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## **Staying by Choice: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Lived Experiences of Urban Teachers**

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Tasha Thompson-Gray  
*Concordia University - Portland*

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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Staying by Choice: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Lived Experiences of Urban Teachers

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in

Higher Education

Audrey E. Rabas, Ph.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

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Concordia University–Portland

2019

## **Abstract**

There are many untold stories about the experiences and dedication of urban school teachers. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the phenomenon of teachers at high-poverty, urban schools encountering many challenges. The purpose of the study was to understand the lived experiences of urban school teachers. The constructivist learning theory and functionalist perspective guided the conceptual framework. The phenomenological design used a convenience sampling of 16 teachers who taught in high-poverty urban schools at least 10 years. The two research questions explored the commonalities of participants' experiences in high-poverty, urban schools to reveal why teachers remain in these challenging schools by choice. Data were collected from one-on-one interviews. A phenomenological analysis and coding were utilized to analyze interview data. The findings indicated that most teachers at high-poverty, urban schools recognize the challenges associated with the specific unmet needs of their students and the teachers remain dedicated to helping their students improve academically. Recommendations for educational stakeholders are to (a) train preservice and current high-poverty, urban school educators to understand the complexities of poverty; and (b) implement the standards of the whole child approach.

*Keywords:* urban schools, high-poverty schools, students in poverty

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my children, Tashan and Kristen, for being my motivation to strive for the next level of greatness. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Eldridge and Karen (deceased), and my grandparents (all deceased), Jesse, Mary, Herbert, and Patricia, for instilling the importance of education and always encouraging me to do my best.

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A very special thank you to all of my family and friends who helped me along the way. Thank you to my colleagues for cheering me on along the way. To my church family, you all spoke this accomplishment into existence. I can't thank you enough for your prayers and encouraging words. Thank you to my children and my father, as well as, my sister, nieces, nephew, aunts, uncles, cousins, and close friends for believing in me. I hope that I have made you proud. Your encouragement and support were greatly appreciated. It was truly a blessing to have so many people in my corner. You were all such a great support system.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge all educators that continue to give of themselves daily to ensure that their students progress to the next level of achievement. Thank you for helping to prepare our future leaders. A very special thank you to educators who choose to stay at urban schools despite the challenges. Your students need you!

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction to the Problem**

Almost fifty million students in the United States attend urban schools that typically have high teacher turnover rates, limited resources, and an excessive number of students at risk on achievement tests (Gehrke, 2005; Hudley, 2013; McKinney, Haberman, Stafford-Johnson, & Robinson, 2008; NCES, 2018). African American and other minority students who attend urban schools have more challenges achieving needed academic skills, attaining an education, and encountering success in the labor market compared to students who attend non-urban schools (NCES, 2018). Urban schools are mainly comprised of poor students, racial minorities, and English language learners according to the latest data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018). Despite the challenges, some urban school teachers are resilient and chose to remain in these schools. Tamir (2013) reports that high-quality teachers are a priority in meeting the needs of students in urban schools; the study also shows that statistical data does not convey the entire story of what makes teachers stay or leave urban schools. Qualitative research methods help to provide a broader understanding of the reasons some teachers decide to dedicate their careers to educating urban school students despite the challenges.

Chapter 1 introduces the research study. The problem statement, background, and purpose of the study are described. The research questions, the rationale for the research, the definition of the terms used in the study, delimitations, and limitations are presented and discussed.

## **Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework for the Problem**

Ladson-Billings (2009) and Yonezawa, Jones, and Singer (2011) contributed to research that focused on teachers personally invested in teaching at urban schools. More studies focused on the positive aspects of urban schools revealed successful strategies and methods that were effective; hence, the need for progressive changes geared toward improving conditions and characteristics of urban schools. The current study explored the lived experiences of urban school teachers who have chosen to remain in these schools. The qualitative research methods yielded rich details to understand further the successes that veteran teachers in urban schools experienced.

Ladson-Billings (2009) conducted a study that revealed two qualities of successful teachers that explained what had been achieved by these teachers. The participants in the study were all experienced teachers with at least 12 years of service; however, the years of experience did not indicate that all teachers who taught for extended periods were effective. The successful teachers in Ladson-Billings study each experienced a moment in their life that caused a reconsideration of his or her own life and those who were less fortunate. Patterson, Collins, and Abbott (2004) also found that teachers who were committed to urban schools held personal values related to social justice and quality education for all students.

**Constructivism.** The conceptual framework for this dissertation derives from the personal relevance and experiences of the researcher. The constructivist learning theorists place emphasis on the active role students play in understanding and making sense of new information that was presented by teachers; this theory describes how learning happens (Kalpana, 2014; McLeod, 2014). Social constructivism focuses on the social links between the teacher and student; it expects that teachers customize the content taught to match diverse learning

environments (Kalpana, 2014). A teacher's culture, values, and background are an essential part of the student interactions and academic tasks (McLeod, 2014). Piaget and Vygotsky, noted psychologists, developed theories for social constructivism. Piaget's approach focuses on the psychological development of children, and Vygotsky emphasizes the social context of learning (Kalpana, 2014). Vygotsky's theories state that cognitive development varies across different cultures; one's culture determines the type of memory strategy developed (McLeod, 2014).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Many high-poverty, urban schools are faced with challenges that prevent academic improvements (Jackson, 2015; Johnson et al., 2014; Miranda, Radliff, & Della Flora, 2017). Teacher turnover in some high-poverty, urban schools are a chronic issue (Morello, 2014; Phillips, 2015). Urban schools with bleak conditions and student characteristics threaten student success, according to the NCES (2018). The NCES (2018) highlights the high poverty and unemployment rates that students who attend urban schools experience later in their lives. Urban schools have more significant enrollment numbers than suburban and rural schools, but urban school teachers have fewer resources and less control over the curriculum than teachers in other schools (NCES, 2018). Despite the challenges, some teachers chose to remain committed to providing a quality education to students in high-poverty, urban schools (Durham-Barnes, 2011; Poplin et al., 2011; Yonezama et al., 2011); however, the experiences, including successes and challenges, of the teachers have been unknown.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the qualitative research study was to understand the lived experiences of teachers in urban schools by interpreting personal stories of teachers in these schools. The study focused on teachers who choose to remain in urban schools and the challenges and rewards that

these teachers experienced. Phenomenological research allowed the researcher to explore experiences and highlight commonalities across a small group of teachers. The study revealed conditions that existed in urban schools that promoted and hindered academic achievement. Results from the study may be used to help improve the economic future of students attending urban schools by ensuring that these students are on track to become college-educated adults.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the lived experiences of teachers working in high-poverty, urban schools?
2. What successes and challenges do teachers in high-poverty, urban schools experience?

