more of my soul. And, I longed to make it a better dissertation than I initially envisioned.

### **Most Recent Career Decision**

#### **Teaching Year/Southern Magnolia Branch 10**

That summer, I decided to set a new course for myself. I talked with my coach about my fears and hopes in order to create goals. With my new knowledge of turnover literature and awareness in self-discovery, I returned to School 4 with a different attitude. I wanted to deliver clear and respectful messages to those around me, and this was the

environment to begin. I took a leap of faith in my growth process and placed trust in my administration, colleagues, and self. I was teaching preschool again and looking forward to another year of working with children. It felt different though. It was as if I was going through a transformation. I was coming to understand who I was after acknowledging who I used to be. I appreciated the impact of connection, and it was my top priority to foster relationships in my work environment.

During the school's preplanning meeting, we were asked to introduce ourselves and say something interesting. Because I was seated on the end of an aisle, I was chosen as the first person to speak. I confidently stood up and smiled. I said, "Hello. My name is Elizabeth Hill. I am married, and I have two children. I am earning my doctoral degree. Something personal about me is that this summer I felt a little overwhelmed with my pursuits and entertained the thought of leaving teaching. However, I realized that it was not the best decision for me, and I decided to stay. I am happy to be here with you and excited to begin a new year."

I started off the school year by rearranging my schedule and spending time with my team. I continued to make my classroom an inviting place by spending a great deal of my own money to purchase resources and gather materials. I wrote lesson plans, made copies, and prepared for the first week of school. I bought some gifts for my assistant to show that I was excited to spend another classroom year together. Additionally, I cultivated the interactions with my principal to establish a positive and reciprocal relationship. It was time to transform the old and brittle relationship into a new and meaningful one.

In an effort to break down the emotional barrier with the administration, I worked with my coach to formulate a plan of what I would say and do. My relationship with my principal had been based on mainly negative conversations from the prior two years, and those were really the only times we communicated. To turn that around and to build trust, I needed to be visiting more, wanting more, and making some of those things clear for our relationship. I was not asking my principal to interact with the whole staff that way, but it was important for me as an employee. I remember feeling awkward in writing out and discussing my ideas with my coach, mainly because I had never had an exchange with an administrator like this before. Janice supported it by telling me, “Because it has never happened before, this initial conversation is incredibly important, Elizabeth. You are creating the template. It is going to be what you create it to be. Try going into it thinking this is brand new and you are creating this new relationship. How do you want it to look? You are willing to put in the work, not just in the classroom, but on yourself.”

After a few weeks of the new school year had passed, the opportunity to chat with my principal popped up. After exchanging pleasantries, we sat down together. I began by expressing appreciation for the occasion, and I divulged my endeavor of self-improvement and wish to enhance my work environment. I candidly showed my tiny written list of talking points and that I had rehearsed the conversation with my coach. I complimented my principal on the availability and willingness to chat. We discussed our first year of getting to know one another. As the conversation naturally progressed, I gently put forth my needs. I asked to deescalate parent conflicts by redirecting parents back to me so situations could be handled on the lowest level possible. I requested support in building team rapport so the teachers could improve relationships and feel

valued. And, I invited my principal to provide constructive and specific feedback regarding my performance by telling her how I would receive it best. I also explained my self-responsibilities. I was willing to communicate openly, be honest about my feelings, accept constructive feedback, and maintain my morale after receiving feedback.

By the end of the conversation, we had a new understanding of our shared goals, our perspectives on reassignment, our shift in thinking about our words and actions, and our willingness to better communicate with one another. The dialogue between us was transformative for me, because it helped me to see that there could be improvement in a work environment without leaving. Hearing my principal speak positively made me want to be positive in return. Our mutual goals of my success and a great school year seemed aligned. Over time, I began to view my principal differently. What started out as a rocky and distant relationship had blossomed into a relationship of respect, mutual interest, support, and kindness. We had come a long way in a matter of months.

The dialogue with my colleagues also improved. I saw my team and its members more clearly. I better understood who they were as people and teachers and the ways we interacted as a team. I gained clarity about their perspectives on our curriculum. When it came to interacting with them, I chose to do so on a relationship level by leaving out my personal and professional opinions in order to reduce conflict. There was also a special bond that had formed between my assistant and me after being together for two years, and that was something of which to be incredibly proud. I had combined my past experiences of having an assistant and being one to develop an effective system of communication and friendship. Nevertheless, I still saw things at work and wished I could change them. There were teachers who had low morale, teachers who left the

school to pursue other endeavors, and teachers who were dealing with their own classroom or leadership issues. No matter the happenings around me, I stayed true to myself, my students, the parents, my colleagues, and my principal.

While I worked at School 4, I made it pleasant. I put forth every effort to feel successful as a teacher, mentee, and colleague. I fully embraced my autonomy to add or subtract ideas from my classroom curriculum. I felt excellent about my academic, cultural, and celebratory practices with the children and their parents. In the back of my mind I remembered my time-bound goals, and I was able to think about them more positively. I didn't worry about where I would be at the end of that school year. It was time for me to just embrace what I felt like and where I was. And, that was different from where I had emotionally been before as an educator. My tenth year of teaching was indeed a success, and I felt fulfilled. No one could take that or my regained confidence away from me.

That thought alone gives me hope and keeps me rooted where I am – living for today, appreciating those around me, making my teaching career what I want it to be, and pursuing happiness with my family.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### METAPHORICAL NARRATIVE & THEMES

#### **Gardening Tip Number Five: Ameliorate negative effects from the environment by improving upon teachers' perspectives through self-introspection.**

This chapter is divided into two sections. Part 1 is a third-person metaphorical introduction. It weaves together my thoughts and statements as an autoethnographic researcher and the proposed questions and insights put forth by my coach. The narrative deviates from a first-person account to third person for this particular portion of the dissertation so that it reads like a story (Bochner, 2012; Ellis, 1999). The story format helped to capture how I envisioned the unfolding of my teaching career (for illustrations of the dissertation's metaphors or story points, see Appendix G.) The technique of writing in third-person is often found in autoethnographic practices (Bochner, 2012) as is the figurative language of metaphors (Custer, 2014; Fairbanks et al., 2010; Muncey, 2005). Both bring together my concept of teacher trees and career experiences. Part 2, which is a majority of the chapter, is dedicated to presenting themes that emerged from the analysis of data.

## Part 1

### Third-Person Metaphorical Introduction

As explained in the prologue of this dissertation, Elizabeth metaphorically envisions herself as a specific type of tree, the southern magnolia. During the data analysis phase, it was a realization that Janice (pseudonym) would best be personified as Mother Nature because of her nurturing aspects, her sense of reason, and her ability to affect humankind.

*Once upon an autumn, a tiny red seed pod was released from her southern magnolia cone. She fell and landed softly on the ground below. She, and others like her, were collected by a local horticulturist. She spent weeks in a refrigerated container layered with moist peat. In the spring, the little seed's crimson coat was gently rubbed and removed. She was planted in a pot, and this is where she remained for several months. The moist soil and mulch allowed the seed to germinate. The nurturing care bestowed upon her kept her safe from slugs, snails, mice, frost, and direct sunlight. The small seedling matured into an established seedling, which was evident in her foot-long stem and leafy appearance. The following spring, the young plant was shipped to a local nursery, where she was purchased, and then transplanted to her permanent home in the south. Her careful placement in the yard exposed her to neighboring vegetation and a favorable climate. After her twenty-year adolescence, she began to bloom. Over the next decade and a half, the young tree experienced environmental variability and extremes that affected her adaptive capacity. This is the story of how her susceptibility and vulnerability to adverse effects ultimately resulted in her resilience and durability.*

*Our story flashes forward with Elizabeth and Mother Nature’s conversation as they sat adjacent to Elizabeth’s metaphorical magnolia tree. Mother Nature asked, “What are your thoughts about you being worth the effort? Because, I am hearing the impact. It is pretty significant. It impacts your family. It impacts your self-esteem. The way you feel. It sounds like this is a high stakes venture for you right now. What if you were the reason? You mentioned teaching as being a reason. What if you made yourself the reason that you endeavor to change the way that you see yourself?” Elizabeth replied, “This autoethnography is the first time I have ever tried to do something like that. I think I have put something small in motion that has the potential to be very big.” Mother Nature agreed. “Absolutely. Absolutely. That is exactly what I am observing from what you have said. And that is really profound. You are putting something in motion that has the potential to be very big. Not just for your career, but for your life, Elizabeth. All of these things on the path to it are incremental steps that are necessary for you to get to the finish line.”*

*Where is the finish line, and what does it look like, Elizabeth often wondered. She had realized the significance of the next several months. She and Mother Nature peered up from the ground floor and took in the sight of all the branches that spread from the trunk of the tree. They ran their fingers along the surface of the bark and observed how it had changed from smooth to bumpy over time – a sign of strength. They could hear the sounds of the wind rustling and the birds chirping. Nestled among the dark green verdure were the white aromatic blossoms. Mother Nature watched as Elizabeth marveled at what stood before them. She leaned over and quietly spoke, “What is really important for*

*you, Elizabeth, is to focus on what it is that you really want. If your goal is not clear, it is almost impossible for you to get there.” Elizabeth replied, “I just want to be happy.”*

*Mother Nature offered a suggestion: “Let’s list the things you need in order to be happy and see if those are possible to accomplish. You can’t control what others do. I am talking about what you can do for you to have happiness.” Elizabeth thought for a moment. “I want to be happy where I work. I want to finish my dissertation. I want to find a balance between working and motherhood. I also want to understand more of where it was I came from and who I am today. These career experiences are 14 years old. These are years of things that have occurred and shaped my beliefs. I want to explore and talk about the past because it impacts whether I want to stay in teaching.” To this, Mother Nature smiled and said, “I want you to try and think about the situations that came up that caused you to have thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Let’s talk about it from that standpoint. The things that really stand out to you. Those are usually the things that we bring up. So you just start wherever you like, and I am going to follow you.”*

*A soft breeze blew through the tree as the morning sunlight filtered through the canopy. The resulting reflection of light in the understory displayed many branches, signifying Elizabeth’s exposures to various educational environments. The larger and sturdier lower scaffold branches symbolized all of her preschool, elementary, middle, and high school phases. Turning one’s attention to the middle of the tree were lateral branches that depicted Elizabeth’s university milestones. Gazing upward, it became challenging to decipher the crown of the tree amongst the copious foliage. Yet, visible segments portrayed each of Elizabeth’s teaching years.*

*Elizabeth rose from where she was seated and pointed to a branch that represented her first year of teaching. As Mother Nature quietly listened, Elizabeth explained her neophyte experience. She described being fresh out of college and a beginning teacher, and how she navigated the state teaching standards and the kindergarten curriculum. She paused. With a pained facial expression, she recounted the difficulties she faced in settling into her teaching role and cultivating a relationship with her paraprofessional. As she spoke, the magnolia shed a leaf, and they both watched as it descended toward the pile of similar leaves blanketing the ground below. "That was a memory of my first administrator," said Elizabeth. As Elizabeth spoke, Mother Nature noticed the blemishes on the branch of Teaching Year One. The markings were discreet.*

*As Elizabeth grasped the uppermost portion of the trunk and ascended the magnolia, Mother Nature glided effortlessly above. Elizabeth stood on the branch of Teaching Year Two as she held onto Teaching Year Three. This time, she told of being reassigned to a second grade teaching position. She had to begin anew with a new teaching team, a different age level of children, and curriculum. Elizabeth conveyed that as time progressed in the grade level, so did her confidence. Her right hand continued to grip the branch above her, but it felt weak and shaky. Determined to remain upright, she calmly recalled the mistreatment by her colleagues and same administrator. Suddenly, the branch in her grip snapped loudly. Elizabeth cried out in fear and quickly steadied herself by clutching the trunk. Mother Nature comforted her as they both witnessed the broken limb tumbling through the tree taking out more leaves with every thump until finally crashing to the ground. It was mentally, emotionally, and physically jarring. The*

*splinter simultaneously showed Elizabeth's discontinuation at the school where she had been for three years and the everlasting mutilation on the magnolia.*

*Elizabeth started to question her experiences and beings around her. Which factors precipitated them? Was it the overall culture, pests, or disease? She inquisitively glanced at Mother Nature, who then stated, "The nature of our relationship is such that I am not here to make judgements about your thoughts or what is right or wrong. I am careful not to do that. I want to remain in my correct role. You will learn my thoughts about what you've mentioned based on the conversations that we have. I will raise points that connect to the goals you have set for yourself. I will notice development, growth, or if something is a challenge for you. Those are the things I am raising to help you focus on what you want to work on to move forward."*

*Notwithstanding the blemishes and broken branch, Elizabeth felt determined to maintain her perspective and move onward. She developed skills, knowledge, and familiarity to help her navigate her surroundings. As the morning progressed, she continued her conversation with Mother Nature. The lateral branches of Teaching Years Four, Five, and Six were explored. Each limb appeared to be in hardy condition and mirrored Elizabeth's continued endeavors as a second grade teacher. She mentioned the autonomous change of climate as compared to the first setting and how it positively impacted her morale, relationships, and philosophy. It occurred to Elizabeth that the magnolia required more time and energy over those years to repair itself than grow. Mother Nature whispered, "We build on experiences from the past, either for the better or worse."*

*Around mid-day, an unfamiliar noise seized their attention. They peered downward and saw a man exiting a work vehicle. Wearing his steel-toed spiked boots, gloves, and helmet, he quickly scaled the magnolia. Elizabeth and Mother Nature moved out of sight and watched closely. He shouted to his partner in the vehicle that the fallen limb and the splintered location were damaged by pests. Before he dismounted the tree, he caught sight of the Teaching Year Seven branch. He stared at a piece of hard metal that had been directly spiked into the wood. The magnolia had adapted its growth pattern to scar over the affected area, but the oozing sap puzzled the man. The fluid that circulated the vascular system of the tree had somehow managed to drip despite the wound's occurrence several years ago. After he climbed down, they overheard him assure the landowner that there was no reason to worry. The tree was still young, vibrant, and healthy. He advised them to purchase a specialized fertilizer that promoted plant growth and controlled pests.*

*After he departed, Mother Nature and Elizabeth gazed at the unsightly injury. Elizabeth's eyes welled up with tears. Her heart ached. No matter the reason, the trauma was structurally altering, permanent, and resulted in a multi-year dormancy of the magnolia and her teaching career. "I don't think I will ever be able to recover from that destruction," she sobbed. Mother Nature asserted, "If you are claiming that you won't be able to recover, that is a self-fulfilling prophecy." Elizabeth realized she was unknowingly causing her predictive belief to come true. Mother Nature commented, "I am going to challenge you to question that. Is that really true? Or is that something that you have been saying so long that you believe it? Is your behavior reflecting a falsehood that is not really accurate?"*

*This question gave Elizabeth pause. Although the past period of dormancy was unexpected, it provided an opportunity for regrowth and clarity about what she desired for the future. She remembered Mother Nature's proposal during that time. "Create the ideal situation. Paint me the picture. Specifically what you'd like to have. It is important to be specific so you can get an idea of what it is you truly want. And then let's look at the reality of it, what your obstacles are, and how to move forward." Elizabeth mentally envisioned the list she had written several years ago. After reflecting on her experiences, beliefs, and values, it had become easier to elucidate her metaphorical wishes. "I had hoped for dependable soil, abundant sunshine, plentiful water, and warmer temperatures. I also wished for less weather disturbances and a less constricted space. I wanted to achieve maximum growth."*

*Mother Nature concentrated on Elizabeth's additional accounts as they moved on to the branch of Teaching Year Eight. Again, Elizabeth had attempted a different setting with new colleagues, curriculum, and laissez-faire culture. During that time, she was confident in her approaches to teaching second grade, building rapport with those around her, and enhancing her practices with new graduate school strategies. However, this too diminished, and it was apparent in the branch's shortness in length and mildewed leaves. White powdery patches had distorted the formation of the leaves, buds, and blooms, and had triggered their untimely shedding. The constant obstacles to Elizabeth's career and personal progress were disparaging.*

*Crickets started chirping in the distance, and evening was upon Elizabeth and Mother Nature. The sun was beginning to set, and it became challenging to see anything clearly through the darkness. Elizabeth pulled a flashlight from her pocket, turned it on,*



*and moved closer to one of the uppermost branches of the magnolia. This was Teaching Year Nine. She hesitated in placing any of her weight on this branch, and she warned Mother Nature to be careful. A very harmful fungal growth had spread over the leaves and stems. The black velvet-like disease was adversely affecting the photosynthesis process, similar to how Elizabeth felt about being reassigned to a lower grade level of preschool. The fungus had engulfed the entire branch and was beginning to spread throughout the rest of the magnolia. Elizabeth's eyes alarmingly expressed shock, anger, and disbelief. Mother Nature was speechless.*

*"I am a failure," Elizabeth wept. "Give yourself credit, Elizabeth. I have said this before, but give yourself grace. I feel like you are extremely hard on yourself," consoled Mother Nature. Elizabeth couldn't understand. Looking up toward the cloud-filled sky with watery eyes, she prayed for immediate healing and peace. A rumble of thunder in the distance shook the ground, tree, and leaves. Mother Nature sensed an unusually strong storm approaching. She motioned to Elizabeth to immediately descend the tree and find safety. Just as Elizabeth's feet touched the ground floor, a jagged lightning bolt lit up the sky and struck the magnolia's crown. The tree was instantly set ablaze! Elizabeth felt like a statue. All the years of careful preparation, care, and maintenance was about to be eradicated. She unwillingly accepted this outcome and intently stared at the horrific scene. She turned and realized Mother Nature was nowhere in sight.*

*A deluge of rain beat down on the tree and surrounding land. Miraculously, the magnolia refrained from becoming completely incinerated. The tree and Elizabeth were soaked to their centers. She felt depleted of energy and will. It would not be until morning before the damage could be assessed.*

*The next day, Mother Nature quietly treaded the ground near Elizabeth's sleeping figure. The ground was damp and the air was filled with fog. When Elizabeth awoke, she gasped at the magnolia's appearance. There before her, stood the giant tree with a gaping hole where some limbs had been ruined. She could hardly speak. Mother Nature finally understood what was necessary. "This whole idea of self-esteem and self-image has really been impactful to you with each of these experiences. Every time there is a situation where you choose to leave or you are asked to make a decision about the position you have, it sounds like it is chipping away at you," she observed. Now, Elizabeth personally understood that although wildfire had the potential to result in death and destruction, it also rejuvenated and restored. She courageously faced her next decision.*

*Months later, Mother Nature and Elizabeth stood together on the branch of Teaching Year Nine as the sun rose to signal a new spring day. It had been quite some time since the night of the threatening lightning storm. Elizabeth recalled how after that day she often returned to the spot where the rain's dampness had ceased the lightning strike. She helped nurse the tree's wound for many months. "Look there, Elizabeth," Mother Nature said as she inquisitively pointed to what used to be the gaping hole in the scorched magnolia tree. Elizabeth turned her head to glance upward, and she smiled. She already knew what Mother Nature was just discovering.*

*Although the tree's trunk had been blackened by the short blaze, there was a new branch extending outward. This branch was sturdy, wholesome, and fast-growing. It was lush with dark evergreen leaves and sweet-smelling blossoms. What set this branch apart from all the others was the song of a small chirping songbird. Its melodious call filled the*