### **Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study**

The study provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect on experiences in urban schools. Reflections motivate and help teachers realize the need to adjust current practices to serve all students better. The study also adds to the field of qualitative research that currently exists related to urban schools. The lived experiences of urban school teachers help to shed light on the challenges and rewards of teaching in an urban school.

Di Carlo (2015) and Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2008) reported issues with teachers leaving urban schools in five years or less. Curwin (2010) highlighted the unique needs of urban youth and the challenges teachers faced in dealing with these needs. The current study uniquely adds to the existing literature by focusing on the experiences of teachers who have remained in urban schools. Educators often search for ways to improve the conditions of urban schools; the understanding of how lived experiences of the study's participants allow the knowledge and opportunity to plan changes for improvement.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Attrition.** Attrition rates indicate teachers leaving the profession (Di Carlo, 2015). Some studies label teachers who do not return to the job in subsequent years as leavers. Researchers use attrition rates to study trends related to teacher turnover.

**Teacher turnover.** Phillips (2015) defined teacher turnover as the issue of teachers not returning to schools in subsequent years. It is reported that turnover is driven by school conditions, mainly salary (Phillips, 2015).

**Urban schools.** Urban schools are large city schools in comparison to suburban and rural schools. The National Center for Education Statistics (2018) stated that urban schools usually have higher poverty rates when compared to rural and suburban schools. Urban schools were once defined by geographical location but were now defined by student demographics. Urban schools are usually in need of teachers and resources. Schaffer, White, and Brown (2018) include population data, as well as racial and social contexts to define urban schools.

## **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

An assumption in this study consisted of the sample studied was representative of the intended population. Another assumption involved the responses to the interview questions honestly and accurately reflecting the participants' lived experiences. The delimitations for this study created boundaries for the researcher as the study only included one school setting, and the participants were from one school district. The delimitations mentioned above may not have allowed the researcher to gain a broad insight into urban schools. The limitations were beyond the control of the researcher and existed based on the chosen methods and design of the study. Qualitative methods did not allow the researcher to make correlational relationships or causal

inferences. The phenomenological model caused difficulties when the researcher summarized a common understanding of the phenomenon among the study participants.

## **Chapter 1 Summary**

The study was a result of the researcher's interest in improving urban schools. Teachers in urban schools seemed to be confronted with many challenges that created barriers to improving student academic achievement levels. Some teachers found the problems of urban schools too significant and avoided working in these environments. Other teachers felt committed to helping improve the trajectory of the lives of low-income, minority students and dedicated their careers to urban schools. The researcher explored the lived experiences of veteran urban school teachers in hopes of providing insight to other educators that could help to improve the current conditions of these schools. Teachers may better understand how it is possible to work within the challenges of urban schools successfully.

The dissertation contains five chapters. The literature review examines, discusses, analyzes, and critiques previous research on urban schools. The methodologies of the earlier studies are analyzed to justify the qualitative methods of the study. Common themes of prior research studies are discussed. The methodology chapter outlines how the study was conducted. The methods and design are explained. The data collection plan is detailed and highlights limitations, delimitations, and expected findings. The results and data analysis chapter analyzes the data collected during the researcher's field experience. The final chapter includes a logical conclusion to justify the argument of the dissertation. The results are interpreted based on existing findings in the field of education.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction to the Literature Review**

In the U.S. society, race and socioeconomic levels are characteristics of students attending urban schools plagued with high teacher turnover rates and low student achievement levels in comparison to their peers of different races and socioeconomic levels. Di Carlo (2015) reported that schools with at least 75% of students receiving free and reduced lunch had teacher turnover rates of over 22%, which is approximately 9% more than schools with lower numbers of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Ronfeldt, and Wyckoff (2010) also noted that neighborhood characteristics impacted a teacher's choice to apply and remain at schools, and schools with larger populations of low-income students that experienced more difficulty attracting and retaining teachers. In cities such as Newark and Union City, New Jersey, some politicians' solutions to improving failing schools was to encourage charter schools, spend more money, or close the schools (Kirp, 2016). School officials in Union City later realized that the solution to improve their failing schools had more to do with gradual change and working within the existing structures. Haycock (1998) noted that schools in urban high-poverty and high-minority communities had some of the most dedicated and talented teachers in the nation. Johnson et al. (2014) suggested that school administrators recognize the leadership within their schools and support teachers prepared to lead school improvement efforts. Perhaps the solutions to the problems that urban schools faced were within the dedicated, effective teachers who chose to remain in these schools.

Understanding the causes of why some teachers have left and why others have remained at urban schools has been a part of the solution in making the changes that students have needed to achieve academic success. In this study, the terms poverty and low-income refer to the

condition of having less income than necessary to obtain the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and other essential items as described by Jensen (2009). According to Muhammad (2009, p. 6), “poverty can put children more at risk for outcomes even more serious than future low income and unemployment.” Studies referenced by Muhammad (2009) proved that children who grew up in poverty were more likely to develop a mental illness, drop out of school, become unemployed, and have poor health. Children who were in the greatest need for quality education, as a catalyst to create positive changes in their lives, were achieving at the lowest levels in American schools (Muhammad, 2009). Researchers studied the attrition rates of urban schools and found that teachers were more likely to leave high-poverty, high-minority, urban schools than teachers at schools with lower poverty rates (Cohen, 2015; Di Carlo, 2015; Long, 2015; Tamir, 2013).

The least qualified teachers were often teaching low-achieving students in urban areas; teachers preferred higher-achieving students (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Cohen, 2015; Loflin, 2013). Guin (2004) identified trends in the turnover rates of low-income, high-minority schools that indicated high-quality teachers were not teaching students in low-achieving schools; these schools not only had high turnover rates, but students were not meeting the standards on statewide assessments. Some teachers began their careers at low-achieving schools and later transferred or quit before they could grow professionally to become more effective. Many factors influenced teacher turnover. These factors include salary, autonomy, specific student and school characteristics, class size, and other factors. School student achievement levels and racial composition were predictors of transition possibilities. According to Boyd et al. (2005), as the proportion of White students decreased and the percentage of Black students increases, White and Hispanic teachers are more likely to leave school. Schools that had the

fewest teacher applicants were the same schools that teachers wanted to leave (Boyd et al., 2010). According to Phillips (2015), 40–50% of beginning teachers left schools within five years as a result of student behavior. Guin (2004) found that schools with at least 50% minority students experienced teacher turnover at twice the rate of lower minority populated schools; these teachers were likely to have higher skills than those teachers who remained at the school. Students who attended low performing schools in high poverty urban areas were suffering an educational deficit that did not place them on track for postsecondary education. Teacher turnover was detrimental to the instructional programs of schools as well as the morale of the teachers who remained at the school (Guin, 2004).

Children in impoverished and minority communities should be able to receive a quality education; “it is a necessity” (Muhammad, 2009, p. 8). In years past, factories and plants were an alternative for persons who were not qualified to enroll in college or enter highly skilled professions. Technological advances have reduced the opportunities for less-skilled workers to enter the workforce; many jobs have been outsourced, and recruitment efforts targeted other nations. Researchers speculated that it would be very logical to assign the best teachers to the students who needed them most. Haycock (1998) stated that doing so would close the achievement gap entirely. Parents with the time and skill set consistently ensured that their children were taught by the best teachers, leaving the mediocre teachers to teach the children of parents who were less skilled. Haycock (1998) also stated that “a full level of achievement in a single school year” (p. 3) was the difference between an effective and ineffective teacher. Students in urban schools needed to receive a quality education beginning with repairing the current teacher turnover problem. According to the NCES (2017), in 2013, almost 50 million students attended schools in urban cities, towns, suburbs, and rural areas in the U.S. There were

successful urban schools in the nation, but many students attended schools that had a lack of resources, overcrowding, high teacher turnover, and other challenges, which led to the students being at-risk for failure (Gehrke, 2005).

Researchers explored the complexity of the challenges in urban schools (Hudley, 2013; Miranda et al., 2017; Schneider, 2017), but little information was documented about teachers working in urban schools taking leadership roles in school improvement (Johnson et al., 2014). The current study explored the lived experiences of teachers in high-poverty, urban schools to gain insight that may help to improve the conditions in schools that other teachers choose to leave. Learning why some teachers want to stay at high-poverty, urban schools showed how these schools might potentially overcome high teacher turnover and create a high-achieving academic culture. Literature related to urban schools was discussed, and possible ways to improve current conditions that may produce a learning environment that could help to create a culture of college-bound minority students was explored.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Understanding the lived experiences of urban school teachers and what motivated those teachers to remain in these environments may prove to be helpful when attempting to improve the conditions of urban schools to produce more minority college graduates. The constructivist learning theory and functionalist perspective applied to this research study as veteran urban school teachers shared their experiences as well as what motivated them to remain at schools where many other teachers do not typically stay for more than 5 years.

**Constructivism.** The constructivist learning theory centers learning on the learner, who was actively involved in knowledge construction (Kalpana, 2014). More specifically, social constructivism encourages learners to come to their version of the truth, which could be

influenced by a person's background, culture, or embedded worldview. The background and culture of a learner shape the knowledge and reality created, discovered, and attained during the learning process.

Lev Vygotsky, a psychologist from Russia, has been credited with laying the foundation for social constructivism research (McLeod, 2014). Vygotsky developed his theories around the same time as Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist. Piaget focused on stages of cognitive development from birth through adulthood. Vygotsky, on the other hand, reported that cognitive development varies across different cultures; childhood environments influence how a person thinks and what they think about (McLeod, 2014).

The viewpoint of social constructivists held that teachers and learners were equally involved in learning from each other. Social constructivists emphasize the importance of the relationship between teachers and students during the learning process. Reciprocal teaching is one contemporary educational application of Vygotsky's theories in which teachers and students collaborate in learning and practicing the skills of summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting; over time, the teacher's role begins to reduce (McLeod, 2014). Another educational application of Vygotsky's theories was termed scaffolding; this is the process of teachers guiding students' learning and development (Stone, 1998).

**Functionalism.** The functionalist perspective regarding education focuses on the ways that school serves the needs of society (Sandovnik, 2007). Functionalists report that education prepares individuals for the workforce. School provides an equal opportunity to prepare for the essential roles in society regardless of ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status. Functionalists also report that education distinguishes "equality of opportunity and equality of results"

(Sandovnik, 2007, p.5). While school may afford a person various opportunities in society, functionalists understand that merit ultimately determines results, which would never be equal.

According to DeArmond et al. (2015), traditional and charter schools had some positive aspects, but “poor, and minority students face staggering inequities, and the picture is especially bleak for Black students” (p. 1). Sever (2012) attributed Durkheim, the founding father of the sociology of education. It is believed that society has interdependent components that have specific functions, and any malfunction in one area, such as education, affects all of society. Educational institutions provide a means of training for one’s role in society. Parsons, Merton, and Luhmann best represent the three major approaches to functionalism (Sato, 2011). Parson was noted for arguing that schools are the only institutional place that teaches skills and roles; schools also serve as a true reflection of society (Selakovich, 1984). Parson viewed schools as neutral entities that provide equal opportunities for students.

The inequality of opportunity exists at educational institutions. DeArmond et al. (2015) explained how urban schools were failing to offer quality education to the majority of public school students throughout the U.S., low-income students, and students of color. Within 50 mid- and large-sized cities, less than one in three students made gains in math or reading; one in four students did not graduate from high school within four years; and affluent students were three times more likely to enroll in their city’s top-scoring schools (DeArmond et al., 2015). Washington’s (2015) reports indicated students of color experienced academic inequities with limited access to high-achieving college preparatory schools. Significant progress was noted in some schools that can serve as models for other schools with similar populations. Raffo et al. (2007) stated the supposed benefits of education did not materialize for people from poorer backgrounds as a result of underlying social structures. Washington (2015) focused on schools

with success stories in cities like New Orleans, that improved or replaced their lowest-performing schools; Memphis and Chicago had Black students participating in advanced courses; Newark and Columbus had high numbers of schools performing better than schools with similar demographics; Baton Rouge was the only city that reported fewer Black students suspended than White students, and Los Angeles had low suspension rates overall. No single model for governing schools proved to consistently address the needs of urban students (Washington, 2015). Evidence-based solutions were needed to improve schools for urban youth.

**Theories supporting the research.** Carol Weiss, an evaluation theorist and practitioner, was accredited for highlighting the challenges associated with the evaluation of complex social and community change programs that birthed the term theory of change. Weiss (1995) defined the theory of change as the how and why an initiative works. The goal of comprehensive community initiatives was to promote positive changes in individual, family, and community circumstances within disadvantaged neighborhoods by improving physical, economic, and social conditions (Weiss, 1995). Urban schools have been the focus of many reform plans. Connell and Klem (2012) questioned why there had not been more meaningful district-wide improvements in student performance and cited the complexity of system change, recurrent public attention on urban education, and the divisive factors of race and class that plagued urban education as the challenges that hinder planning and implementing meaningful change. Serving as educational consultants, Connell and Kubisch (1998) found the theory of change approach to planning urban education initiatives useful since it made plans more sensible and grounded in current research, built a local knowledge base, made the changes more likely to happen, and created an evaluation that was more rigorous, timely, and useful.