*air. They silently observed more wildlife – squirrels, opossums, and deer - munching on the tree’s lower twigs and leaves. The tiniest beings were the beetles feasting on the attractive pollen that would be scattered about for pollination. Mother Nature beamed, “I am hearing you say that you had been burned by the fire. Elizabeth, the fire can burn you. But, it can also warm you.”*

*Elizabeth explained that her teaching career, just like the magnolia, had weathered many disturbances over time. She had seen her fair share of droughts, storms, and hard freezes. In the past, they made her feel like a drooping, spiny, and unsightly cactus. Sometimes, her body felt as though it had been enveloped by concrete. But through the process of reviewing her worn exterior, it became more apparent that her spirit was still unbroken. There came a point of reconciliation about what she thought life would be versus the experiences she was having. She had become resilient again, and that required pure sunlight, plentiful rain showers, powerful nutrients, and care from those around her. Mother Nature commented, “This is the foundation for you to do even more of the things that will help you create the environment that you need. Every experience that you have gone through and the decisions you have made help you with your next steps. Don’t forget what you have done. Don’t forget what you have accomplished and how you were able to do that.”*

*They continued their conversation, and the topic of perseverance transpired. Elizabeth shared, “I had to keep going and not give up. My favorite professor once made a statement about it being darkest before dawn. That is how I felt so many times. You and I have talked about things that have happened in my life. We giggled as I wondered if all these kinds of challenges happen to other people. I think I have experienced things others*

*have not, but those are the things that made me stronger. I learned the life lesson to appreciate my health, the process and the product, and my support system of family, friends, and colleagues.”*

*There was a slight concern about the possibility of future disturbances. Mother Nature said, “I think this experience that you have gone through the last several years has been very profound. I have watched you grow. After seeing you again, I watched it play out and come full circle. You seem happier, more at ease, more mellow, and you have a lot to be grateful for. The next time a challenge occurs, you might recognize emotions that you have felt before or feel as though you are climbing a mountain. But, I see it differently. Sometimes out of conflict comes the best motivation. Things have to bubble up to the surface for them to be unmasked and dealt with. Now, you have more skills, better self-coping mechanisms, and better tools to handle whatever comes your way. Instead of it being a mountain, it will be a speed bump that you are able to pull yourself over. That is the difference that I see.”*

*When Mother Nature asked about additional thoughts on the future, Elizabeth peacefully replied, “I want to do what I can while I am here in this garden. I will figure that out the longer that I am here. I need to know what it is like to be in this place and feel happy. I need to give myself time. While I am here, I will do what is possible to contribute to myself and the benefit of others. “Okay!” Mother Nature exclaimed. “That is a pretty big revelation for you to have because it kind of sums up everything that you have been working toward. You were looking for a rewarding, comfortable environment where you can do what you do best, where you could feel rewarded, where there was*

*some camaraderie, and have something you said was important – an ongoing dialogue with leaders. All of that sounds like it is falling into place.”*

*Elizabeth shared her appreciation for Mother Nature’s guidance, love, and leadership. In turn, Mother Nature acknowledged the progress she had seen. “In this process, my words weren’t really important. It was you finding your authentic voice, exercising your confidence, and articulating your realizations yourself. I just want to thank you for all of the effort and energy that you have put into this engagement. You are really doing the work, Elizabeth. I appreciate that. It is very rewarding. You had the heavy lifting piece of it. I see you moving forward by leaps and bounds. Keep up the good work. I think you are fabulous. I am really grateful to have you.”*

*Elizabeth decided to do everything she could to stay strong so she could continue to fill her garden space with color and vibrancy – no matter the season. Just as there was an abundance of other gardens in the area with striking and long-lasting trees – Trident Maple, River Birch, Eastern Redbud, Flowering Dogwood, and Willow Oak – Elizabeth’s Southern Magnolia remained the most fragrant and statuesque of them all.*

## **Part 2**

### **Illuminated Themes**

Several themes developed as I learned about my experiences and situations in relation to the larger socio-cultural context of teaching. Each theme that has emerged from the data is specific to me and my experiences, but, in many instances, may possibly be applicable to other teachers and education more broadly (see Table 5). Perhaps you, the reader, realized some of the same explicit and implicit ideas in the text and formed

your own opinions about its meaning. Although this is an autoethnographic account of my personal experiences, what is ultimately important is the meaning it brings forth for you. I have explained my thoughts by stating a claim, elaborating, linking those ideas to coaching transcriptions or journaled texts, and explaining each to provide supporting evidence of each theme.

My themes were indicative of all that had transpired over my career as a teacher. Not only do the explanations highlight my personal and professional experiences, the thoughts are enriched by figurative expressions of metaphors. Some metaphors, as discussed in Part 1 of this chapter, related to the southern magnolia's physical being – the trunk, branches, leaves, blossoms, and effects of pests, disease, and weather conditions. Further metaphors, presented in Part 1 of this chapter, helped me (and hopefully the reader) to visualize how I felt during my challenges, transitional phases, and evolvment. The ideas put forth in this chapter elucidate my perspective as a person and a teacher, thereby furthering the necessity of ameliorating negative environmental effects by improving upon perspectives through self-introspection.

Table 5. Themes Elicited from My Autoethnographic Dissertation Study	
Central Theme: People are not defined by the challenges they face. People are defined by how they respond to those challenges.	
<p>Theme 1: People can process uncomfortable situations without stepping away from them.</p> <p>A: People are not always the cause of a problem, but they can be part of the solution.</p> <p>B: People can begin to change their future by examining their past.</p> <p>C: People can discover lessons from every professional experience.</p>	<p>Theme 2: People who experience conflict, whether internal or external, have the power to stimulate change.</p> <p>A: People trigger conflicts by thwarting other people’s goals.</p> <p>B: People’s messages may sometimes be lost in their delivery.</p> <p>C: People can communicate more effectively and clearly when expectations are set.</p> <p>D: People can deliver feedback that supports others’ personal and professional character.</p>
<p>Theme 3: People can do things that will get them closer to their goals and not farther away.</p> <p>A: People can identify things they want to accomplish and devise a plan.</p> <p>B: People who are self-aware can better determine aspirations, hindrances, navigation, and accomplishment.</p> <p>C: People humanize themselves when making known their vulnerabilities.</p> <p>D: People can replace negative experiences with positive experiences.</p>	<p>Theme 4: People can enhance an organization’s culture through meaningful dialogue.</p> <p>A: People in a team must learn how to effectively work together.</p> <p>B: People who are familiar with one another reduce their susceptibility to conflict.</p> <p>C: People need time and assistance to assimilate to the traditions of a new environment.</p>
<p>Theme 5: People who act as agents of change may be viewed as either troublemakers or leaders.</p> <p>A: People who express themselves or agitate for change are, to their detriment, perceived as troublemakers.</p> <p>B: People view leaders as infallible, but they are human and sometimes sources of disappointment.</p> <p>C: People sometimes perform as leaders without actually realizing it.</p> <p>D: People are shaped and changed by the obstacles they overcome, thereby realizing their potential as leaders.</p>	<p>Theme 6: People learn more about their identity through self-discovery.</p> <p>A: People can utilize their self-awareness to influence and positively affect others.</p> <p>B: People should understand that life is a balancing act.</p> <p>C: People make choices based on what is best for them at the time.</p>

### Central Theme

People are not defined by the challenges they face. People are defined by how they respond to those challenges.

In my thirty-six years of living, this statement remains constant. Physically, I discovered and managed unexpected femur tumors and other surgeries. Mentally, I reconciled beliefs and attitudes toward my actions and those of others. Emotionally, I welcomed the joy of growing, learning, giving and receiving love, and becoming a mother. I also muddled through the loss of loved ones, deterioration of friendships, and the trials of becoming and being an educator. Spiritually, I reflected on my perceptions of how one aspect of my life influenced another, how I responded to those situations, and how I have shown resilience in some areas more than others.

As detailed in Chapter 4, I discussed my personal and professional memories and instances by drawing on assorted emotions of positivity or negativity. There were elations of being a newlywed, earning teaching degrees, obtaining teaching jobs, purchasing a home, becoming a mother, and working with children. On the flipside, there were also pains of maneuvering job difficulties, encountering sources of conflict in educational settings, and trying to maintain my earnestness as an educator. After all my self-introspection in the autoethnographic process, it became increasingly apparent that schools as organizations and cultures were what spurred my career turnover rather than instances in my personal life. Events in my personal life certainly seemed powerful enough to affect where, what, how, or why I taught children; in hindsight, they took a backseat to my utopian vision of teaching and drive for success.



My dissertation's six themes and subthemes were designed to be universal concepts that anyone could relate to. Perhaps readers have themselves undergone turnover, set meaningful goals, reflected on the past, or learned about identity. However, the themes also reflected what I learned specifically as a teacher and graduate student. Maybe teachers or others in the educational community can connect to what I learned and the conflicts I faced in my chronological career story. In fact, the themes would be what is actually generalizable about my study.

By recounting my teaching years and writing my metaphorical narratives, I served as the researcher, participant, and most importantly, the protagonist. In my real events and literary work, I tried to show how I changed over time. How readers are able to identify with me serves as an example of helpful choices that could be repeated or disadvantageous choices that should be avoided.

Resilience has played a huge role in my personal and professional life. I overcame four leg surgeries on the same leg to correct the same problem over the course of 15 years, the loss of my mother, infertility, and my self-doubt. As Billingsley (1993, 2004) asserted, personal factors were a major determining factor in whether or not a teacher remains in the profession. Being resilient and overcoming those personal health problems to remain in the profession was, and is, incredibly important to me. Regarding my professional life, there have been innumerable opportunities to step away that were organizational and cultural (Ingersoll, 2001, 2002, 2003). Whether one considers it to be stubbornness, resiliency, or determination, it has been part of my makeup as a teacher. Forming and facing beliefs and decisions about job turnover, the effectiveness of

leadership, and the adversities in relationships, are all part and parcel of a teaching career. How I responded to my challenges defines my character as a person and professional.

*Theme 1: People can process uncomfortable situations without stepping away from them.*

Since obstacles have hindered my progress in feeling confident, secure, and valued, I have searched and longed for more favorable opportunities. Through coaching, Janice helped me understand that I got opportunities to practice the things that I was asking for and needed. When I made the decision to voluntarily leave School 4, I felt confused. I couldn't bear the thought of departing the career I innately loved. My resignation was a result of all the things that had transpired over time. I was physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted from it all. After resigning, I started to wonder if I really should try to make it work. This couldn't be resolved by turning away. Janice shared, "Now that you have the realization that you shut down or leave when feeling distressed, you can pay more attention to your thought processes." Attaining opportunity occurs through discovery.

In the midst of my deep reflection, the principal from School 4 called to continue the conversation. For the first time in my profession, a principal showed concern toward something beyond a work environment – my well-being. The door had been reopened for voicing perspectives and feelings, and that had never happened to me before. My principal was able to better understand the struggles I faced in working while completing my degree and needing to feel good about my work environment. What's more, my principal suggested I mull over my decision for a few days. There was an absence of pressure and finality as there had been from prior principals or myself. At that moment, it became a significant turning point for me.

It was substantial because maybe I was finally feeling appreciated and valued, especially by someone in a leadership position. For years, I walked away from my teaching experiences feeling underappreciated. I had to think about what being valued by an administrator looked like in order to reconcile my beliefs and past experiences with leadership. I perceived our conversation to be an initial action that made the possibility of staying at School 4 attractive. I did not have to leave feeling horrible – rather, I could stay and talk about the past in order to move forward in a positive direction.

*Subtheme A: People are not always the cause of a problem, but they can be part of the solution.*

The notion that I could control my own turnover was rather epiphanic. It became apparent one day when I told Janice, “My dissertation focuses on reasons behind turnover. If it is about me and my perspective, then I am on the brink of turnover. But, if I am writing about ways to curb that, then it would be beneficial to continue working and try out some strategies. I don’t want to write from the perspective of being just another teacher who left the field and provided influencing factors.” Janice agreed, “This will challenge you. It is the perfect opportunity. You can make these changes, and you have the environment to do it in. You can try something, see if it works, and think about what you can do next. Don’t allow it to be related to you and your self-worth. Disconnect yourself from outcome.”

I had intertwined my personal life and my teaching career into one identity rather than being separate components. Disconnecting myself from the outcome meant that I needed to feel good about myself without worrying about what happened in the world of teaching. But, I didn’t know how to disassociate the two, because I viewed education as a

very personal profession. I had to become self-reliant. Additionally, I showed confidence in seeking answers to things I did not understand. I learned to advocate for myself when something went wrong. I felt I could create change rather than wait or hope for someone or something else to meet my expectations. I did not have to be someone in a leadership or bureaucratic position to actively influence issues in education that needed modification.

In my personal life, I became more resourceful. Emotionally, I stood up to my self-doubt through the coaching process. I made the decision to recognize my feelings and realize they needed to be changed before I caused any further emotional damage to myself or to others. Physically, I became proactive in researching issues of tumors or infertility, and I arrived to doctors' appointments with my findings. In my professional life, I became self-assured in remembering my past experiences and using them to achieve current or future goals. When I felt I had the information I needed, I sought out people in positions of power that could help me. I combined my self-documented experiences with literature of policies, procedures, or best-practices to confront issues in my university and teaching settings. Therefore, the positive outcome of becoming more assertive helped me to put actions into motion in order to help myself, rather than waiting for someone to come and help me.

**Subtheme B: People can begin to change their future by examining their past.**

Through an authethnographic process, I wanted to decipher my past realities and former self in comparison to my current self, inclusive of my desires, career goals, and experiences. It was a matter of changing my perspective to understand that the past was just a snapshot in time and not a dictation of the rest of my life. One day, Janice asked,

“What would it mean for you if you could change your mind about how you think of yourself today?” “It would probably be just a sense of freedom,” I replied. “Okay, freedom. Freedom from what?” she asked? I stated, “If I used a metaphor, having sunny days instead of rainy days all the time.” To me, sunshine represented light, warmth and prosperity.

Janice understood a way to frame our endeavors in a manner that I could identify and comprehend. She encouraged me to look at my teaching experiences using the lens of a researcher. “Look at the raw data and observations. The recurring data are what we need to pay attention to. Separate it from you, get curious, look at everything that has happened, and try to come up with an answer to that. We are looking objectively at what we have been able to observe and making adjustments based on that.”

Despite the understanding that my own objectivity is an unattainable goal (especially with autoethnography), acting as a researcher allowed me to deduce something significant: To me, the world of education had been a Sisyphean task. Sisyphus was an infamous Greek mythological character who made choices that earned him the punishment of rigorously pushing a giant boulder to a mountain summit to then have it repeatedly plummet. I felt as though my teaching career was markedly similar. I would get close to the summit (good classroom management, former best practices, recent strategies in research, relationships with coworkers, high confidence, etc.), and then I would tumble back down the mountain to start again (with each career action or decision). When I explained this to Janice, she asked, “For something that you are doing that you feel so great about, that you love, that is an extension of you, does the statement ‘I keep trying, and trying, and trying to make teaching work’ equate with something that

should kind of be a flow for you?” She was right. No one’s career choices should be so difficult.

But, I wasn’t alone. In my lifetime, colleagues or peers who endeavored to become teachers or who had remained in the field had their own tales of tribulations. They, too, recounted stories of bewilderment, disappointment, and stamina. Janice explained, “Trauma on one person is felt the same way by another. When you engage with others who have undergone adversities in teaching, it transfers to you.” With the understanding that emotions played a part in teachers’ awareness and decisions, I had to determine what I planned to do about it.

When one learns from the past, it is thought they will not make the same mistake twice. I evaluated my past teaching experiences as I listened to the stories of others. Even at the time of later date collection in the spring, those I worked with at School 4 spoke of being unhappy and wanting to leave. They spoke of earning an inadequate salary, being overworked, and managing unclear organizational actions. Also, there was an overwhelming sentiment of not feeling valued or appreciated by the administration – that we were all expendable. I could identify and relate to them, but I needed to remember and stay focused on my goals independent from anyone else. By focusing on what I wanted and needed, irrespective of others, I could change my future.

*Subtheme C: People can discover lessons from every professional experience.*

Janice taught me that I could learn something valuable from each of my schooling environments. Rather than viewing my experiences as entirely negative, I had to continue

looking at them as a researcher. It was not about what went right or wrong. It was more about realizing what I needed or decided for myself for the future.

School 1 taught me the importance of notifying leadership about conflict at the onset. Specific support from administrators needed to be defined and verbally requested by me. I found significance and reason behind having team members serve as mentors rather than other school staff. Unexpected conflicts alerted me to how I started responding and communicating with others. Knowing district or school procedures when feeling uncomfortable in my work environment was essential.

School 2 showed me that I could end something that was negative and start anew with a positive frame of mind. Fostering my beliefs and practices about curriculum subjects, especially in literacy and social studies, increased with grade level familiarity. Establishing my plan to be pleasant with everyone was important, but having a plan to manage conflicts or a backup option was paramount. When tension cropped up from others, I could witness and participate in successful outcomes that didn't result in a leadership's punishment.

School 3 provided new insights about truly knowing an environment once working there on a daily basis. My disconnections from theory to practice occurred in various settings. The traditional teaching environment that I had been properly trained for might have been best suited for me. It did not matter whether someone was an assistant or lead teacher in a classroom as long as there existed effective communication. Resignation could be done positively, and I did so with dignity and grace. A weak organization prompted my resignation and high employee turnover.

School 4 demonstrated the most lessons about people and myself. I needed to use caution when entering new settings and immediately trusting others. All people, including me, sometimes needed to be handled with kid gloves. Even when I doubted my self-esteem because of others' words or actions, I trusted myself, my classroom practices, and my social interactions. Having an extensive background in education did not guarantee success, stability, high salary, or a hassle-free work environment.

Theme 2: People who experience conflict, whether internal or external, have the power to stimulate change.

The most prevalent meanings of conflict include disagreement or incompatibility. Throughout my educational experiences, I have felt both. The inner conflicts stemmed from my confusion surrounding my beliefs, values, and expectations surrounding teaching. I was often faced with moral dilemmas and making decisions that required excessive bandwidth. My greatest strength of self-awareness forced me to constantly question the effectiveness of my classroom teaching practices, how I contributed to a team, the advice I received from others, and the effects of negative thoughts impacting my personal and professional morale. The external conflicts emerged when I felt mistreated by administrators, colleagues, parents, past professors, or the teaching profession altogether.

Interestingly, it appeared to me that all of the conflict in my teaching career came from outside the classroom. Hence, the mistreatment of others were all sources of conflict. Inside the classroom was my sanctuary. It was free from all the strife surrounding it. I could close the door to the world outside by working with children, engaging in meaningful conversations and laughter, losing myself in the creativity of



researching and designing lesson ideas, and creating the welcoming and nurturing environment that I envisioned. I could facilitate my beliefs with the children, but for many reasons, working with the adults was tense. Those instances of conflict started to dampen my passion and longing to teach, and that feeling increased with each issue in my career. Spiritually, I was forced to confront the battle between my external and internal conflicts so I could change how I felt about myself and my teaching environment.

**Subtheme A: People trigger conflict by thwarting other people's goals.**

As a student, I had become accustomed to having my goals explicitly stated for me. “You will learn these concepts. You will read this text. You will master these objectives. You will demonstrate your knowledge. You will maintain this grade point average. You will work with others.” As a teacher, that was also the case. “You will get along with your team and students’ parents. You will teach these objectives. You will know best practices. You will do what is asked of you. You will accept these evaluations of performance. You will do your job of teaching.” I was faced with all of these explicit goals, but there were underlying implicit statements that accompanied them – I would do those things without asking questions, even if I did not agree. During my coaching sessions, I learned about another description of conflict. Janice explained that, “Sometimes we don’t know we are thwarting another person’s goals because we don’t know really what the goals are.”

It dawned on me that I have rarely heard anyone in my lifetime openly discuss their ambitions or how they planned to accomplish them. Goals tended to be personal in nature. In the teaching profession, it was my early belief that the people who encircled me shared universal attitudes of care and desire to help others succeed. Years later, that

preconceived notion turned out to be inaccurate. Since then, I have felt obliged to speculate about the aims and impulses of others. No colleague, principal, or professor has ever specifically named his or her goal to support harmony, seek perfect test scores, receive good ratings, or maintain a purposeful career. Furthermore, no colleague, principal, or professor has ever explained to me how I could help them achieve their goals or vice versa. If the intention of education is achievement, one must understand that it is both an independent and collective endeavor.

It was possible that I impeded each principal's overall purpose of harmony. It was conceivable that I worsened the derailing situations with my colleagues. It was imaginable that I made a poor choice in giving out candy during standardized testing. It was likely that I played a role in exacerbating my attitude towards teaching. It was believable that I was, to some degree responsible, and I needed to hold myself accountable. Still, anything I have said or done has never been deliberate, calculated, or malevolent. I never awakened in the mornings and premediated how I could damage my own work environments or teaching career.

*Subtheme B: People's messages may sometimes be lost in their delivery.*

I put a lot of thought into the decisions I made, but perhaps the way I phrased my sentiments needed fine tuning. The message I intended to present to colleagues was, "I want to belong." The message I wished to put forward to principals was, "I want to meet expectations." The message I meant to offer to professors was, "I am knowledgeable." The message I desired to express to parents was, "I care about your child." The message I wanted to convey to myself was, "I am worthy."

The manner in which an idea was (bodily and vocally) presented really mattered. Janice likened the manner of language to children who talked to each other using two plastic cups. “There is an encoder and a decoder. The encoder is giving a message out, while the decoder receives and translates it. One person on one end says something, and when it gets to the other end, it can be distorted. The decoder might not hear exactly what is being said. It is the same thing with our interpersonal messages in a social and professional environment.”

The information that I decoded from the world of teaching was that I was defective. My first principal and latest principal both had their ways of conveying I needed improvement, and whether or not I agreed was irrelevant. It was the way they told me. Where they might have felt justified in placing me on a professional development plan or reassigning me, I wholeheartedly viewed those actions as punishment. Where the state’s standards commission warranted a certificate suspension, I felt condemned. As an early childhood educator who worked with children, I valued the adage that one was able to catch more flies with honey than vinegar. Just as children learned and understood best through explanation and support, so did adults. It was simply not enough to administer consequences without providing the necessary support or rehabilitation that resulted in achievement.

*Subtheme C: People can communicate more effectively and clearly when expectations are set.*

During my coaching sessions, I was able to refine my communications skills through introspection, discussion, and practice. I had to better understand what might be an obvious thought to anyone - that social skills are essential for humans, especially

teachers. Janice and I acknowledged my skillset when I entered the coaching engagement, and it became our shared goal to increase my self-awareness. Believe me, it was no easy task.

Even though I was an expressive person, and I saw myself as genuine and kind, I had become hardened by all that had happened during my teaching experiences. I felt foolish when I imagined initiating conversations with others to explain my communication style. “I feel weird approaching someone and saying, Let’s have a talk about how we communicate,” I told Janice one day. She replied, “You know what? I hear that so often. We don’t usually have a talk about how we communicate. When we don’t have a conversation about how we want to communicate, there is always a chance that things will be lost in translation or you won’t articulate a genuine need that you have.”

According to Janice, the brain best understood positive messages. When she asked me to clarify my needs, I began by telling her what I did not want. I was finally grasping that my mind had been engulfed by negativity, and it was best for me to articulate what I did want. I expressed how challenging it was, and Janice agreed. “Therein lies the work. When we get into what that really looks like, you will be able to communicate that more clearly.” The task was deeper than my wishes for personal happiness or having a positive work environment. Janice explained, “I think you have summed it up by saying you want to be happy. It is so big, but we have to funnel it down and examine what that really looks like. It may be that you are having a hard time getting there because you don’t know exactly what it looks like. Here’s how. What is it that I want? What is it that I need? Talk about the things you would want to have or do

specifically.” I had to whittle down exact statements and feelings to name and recognize how they could be changed.

Subtheme D: People can deliver feedback that supports others’ personal and professional character.

Just as relaying unpleasant messages was for me in the past, so was hearing them. Someone in an authority position could mentioned ten great things, and I would focus on the things that did not go well. At the end of my ninth teaching year, I felt so bad about myself that it was impossible to make a distinction between personal and professional feedback. Janice mentioned two common thinking errors to me. “We have looked at cognitive distortions, or thinking errors. One of the many thinking errors that we as humans suffer from is catastrophizing. We feel like everything is going to be bad because this one thing is bad. Or overgeneralizing. Because I made one mistake that makes me a failure and I can never do any better. Those are actually errors in thinking that aren’t true and that we convince ourselves of.”

With the new insight that the brain understands positive things, I better understood how I would have been more receptive to the criticisms of my past principals if they were worded differently. It took confidence to approach others, ask for, and listen to feedback during my dissertation data collection phase. Wanting to hear feedback in a more positive way required more dissection. It required me to name and request specific actions that people could perform so I felt like feedback was helpful. As a teacher, I knew parents preferred to hear thoughts and constructive observations. As an employee or graduate student, I preferred to receive similar feedback from those in leadership positions. For some reason, it seemed like a reasonable expectation as an adult, but it

wasn't happening. During my discussions with Janice, we simplified and related the appearance of feedback methods in ways that I communicated with parents during school conferences. "You hear feedback best and receive it best maybe if it is done in what is known as the sandwich method. You say something that is positive, then give the advice and constructive feedback, then follow it up with something that is positive."

I learned to ask those around me for the detailed feedback and established criteria that I needed. When someone relayed something negative, I learned how to express to them its negative impact on my self-esteem. It looked like this: "When we discussed \_\_\_\_\_, you mentioned \_\_\_\_\_. It made me feel \_\_\_\_\_. It would have been more positive for me to hear it like \_\_\_\_\_." It was important for me to have my needs met, but also to present my perspective in a manner that reduced the chance of making others feel defensive. Even though I was acquiring skills to voice things, Janice warned there was no way of determining how others would feel or react. "There is no insurance policy against that. All you can do is control you. All you can do is manage your thoughts, what you say, and how you behave." It was my responsibility to children and adults in the world of teaching to treat them the way I valued. In due time, I would be able to navigate through someone else's opinion without it leaving an indelible mark.

To meet my initial goals, I listened to the comments that Janice provided. There was difficulty in being open and vulnerable, because I had become so emotionally guarded. There was also uneasiness about receiving feedback, because a majority of the professional feedback (aside from classroom evaluations) I had received was negative. If I wanted to improve my perspective of the future, I had to start with myself. I tackled my self-doubts by remaining at School 4. Initially, it was a place of comfort, because I was

slightly familiar with the setting, the curriculum, and the families. However, when I encountered challenges, my comfort faded. I tried to make it a more hospitable place by returning and initiating awkward conversations with my colleagues and principal about my goals and what I envisioned my work environment to be.

Theme 3: People can do things that will get them closer to their goals and not farther away.

When I started the coaching sessions with Janice, I had three general goals. I wanted to complete my dissertation, to understand my identity, and to be happy. Initially, there were feelings of anxiety and pain, and there were plenty of tears. But, Janice's encouragement paved the way. "I commend you for taking this on. It is courageous. You have identified that there are some things you need to work on, and that is why you are doing this. You are working toward improving yourself. It is a process. That is why I tell you to continue to give yourself grace. You don't do it because it is hard. That is why you stay at this job. We have talked about leaving or staying in teaching – you love this work, you are good at this work. You might have to go through some uncomfortable things to get to your goal."

Subtheme A: People can identify things they want to accomplish and devise a plan.

My dissertation created an opportunity to consider my past achievements in order to accomplish new things. I was on a mission. It was time to stop worrying about the words and actions of others and myself. I needed to stay focused on my own plan. "Find your center, your plan, and work that plan," Janice stated. Maybe where I was in life wasn't my intended plan, but there were good things that came about as a result. I was

successful in several professional areas and I learned some things of value. I had been enriched.

I was a professional in education, research, and literacy. Now, I had to become skilled in personal growth. Surprisingly, Janice positioned me as the specialist. Months into our sessions she told me, “The premise of coaching is that you are the expert. I have seen it over years and years of practice. You have the answer. The only thing I am helping you do is uncover it. In this coaching process you have figured out how to deal with some of these things that have been really weighty issues with which you have struggled. You figured them out! All I did was uncover it so you could see it. I shine light on what you already know.”

The more Janice and I spoke, our conversations illuminated areas that I could set additional goals and improve. The goals became specific and time-bound. In my personal life, I wanted to be a better mother to my children and a better wife to my husband by showing strength and love. In my professional life, I wanted to be a better colleague by being more positive and communicating my needs. I made commitments to myself, Janice, family, dissertation committee, and teaching environment. In my personal and professional life, making decisions and acting upon them were inevitable. There was always an understanding that there were pros and cons to choices, and those choices led to options and consequences. I certainly could have chosen to continue my path of negativity and dissatisfaction. But, my heart, mind, family, and career deserved more.



Subtheme B: People who are self-aware can better determine aspirations, hindrances, navigation, and accomplishment.

As inferred from above, the subject that kept reappearing in my specific goals centered on relationships. No matter where I went in my world, I was going to have relationships. There would be relationships with my family, my children's teachers or coaches, those who provided goods or services, those with whom I worked, and myself. It became very important for me to think about what was important for me to feel edified.

Most specifically, Janice shone light on how the interactions with my colleagues were extremely noteworthy. I loved teaching in my classroom, but the relationships in my educational environments heavily impacted my satisfaction and experiences. We uncovered emotions about belonging and how a good connection with one coworker translated to relationships with others, and ultimately, teaching in general. I knew that if I could work alongside one colleague, then it was possible to influence relationships with others so I could be a better teacher with the children and parents in my classroom. In my discussions about relationships with Janice, I explored relationship qualities that were personally fulfilling. I wanted to be myself. I want to feel comfortable exchanging ideas and sharing information. I wanted to open up to someone who was easy to talk to, who had a sense of humor, and who was nonjudgmental. Janice and I hypothesized that if positive work relationships could improve my experience, then perhaps my outlook of being in a teaching environment could also be transformed.

My journal entries and our discussions also exposed my innermost feelings of rejection and how it had played a significant role in my self-image and confidence. Ultimately, it had become very difficult to return to people or environments where I felt

rebuffed. Janice commented, “If you think about it, it is almost as if you might feel rejected by teaching. By the entire teaching environment.” She was absolutely correct. She wanted to know how I coped with it in the past and how I planned to progress. In the past, there were times that I walked away, attached myself to the opinions of others, and retreated to the comfort of my bed. I felt I was a loser and a failure. I realized that I dispensed advice to my son and daughter that I couldn’t personally follow. I would say to them, “If you are feeling a certain way, I want you to be able to talk about it. I don’t ever want you to think badly of yourself. Don’t say you can’t do something, just ask for help.” Since those days of isolation, my coping mechanisms have progressed to formulating a plan, asking for help, writing journals or dissertation work, reading fictional books, napping, or spending time with my family.

*Subtheme C: People humanize themselves when making known their vulnerabilities.*

The year of my autoethnographic dissertation was the time to cease my self-mistreatment and ask for help. The autoethnographic study on teacher turnover and my shifting perspectives propelled me forward. I began by creating healthy boundaries for myself by teaching people how to communicate with me. That required me to be proactive in approaching others, manage my expectations, disclose more information about myself, and let others know what I was striving toward. These were opportunities that I created to say, “Here are some things that I noticed I would like to work on with myself, and here are some ways that you can help me.”

Letting my committee know about my past committee and graduate experiences helped me to express my vision of a committee and my needs to be soothed, involved, and informed. Conveying to my most recent principal that my previous teaching

experiences and the negative feedback given impacted my morale, but they also bettered my efforts of self-improvement and commitment to my new time-bound goals.

Communicating to the colleagues of my preschool team my wishes to trust, collaborate, and be collegial enhanced my effectiveness and confidence in communication skills.

Telling myself to be less critical and forgiving of my thoughts and actions allowed me to enjoy the process of self-discovery. Disclosing to anyone that read my dissertation that I had been plagued by my own, and others', decisions and actions in education liberated me from perpetuating shame and self-degradation.

When humanizing myself in conversations, people were very receptive.

Communicating my vulnerabilities was distressing at the outset, but the more I practiced, the easier it became. I was making careful choices about who to share things with and what to share. My doctoral committee acknowledged the significance of each of our efforts, and the encouragement and guidance they offered made us an effective unit. My principal became more sympathetic and expressed interest in creating an environment that included honesty, assistance, and mentorship. Members of my preschool team and colleagues in the school became more approachable. We were able to have more frequent and better communication about alignment among the grade levels, literacy, classroom management, student objectives, and each other. These groups' amenability influenced me to become more acquiescent to the demands of my professional teaching career.

Whereas before, my hesitancy and safeguarded behavior made tough situations worse. I was understanding that there was actually an "I" in the word *team*.

Subtheme D: People can replace negative experiences with positive experiences.

The largest vulnerability was self-imposed. Somehow I had managed to overshadow any positivity in teaching or in my personal life with my feelings of career negativity. One memory seemed to attach itself to other negative memories, and everything from the past would resurface. I had a great amount of healing to do, and I felt it would take time, patience, and willingness on my part to do whatever was necessary. There was a striking moment during my literature review and data collection process when I realized that my emotions factored into the decisions I made. People - particularly teachers, had beliefs and attitudes that stimulated decisions and actions. For me, my emotions that had been tied to my past, fueled what I did and wanted for the future.

Janice enhanced our discussion about fuel and emotions. "You mentioned the word fuel. I am glad you did. If I brought in a five-gallon tank of fuel and set it right in the middle of the table, what could happen? Well, I could syphon some off, put it in a car, and use it to be very productive. But, what if I lit a match to it? Then it becomes explosive and dangerous. Fuel can be used for good or to be destructive. Our emotions are just like fuel. The question is, how do you harness the energy of your emotions in a way that is beneficial to you?" Despite how I felt at the time, my long-term goals superseded the emotions of the day. I had to learn to keep the things I felt were important in perspective.

One simple way to mend myself was to write about what was important. Sadly, I had been focusing on the negativity in my professional life, but I needed to start uncovering positivity there and in my personal life. I felt enlightened and invigorated by employing my skills of detailing and describing situations to solidify my personal and

professional identity. I took a more mechanical approach in concentrating on the self-discovery that would bring my dissertation to life. It was a crucial period of seeing and acknowledging the changes that evolved in the goals I had set for myself.

I created a gratitude journal separate from my career journal. At the time, I had little knowledge of how advantageous it would become. I composed over 230 entries. As I was writing, I noticed more appreciation toward people and experiences than objects. By acknowledging my thankfulness of what composed my life, I was able to think more positively. There were notations about grocery shopping with my son and celebrating my daughter's birthday. I jotted about going on dates, snuggling, or cooking with my husband. I wrote about my in-laws' helpfulness in watching my children or how much I valued our Sunday dinners together. Numerous descriptions were about my dad and how we ran errands, shared conversations, watched movies, or feasted on treats. I acknowledged my coach, my principal, my colleagues, and the parents of children in my classroom. The most salient entries were about what I learned to treasure about myself: my health, my increasing self and personal competence, my graduate school progress, being able to rest and relax more, and becoming a more proficient rider of my scooter. The memories were about little events - little positive events that had the power to override what used to be more prevalent negative things.

Memories of my career started to become more positive, and it was important for me to experience them, write about them, and eventually discuss them during coaching sessions. For example, during my first year as a preschool teacher at School 4 the team felt non-communicative and disjointed. There was reluctance from several team members to discuss and share ideas, and there was a resistance to change. But, when we began our

second year together, and I returned with a new mindset of being more communicative and self-assured, there was marked improvement in recognizing our communication styles and building rapport. Teachers who had been reluctant put forth more ideas. We learned to resolve our own conflicts without relying on administration. I was grateful for them and the experiences we were having, more than I had been before.

**Theme 4: People can enhance an organization's culture through meaningful dialogue.**

The exchanges I shared with Janice seemed to flow easily. We freely shared thoughts and viewpoints on fostering relationships. I expressed my definition and expectations of a team and wondered if my ideas had been misaligned. When I envisioned a team, I saw a group of people working together to solve a problem or to carry out a plan. They had a shared mission, some goals, and an understanding of the roles people play. I began to realize that there were varying versions of teams in my personal and professional life in which I played role. Foundations of open and sincere communication were everywhere. They were evident in my personal life such as my marriage, the relationship with my children, the connections I had with friends, and my interactions with my children's teachers. Meaningful dialogues were also in my professional life such as at my university, my teaching setting, and with colleagues in other settings.

The most significant idea of this dissertation was that dialogue has the potential to positively or negatively affect those in teaching settings and careers. From what I had experienced, even the slightest miscommunication could completely derail goals, intentions, or situations. The theme of engaging in meaningful dialogue is especially important for the implications of this study, which will be explicitly discussed in Chapter

6. There, the data and analysis from the dissertation are used to inform our collective awareness of how to improve the organizational culture of schools.

*Subtheme A: People on a team must learn how to effectively work together.*

In the three out of four schools I have worked, I never felt that welcoming and assimilating newcomers to a team or school were priorities for the administration. Personally, I found value in being together, meeting biweekly, getting to know one another, and learning about others' perspectives and practices. It seemed like the macro-managed environments yielded more organic cooperation than settings that were micromanaged.

Janice reminded me that there would be challenges anywhere – that there was no perfect environment. I had to refrain from punishing new colleagues for the actions of my former colleagues. I needed to be prepared to mitigate conflicts or situations that materialized, and I could do that by forming a plan. I decided to give thought to knowing my team better, being able to assess their communication styles, and recognizing when topics of conversations could be perceived as a threat. I honed my strategy to have a plan in place for myself regardless of acceptance from others.

I felt that being a part of team included initiating conversations, describing who we were, stating our goals, and inquiring about others' beliefs. Then, team members could come together on common goals, share ideas about how to achieve them, and compromise. Janice stated that in many organizations she had assisted, teams usually discussed their norming and clarification of goals upfront. "All of them come together, acknowledge one another, discuss endeavors, and make plans about accomplishing

goals.” If I was a teacher who began teaching years with my classroom children that way, and Janice was a professional coach who witnessed adults in other professions act that way, why had this not occurred with adults in teaching environments where I worked?