Urban school reform required a systematic plan of action with a complex system of change. Weiss (1995) suggested that theories of change incorporate long-term measurable goals, involve stakeholders, and employ a research-based framework. The framework included include key elements and outcomes. Connell and Klem (2012) suggested prioritized sequential timelines and action strategies based on local school conditions and available resources and an accountability plan that monitored the progress of the project and allowed for adjustments based on data. The implementation of urban school reform strategies relied heavily on the planning process, which was led by what needed to be done rather than protecting the business as usual mentality (Connell & Klem, 2012). The implementation phase of reform plans was the most complicated issue; stakeholders developed skills to challenge and support one another, not in doing that which was comfortable and familiar, but in changing the approach to work, following through on commitments, and persisting together in overcoming setbacks (Connell & Klem, 2012).

The conceptual framework for this dissertation stemmed from the researcher's professional experiences as an educator in urban schools and reading current literature. The researcher was alarmed by the number of urban schools that maintained low student achievement and high teacher turnover rates; nearly 40% of teachers in low-achieving schools left within two years, according to Boyd et al. (2008). Far too many students were trapped in impoverished communities with failing schools; a quality education should have been every child's fundamental right.

The researcher aims to support students who live in poverty and attend low achieving urban schools. The goal is to maximize students' intellectual abilities by maintaining effective teachers who are willing to put forth the effort to guide students toward academic success and

matriculates them to higher education. Stabilizing an effective teaching staff results in positive outcomes that benefit students academically, socially, and emotionally. Identifying the motivation of effective urban school teachers who remain committed to these schools is instrumental in increasing student achievement at these low performing, urban schools. Initiatives that focus on the needs of students and teachers, strong school cultures, and consistently enforced high expectations work to improve teacher turnover and student achievement leading to more minority students graduating from college.

The conceptual framework also illustrates how initiatives aimed at urban school reform must understand the culture of the school to create effective plans aimed at improving overall student achievement. Inner-city schools do not have the luxuries that more affluent schools have as necessities (Curwin & Mendler, 1999). The school buildings in the inner city are typically overcrowded and older structures. Inexpensive beautification projects help to create a more positive, inviting learning environment. Inner-city neighborhoods can be hostile and unsafe; a lack of trust permeates the school environment (Curwin & Mendler, 1999). All stakeholders need to find ways to connect. Over time, partnerships that create win-win situations are beneficial for all parties involved. Despite the negative aspects and challenges of urban schools, the reform provides the necessary changes that lead to reduced teacher turnover, increased student achievement, and a significant increase in the number of minority students graduating from college.

### **Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature**

This section explores different aspects of urban schools, including teachers' experiences, teacher attrition, teacher turnover rates, student demographics, and school conditions. Poverty is defined and discussed in relation to urban schools. Teach for America and Urban Teachers'

Program had been introduced as two reform efforts aimed at improving urban schools; effective urban schools and high achieving urban students are explored as well. Each section integrates research on minority students to understand the instructional needs of this population of students better.

Teaching in urban schools came with a unique set of challenges that some teachers struggled to overcome. Students in low-income communities often lacked the motivation it took to be successful in school; teachers were sometimes the only person attempting to inspire students (Curwin, 2010). The social and emotional needs of students in urban schools required school personnel to be innovative in meeting these needs before focusing on academic tasks. A lack of financial, emotional, mental, and physical resources were issues that teachers in urban schools faced that were different from their counterparts in affluent schools (Curwin, 2010). The lack of funds had, at times, forced teachers to improvise and use personal finances to supply their classrooms. Urban school teachers spent a significant amount of time disciplining students versus actually teaching (Curwin, 2010). Unmotivated students misbehaved more frequently, and students who misbehaved frequently often did not care about learning. According to Curwin (2010), urban youth were more susceptible to escalating behavior problems because of their need for control and preservation of their dignity. Urban school teachers faced many challenges that may have contributed to high turnover rates.

**Teacher turnover.** According to Ingersoll and Smith (2003), there were more than twice more teachers than nurses and five times as many teachers than lawyers in 1998; the profession has suffered from chronic turnover compared to other occupations. Recent research revealed that new teachers stayed on the job longer than in previous years; only 17% of new teachers left after 5 years (Long, 2015). Earlier reports indicated 40%–50% of teachers left after the first 5 years,

according to Long (2015). Ingersoll (2001) identified the following characteristics as predictors of turnover: young teachers (under age 30), older teachers (over age 50), special education teachers, female teachers, and White teachers. High turnover rates should have become the focus of education reform among school leaders, considering how indicative they were to underlying problems that harm the learning environment and student achievement.

Unfortunately, after many years of preparing and training to become effective classroom teachers, some teachers discovered that their once highly anticipated profession was not as easy or as enjoyable as it once appeared. There were two options available for those teachers who were not satisfied with their current job placements: transfer or quit. Boyd et al. (2005) reported, in their study of low-performing schools, 27% of first-year teachers did not return to their classrooms the following year. Some dissatisfied teachers migrated to other schools in hopes of finding one that better met their personal and professional needs. Other unhappy teachers changed professions altogether. Both options left schools with high turnover rates, which made schools unattractive to potential new teachers who might have concluded that the school had underlying problems (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Teacher turnover, in addition to low achievement scores, has been a growing problem for schools in America, especially in urban schools with students living in poverty.

The literature revealed the significance of teacher turnover and how its effects negatively impacted the students. Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2002) conducted a quantitative study within Texas Public Schools that investigated the factors that influenced teachers' decisions to switch schools or leave the profession entirely; teacher mobility was mostly related to characteristics based on students, such as race and achievement. The participants in the study were multiple cohorts of teachers from Texas public schools. Mobility rates were correlated to teachers' years

of experience to establish patterns within different types of communities. The study concluded that teachers preferred to teach specific kinds of students, but there was little evidence to prove that higher salaries raised student achievement by reducing turnover. Cohen (2015) reported that nearly half of all new teachers in urban schools leave the teaching profession after five years.

The NCES indicated that schools with 50% or more minority students had twice the turnover rate of schools with lower minority populations; high teacher turnover created problems for schools that included difficulty planning and implementing a coherent curriculum and sustaining relationships among teachers (Guin, 2004). Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2012) used administrative data from New York City's Department of Education and State Education Department to analyze fourth and fifth-grade students over a 10-year period. The study used regression models to study turnover within grade levels and schools. The study indicated that there were many reasons why researchers assumed that teacher turnover harmed student achievement; institutional memory was lost, and resources were spent on the hiring process; schools serving low-income, minority, and low-achieving students had higher rates of teacher turnover.