**Subtheme B: People who are familiar with one another reduce their susceptibility to conflict.**

By stating norms and building rapport, teachers learn about one another. Because every setting failed to encourage getting to know one another or support effective communication, serious problems occurred when conflict transpired. Sometimes teachers did not feel respected, appreciated, or heard. Janice spoke of the inevitability of conflict in human interactions and how people developed their own communication and conflict styles. She encouraged me to have a plan when conflict happened. Even with an artillery of conflict management strategies, my abilities to internalize and apply them were crucial.

Throughout my career, issues frequently appeared. I reflected on past conflicts with students’ parents or colleagues who escalated conflict by seeking an audience with the administration before addressing me first. Perhaps that was just how people felt their problems could be solved – by going directly to the top. By doing that, they abruptly dissolved my respect and my desire to continue a relationship, even though there were months of the school year ahead. Furthermore, the feeling of disconnection hampered my ability to be my best and highest self in my teaching role.

Unfamiliar to me, some people could separate the tensions in conversations from our relationships. It was an adjustment for me. I felt that parents and colleagues did not



have the right to say and do what they pleased and then offer an apology afterward. They felt that once an apology (no matter how genuine) was stated, that the offended person should immediately recover. Even when I openly told the parent who bullied me a few years ago that I needed some time and space, the parent found it absolutely unacceptable. As a teacher, it was very difficult to maintain professional relationships without expressing how I really felt. I learned from Janice that I did not have to maintain the facade that everything was okay. I could take the journey back to feeling better about situations and people. By doing so, I was setting my own personal boundaries in teaching others how to treat me.

Not personally knowing others bred conflict about our philosophical differences. It was my desire to work with colleagues who believed in past and current best practices. Although I had an extensive background in education, I carefully treaded the fine line between having and sharing my viewpoints. If someone asked for my insights, especially in regards to literacy, I was happy to share them. But, I have never pushed my beliefs or philosophies of teaching on others. Janice pointed out that sometimes teams have an internal process of moving past disagreements of philosophies. "Sometimes that gets mixed into conversations. In many groups, there is a conversation about goals and what to do if people have differing viewpoints. Like a tie-breaker. A couple of people might say they feel strongly about something and the others say they feel equally as strong about the opposite endeavor." I understood that effective teams of teachers decided if everyone would do things differently or strive for cohesion, and without the administrator as the first line of defense.

Subtheme C: People need time and assistance to assimilate to the traditions of a new environment.

Teachers who enter a new grade level, team, or school are faced with many changes all at once. The volume of change in new faces, curriculums, materials, and customs were sometimes hectic for me. Each team had its own way of doing things, and I was always willing to listen and understand. Although, the habits of teams and schools remained concealed until my familiarity of my environment increased. My knowledge and confidence of each aspect strengthened with each school year and setting that passed, and I learned more about my philosophy and self. I became a grade-level expert in progressive stages: culture shock, adaptation, equilibrium, and professional.

Bewilderment ensued when I transitioned from the public school arena to the private school arena. Regardless of my teaching settings, I thrived when there was clarity about processes and procedures. Whereas the public setting was proactive in communicating its policies about grading, testing, discipline, and evaluations, I found the private setting to be more enigmatic. The absence of procedures led to more reactive responses in that teachers were spoken to after a mistake happened. Contrary to my assumptions, a private school's smaller population and relaxed approach did not equate more advantages for families, better organized programs, a plethora of resources, closer relationships between administration and staff, or a more straightforward system of managing parent conflicts.

Janice and I delved deeper into why I felt some actions in both settings were not commonplace. The things that I believed to be "normal" differed from other people's or schools' values. Janice explained, "Even within your group there will be different values

and beliefs. There are individual values, beliefs, and attitudes, and there are group values, beliefs, and attitudes.” Despite what should be a common goal of wanting what was best for children, people including parents, teachers, and administrators differed in their opinions. Perhaps they were also in need of strategies that best articulate their messages.

**Theme 5: People who act as agents of change may be viewed as either troublemakers or leaders.**

An insufficiency of meaningful dialogue stirred unrest for me, and I wanted to use my voice to create change so that my work environment better suited me. Yet, having and declaring divergent values and beliefs often met resistance. Other colleagues did not seem to share the same awareness or concerns about problems, and I started feeling uncomfortable. Janice acknowledged the possible reasons behind it. “When you come into a new environment and things aren’t right, you notice them. But everybody else is like, ‘Oh, it’s always like this. We have been doing this for years.’ It starts to look like you are the one who is trying to break up the happy home.” I completely agreed.

**Subtheme A: People who express themselves or agitate for change are, to their detriment, perceived as troublemakers.**

My viewpoint was tied to my expectations of others prior to my arrival. An entrance to new teams came with my different lens, background, and experience. What I was noticing was not necessarily wrong, because I believed that whatever could help me would ultimately benefit the children whom I taught. Janice further stated, “It might come off to your peers as you are a know-it-all goody-two-shoes who is coming in here to make us look bad. Your competence makes me look incompetent. You are shining a

mirror up to me, and all of the sudden I don't like what I see. It was fine last week before you showed it to me. Think about the dynamic that exists among you, other instructors, and your schools' administrations. You are bringing all of these new things into them, and some of them are not going to be happy."

After many years of working in different schools, it was obvious to me that being the person who communicated issues and brought them to the fore might bring about change. At times, I was faced with making the decision to speak or remain silent, even when my ideas seemed valid. The consequence of speaking out resulted in conflict with my colleagues. The consequence of remaining silent maintained the status quo. Either way, my morale was negatively affected. When I voiced my wonder of saying anything at all, Janice conveyed that team and school dynamic could change based on building rapport of being able to discuss differences and ideologies.

I did not want to be viewed as a troublemaker. I never entered teaching with ill intent or wanting to change people or the environment. Honestly, I just wanted to walk into my classroom each day to guide and inspire children. I wanted to use my creativity to make learning relevant and interesting. But beyond my classroom, I faced challenges that varied from my core values and beliefs. I felt that education for anyone, student or facilitator, should be collaborative, meaningful, and appropriately assessed. Education should continuously provide opportunities for achievement, independent and social growth, mending mistakes, and a foundation of knowledge for each person involved. Year by year, my challenges moved me to become more assertive in creating the opportunities I wanted.

Subtheme B: People view leaders as infallible role models, yet they are human and sometimes sources of disappointment.

I humbly began my graduate program wishing to find myself again. I demonstrated to myself that I could collaborate with my cohort colleagues and professors to investigate research-based strategies in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. During that process, I realized I could improve student learning by using my voice as a teacher. Additionally, I could improve adult learning by using my voice as a leader. But, what was a good leader, and what did good leaders do?

In my opinion, a good leader was a great role model. He or she shared insights about experiences, expertise in skills, passion towards life, and interest in people. A good leader also listened, offered guidance, suggested solutions, supported goals, and presented constructive feedback. And, a good leader understood how to effectively communicate diplomatic messages. I felt people who were categorized or compensated to be leaders sometimes seemed rather inept. Janice explained that maybe I was reconciling my preconceived notions with my actual experiences with people in leadership positions. My experiences had been inconsistent with my utopian vision.

Distrusting leadership was also a recurring theme in our coaching conversations. In the past, I had encountered leaders who were neglectful. They paid little attention to my classroom practices, my perspectives, or me as a person. They expressed disappointment, criticized, and punished me. If a leader was in a superior position and he or she had a concern, I felt it was his or her responsibility to tell me what they wanted, what I could do, or how I could improve. Administrators also appeared to address concerns at face value rather than actually investigating further or objectively

approaching me. Overall, I felt mistreated, slighted, shamed, and demeaned by those who were in positions of power. And at the time, there was little I could do other than take it personally.

To heal from my feelings of resentment, I needed to create new experiences with leaders that were positive. Janice also agreed. “One of the solutions to dealing with those feelings might be to create new experiences, new thoughts, new memories, and new ideas about your interactions. I am not saying it will completely get rid of it, but it will give you something else to focus on that is positive and will help you move forward, rather than staying in the resentment place.” I also needed to understand that leaders, just like people in general, have shortcomings. They may not have all the answers. Furthermore, being a good leader entailed stepping aside to allow the natural progression of others. Bringing down the hammer or having a more definitive viewpoint, in some cases, might have actually stifled people’s organic creativity.

### *Subtheme C: People sometimes perform as leaders without actually realizing it.*

By finding my voice in the autoethnographic process and by mingling my graduate background with my teaching experiences, I was becoming a trailblazer. What’s more, I could feel it resonating in my soul. As a teacher, researcher, or doctoral student, my voice interchanged between being silent or vocal. When our discussions of being a leader arose, Janice and I shared the same opinion. “What just stuck out for me when you spoke, is that you have taken on a silent leadership role. That is exactly how I view it. We all have the potential to do that in any arena. You don’t need the title to be a leader. It sounds like you have been motivated. You have been generating open lines of dialogue between leadership and your team as well across your peers. It sounds like you have been

creating the environment of camaraderie you said you wanted. Now you are starting to see the benefit and reaping the rewards from that.”

There were leaders all around me, and some were more obvious than others. My committee members were extremely knowledgeable and encouraging. Paying attention to their suggestions inspired me to enhance my preschool practices and made me miss attending university courses. But, I came to realize there were others with the same potential who were not directly related to my career. My husband shouldered the responsibility of parenting our children while I worked for so many years. He listened to my career sentiments, dried my tears, diverted my sorrow, and positively propelled me and our relationship. My immediate family taught mutual loyalty, forgiveness, and strength – especially during our darkest moments. My favorite professor encouraged me to defend myself and fight for my convictions with courage. My coach, cohort colleagues, coworkers, and friends all believed in me. Our combined confidence and pride drove my success, especially in formulating a meaningful and beneficial dissertation. Janice one said that others were just little pieces of the overall work I was accomplishing. “Iron sharpens iron. We are stronger together.”

Through engaging in dialogue and writing, I had the power to influence others and shift the status quo. All good leaders knew, as I learned, that change was a process. My dissertation committee stated that writing a dissertation was a process. My current principal remarked that a shift in team thinking was a process. Janice pointed out that changing belief agreements was a process. I observed that increasing my emotional intelligence to become more skilled at responding in ways that helped me achieve my goals was a process.

Subtheme D: People are shaped and changed by the obstacles they overcome, thereby realizing their potential as leaders.

I had viewed myself as a failure and loser for so long, I needed to redefine what success looked like. For me, not bringing home an income, making mistakes, not being able to hold down one continuous teaching job, and watching my peers or colleagues succeed in teaching made me feel disappointed in myself. One time, Janice made a comment that prompted me to laugh and realize how ridiculous my thoughts had become. “Where in your mind does it say that losing a teaching job makes you a loser? How did those thoughts formulate? Sometimes we have thoughts like that and we just assume them to be true without actually examining them. Doctorate degree and loser don’t even go together.”

Definitively, my belief stemmed from receiving my teaching certificate suspension. In theory, the ethics commission believed in a suspension period as a time of rehabilitation. But, in reality, what I experienced was people blacklisting me. The chipping away of my self-esteem was not really about remaining a committed and passionate educator. Perhaps the world of education - despite my hardships, atonements, level of degrees, and innate drive - no longer wanted me. Surely, all the aforementioned factors contributed to the challenges of being a teacher. However, my employability was the main factor that prompted my turnover decisions as a teacher.

Throughout the self-reflection, coaching, and dissertation processes, I learned that success was not about external validation. I was not money. I was not a grade from my professors. I was not an evaluation from my administrators. I was separate and distinct from those things. My inner peace, acceptance, prosperity, worth, and feeling rewarded,



did not depend on any of that. Janice helped me realize it. “That was very powerful. You said an inner peace and acceptance needs to develop on its own. That inner peace and acceptance is not tied to outside external forces. It really does come from within. If that part of you is developed, it doesn’t matter which opportunity you go to, Elizabeth. You will be successful.” I had proven to myself that I was accomplished, educated, and talented in my professional and personal life. I no longer wanted or needed others to define or determine my victories. Janice and I were able to witness together my involvement in seeing me achieve so many things that I had been asking for in my life. And, it was because I created that. It was important for me to realize that if I had been triumphant once, I could replicate it and do it again. I could go anywhere in life and do anything. If I was not successful at first, I would be eventually. I was no longer the ugly duckling. I had finally become the swan.

All of these instances impacted how I viewed myself and others, especially as leaders. Similar to how there were foundations of open and sincere communication in various settings, there were also leaders. There were to be challenges in my personal and professional life, just as there were to be obstacles for leaders to face and overcome. Even though I had a utopian view of great leadership, it wasn’t incredibly far-fetched. Some people such as colleagues, professors, family members, and my coach were great role models, listeners, and advisers. And, I am, too. The more I carried out my new perspective and goals at School 4, the more I saw myself as someone that I aspired to be – knowledgeable, enthusiastic, sociable, a supporter of others’ personal and career goals, and a skilled practitioner in verbal and written communication.

Theme 6: People learn more about their identity through self-discovery.

Introspection was an extremely valuable process for me. I could acknowledge, monitor, and clarify my mental and emotional processes to enhance my life and my outlook of the teaching profession. I influenced the redemption that I had been craving. I had hinged my happiness and being rewarded on people that I had no control over. The only person I had control over was me, and I was the person who ultimately determined how I saw myself. My experiences provided me with an opportunity to examine my inward perceptions and responses to varying situations. I had always been aware of my feelings and capability of expressing them. I developed a goal of improving my self-management. If I could improve there, then my social competence would also improve. And, if those areas improved over time, then perhaps I would feel better about myself and the way I responded to future situations.

I am the cornerstone of my personal and professional life. Through self-discovery and introspection, I strengthened my inner being. I understood that my self-evaluation was crucial for growth in several areas. I discovered the expectations I placed on teaching, leaders, relationships, and myself. Thus, I was able to learn from those understandings to reshape who I was, how I viewed the past, what I wanted for the future, and how I could achieve my goal of feeling rewarded through my personal and professional experiences. In reference to the intertwining of myself and career, I now viewed being a teacher as a component of my identity along with being a researcher, leader, wife, mother, daughter, and friend.

Subtheme A: People can utilize their self-awareness to influence and positively affect others.

Although I had no control over what other people thought or did, I adopted the attitude to be a positive influence. I wanted to motivate my students by creating a comfortable, clean, organized, and decorated classroom. I wished to inspire their parents by sharing my structured schedule, procedures, information about learning, and welcome feeling. I aimed to encourage others in my work environment to be respectful, friendly, positive, and collaborative. I desired to communicate to my principal that I needed a sense of value, clear role expectations, guidelines, performance reviews, and positive relationships. Janice supported my endeavor, “Keep in mind the influence that you are able to create with others. It is important for you to know that you do have influence and that people are listening to you. Regardless of whether you are validated externally, you always have impact whether people tell you that you did great or not. It is good when they do, but even when they don’t, it doesn’t change your value or your bearing.”

In all, I wanted to construct an environment where I could be my dedicated, curious, prepared, hopeful, strong, humorous, sincere, loving self. It was shining through every area of my life. My family expressed their delight in my graduate school accomplishment. My favorite professor conveyed that she had a great deal of respect and admiration for me. Janice felt rewarded in witnessing my commitment and achievement in my own self-improvement. My committee saw potential and importance in my discoveries. One of my colleagues told me I was a beautiful person, and that it was an honor to know me. Another asked me to spend time together outside of school. A parent from years ago mentioned to a colleague that I was the reason her child embraced reading

more than ever before. Janice understood that these were all the things I had been wanting. I understood the things I was feeling, saying, and doing were right. Teachers can make a difference. Dialogue did have power. I could cause change, even if it was small. I made a difference.

**Subtheme B: People should understand that life is a balancing act.**

An outstanding theme revealed during coaching was balance, or the state of equilibrium. Time and time again, Janice mentioned a balance between work and lifestyle. I was a whole person. By the end of my ninth teaching year, I had been completely turned off by my career and self. I wanted to find peace – if not in one area then perhaps in both, and it prompted me to resign from teaching. My original thought was that I could take time to work on healing myself and later focus on my career. But when I resigned, something inside felt horrified. Janice helped me see that the pendulum of life wasn't about having all or nothing. "If the pendulum swings from end to end, staying at home to focus on your dissertation or working as a teacher, is there some place in the middle? It sounds like you can work on your dissertation and maybe do a better job of it because you are actually getting the real experience of working through these things we are talking about with teacher turnover. Versus having to choose one side or the other."

There was also balance between being confident and sharing my perspectives with colleagues on things I felt were important. Prior to my ninth year of teaching, I was taking peoples' comments to heart. I was evolving into someone who was courageous and fearless, but I still needed to aim for the results I intended. I made decisions to share my knowledge when asked in order to maintain an open dialogue with my colleagues.

Even though I had experienced issues in trusting leadership, it was time for me to create balance in that area as well. I had to maintain equilibrium between my trust level in authority and trusting myself. I needed to recognize that I could take care of myself because I had the answers. As a teacher, I had always been given flexibility and autonomy. There was knowledge in having expertise and experience. Conclusively, I found a balance between increasing my morale and decreasing my turnover, and it occurred because I set and carried out my mission to better myself and work environment one step at a time.

*Subtheme C: People make choices based on what is best for them at the time.*

When my mom passed away ten years ago, I imagined leaving the elementary profession to work as a preschool teacher. At the time, I felt preschool teaching was a better combined approach of playing a role in the profession I loved and increasing my availability as a mother to my child. But I forged ahead as an elementary teacher and sacrificed my personal time, emotions, and witnessing my daughter's development. Looking back on all of my career highlights, my latest reassignment to recently being a preschool teacher was actually a blessing in disguise.

Existent in my preschool teaching was an absence of evening grading, extensive lesson planning, or long school hours. I could take the time I needed to be with my children, rebuild myself, finish my dissertation, and reconstruct my work environment. However, I still had the nagging desire to bring home a higher income and teach subjects on a deeper level. Janice told me that my attitude or belief about income was pigeonholing me into making decisions that may not have been the best for me. My thoughts had enough power to force me back into a situation or school environment that I might

not be ready for or the timing might not be right. When Janice and I discussed what I valued in a work environment, it was apparent that returning to teach elementary school was just one of many options that I could pursue. “We talked about being able to use your skills, the ones that you really enjoy sharing with people. You can still teach and not be in a classroom. Those are things you need to explore going forward to give yourself the most options possible. In creating an ideal work environment list, you have to think outside the box. Have you given that any more thought about what other types of environments besides the traditional school atmosphere where you might be able to use those skills?”

Maybe what I wanted before as a teacher was no longer the same, especially based on my life experiences and what had changed my overall outlook of teaching. In fact, the idea of leaving School 4 to return to the public sector (if it was even a possibility) or starting again elsewhere was slightly unnerving for me. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that perhaps School 4 had exactly what I needed for my current lifestyle. I had formed positive relationships with students, parents, colleagues, and principal. I had knowledge of the curriculum and materials. I had time for myself and with my family. If I left School 4, I would be starting all over again. I wanted to be seen as Elizabeth, and not an unfamiliar employee. I had to evaluate what I really wanted based on where I was with my current family, education, and experience.

As mentioned, I decided to stay at School 4 for my tenth year of teaching. I was making the career decision to continue working in the profession I loved. Janice was fully supportive. “It sounds like you are on firmer footing about your decision to continue. What I like in the difference between this year and last year is you are kind of changing

your mind and getting your mind ready to have a good year, to get the resources that you need, and to make the connections that you need so that you can move forward and feel good about it.” What was amazing was that everyone around me was working with me to get to my goals. All the way around I had assembled an incredible team of support. I enlisted my coach and committee, and told my colleagues and principal about my plan.

Best of all, I was ready. It was as if I was a phoenix rising from the ashes. It was an opportunity to start fresh. I could change my classroom, my practices, and myself. There was a sense of newness, energy, and excitement. Additionally, there was great importance and satisfaction of being with children because they breathed life into each new day.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SUMMARY, FINDINGS, SUPPORTING LITERATURE, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, & CONCLUSIONS

**Gardening Tip Number Six: Nurture teacher trees by providing the support and nourishment - found in worthwhile findings and suggestions for the field - they deserve.**

“A living tree is a changing sleeve shape, a wet, thin, bright green creature that survives in the thin layer between heartwood and bark. It stands waiting for sunlight, which it catches in the close-woven sieves of its leaves.” ~ Alice Oswald

As a teacher with seven years of traditional public school experience, three years of private school experience, and part-time experience as a literacy tutor and assistant, I had witnessed and experienced the gamut of teaching practices inside and outside of the classroom. I experienced successes, faced challenges, endured conflict with colleagues, sustained periods of uncertainty and self-doubt, and underwent turnover.

Throughout my career as an educator, I focused on my own professional growth by returning to my university in order to study current and effective teaching strategies in early and elementary education, especially in the realm of literacy. During my university courses, I reviewed literature, studied various pedagogical theories and practices, designed integrated lessons throughout content domains, and conducted several qualitative pilot studies. My teaching and graduate student events shaped my values,



beliefs, and growth over time as I interact with different environments and experiences (Heifitz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

As Wall (2006) suggested, I needed to give thought to how my presence had influenced the end product of the research process. While my confidence soared as a university graduate student, I questioned my self-efficacy as a teacher. My internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation (Berger, 2015) during the dissertation process contributed to my positionality as an autoethnographer. Therefore, my reflexivity as the primary instrument in data collection and analysis (Watt, 2007) was absolutely important.

### **Summary of the Study**

The prologue of my dissertation metaphorically related teachers to trees, as both were worldly, varied, sturdy, and necessary. Both were subjected to environmental conditions and disturbances that affect efflorescence. While some were capable of flourishing, others succumbed and withered in their unstable settings. I metaphorically saw my intertwined self and career as a southern magnolia tree. As such, my erosion of mind, body, and spirit was greatly influenced by a lack of human care. Like many other teachers before or alongside me, I was slowly and frustratingly being weeded out of my garden spaces. My eradication was imminent. However, my environmental and personal condition seemed to simultaneously align after I sought out the proper nourishment of coaching and self-discovery. During that process of healing, I had many realizations about how my ingrained beliefs were just one of several characteristics that contributed to the inner-conflict I felt when encountering teaching environment factors. To better understand all that I had endured, I asked myself three questions:

1. What factors in my career have influenced my decision to leave or remain in the teaching profession?
2. In what manner has administrative support contributed to my decision to leave or remain in the teaching profession?
3. How have my beliefs about being a teacher been shaped during my experience in the field of early childhood and elementary education?

My study was theoretically designed to explore turnover by three distinct, yet interrelated, perspectives. The first, *Organization Theory*, helped me to understand certain factors in my teaching environment directly or indirectly influenced my function and performance (Billingsley, 1993; 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Taylor, 1911). The second, *Contingency Theory*, assisted my knowledge of how my principals' leadership styles contributed to my school environment and self (Fiedler, 1971). The third, *Theory of Reasoned Action*, strengthened my clarity of mental processes after encountering factors that stemmed from my teaching environments (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

Those three theories informed my overall perspective and my methodological framework of autoethnography. By acting as the primary source of data, I was able to place my voice, identity, bias, and subjectivity into my research (Wall, 2006). I used my past decisions and teaching environments as a platform to change my future (Capel, 2012; Pithouse et al., 2009; Loughran & Russell, 2002). Through systematic sociological introspection (Ellis, 1991 – Starr, 2010), I wanted to make my narrative visible in hopes of contributing knowledge and generating social change (Van Manen, 1990; Starr, 2010).

The literature review focused on several roots of the turnover issue. I explained the terminology of turnover and clarified the meaning as it applied to me. I elucidated the

inevitability of turnover in schools and the responses of prepared and unprepared organizations. I described researchers' perceptions of turnover and the chained-reaction of effects on children, parents, teachers, and administrators. Finally, I provided snippets of historical approaches to related studies that cited organizational and leadership factors as prominent reasons spurring turnover. Conclusively, upon gaining a wealth of knowledge about the topic of turnover, I realized I was demographically and characteristically a prime candidate.

Examining the research on turnover and the craft of autoethnography proved to be enormously beneficial to grasping overall thoughts of those who also conducted qualitative self-studies or studies of teachers. The methodological approaches of interviewing and reading educators' precise sentiments about their feelings of self were more relatable than statistical data outlined in turnover research. During and after my reading of research, I crafted research questions that allowed me to qualitatively explore my beliefs, values, attitudes, thoughts, and actions about teaching and its effect on my identity. Because I was reflecting on my entire teaching career, I used the method of memory recall in my journaling and coaching sessions. I perused through over 300 pages of electronically collected data to find patterns and themes. In doing so, six powerful themes and corresponding subthemes emerged that were general to organizational structures and specifically teaching settings.

**Revisiting Research Questions and Supporting Literature**

**Research Question 1**

The premise of the first research question was to explore factors in my career that have influenced my decision to leave or remain in the teaching profession. During my data analysis process, I discovered that my feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction varied upon who I was at the time and the factors within the particular organization. To illustrate these variations, I used visual diagrams to show what types of causes led to my thoughts or feelings in each of the four teaching settings (see Figures 7, 8, 9, & 10). They best captured how the events of my teaching years could be categorized into characteristics or factors that I had read about in the literature.

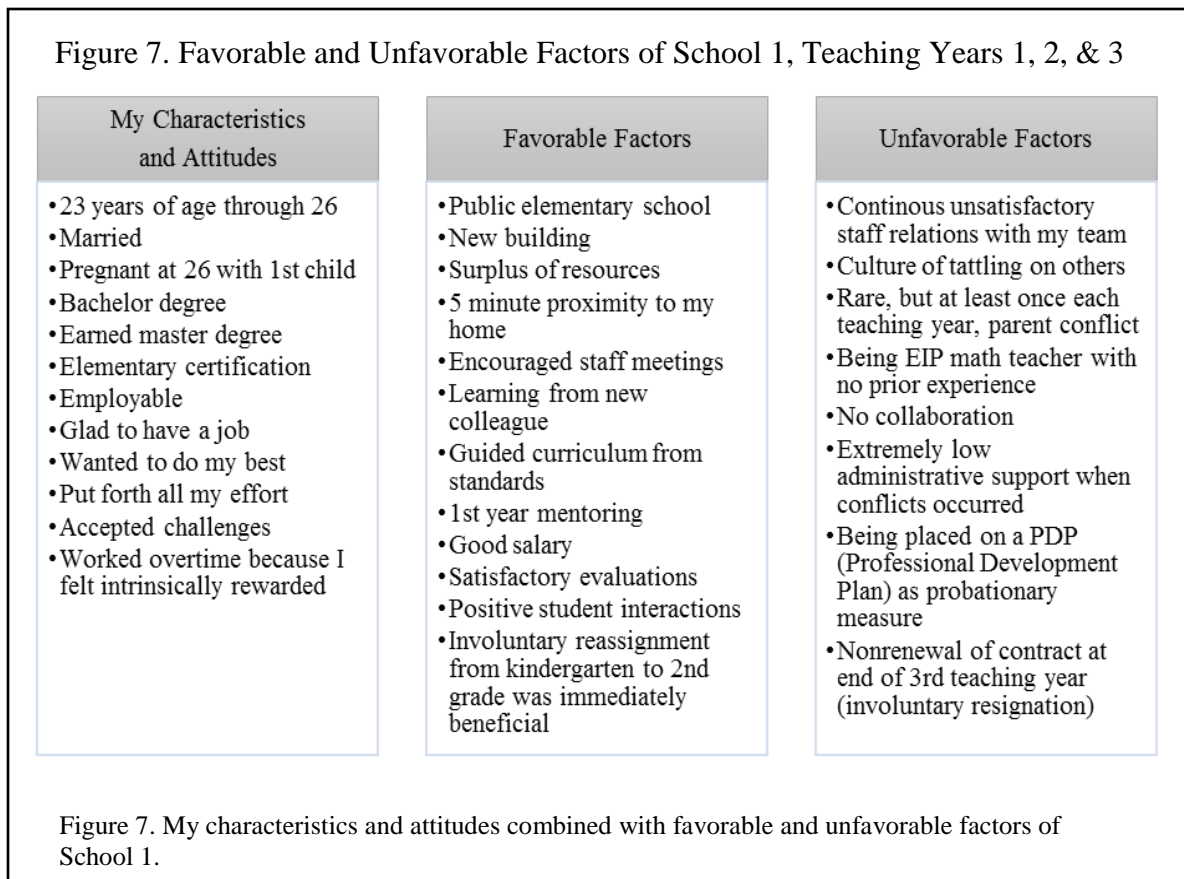


Figure 8. Favorable and Unfavorable Factors of School 2, Teaching Years 4, 5, 6, & 7

My Characteristics and Attitudes	Favorable Factors	Unfavorable Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•26 years of age through 29</li> <li>•Married</li> <li>•1 child</li> <li>•Bachelor degree</li> <li>•Master degree</li> <li>•Elementary certification</li> <li>•Was unsure of my employability after PDP and nonrenewed contract from School 1</li> <li>•Wanted to start fresh</li> <li>•Suffered loss and surgeries</li> <li>•Continued to put forth effort in trying new classroom practices</li> <li>•Worked regular hours because I had a child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Public elementary school</li> <li>•Old building</li> <li>•Surplus of resources</li> <li>•Half hour proximity to my home</li> <li>•Better staff relations with my team</li> <li>•Guided curriculum from standards</li> <li>•Good salary</li> <li>•Satisfactory evaluations</li> <li>•Positive student interactions</li> <li>•High level of autonomy with classroom practices</li> <li>•Consistent teaching of 2nd grade (easy transition and adaptation to school)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Rare, but at least once each teaching year, parent conflict</li> <li>•No collaboration</li> <li>•No mentorship</li> <li>•Not much communication with team members about school-related topics</li> <li>•Lack of administrative presence or interest</li> <li>•Mistake of handing out candy during standardized testing that prompted, involuntary resignation, ethics investigation, certificate sanction of suspension</li> </ul>

Figure 8. My characteristics and attitudes combined with favorable and unfavorable factors of School 2.

Figure 9. Favorable and Unfavorable Factors of School 3, Half of School Year, Assistant

My Characteristics and Attitudes	Favorable Factors	Unfavorable Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•32 years of age</li> <li>•Married</li> <li>•2 children</li> <li>•Bachelor degree</li> <li>•Master degree</li> <li>•Specialist degree</li> <li>•Elementary certification</li> <li>•Was unsure of my employability after PDP and nonrenewed contract from School 1, as well as teaching certificate suspension from School 2</li> <li>•Trying to rebuild self</li> <li>•Worked during the school day only</li> <li>•Graduate school challenges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Private School</li> <li>•Elementary classroom</li> <li>•30 minute proximity to my home</li> <li>•Staff retreat at onset of school year to build rapport</li> <li>•Witnessed fascinating and different philosophy of teaching</li> <li>•Appealing building</li> <li>•Resources appropriate for nontraditional philosophy</li> <li>•Less job demands compared to being a public school teacher</li> <li>•Attempts to foster communication and create change</li> <li>•Positive student interactions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Extremely low communication between lead teachers and assistants</li> <li>•Lack of clarity about job descriptions and expectations</li> <li>•Inconsistencies from theory to practice</li> <li>•Lack of interest from lead teachers in my background because my knowledge and expertise were traditional</li> <li>•Witnessed low morale of other coworkers</li> <li>•Really low salary</li> <li>•Feeling increasingly uncomfortable led to voluntary resignation</li> </ul>

Figure 9. My characteristics and attitudes combined with favorable and unfavorable factors of School 3.

Figure 10. Favorable and Unfavorable Factors of School 4, Teaching Years 8, 9, & 10

My Characteristics and Attitudes	Favorable Factors	Unfavorable Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•34 years of age through 36</li> <li>•Married</li> <li>•2 children</li> <li>•Bachelor degree</li> <li>•Master degree</li> <li>•Specialist degree</li> <li>•Earned doctorate degree</li> <li>•Elementary certification</li> <li>•Was unsure of my employability after PDP and nonrenewed contract from School 1, as well as teaching certificate suspension from School 2</li> <li>•More graduate school challenges</li> <li>•Finding balance, healing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Private school</li> <li>•Appealing campus</li> <li>•10 minute proximity to my home</li> <li>•Staff kickoff each school year</li> <li>•Consistent teaching of 2nd grade (easy transition and adaptation to school)</li> <li>•Involuntary reassignment from 2nd grade to preschool was initially unsettling but eventually beneficial</li> <li>•Positive student interactions</li> <li>•Attempts to foster communication and create change</li> <li>•Learn-as-I go curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Lack of resources or materials for teaching</li> <li>•Low salary</li> <li>•Culture of tattling on others</li> <li>•Rare, but at least once each teaching year, parent conflict</li> <li>•Bullying by one parent</li> <li>•Extremely low administrative support when conflicts occurred</li> <li>•Lack of clarity about job descriptions and expectations</li> <li>•No evaluations</li> <li>•Subjective performance feedback</li> <li>•Colleagues' open discomfort with my teaching philosophy</li> <li>•Low morale of colleagues</li> </ul>

Figure 10. My characteristics and attitudes combined with favorable and unfavorable factors of School 4.

Some factors among the different settings were consistently favorable, meaning they afforded me opportunities or resulted in positive outcomes. Each school location was within a reasonable distance from my residence. Another stable factor was my rapport with students. No matter the age or the grade level of the children, I felt welcomed and comforted by their presence.

As my demographics evolved over time, so did my perspective of teaching and the world. In thirteen years since my first teaching job at School 1, my knowledge and experience increased as my self-confidence waivered. I was one out of few who added to my educational repertoire by pursuing advanced degrees (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987), and I desired to work in environments where my level of education was compatible among my colleagues (Whitebrook & Sakai, 2003). By joining similar coworkers elsewhere, it was

possible for me to feel a sense of belonging, thereby strengthening the shared culture and mission of a school (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006). Becoming a mother positively affected my life and my familiarity with children.

On the contrary, as evidenced in each of the four figures above, there were constant factors that were unfavorable. They did not give me an advantage or good chances of success as a teacher. Undoubtedly, I initially felt a sense of frustration when I assumed demanding responsibilities (Macdonald, 1999; Osborne, 1992) as a first time teacher. No matter the setting or years of experience, I still mistook the uneasiness I felt as an indication that I made a mistake in my choice of profession (Inman & Marlow, 2004). But, somehow my resilience during my preliminary experiences thwarted any thoughts of career alteration. Despite reported attrition data indicating that beginning teachers' reasons for attrition were for personal reasons, a better job or another career, dissatisfaction, low salary, or a staffing action (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003), I had somehow survived.

The characteristics of the school were not major factors for me. Whether I taught in the public or private sector, I maintained my same philosophies and ideologies. Interestingly, I witnessed and heard from peers in other teaching settings something noteworthy in the research - small private schools, more than public schools, suffered significant amounts of turnover – often losing as much as a quarter of their staff on a yearly basis (Ingersoll, 2001, 2002). At School 3, one-third of the staff left by the year's end, and at School 4, one-fifth of the staff left. I was perplexed, as I had believed private schools offered a more pleasing atmosphere than their counterparts. Even though I had made significant gains in School 4's work environment during my tenth year of teaching,

an aspect of me still yearned to be a public school teacher again, which was similar to studies of private school teachers who claimed to have great job satisfaction and school climate (Ingersoll, 1997; Reyes, 1990), but thought of transferring to the public sector again (Ingersoll, 1995).

Compared to working in the public sector, my private school salary and lack of benefits were inadequate (Curbow et al., 2000; Curbow et al., 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Hewitt, 1993; Ingersoll, 2001; Kagan et al., 2002; Loeb et al., 2005; Macdonald, 1999; Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Whitebrook & Granger, 1989; Whitebrook & Sakai, 2003). Inadequate compensation was one of the strongest predictors of teachers' turnover (Philips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Shim, 2000; Whitebrook & Bellm, 1999; Yesil-Dagli, 2012), and it was something that remained in the back of my mind the longer I worked in the private sector.

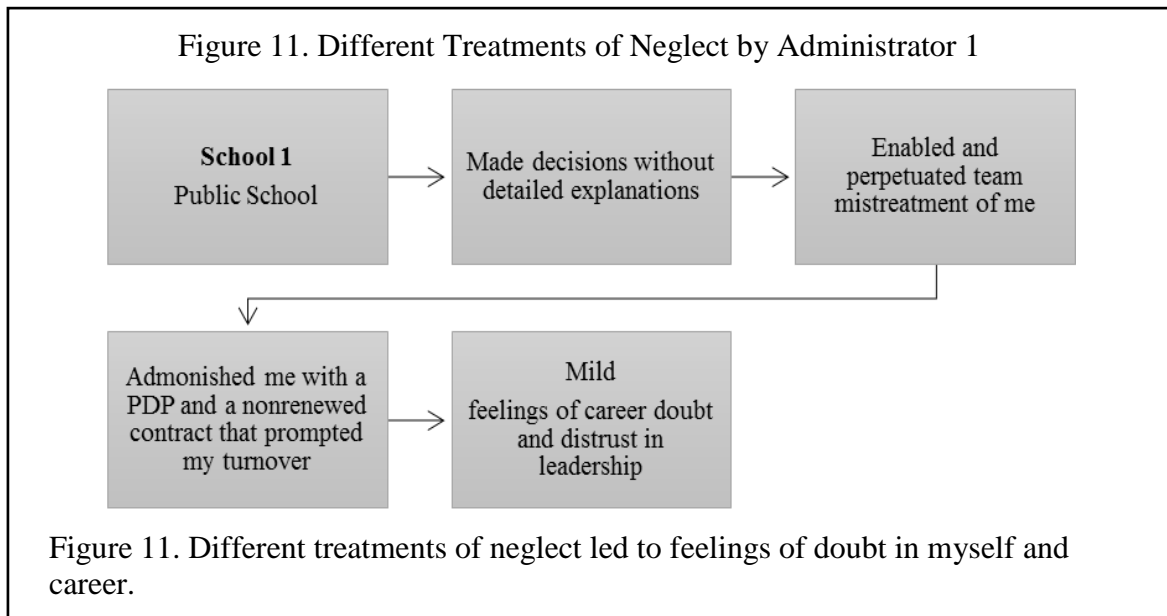
Nevertheless, my ample university preparation and academic advancement did not guarantee success, happiness, stability, salary, or the prestige that I felt I deserved (Macdonald, 1999; Marlow et al., 1995; Natale, 1993; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). Because of that and the challenging elements around me, I felt tense, anxious, frustrated, and angry (Macdonald, 1999). All of these emotions held by teachers like myself, were characteristic of dissatisfaction, which was the most prominent factor of turnover (Boyd et al., 2011; Haynes et al., 2014; Ingersoll, 2001, 2002). I agreed with the notion that if dissatisfied teachers kept silent and remained in the profession, self-efficacy would diminish and burnout might occur (Hewitt, 1993; Starnaman & Miller, 1992). I had felt burnout's characteristics of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Consequently, other job



opportunities started to look appealing (Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll, 2001; Macdonald; 1999). Even though I cannot currently predict where or what I will be in the future, I am still absolutely determined to find intrinsic fulfillment in my career – hopefully as a teacher.