Another study used teachers in New York public schools and reported that low-achieving students were often taught by the least qualified teachers as a result of teachers in urban areas transferring or leaving the profession altogether (Boyd et al., 2005). Data was gathered from the state database to track teachers over five years. Some schools faced severe teacher shortages that forced districts to lower their standards for teacher quality (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Increased student enrollment and an increase in the number of teachers who retired also negatively impacted an already growing teacher shortage. Inexperienced teachers did not always stay in schools long enough to make a difference, which further perpetuated the issue and ramifications

of teacher turnover (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). The data from Ingersoll and Smith's (2003) study was gathered from the NCES; data proved that working conditions could have improved to help lower teacher turnover rates in schools. Ingersoll's research was cited by Phillips (2015) and revealed the financial impact of teacher turnover. The cost, nationally, for schools was about \$2.2 billion annually. The source did not indicate how the monetary amounts were calculated; however, if the financial amounts were accurate, the money would have been better spent improving schools.

In most cases teacher turnover was viewed as unfavorable; however, depending on the rate and circumstances, turnover could have been positive. If the teachers who left were ineffective, students had been spared from a disservice. Another positive aspect of turnover was that it created an opportunity for new and innovative ideas that new teachers may have brought with them (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Long (2015) indicated that the percentages of beginning teachers who left the profession were lower than previously predicted; only 10% left after year one, 12% after year two, 15% after year three, and 17% after year three. Teacher turnover may not have always been negative, but high teacher turnover in urban schools seemed to perpetuate the existing issues within these schools.

Teacher turnover negatively impacted urban schools (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Student achievement suffered when there was a revolving door of new teachers (Ingersoll, 2001). Students in urban schools have benefited from a more stable teaching staff; this study helps to identify ways to improve teacher turnover rates in high-poverty urban schools.

**Student achievement.** In a data-driven society, student achievement levels are used to rank schools and determine school funding in some cases. Many factors attribute to a school's academic achievement levels. The U.S. has a long history of investigating the causes of poor

academic performance; gender and social class impact academic achievement (Conchas, 2006). Urban schools have traditionally had lower academic success and, the educational reform movement had aimed at closing the achievement gaps in these schools (Ravitch, 2013). Improving the quality of teachers and their pedagogy for minority students who were low-achieving has been a reliable way to eliminate or reduce the achievement gap (Boyd et al., 2008). The link between teacher turnover and student achievement has not been as widely studied as teacher turnover itself.

Researchers, who considered how teacher turnover impacted students, suggested that future studies go more in-depth to examine the impact high teacher turnover had on other areas of the school. The United States Department of Education and the New York State Board of Education investigated the extent to which teacher attrition impacted student achievement in New York City schools (Boyd et al., 2008). From 2000–2005, first-year teachers had higher attrition rates than more effective teachers in both low and high achieving schools. About 25% of first-year teachers left the teaching profession within their first three years; higher rates were the reality in schools with low academic achievement.

Guin (2004) used three years of staff climate surveys, case studies, and interviews to report a significant but negative correlation between student achievement and teacher turnover. High turnover rates harmed the momentum of the instruction delivered at the schools studied in terms of staff morale and day-to-day instructional activities. Guin (2004) suggested that future research address the link between turnover, organizational functioning, and student outcomes. Ronfeldt et al. (2012) indicated that there was a disruptive effect of turnover that goes beyond the changes in the quality of the teachers at a particular school or district. The results showed evidence of a significant and negative effect of teacher turnover on student achievement;

turnover was predominantly harmful to students' academic performance in schools with student bodies with large populations of low-performing Black students. Ronfeldt et al. (2012) did not indicate precisely how turnover harmed students, but guidance on where to look for results was provided; more research was needed.

Future policies must focus on improving teacher retention rates to improve student achievement. Research indicated that teacher turnover rates in high-poverty, low-achieving schools were 50% higher than turnover rates in more affluent ones, as shown by Ingersoll (2001). The research used random samples of teacher data from the NCES. The subpar academic performance of the schools in Ingersoll's study was a result of the schools' inability to adequately staff classrooms with qualified teachers. Schools with higher rates of turnover had fewer students meeting standards in reading and math according to statewide assessments (Guin, 2004). Ronfeldt et al. (2012) revealed the first empirical evidence linking teacher turnover and student achievement; the teachers who left their schools were linked to low performance while low success rates were related to teachers leaving.

Decreasing teacher turnover helped to increase student achievement because teachers' effectiveness improved over time. A constant stream of new colleagues prevented teachers from working to their full potential since time dedicated to helping new colleagues get acclimated to their new environment replaced planning and preparing for students (Guin, 2004). The impact on student learning was hard to quantify, but the extra time that veteran teachers dedicated to supporting new teachers was beneficial if the teacher remained at the school for a lengthy period. Effective teachers, who left low-performing schools, mostly moved to higher-achieving schools, and less effective teachers stayed at lower-performing schools (Boyd et al., 2008). Decision-

makers in schools could have created incentive structures to possibly help to retain teachers and could have kept grade-level teams in place over time.

**Characteristics of schools and students.** Teachers with access to school and student characteristics helped applicants make more informed decisions about schools before applying for open teaching positions. Information that was publicly available via the internet made it easier for teachers to find schools that matched individual preferences. It was helpful for teachers seeking employment to research schools before applying to find a school that was a good fit. Two-thirds of beginning teachers left because they chose to pursue other jobs and were dissatisfied (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Specific characteristics of schools and students could have swayed teachers' decisions to leave and remain at a school.

School and student characteristics played a role in teachers' decisions to remain or leave a school. Boyd et al. (2010) used data for the New York City Department of Education Transfer Request System to conduct a quantitative study that used logit models and found that median family income, crime rates, and local amenities for practical and leisure purposes impacted teachers' career decisions. Highly qualified teachers were more likely to leave the teaching profession or move on to other schools than less qualified teachers, mainly when they taught in low-achieving schools (Boyd et al., 2005). Boyd et al. (2005) conducted a study of elementary school teachers in New York City to understand their decision to change schools or leave the profession altogether. Much like previous studies, Boyd et al. (2005) reported that student achievement and the racial composition of the schools were important components that influenced transition possibilities. The study indicated that teachers left low-performing schools, but the study did not determine if teachers left because of the dynamics of the student body. Curwin and Mendler's study (1998) described inner-city schools as older, overcrowded, unsafe,

and lacking resources, yet more and more of these students believed they would overcome their struggles despite turnover rates. Ingersoll (2001) reported private schools, small schools, urban schools, and elementary schools were more prone to high turnover rates. Some teachers made employment decisions based on the characteristics of particular schools and the demographics of the student body. It was helpful for teachers to gain an understanding of the school and student characteristics before applying for a job at a new school.