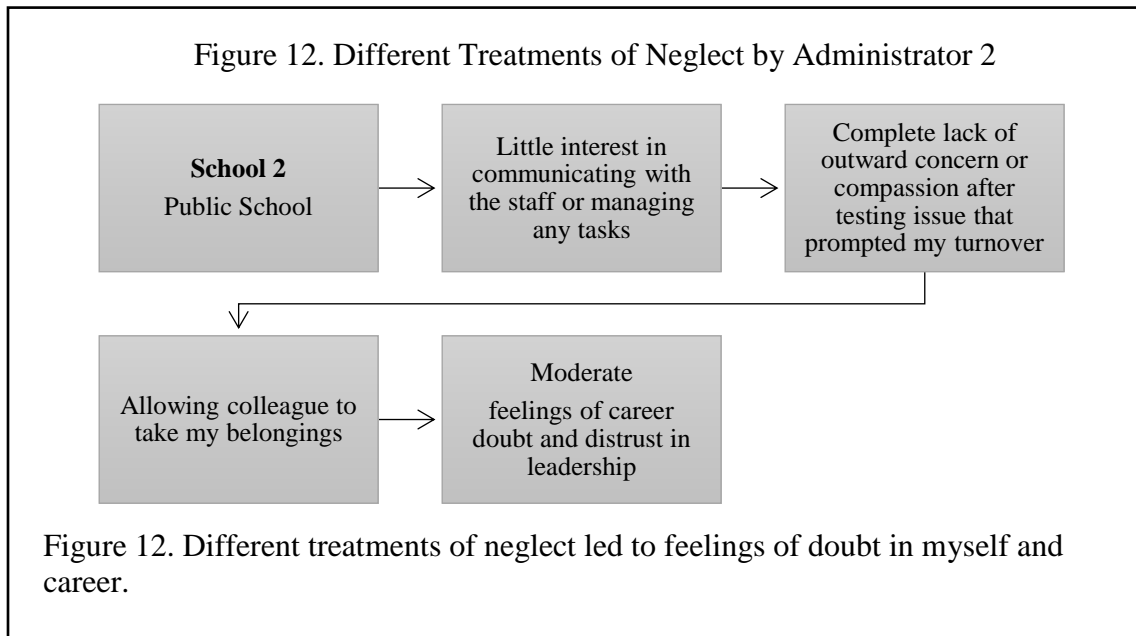
**Research Question 2**

The principle of the second research question was to discover how administrative support has contributed to my decision to leave or remain in the teaching profession. My data analysis revealed inconsistencies in the actions of my administrators, which was a source of conflict for me. I saw principals and directors as people who chose the basic mission and group members of my schools (Schein, 2010). Thus, my organizations were contingent on their leadership styles, and it was reflected in the daily atmosphere. Through coaching and journaling, I was able to articulate when I felt neglected by principals, and I visually described them as illustrations (see Figures 11, 12, 13, & 14).

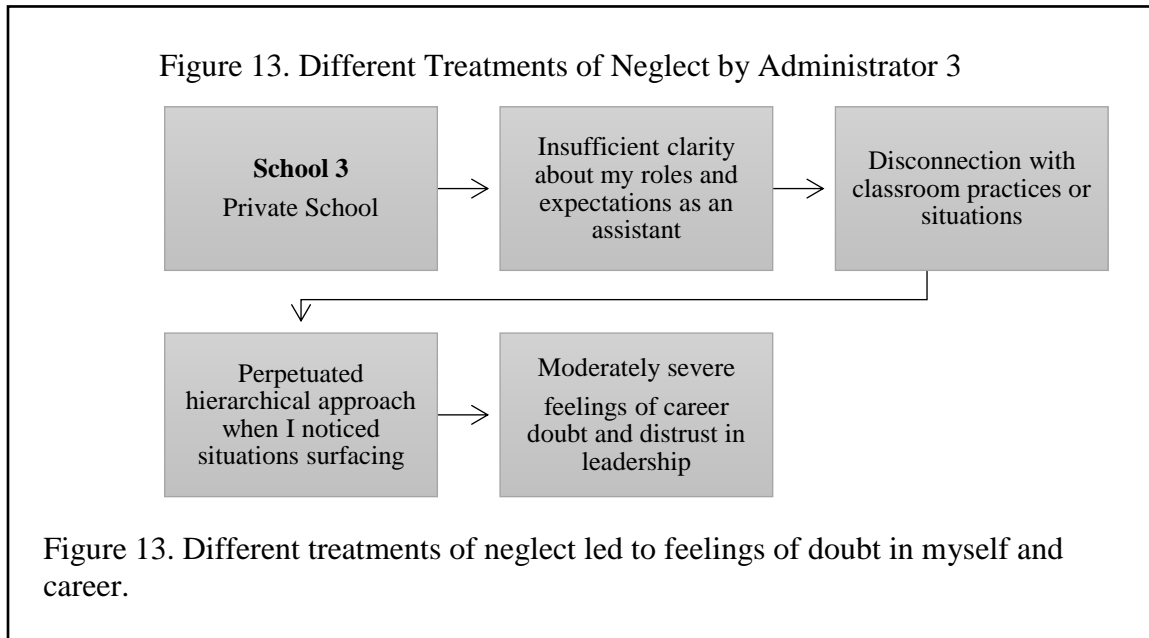


The relationship that I had with my first principal was troubling. Initially, I felt supportive by being provided a mentor and occasionally conversations in passing. I

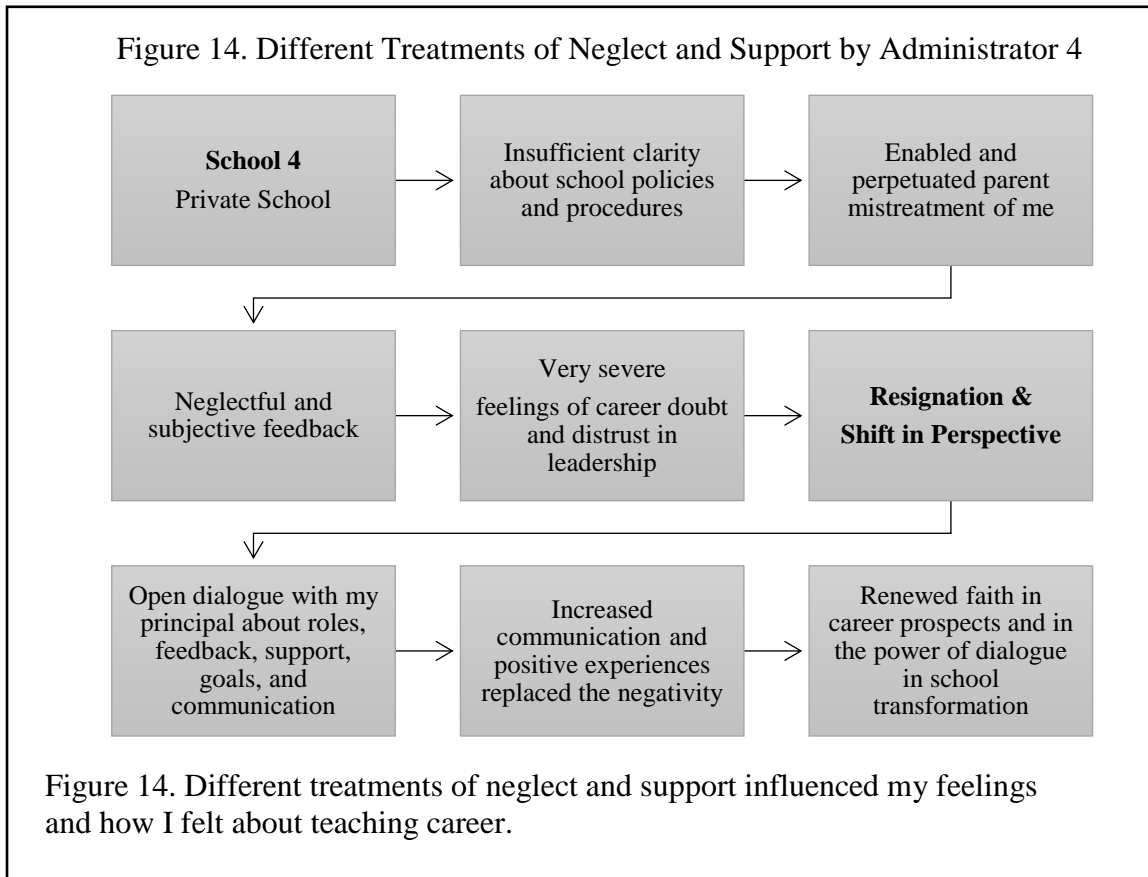
expected my principal to assist with instructional methods, curriculum, and adjusting to the school environment (Borman & Dowling, 2008), but I was left to “sink or swim.” I did not take the reassignment from kindergarten to second grade personally, because it was a better match for my creative talents. As mentioned in Chapter 4, I experienced hardships when trying to assimilate to a team of second grade teachers. Unfortunately, I had no prior experience of teaching students who were struggling to achieve grade level expectations. Prior experiences in classrooms did matter, but the complex EIP math teaching position should have been granted to a teacher with more experience (Billingsley, 1993). I loved the curriculum and age level of the second-grade students, and that was one reason why I stayed at the school. As the conflicts with my colleagues increased, I was dismayed at my principal’s lack of intervention. Principals, vice-principals, and other specialists are looked to for guidance, particularly when recognizing, analyzing, and resolving problems (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006). Teachers thrive in conditions when they experience agreeable relationships with colleagues (Whitebrook & Bellm, 1999), especially as a member of a team (Inman & Marlow, 2004). That was not to be. Just as I was feeling wonderful about myself and my classroom practices, I was not given a renewed contract. Teachers who involuntarily suffer school staffing actions by administrators are forced to migrate to other districts or leave the field of teaching (Boe et al., 1999; Boe et al., 2008; Ingersoll, 2001). Thus, I was unintentionally added to the percentage rates of turnover and attrition (Loeb et al., 2005).



My overall experience at School 2 was very rewarding. When I was hired, I had a smooth transition because the curriculum and instruction were standardized (Boe et al., 2008). There was sufficient access to resources and materials necessary to enhance my lessons, presentations, and activities (Billingsley, 1993). The staff meetings, although seldom, celebrated accomplishments (Inman & Marlow, 2004) and created opportunities for positive networking between the experienced teachers and myself (Marlow & Inman, 1993). My principal communicated clear role descriptions and more autonomy to teachers (Billingsley, 1993). The positive experiences at my work environment boosted my efficacy and commitment to teaching (Whitebrook & Bellm, 1999), and they helped me to appreciate the inherent value of becoming and being an education practitioner (Shen, 1997). Sadly, that position also came to an end. Even though my diagram above indicated some neglect on behalf of the administration, I was the one who was at fault for my involuntary resignation.



When I was hired by the director at School 3, I was under the impression that my new position as an assistant was fairly straightforward. I believed the director set the relaxed tone for how the organization was operated. While the school did an amazing job of opening doors to parents and promoting community participation (Inman & Marlow, 2004), there seemed to a lack of communication within the organization. I believed that as a newcomer to the school, I had not received adequate mentoring to better assimilate to the school's culture or expectations (Hewitt, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2003). My well-intentioned attempt to bring some classroom issues to the fore was not exactly welcomed. I muddled along during my employment without knowing if I could make meaningful contributions to the school's curriculum or policies (Ingersoll, 2001). The organization's underlying dilemmas inhibited positive relationships among the director, lead teachers, and assistants, and what resulted was turnover (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Ingersoll (2001, 2002). For the first time, my resignation from a school was completely voluntary. Looking back, I knew it was the right thing for the school and me.



In my most recent setting of teaching employment, I underwent several shifts in thinking about leadership. I was assigned to one of School 4's second-grade positions, and it was a perfect match. Teachers are more likely to remain in a school or the profession if they are appropriately assigned to positions corresponding to their certification (Boe et al., 1997b) and training (Whitebrook & Bellm, 1999). My job satisfaction increased because I was given freedoms related to textbook choices, instructional delivery methods, discipline issues, and student grading. Since learning was an ongoing process of education for me as an educator, I thrived in the classroom. Even though research showed that regularly-scheduled meaningful faculty development opportunities (Carter, 2001; Inman & Marlow, 2004; Whitebrook & Bellm, 1999) motivated and engaged teachers, there were no professional development opportunities.

Because of some conflicts with parents, the administration reassigned me to a preschool teaching position. It was the second time in my career that I was involuntarily moved. It was as if I was again experiencing a leadership style similar to School 1. When I joined the preschool team, it was hard for me to casually introduce literature or ideas that could add skills to the team's repertoire of up-to-date best practices (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006). I eventually integrated into the group and found my way. But my summative dissatisfaction in scarce support from my administration and leadership in general (Boe et al., 2008; Carter, 2000; Ingersoll, 2001; Tye & O'Brien, 2002) was the most prevailing factor in my rate of turnover (Boyd et al., 2011). I had finally figured it out for myself.

By voluntarily resigning after my ninth year of teaching, I was liberating myself from receiving future potential unsatisfactory feedback, reassignments, or lack of support. However, I still felt determined to find meaningful answers to the questions that I had been asking myself. Through coaching, I uncovered my shadowed and preexisting ability to effectively communicate my needs in hopes of bettering my perspective and life. I wanted to believe in all the leadership and organizational literature that my graduate program espoused. I felt, if the management of school organizations improved, there was the prospect of decreasing my own turnover (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

Nevertheless, I would not have returned if it weren't for my principal's follow-up call after my resignation. I was conflicted, and I was honest about it. To my delight, my principal showed interest and concern for me. It was the first time a principal had ever done so, and I took it as a sign of respect. It became an opportunity worth seizing. The importance of administration and school leadership was clearly evident in research (Knapp, Copland, Plecki, & Portin, 2006; Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993; Leithwood, Louis,

Anderson, and Wahlstrom, 2004), and I personally understood that more than anyone else.

During my tenth year of teaching, my principal and I rebuilt our relationship by generating dialogue. Throughout the year, time and assistance were provided as a means of support (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). In turn, I reciprocated by wholly investing my time, energy, money, and heart into making it a fulfilling teaching year. I realized the importance of requesting and receiving effective, helpful, and specific feedback (Carter, 2000). The principal's encouragement was radically different from our first year with one another, and a new leadership perspective made it possible for my principal to acknowledge the success of my ventures and attempts at professional and personal growth (Billingsley, 1993). For the first time in my decade-long teaching career, a principal and I worked together by sharing ownership and cultivating a sense of belonging (Sciarra & Dorsey, 2003). The principal had adapted a leadership style to make the situation move favorable for us both, and that was contrary to previous conceptions of leaders' inability to change (Heller, 1973; Seyranian, 2010; Wong-Mingji, 2013). Consequently, it helped me to understand that change in a leadership style and in myself was possible – and that positively affected my desire to continue teaching.

### **Research Question 3**

The basis for the third research question was to investigate how my beliefs about being a teacher have been shaped during my experiences in the field of early childhood and elementary education. In my review of literature, I referred to the *Theory of Reasoned Action* (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). It claimed that people went through a series of steps before arriving at an action. As elucidated in every chapter of my dissertation, I

underwent several processes in thinking. In Chapter 2, I revealed my innermost sentiments. They included:

- Teachers working together proficiently communicate their expectations and feelings.
- Leaders and those in authority positions were always right, could be trusted, and always knew what they were doing.
- I had to have a job and earn money in order to feel successful.
- I saw myself as a fallen teacher, and leaders were not failures.

Each of those was a belief agreement that I made with myself (Ruiz & Mills, 1997).

Through the autoethnographic process, it dawned on me that my emotions played a significant role in the career decisions I made. As a person, I was carrying out actions and behaviors based on my available information, beliefs, attitudes, and intentions; but, the emotions from all of my teaching experiences were also important to examine. This realization determined how I used affective coding methods and how I analyzed the effects of my career turnover on my personal life. Consequently, I mentally framed my decision-making process a bit differently than before (see Figure 15). The emotions I felt about my experiences as a teacher were elements of personal factors that indirectly fueled my career decision to be and (if possible) to remain a teacher (Billingsley, 1993, 2004).

I also understood that my personality and character reflected the groups that socialized me, with which I identified, and to which I wanted to belong (Schein, 2010, p. 9). I had to change my perspective and use my cultural lens. By doing so, I could “perceive and decipher the cultural forces that operate in groups, organizations, and occupations” (Schein, 2010, p. 13). Deciphering the culture of my teaching organization



required that I observe, spot confusing processes, ask myself and others why actions were done in that way, distinguish my espoused values, and figure out my deeper assumptions (Schein, 2010, p. 178). I was able to capture it through my lens as an autoethnographic researcher.

Figure 15. My Adaptation to Relationships between Beliefs, Attitudes, Intentions, Decisions, Behavior, and Available Information

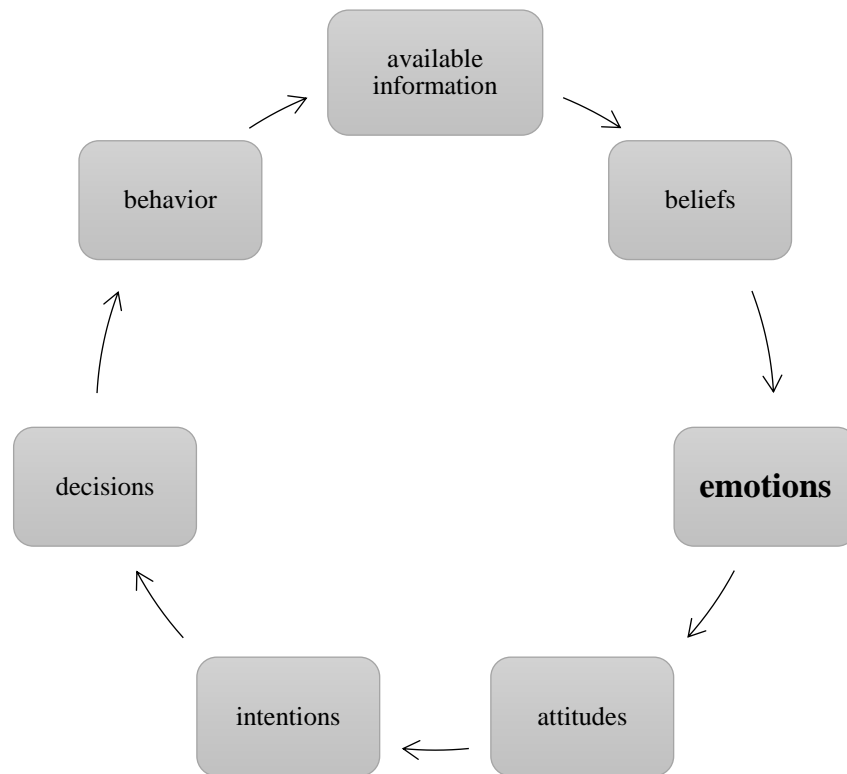


Figure 15. How my emotions were also factored in to the causal chain of decision-making. Adapted from “The impact of teachers’ instructional beliefs on their teaching: Implications for research and practice,” by P. Bauch, 1984, Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, p. 3, Copyright by The Catholic University of America. Reprinted with permission.

While some unfavorable factors may not have been constant throughout each setting, what could be inferred was the amount of challenges within the organizations I

encountered. I started out with a belief of who I wanted to be as a teacher: successful, intelligent, loved by all, and well-paid. But, my perspective became more jaded with each unfavorable factor. I really started to question the people and situations around me, and my inner-conflict continued to fester. Looking back on my overall experience as a teacher, factors I initially talked about in my coaching sessions - like salary or resources - weren't really what were important to me. One reason was because living with my dad alleviated the pressure of earning an income in order to support my family. I worked and taught because I chose to pursue a career I loved. Once the factor of salary was removed, it was easier to understand that my work environments lacked things that were hard to articulate: a sense of belonging, community, and vision – and all that stemmed from the most outstanding unfavorable factor of weak communication. To become a better person, mother, wife, teacher, and researcher, I needed to embrace my traits, abilities, values, and ability to lead and influence – and I learned to do it all through effective and favorable communication.

In completing my dissertation study, I hoped to let go of the anguish I felt from the past in order to make room for new experiences. Through the process of coaching, I uncovered that I needed positive experiences to replace the negative experiences. Thus, I had to shed some of my old memories and self-views – similar to how I needed to shed old agreements to make room for new agreements (see Table 6).

Old Agreement	New Agreement
Teachers working together proficiently communicate their expectations and feelings.	Teachers working together can communicate better once group norms are established.
Leaders and those in authority positions were always right, could be trusted, and always knew what they were doing.	Leaders are human just like everyone else, and they come to their positions with their own traits and assumptions.
I had to have a job and earn money in order to feel successful.	I need to have the love and support from my family to feel valued. I need to experience good relationships in my work environment to feel a sense of belonging. I need to have good communication with my principal to feel edified.
I saw myself as a fallen teacher, and leaders were not failures.	I have reached the pinnacle of my educational achievement. I am part of a family. I am still working as a teacher. I may have fallen a few times, but I kept getting back up. I am no failure.

### Implications

Despite the consecutive status of reported turnover data, there is not one single solution. Rather, a multi-perspective approach to this issue must be in place” (Shen, 1997, p. 88). For any teacher, novice or veteran, positive experiences are central to retaining teachers (Inman & Marlow, 2004). The rest of this dissertation focuses on its implications for my school’s context and wider educational research community. While school, student, and teacher demographics remain constant, schools’ organizations, policies, and working conditions are amenable to change (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). The possibility of change may in fact increase teacher retention, which should be a top priority for all schools.

The retention of teachers, in addition to the topic of turnover, has also been extensively studied (Boe, 1991; Boe et al., 1997a; Boe et al., 2008; Inman & Marlow, 2004; Shen, 1997; Whitebrook & Granger, 1989). Similar to teachers who turnover, those

who stay are women who have children (Heyns, 1988). These teachers earn salaries over \$40, 000 hold bachelor's degrees, are 30-50 years of age, and had mentors (Brenneman, 2015; Long, 2015). Interestingly, teachers who have overcome burnout tend to stay in the same school (Yesil-Dagli, 2012). Again, I fall into several of those demographic categories. It's entirely possible that I may remain a teacher in the profession of education, because I have uncovered my own solutions. It is qualitative studies of self, like this dissertation, that go beyond discovering factors and relationships to uncovering solutions.

This autoethnographic study provided insight into teacher turnover and followed with observations, knowledge, methods, experiences, wisdom. Each chapter began with specific gardening tips to help properly cultivate a growing "teacher tree." The implications of this study reach out to those considering teaching as a career, those who are presently teachers, those who prepare teachers, and those who oversee teachers.

To encourage efflorescence:

- Observe the garden environment of teaching by watching and carefully listening to what is happening. Pay attention to small and large details as well as the conversations people have in educational settings.
- Cultivate deeper knowledge of the surroundings by becoming more familiar with the world of teaching. Go beyond your environmental observations, conversations taking place, and the knowledge you have about your subject matter by reading about topics that are prevalent in current educational literature.
- Help to encourage natural propagation by allowing the ideas of qualitative research and autoethnography to progress. When positive, confusing, or negative

events take place in your career as an educator, write them down, ask questions, and consider your viewpoint worthy.

- Tolerate varying seasons of growth and change by experiencing the environment and its challenges. Understand that no teaching environment is perfect while carefully managing your own beliefs, emotions, attitudes, intentions, decisions, and behaviors.
- Ameliorate negative effects from the environment by improving upon your perspectives through self-introspection. Maintain your outlook as you learn about yourself, others, and the culture of teaching – especially if you wish to persevere. What defines you is how you respond to favorable and inclement climates.
- Nurture one another by providing the support and nourishment that you and others deserve. Recognize that you and those surrounding you are leaders, and that the way leaders communicate thought and ideas include simultaneous words and actions.

Whether you are a horticulturalist or a tree, it is imperative to maintain the symbiotic relationships in the garden of education. This dissertation study and others' research suggests numerous ways to retain quality teachers who wish to teach, and that advice deserves our attention.

### **Recommendations**

The first solution is to build a school's climate. Climate considers the individual teacher's needs, values, and characteristics. Leaders and teachers both should recognize and appreciate the investment that people make of time, money, and effort in becoming a teacher. It takes several years to earn a teaching degree, undergo internships, and meet

certification requirements in order to become a teacher (Jalongo & Heider, 2006).

Becoming a teacher is a transformative process (Wilson, 2013). Thus, the more time a person spends teaching, the more experienced she or he will become (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007; Harris, 2009; Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009). Keeping this in mind, principals of schools should value those who endeavor to invest in their own education without making additional certificate endorsements a prerequisite for employment.

Building climate, starting with an individual, can be achieved by initiating meaningful dialogue. Teachers should continually develop their philosophies of teaching and their voices inside and outside of the classroom. Administrators should take time and make the effort to get to know teachers' classroom and career goals by participating in individual and group discussions. Teacher preparation programs and professional development seminars should embed workshops on building school culture and climate that allow teachers to learn, practice, and analyze effective communication strategies.

The second solution is to foster a school's culture, which is "a set of shared meanings, shared beliefs, and shared assumptions of the members of the organization" (Van Houtte, 2005, p.73). This involves creating upfront opportunities for teaching teams to have open discussions that enhance human relationships (Schein, 2010). This might look like sitting down together as a group to make introductions and discussing individual philosophies, goals, social norms, and ways to maneuver conflict. Working with others fosters teachers' self-efficacy (Fox & Wilson, 2009; Johnson et al., 2010; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) and a sense of belonging (Johnson et al., 2010; Le Cornu, 2013; Rippon & Martin, 2006). Getting to know others by spending time together increases trust, motivation, and collaboration (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Putnam, 1995).

Perhaps teachers, administrators, and other staff should engage in group retreats outside of the school setting where group workshops could focus on team building and communication exercises. I found this to be very helpful in joining the new staff at School 3. School settings that create opportunities for intellectual stimulation, individual improvement, collective growth, and high performance affect motivation (Griffith, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006; Webb, 2007). In my experience, teachers do not mind creating time to learn about topics or strategies that directly apply to them or their classrooms. Public, private, and teacher preparation programs should work together to bring in guest speakers to focus on curriculum and teacher leadership. If there are strict budget limitations, administrators could ask individual teachers who have specific content or skill knowledge to make informal and informative presentations to staff or parents of students. This would give teachers opportunities to shine by imparting their intelligence or materials while indirectly strengthening the school's culture of togetherness and sharing.

A third solution is to facilitate induction programs. Providing this type of support, especially to beginning teachers, is invaluable (Ewing & Smith; 2003; Johnson, 2004). A quality induction program includes a comprehensive orientation, educative mentor support, organized professional development, and formative assessment that continues throughout the third year of professional teaching (Wood & Stanulis, 2009). Additionally, programs should provide well-matched mentors, valuable agendas, and appropriate curricular guidance (Johnson, Kardos, Kauffman, Liu, & Donaldson, 2004). A well-matched mentor could be a retired teacher or teacher leaders who wish to promote the positive environment of the school. Administrators should seek out those who previously

taught or currently work at the school who would be interested in sharing their time, expertise, and insight. A definite focus should be placed on veteran teachers who have successfully remained at the school or in the field for an extended period of time; their viewpoints and tried-and-true strategies are worth listening to and adopting. While some school districts may feel they already employ this approach, it should be done at the school level, too – whether teachers serve in the public or private sector. If feasible, districts or schools could lightly compensate volunteering individuals by awarding an extra personal day each month of the school year.

Thus, the fourth solution is to foster mentor and mentee relationships. An educator who collaborates with a mentor, team member, lead teacher, department head, or other faculty member, reduces the likelihood of isolation (Inman & Marlow, 2004). Criteria for selecting mentors include having deep content and pedagogical knowledge, strong classroom management and instructional practices, commitment to professional growth, good communication skills, a reflective approach to teaching, and a sense of empathy toward novice teachers (Wood & Stanulis, 2009). Mentors are at the same site, same grade level, and subject (Wood & Stanulis, 2009). Further, there must be a common planning time (Ingersoll & Strong, 2012; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). A close match naturally encourages deeper and more frequent conversations about teaching practice because of the shared experiences of the mentor and mentee. Collaboration must include interaction, dialogue, feedback, listening, and sharing, that allows for a new appreciation of trust (Musanti & Pence, 2010). If districts and schools experiment with mentor relationships and achieve success, their strategies of implementation and management should be shared so that



other educational settings or colleges of education could develop an endorsement or certification solely in mentorship.

A fifth solution is to provide ongoing support from school leaders (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Success of a teacher is founded on the trusting relationship with the principal. The relationship is founded on classroom visits, frequent conversations about practice and professional growth, and information about the school culture and community. (Wood & Stanulis, 2009). The competent leader influences others, and is not opposed to being influenced by others as well. Successful leaders are emotionally stable, assertive, agreeable, conscientious, and open-minded. They are fair in treatment of others and situations, caring towards all, and they adequately communicate (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006). Administrators should build a climate where teachers feel safe to share their voices and feel heard. One way to achieve this might be by offering a monthly team or staff meeting to discuss critical topics after group norms have been established. Similar to how teachers conduct morning meetings with an agenda using student input, the staff could submit topics for discussion in a notebook or box to then be discussed honestly and openly as a group. School administrators are effective when everyone is focused on the core work of the organization (Spillane, 2006). Effective school leadership positively influences teachers' knowledge, motivation, and behaviors.

Adding to thoughts of supportive leadership is the sixth solution. It argues for the importance and capability of leaders to ameliorate tough occurrences in teachers' professional careers that can affect their personal outlook (and indirectly their lives). In instances of questioning a teacher's best "fit" for a school's organization, there should be

ongoing conversations about how to ensure success without directly or indirectly causing a teacher to feel inferior, defective, or substandard. If issues crop up with parents in the school or members of the staff, leaders should offer immediate assistance that deescalates the emotions and status of situations. Assistance should be encouraging, constructive, and strategy-filled, rather than accusatory or deflating. If possible, leaders must help to maintain staff morale by waiting to have employment conversations once the school year has ended, as not to disrupt a teacher's confidence or forward classroom momentum with practices, children, and parents. Most critically, if an unexpected legal issue arises (as it did in my career), leaders should emotionally support a teacher when his or her back is against a wall. Encourage the teacher who may face legal consequences to be strong, have courage, and resist making impulsive decisions without enough time to ponder the personal, professional, and career ramifications. Whether one holds a leadership position in a school, district, or a state's standards commission, he or she must understand that teachers are humans – and the decisions made by leaders have real consequences for real people, even if/after a teacher has moved on from an organization. Career decisions, especially involuntarily resigning or not being able to regain adequate employment after a certificate suspension are damaging – not only to a teacher's livelihood, family, and outlook of the profession, but also to his or her spirit.

The final solution, which is one of the most prevalent themes of this dissertation, is that leadership can come from any member in an organization (Schein, 2010). Every functioning member, no matter the position, should be included in enhancing the organization to meet its fullest potential (see Figure 16). All humans, including teachers, have a desire to belong, and leadership is an important factor for teachers' sense of

community (Weathers, 2011). When teachers are included as leaders, the teacher-centered environment becomes open, responsive, thoughtful, and empowering (Beachum & Dentith, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2005). As leaders, teachers strive to improve students' learning, thinking, and current and future lives (Beachum and Dentith, 2004). While teachers and principals are focused on the students, they should also be focused on each other.

Figure 16. Individuals Who Should be Valued in Shared Leadership of Schools

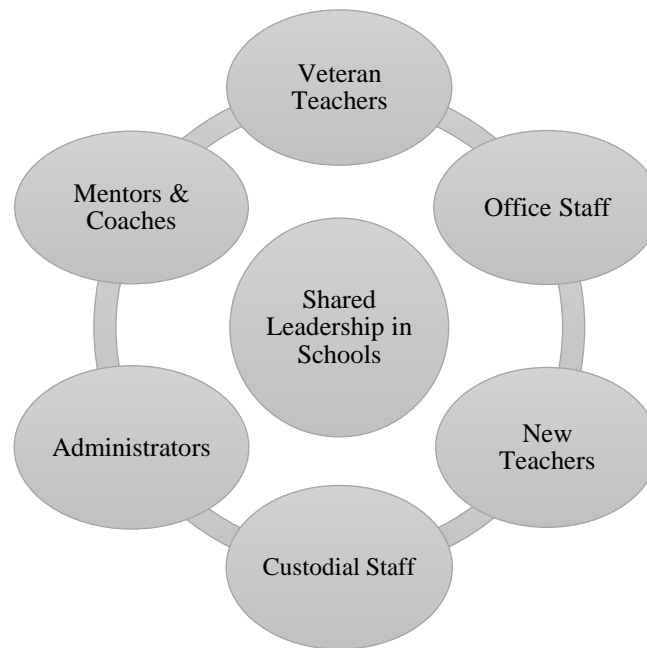


Figure 16. Collaboration of leadership among individuals in a school's organization has the potential to positively affect teacher satisfaction and retention, thereby affecting the school's culture and total achievement.

### **Conclusions**

There are several challenges leadership must navigate to improve teacher retention overall. There must be a shift in priorities. By improving teachers' morale and commitment, students will also benefit from the boost the instructors receive. Mentoring and teacher induction provide excellent solutions for administrators working with novice teachers who might otherwise leave the field due to a lack of support and guidance. This practice becomes challenging if expert teachers are hesitant or unwilling to fulfill these leadership roles. While teachers, students, and parents are all contributors to the school climate and culture, the action of the school leader will initiate and support the process of change. Principals, regardless of experience, must be aware and prepared to create the necessary environments that lead to teacher job satisfaction and retention. When administrators extend this effort to increase support, attrition rates decline (Ingersoll & Strong, 2012). Also, the working conditions of schools must no longer be ignored. Just as in other occupations, the job satisfaction of the employee affects many areas. Teachers and administrators must all work together to recognize and create rewarding environments. When teachers are well prepared and empowered, retention becomes an expectation.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Appendix A. List of References for Figure 4 (Delineated Factors of Turnover According to Literature)	
Reference	Topic and Content
Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, Weber 1997	-Teacher status and predictor variables: school retention, school transfer, attrition -Teacher demographic characteristics, teacher qualifications, teacher assignment, employment conditions, school characteristics -More reliable predictors of teacher attrition: age, experience, high academic ability
Borman & Dowling, 2008	-Factors of attrition: individual characteristics, compensation policies, attributes of schools -Variables: teacher demographics/characteristics, teacher qualifications, school organizational characteristics, school resources, school student body characteristics -Personal characteristics: higher among female, white, young, married, have a child -Qualifications: greater if no graduate degree, specialized math or science degrees, regular certifications, more years of experience, relatively lower on standardized tests -Schools: urban and suburban schools, private schools, elementary schools, schools with a lack of collaboration, teacher networking, administrative support, high enrollments of poor, minority, low-achieving students -Resources: lower levels of instructional spending, lower teacher salaries
Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006	-types of schools influencing teacher attrition: urban schools, high percentages of minority students
Ingersoll, 2001, 2002	-Teacher characteristics such as specialty field and age are strongly related to turnover -Factors related to turnover: salary, student-discipline problems, input into school decision making, administrative support (classroom supplies, mentoring for new teachers)
Loeb & Darling-Hammond, 2005	-Predictors of teacher turnover: schools' racial compositions, proportions of low-income students, salaries, large class sizes, facilities problems, multitrack schools, lack of textbooks
Marlow, Inman, & Betancourt-Smith, 1995	-Demographic factors: gender, years of teaching, age, marital status, socio-economic status -Attitudinal/environmental factors: teaching level, years of experience, professional prestige, pupil ideology, support of principal, school cultural composition, intellectual stimulation

Shen, 1997	<p>-Personal factors: year in teaching, annual salary, race, background before entering teaching, full time or part-time, subject matter of undergraduate studies, master's degree, gender, level of teaching, bilingual status, number of breaks</p> <p>-School factors: percent of teachers with less than 3 years' experience, percent of minority students, number of free lunch students, salary for senior teachers, salary for beginning teachers, total enrollment, locale, mentoring program, class organization</p> <p>-Teachers' perceptions: teaching have more advantages than disadvantages, influence over school and teaching-related policy, school administrators knowing staff's problem, match between expertise and assignment, student deviant behavior and lack of family support</p>
Yesil- Dagli, 2012	<p>-Teacher characteristics (gender, race, age, certification, educational level, years of teaching experience), work conditions, school climate, and student characteristics have been linked to teacher turnover</p>



APPENDIX B

Appendix B. Section of My Career Journal	
Date	Career Journal Content
July 15	There aren't many things I might be able to change like professional development or salary. But there can be collaboration and good working conditions. Maybe these things are more important than salary. Maybe if you have these things the other stuff won't matter. I don't want to exit at a time that could be crucial in changing my mindset about teaching.
July 29	The professional me has taken over the personal me, so I feel more negative. The professional me feels like concrete covering a plant. I feel suffocated. I live in this little world. I don't get out to see other people. I don't spend time with friends. Part of the reason I don't socialize with some of my friends that are teachers is because they are successful in teaching and making a nice salary. I am not. I remember years ago standing in the living room with my dad crying and saying how sorry I was, that I was a loser, and that I had no worth. Just looking at my identity there is a lot of worth in having a teaching job.
Aug. 22	My principal thinks people are afraid to talk and doesn't know why. For me to have fear about talking to any administration, for my colleague to express fear about talking to another colleague... it lets me know that in this world of teaching there is an aspect of fear that somehow drives our decisions of whether we do or don't communicate with one another. Somehow that has to link up with our decisions to leave teaching or to leave schools. I feel like if we communicated with each other more, or knew how to do it, then maybe there wouldn't be issues of fear or teachers leaving. If I can figure it out, and I can stay to make my work environment better, other people should be able to feel like they can do the same thing.
Sept. 16	One veteran colleague in a higher grade level asked about my team dynamic and how interactions go. I was asked if we plan with one another or if anyone else was using a particular resource. It was explained how the colleague's team mate last year planned and talked often, and this year with a new team mate was different. This year the colleague knows what lessons they are on and they stick to the curriculum layout, but they don't communicate as much. I said my team is like that. The reply was that was a leadership issue. I agreed. It was explained this was what this colleague has talked about for years, about how the teams should be vertically aligned and knowledgeable about others' practices, but no one ever listened when my colleague spoke.