**Improving conditions.** Leaders at urban schools with low-achievement and high poverty have believed that student achievement would increase by improving the conditions of the school to mirror those of more affluent schools. Funding may have created a hindrance for some conditions such as higher salaries to grow, but there were cost-free ways to improve other school conditions. Muhammad (2009) reported that school leaders needed to holistically understand important variables in healthy learning environments, learn strategies that eliminate toxic elements, and create healthy learning environments. Holding students to high academic and behavior expectations was one cost-free way to improve achievement, possibly. Jensen (2009) suggested that schools find, recruit, and train the most qualified staff available. School leaders needed to create action plans to address the conditions that deterred teacher candidates from applying for jobs at their schools. Curwin and Mender (1999) suggested that inner-city school teachers all focus on improving all students reading abilities regardless of the subject taught since the lack of reading ability linked to poor achievement and behavior infractions.

According to Boyd et al. (2005), teachers responded positively to salary increases and other non-pecuniary characteristics of their jobs like class size, planning time, facilities, student characteristics, and school leadership. An alternative to raising salaries was to address specific working conditions which may have included safety concerns, student discipline, and/or poor

leadership (Hanushek et al., 2002). The literature consistently suggested that salary was not the main reason teachers left their schools and the profession. Ronfeldt et al. (2012) suggested the implementation of an incentive structure to retain teachers. The Boyd et al. study (2010) advised schools to attract high-quality teachers, select the most qualified teacher candidates available, and retain effective teachers to achieve and maintain healthy workforces. Studies indicated that teachers with higher preservice qualifications were more likely to transfer or leave the profession since they are usually in high demand. Tamir (2013) conducted a longitudinal case study that included 30 teachers from elite colleges; it found that these graduates were the most likely to leave urban schools. The case study conducted by Tamir (2013) indicated that teachers from elite colleges were not being adequately trained to work in urban schools. However, the study also showed that the statistics from quantitative studies did not necessarily convey the entire story about teachers leaving urban schools. Qualitative research studies may have helped to gain more opulent details about what made some urban school teachers remain at their schools and what drove others out.

Jensen (2009), Lemov (2010), and Dweck (2006) all indicated that establishing and maintaining high expectations was a way to increase student achievement. Each researcher shared systematic ways to hold students to high standards. Jensen (2009) suggested that teachers work to understand their students' cultures better and replace feelings of pity with feelings of empathy. Lemov (2010) shared specific, concrete actions that educators use to create positive learning environments that focus on holding students accountable and maximized instructional minutes. Dweck (2006) shared how nurturing atmospheres with high standards for all students help to increase student achievement. Changing the conditions of a school was not deemed an

easy task, but the literature helped support efforts aimed at creating productive learning environments.

**Teaching students in poverty.** Payne (2005) defines poverty as the extent to which an individual lives without specific resources. There is limited access to, or absence of, financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical resources, support systems, relationships, role models, and general knowledge of hidden rules. Jensen (2009) defines poverty as a chronic and debilitating condition that results from multiple adverse synergistic risk factors and affects a person's mind, body, and soul. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that 17.5% of all children under the age of 18 lived in poverty in 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Financial status did not determine if an individual could not learn, but the type of education received was negatively impacted.

Teachers in urban schools can effectively influence their students to achieve academic success and ensure a brighter future. Unfortunately, children who live in poverty are more likely to attend ineffective schools with less qualified teachers (Jensen, 2009). A culture of caring and speaking respectfully begins with verbal and written positive affirmations. Urban youth have unique needs that differ from their rural and suburban counterparts; urban teachers face problems that other teachers deal with less frequently, if at all (Curwin, 2010). A technique mentioned by Curwin (2010) that helps to motivate students in urban schools is to help students feel a sense of belonging by being a part of something bigger than themselves. Curwin (2010) suggested schools use athletic programs, fine arts, and other extracurricular activities to help students feel a sense of belonging and pride in their school. Positive connections with school staff may change a student's life if the proper supports and guidance are in place.

Poverty impacts student academic performance. Children raised in poverty often enter school at lower educational achievement levels in comparison to their more affluent peers (Jensen, 2009). During the early childhood years, parents should provide cognitive stimulation, but children growing up in poverty do not always receive adequate stimulation. High academic expectations are the most reliable driver of high student achievement (Lemov, 2010). Educators who hold students to high expectations help students to grow academically. Curwin (2010) confirms high expectations coupled with challenging work leads to a sense of pride and achievement; motivation increases when teachers raise their academic aspirations. Effective teachers craved challenges and continually improved their skill levels and knowledge base (Jensen, 2009). Supportive administrators attract effective teachers and should appeal to their values. The price of failure is too high for students to pay (Lemov, 2010). Teachers should incorporate techniques that promote student achievement.

Living in poverty has adverse effects on a child, which leads to poor academic records linked to a poverty mindset (Rawlinson, 2011). Jensen (2013) reported that the odds of students who live in poverty graduating from high school are lower than students from middle-income families. Rawlinson (2011) stated that students with poor academic records and a poverty mindset are stripped of ambition and enthusiasm; making them indifferent. Jensen (2013) offers a different perspective of students' failure; blaming schools that were in need of repairs and teachers who are boring, uncaring, and irrelevant. Rawlinson (2011) reported that children who lived in poverty are human and want the same things other children want—to be treated with respect and afforded equal opportunities, though they may ask for them differently. Teachers who choose to teach in schools with high poverty rates should understand the impact that poverty

has on students, know how to implement teaching strategies to help students successfully, and genuinely have a passion and dedication for teaching students in poverty.

Teachers who work in schools with high poverty and low achievement should understand the needs of the student body to educate them successfully. According to Jensen (2013), most teachers struggle to reach economically disadvantaged students. Hattie (2003) found that what teachers know, what they do, and what they care about are the most significant variances that make the difference in student achievement when compared to what students bring to the table. These include home influence, principal's influence, peer influence, and attributes of the school. Jensen (2013) used his personal and professional experiences, combined with research, to outline practical strategies intended to help teachers better engage students who live in poverty by assisting them in learning and building attitudes that help with school success. Kirp (2013) observed students in New Jersey schools and noted that students made a real accomplishment by merely being at school; many were thriving despite the hardships of their lives. At home, the students do not seem to have boundaries, and the young children were very knowledgeable about many of the adult issues going on in their homes (Kirp, 2013). Students in poverty need teachers and leaders who understand their dilemma and are willing to work hard to help them achieve academic success.

Some educators personally overcame the harmful effects of poverty that they experienced as children. Many of these educators have dedicated their careers to working at high poverty schools to ensure that students receive a quality education. Perry (2011) founded an urban, charter school, gave speeches, and wrote books about America's failure to create a successful public school system. The goal was to replicate his program across racial and socio-economic levels. Thomas-El (2003) shared some of his childhood experiences of growing up poor; he used

his personal experiences as motivation to dedicate his career to working at schools in urban communities despite the challenges. Falk and Blumenreich (2012) revealed the dilemmas that teachers struggled within high-poverty, urban communities. Jensen (2013) experienced hunger, homelessness, and violence as a child; as an educational researcher, he shared strategies to help teachers raise the academic achievement levels of students who live in impoverished conditions. These educators overcame poverty, enhanced their pedagogy, and shared their work with other educators to help improve student achievement.

Students who attended high poverty urban schools needed teachers and leaders focused on their specific needs. Some incentives for teaching in urban communities were enough to attract teachers, but the willingness to teach in these communities was not always coupled with the high level of dedication and compassion that students need. Outright and deliberate discrimination was expressed in the form of low expectations and low demands, listless teaching, and inequitable distribution of resources (Payne, 2008). The literature captured techniques that would help teachers to effectively teach students in impoverished communities and increase the number of minority students who are accepted and graduate from college.

**Teach for America.** Urban schools have formed partnerships with outside agencies such as Teach for America to fill voids in urban schools, as indicated by Miranda et al. (2017). Teach for America is a national organization that recruits college graduates from elite colleges and universities to teach in low-income urban and rural schools for at least two years (Cohen, 2015). Teach for America regions are located in Baltimore, Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, New York, the District of Columbia, New Orleans, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, Atlanta, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Detroit, and the San Francisco Bay Area. Teach for America, teachers are usually highly educated and fill in gaps when finding effective teachers in high-poverty areas are a

challenge (Cohen, 2015). There are advocates for Teach for America and those who oppose the program. There is evidence that suggests the success of Teach for America. Reports indicate that nationally, 90% of the corps members return for their second year (Cohen, 2015). Teach for America corps have generally performed as well as other novice teachers.

Critics of Teach for America typically cite the short training period, lack of dedication to the teaching profession, and cultural disconnections to students' cultures harm the communities served. Some of the young novice teachers who represented Teach for America were likely to leave their teaching positions shortly after being hired (Cohen, 2015). Teacher turnover rates increased as a result, and schools were unable to build their institutional capacity. The race and ethnicity of the Teach for America corps rarely matched that of the students in which they taught (Cohen, 2015). Teach for America charged school districts upfront fees that were higher than traditional, district-hired, entry-level teachers; according to Cohen (2015), these non-refundable fees were typically \$2000–\$5000 per corps member, per year. Despite these costs, some school districts hired growing numbers of Teach for America corps in areas where there was not a teacher shortage; according to Cohen (2015), hiring became political.

The thriving urban schools in Union City, New Jersey, did not have Teach for America recruits because it was believed that the fresh out of college teachers would destabilize the schools (Kirp, 2013). School officials in Union City were not convinced that the raw intelligence of the Teach for America recruits translated into the skills needed to be successful in the urban classrooms; the limited training only placed these teachers at the very beginning of the learning curve. Kirp (2013) shared that the successful schools in Union City ran on loyalty and longevity, and 80% of Teach for America teachers quit after the required two years to pursue careers in law

and business. Although Teach for America teachers may have cared for students, Strauss (2013) noted that those teachers were placed in unfamiliar communities for only two years.

High-poverty urban schools have experienced high teacher turnover rates; reform efforts have included a partnership with Teach for America. The company brought in new teachers but did not improve the teacher turnover issues that many urban schools experienced. Teach for America was an ineffective option for many urban schools, and some successful urban schools found other solutions to staffing issues. This study helped recognize certain aspects of high-poverty, urban schools by highlighting the success that veteran school teachers in high-poverty, urban schools experienced.

**Urban Teachers Program.** Another program aimed at helping to improve the conditions at urban schools was the Urban Teachers Program (Jackson, 2015). Started in 2009, Urban Teachers, was a 4-year teacher preparation program aimed at addressing the challenge of retaining highly effective teachers in urban schools (Jackson, 2015). The program consisted of pedagogical instruction, extensive clinical experiences, and coaching support. Coursework, clinical experiences, and coaching have been the key components of the Urban Teachers' program. The coursework in the program aimed at providing the pedagogical and content knowledge needed to deliver quality instruction effectively. Student teaching lasts for one year, and candidates worked with a teacher at a partner school; participants continuously received on-site coaching for three years.

A study was conducted by the National Research Council (2010) included 1000 prospective teachers in an urban school district; the study indicated that lengthening the amount of time spent student teaching had little impact on the perception of being prepared. In contrast, Jackson's research (2015) stated that more practice teaching completed by prospective teachers

led to longer teaching careers. The results were mixed in terms of whether the coaching a teacher received had an impact on student achievement or not. Urban Teachers was another attempt to prepare teachers for teaching in urban school settings. This research study's finding provided the Urban Teachers program more insight into the experiences of urban teachers.

**Successful urban schools.** Past literature mostly discussed urban school issues and challenges. One may have assumed that there were not any successful urban schools based on the amount of criticism publicized. This section highlights urban schools that have been successful academically. Kirp (2013) stated that some education leaders considered that schools were broken and that charter schools were the only solution. The media thrived on negativity and did not report about schools that were doing well (Kirp, 2013). Although some public schools in some communities were operating as factories for failure, and consequently, in danger of being taken over by state agencies or closed altogether, Kirp (2013) stated that there were large and small school districts with different funding statuses and predominantly minority student populations that were increasing achievement test scores as well as closing the achievement gap.

Union City Schools could be a model for education reform according to Kirp (2013). In 2011 the high school graduation rate was 90%, which is 10 percentage points higher than the national average. In 2012, 75% of Union City graduates enrolled in college, and top students earn scholarships to Ivy League Colleges. Kirp (2016) described his observations as a variety of game-changing strategies, and teachers focused on continuous improvement and allotted time to collaborate. Educational leaders need to find evidence-based solutions to create more successful urban schools. One single model might not work in all geographical areas, but an immediate positive change is necessary. Improving schools would help strengthen communities.

**Highly effective urban school teachers.** Poplin et al. (2011) conducted a 4-year qualitative study comprised of nine experienced classroom teachers in some of the most economically depressed communities in Los Angeles. The research team studied 31 highly effective teachers who had the highest percentage of students who increased their assessment scores to the next level of proficiency on the California Standards Test for two to three years, as compared to their colleagues who taught the same students at the same school. The teachers were observed as the research team set out to find out if highly effective teachers existed in low-performing urban schools. They observed the instructional strategies used and the teachers' characteristics and beliefs. Polin et al. (2011) determined that highly effective teachers did exist in low-performing urban schools, and they used strict discipline to establish safe and respectful learning environments. The diverse group of teachers used traditional explicit methods of instruction with few cooperative/collaborative learning activities, maintained a sense of urgency, and linked students' character and achievement to the students' future, going to college, getting good jobs, and supporting their future families. Controversially, Chambers and Tate (2013) reported that high-quality teachers did not improve the overall student outcomes in urban schools; their impact diluted in larger populations.