Nov. 16	If I work, I want to be in an environment that is warm, inviting, appreciates creativity and innovativeness, is fulfilling and challenging, is financially and emotionally rewarding, and makes sense to me. Even after all these years in education, I still have not found it. Maybe my expectations are too high, or maybe who I have become prevents me from fully enjoying what teaching could be. Maybe this environment that I am in has all those things and I fail to see them.
Nov. 27	My principal said that my team has a culture of not embracing change easily. I commented that I bring new ideas and strategies to the team, but I feel they are not valued by others. I said that I spoke with my coach about this very topic and that my coach asked me how I would go about presenting my ideas, opinions, and knowledge to others. And, I revealed to my principal that I will not be – not with this group of teachers at this time. I value my work relationships and wish for cohesiveness rather than conflict and challenges over curriculum. My principal felt I was at a disadvantage and my principal felt badly about it. My principal knows I am very smart and that I have a lot of knowledge to share, but does not know how to maneuver the situation. I said that I had made the time-bound commitment of staying for the remainder of the year, but at the end of that time I might start looking at other options. I preferred to stay at this school since I had invested time and energy into improving my work environment. My principal asked if I ever thought about teaching adults and said I would be very good at it. I went on to say that once my degree is earned I will be in a better place to explore my options. I also explained that when I am more committed to teaching, I am a better person. I feel better about myself when I can use my creativity to dive into subjects, when I am earning more money, and when I work with others who share similar passion about collaboration. My principal said my thoughtfulness was one of my strengths, and I was thankful. I thanked my principal for taking the time to meet with me and explained that it will become a component of my dissertation – that there is a principal somewhere in the world that is learning to listen to a teacher’s beliefs, thoughts, and opinions and shares ideas about experiences in the work environment. It really has been an eye-opening experience for me to meet with my principal this year.
Dec. 2	When something happened at work, it would take me back to the darkest days I have ever had. I hated myself. Now when I think about something at work, there is so much more confidence, passion, love, and belief that guides who I am and what I do.

APPENDIX C

Appendix C. Section of My Gratitude Journal	
Occurrence	Gratitude Journal Content
Aug. 15	I am grateful for my father. My father shows love and concern for me. Today, he knew I wanted to ride my new scooter to school. So, he woke up early, got dressed, and drove his motorcycle behind me to make sure I arrived to school safely. Knowing he was right behind me gave me a sense of comfort.
Aug. 30	I am grateful for my experience during Open House this evening. I had packets ready as well as some crafts done by the children. Parents came in and sat at their children’s seats. I welcomed them and followed my written agenda. I used the hour to discuss the schedule of the day, special routines, the curriculum, and the printed papers that I copied earlier. I demonstrated a circle time lesson (and sang to the parents some of our songs) and a reading lesson. I showed them a PowerPoint of fun photos/experiences they can expect this year, and I walked them through the class website. We spent some times asking and answering questions. I know I made them laugh, and they could see my confidence and knowledge shine through. They all seemed very pleased, and many of them asked about my class wish list. I received several compliments from parents, and I felt very good after I left.
Date Sept. 14	I am grateful for an excellent committee meeting today. I really am. I like to sit down with all three members. I appreciate their time and efforts. The conversations that we have about my writing and pursuits are engaging and uplifting. They leave me inspired, and for the first time, someone said they felt inspired by my comments and my work. I can’t believe it! Me, inspiring someone else, that is not a child; I inspired an adult. I had a smile on my face during that entire meeting.
Date Sept. 23	I am grateful for fun times in my classroom. Yesterday I did a science lesson with my students. I think as a teacher I have always favored social studies, but science is growing on me. We have been talking about the 5 senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. So, I brought in a popcorn popper that my dad bought for me for Christmas a couple of years ago. The children were eager to see the popcorn kernels pop into popcorn, and they loved the way it tasted. This is one of many times that I am glad to be a teacher of young children.
Date Oct. 9	I am grateful for waking up in the morning and feeling refreshed. I am in the middle of a three-day weekend, and I can tell I feel more relaxed just because I have tomorrow off of work. I am really trying to spend more time with my family and work on dissertation stuff less. I guess that is because when I sit down to work, I am at the computer for several hours. But yesterday and today – nope, no work. Just family time.
Date Nov. 9	I am grateful for my daughter. What a wonderful girl. It is her 10th birthday today, officially at 9:30pm. I got up early this morning to make her some breakfast before going to school. We sent in some cookies for her class to celebrate. And, I drove her to school. But, before all of that, I let her open 2 birthday gifts. She loved them, and I loved watching her open them. I took videos and pictures. I am so happy to be a mother. And when I look at her, hold her, and spend time with her, I know in my heart that my husband and I have done a good job raising her.

Date Nov. 16	I wish to acknowledge what I am grateful for. I like being with children. I like being in a classroom. I like feeling necessary to children, parents, and sometimes my colleagues and administration. I like having a place to go to work. I like bringing home an income. I like having positive relationships with members of my team. I understand that where I work and what I do with my life must be meaningful to me, just as learning should be for children.
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APPENDIX D

Appendix D. Section of My Coaching Transcript Sessions	
Occurrence	Session Content
<p>Date Dec. 2</p> <p>Session Number 14</p>	<p>Elizabeth: My colleague sent me a text on Thanksgiving. I wrote back and said I was grateful for the friendship and help. My colleague added being grateful for what [he/she] has learned from me.</p> <p>Janice: Wow. So [he/she] sees you as a mentor.</p> <p>Elizabeth: Maybe. [He/She] has never said anything like that, so it made me feel good. Another colleague asked me to go to lunch with [him/her]. [He/She] wanted to talk and get a bite to eat. It made me feel good to spend time together outside of work.</p> <p>Janice: I know that was one of the things before that we talked about. About you having adult interactions or social engagements that didn't involve work or kids. That is a great example of that. So how did it go?</p> <p>Elizabeth: It went great. We went yesterday. We met up and ate a pastry. We sat at a table together. It was getting to know one another. [He/She] asked me about my dissertation. We both talked about how we met our spouses. [He/She] talked about chaperoning a field trip. [He/She] talked to me about a classroom situation. I told [him/her] that I was available for moral support. Today, after work I visited [him/her] to check in. I asked how [he/she] felt, and [he/she] said tired. I told [him/her] when I have felt tired in the past, I coped with it by crying a little. [He/She] agreed.</p> <p>Janice: [He/She] could relate.</p> <p>Elizabeth: I told [him/her] to go home and relax. I told [him/her] a funny story, and we laughed. I said I really liked working together.</p> <p>Janice: That is really nice.</p> <p>Elizabeth: [He/She] said the same thing back. Then [he/she] said that I was so smart. I was thankful. It made me feel good.</p> <p>Janice: It is what you have been wanting.</p> <p>Elizabeth: When those things happen or when I have a good day at work, it makes me want to be there. It increases my morale. At times like those, I can't imagine working anywhere else. Those emotions are driving my decisions to stay or leave the field of teaching.</p> <p>Janice: So the emotions of the day are driving the way that you feel.</p>

APPENDIX E

Appendix E. Complete Table of Metaphors from My Dissertation Study		
<i>southern magnolia tree</i> my educational endeavors	<i>branch blemishes</i> beginning signs of conflict	<i>plastic cups</i> distortion of communication
<i>tree trunk</i> my physical being	<i>sturdiness</i> growth, strength, confidence	<i>fuel</i> energy or emotions
<i>tree rings</i> my chronologic years of age	<i>broken limb</i> turnover	<i>treading a fine line</i> hesitancy in sharing ideas
<i>tree roots</i> my support systems	<i>hardiness</i> more strength, confidence	<i>bringing down the hammer</i> decisive leadership action
<i>nutrients</i> higher education	<i>metal spike</i> serious damage to my career	<i>iron sharpening iron</i> strengthening others
<i>branches</i> career classroom settings	<i>dripping sap</i> heartache	<i>chipping away</i> decreasing self-esteem, worth
<i>leaves</i> memories of career people	<i>white, powdery mildew</i> more signs of conflict	<i>blacklist</i> unemployable
<i>white blossoms</i> children I taught	<i>black velvet fungus</i> feeling of hopelessness, anger	<i>ugly ducking</i> how I saw myself then
<i>seasons</i> changes in a teaching year	<i>lightning fire</i> recent resignation	<i>swan</i> how I see myself currently
<i>forests</i> groups of teachers	<i>rain</i> sudden epiphanic healing	<i>pendulum</i> balance between things
<i>inclement climate</i> environmental conditions	<i>new growth</i> recent teaching year	<i>phoenix rising from ashes</i> rebirth of self
<i>wildfire</i> harmful/helpful	<i>garden</i> surrounding people	<i>favorable conditions</i> promote positive growth
<i>trees</i> teachers	<i>mountains</i> difficulty coping of stress	<i>kid gloves</i> handling of others with care
<i>efflorescence</i> success in teaching	<i>speedbumps</i> easier coping of stress	<i>cactus</i> feeling undesirable
<i>Eradication</i> Teacher turnover	<i>Vibrancy</i> Enthusiasm	<i>Sisyphean task</i> Challenge of being a teacher
<i>erosion</i> wearing away of self	<i>sunshine</i> warmth, promotes growth	<i>snapshot</i> a moment in time
<i>dormancy</i> period of nonteaching	<i>nurturing teacher trees</i> helping teachers reach goals	<i>concrete</i> hardening of my spirit
<i>scarlet letter</i> certificate suspension		

## APPENDIX F

Appendix F. Complete List of My Work Environment Needs
<p><b><u>PHYSICAL SETTING</u></b>            Comfortable            Appealing walls/decorations            Close proximity to my home            Clean            Organized</p> <p><b><u>PERSONAL EMOTIONAL RESPONSE</u></b>            Welcome feeling            Respect            Friendliness            Cohesiveness            Collaboration            Belonging            Sense of importance/value/appreciation/purpose            Relationships            Positive attitudes            A place where I can be myself            A place where I can ask for help            Opportunities to use my talents and skills (organization, scrapbooking, singing, drawing, speaking aloud, creating documents, writing, having humorous discussions, reading, planning)            Opportunities for me to contribute</p> <p><b><u>SCHOOL LOGISTICS</u></b>            Directly working with children            Supportive leadership            Effective administration            Performance reviews            Clear role expectations            Routine schedule            Opportunities to interact with families            Opportunities for professional growth or advancement            Curriculum matching my interests and beliefs            Resources to do my job            Structure            Policies            Procedures            Guidelines</p> <p><b><u>BENEFITS</u></b>            Health/dental insurance            Time left in the day for my family            A good income/comparable salary            Mentoring            Induction program</p>

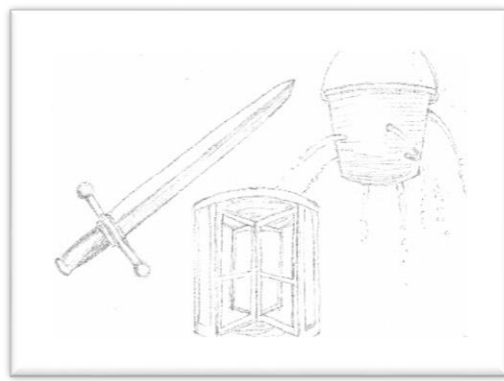
APPENDIX G

Illustrations of the Evolvement of My Teaching Career and Thought Processes

My Metaphor of Eradication of Teachers



Turnover Metaphors in Literature



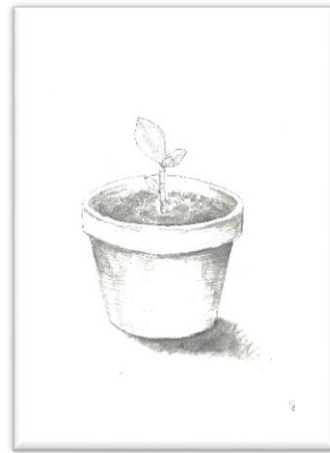
My Southern Magnolia



The Magnolia Seed Pod



Planting the Magnolia Seed





Nurturing the Growing Sprout



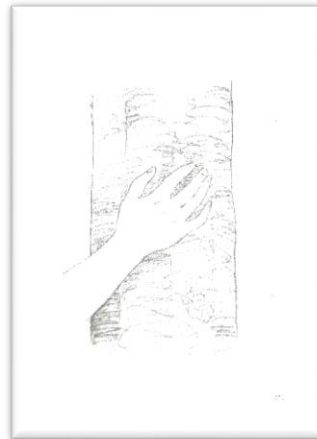
The Maturing Magnolia



Me and Mother Nature at the Foot of My Metaphorical Teaching Tree



The Trunks' Strong Bark



Pondering the Past and the Future



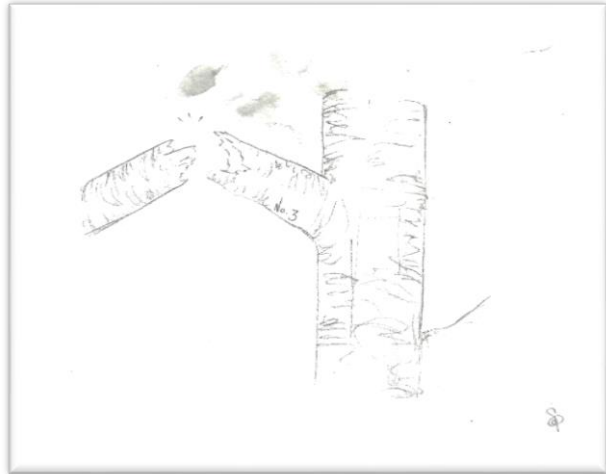
The Canopy of the Magnolia Tree



Teaching Years/Branches 1 & 2



Teaching Year/Branch 3



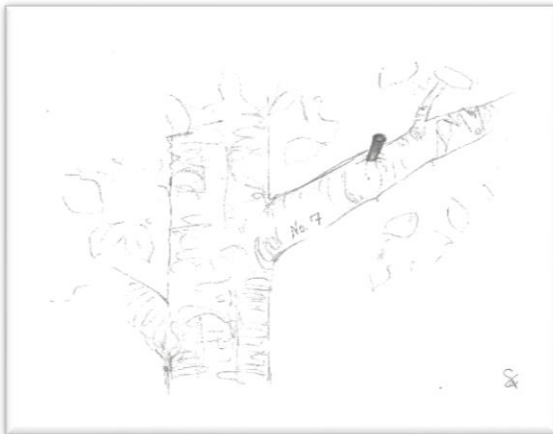
Wondering Why with Mother Nature



Teaching Years/Branches 4, 5, 6



Teaching Year/Branch 7



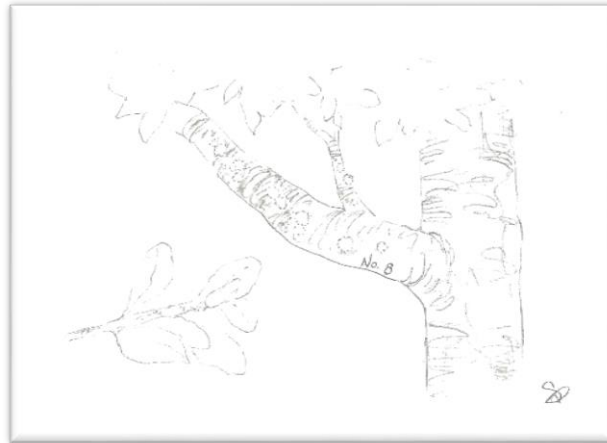
Failure



Listing Work Environment  
Wants and Needs



Teaching Year/Branch 8



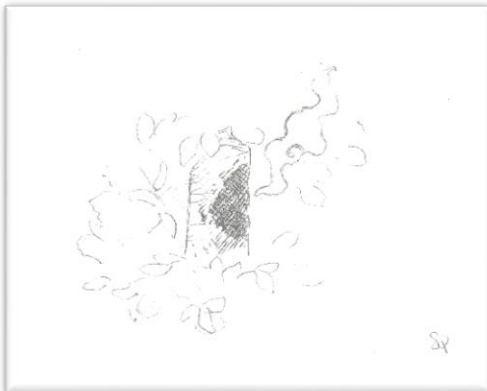
Teaching Year/Branch 9



Resignation from Teaching



The Damage Caused by Wildfire



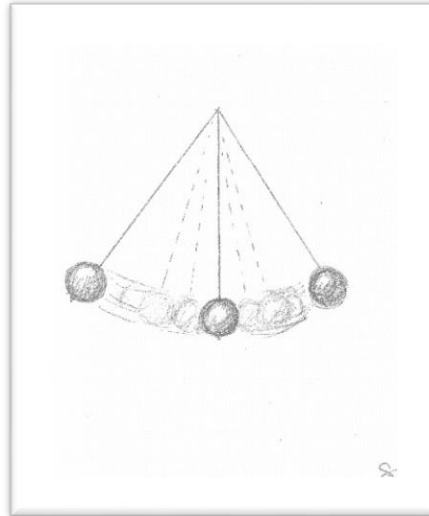
Teaching Year/Branch 10



Dr. Mary Chandler, a True Leader



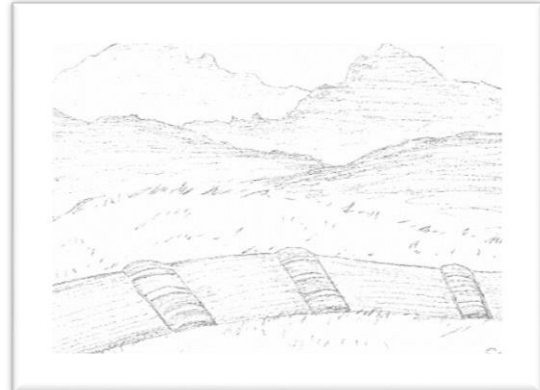
Balancing Choices



Fire Burns and Also Warms You



Mountain Versus Speedbump Struggles



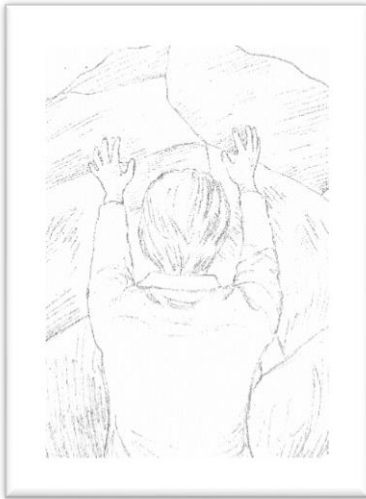
Making Choices as a Teacher and Leader



At Times, I Felt Like a Defective Teacher



Teaching Was a Sisyphean Task



Feeling like a Spiny Cactus and an Ugly Duckling



Becoming a Statuesque Magnolia and a Beautiful Swan



Transformation of Perspective