While the teachers selected for the study were based on their test scores, the teachers themselves were not heavily focused on test scores. Kirp (2013) described a team of third grade teachers as the "Dream Team," as defined by their colleagues, for comparatively meshing as smoothly as a 400-yard relay team does. These teachers had teaching styles and personalities that differed significantly, but their students had been the school's top performers on the state assessment; 79% passed the reading and writing test, and 93% were rated proficient in math. The teachers all grew up near the school and never moved away. They all graduated from not so

popular colleges, and their grade point averages were not stellar. Kirp (2013) stated that each of the “Dream Team” teachers all had a hard time at the beginning of their teaching careers, and their ties to their students seemed to come naturally since the teacher intimately understood their students’ cultures. This group of teachers respected and helped one another, shared materials, planned together, and collaboratively discussed ideas.

This study aimed to complement Poplin et al.’s (2011) findings and helped to identify characteristics of effective urban school teachers. The participant selection process differed, but this study yielded valuable insight to help support high-poverty urban schools. The study revealed that highly effective teachers did exist in some low-performing urban schools.

**High-achieving urban students.** Low-income minority students, despite their limited opportunities, could be empowered to become successful, productive citizens who are college-educated. Conchas (2006) collected and analyzed the results of a case study and highlighted the schooling experiences of high-achieving, low-income minority students. Both qualitative and quantitative methods helped to analyze data on 80 minority students. Interviews and focus groups allowed the inner workings of the school and the daily lives of the students to be revealed.

Baldwin High School was used in Conchas’ study (2006), which showed why and how minority students achieve academic success. Conchas (2006) defined the school’s culture as an underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that were built up as people worked together, solved problems, and confronted challenges. It was noted that high-achieving minority students had institutional support in the form of advanced school programs, which gave students a more rigorous education, the desire and chance to attend college, and a head start on a

career (Conchas, 2006). These were the experiences that led to the students being better prepared for college and careers.

The empirical findings of Conchas' research (2006) highlighted how urban students became academically successful. Society, as a larger entity, influenced the study, and it was suggested that schools produce, reproduce, and reflect social and economic inequalities. The key findings and recommendations from Conchas' research (2006) indicated that smaller and intimate school-within-school structures or small learning communities were significant for student engagement. School effects contributed to differing patterns of school adaptation within and between racial groups (Conchas, 2006). Some institutional arrangements were more successful at creating supportive cross-ethnic communities of learners (Conchas, 2006). Some institutional arrangements successfully channeled students of varying academic abilities into a culture of academic achievement (Conchas, 2006).

**Summary.** Roughly half a million teachers in the U.S. move or leave the profession each year; that is a turnover rate of about 20% compared to 9% in 2009 (Morello, 2014). Compared to other careers, this rate of attrition is exceptionally high and costs up to \$2.2 billion annually (Phillips, 2015). The reasons why teachers leave the profession may vary, but the effects are the same. Minority students are consistently and negatively impacted by teacher turnover. While the immediate impact on student achievement may not be as visible, a correlation exists and will continue to get worse without immediate plans for improvement in place (Phillips, 2015). Leaders of urban schools should examine their learning environments and use the literature to put ideas in place that would retain high-quality teachers and prepare students for success. Programs and initiatives in urban schools have constructed failure and success for urban minority students, as stated by Conchas (2006).

## **Review of Methodological Issues**

Over the years, research had been conducted to describe the issues with urban schools and teacher attrition. Guin (2004) and Yonezawa et al. (2011) used case studies to reveal qualitative research data about urban schools. The research was conducted on the national level by the NCES to provide the best analysis available to the public every four years (Di Carlo, 2015). The data came from follow-up surveys completed by a sample of teachers. According to the data, teacher attrition and mobility were on the rise (Di Carlo, 2015). Ingersoll (2001) and Garcia and Weiss (2017) relied on data from the NCES to report findings on teacher attrition in urban schools.

Data from research studies may have been reliable and valid, but other factors and variables should have been considered before generalizing. Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (1999) used data from a school district in Texas to get empirical evidence on a link between teacher quality and salary; teacher quality was difficult to measure. A study was conducted in successful urban schools in Milwaukee using four years of assessment data; results were only associative (Reeves, 2003). Dee (2003) used assessment data to find evidence that teachers who were of the same race as their students resulted in high student achievement; the study was limited and would not generalize to other schools (Dee, 2003). Durham-Barnes (2011) used interview data to understand the challenges of urban school teachers; the data was not useful for generalizations, according to Durham-Barnes (2011). In another study with 30 teachers, Tamir (2013) conducted interviews and noted that statistical data would not tell the entire story of what made urban teachers stay and leave schools. Specific school and student characteristics must be considered when reviewing data from a research study.

**Quantitative methods.** Quantitative data was typically included in studies on urban schools to help describe specific aspects of the school. Patterson et al. (2004) relied on state testing data to share details about resilient urban school teachers. Research on teacher attrition mostly used quantitative methods that focused on web-based surveys and longitudinal studies. The U.S. Department of Education (2014) used a survey to gather data that showed the number of teachers leaving and remaining at their schools; computer software was used to compute the statistics. Questionnaires were also used to collect data from almost 6,000 public schools and 1,200 private school educators. The survey yielded low response rates from private school teachers, which caused those teachers to be excluded; paper questionnaires were mailed to Amish and Mennonite teachers. In today's technology-dependent society, religious, cultural, and personal beliefs have to be considered when studies are planned. Follow up telephone calls were made to encourage participation.

Sawchuk (2015) conducted a longitudinal study that indicated attrition, mobility, and retention rates. This study supported the claim that teacher retention was a real issue, especially in urban schools, and should be studied for the sake of higher quality schools and improved student achievement. While longitudinal studies showed trends over time and made research more reliable, these types of studies required a great deal of time; Sawchuk (2015) and Boyd et al. (2008) studies took five years. Ingersoll conducted various studies on teacher turnover that relied on surveys conducted by the NCES. One study was based on staffing survey data and showed a strong correlation between teacher turnover and individual characteristics of teachers; other factors not revealed by the survey could have impacted teacher turnover (Ingersoll, 2001).

The literature demonstrated that past research was based on valid data from state departments of education databases. Guin (2004) used demographic and student performance

data to show correlations. The demographic and student performance data allowed the researcher to focus on relationships among variables that produced reliable study data. Creating models from data gathered from a reputable source allowed the researcher to study trends based on authentic characteristics. Boyd et al. (2005) incorporated exit survey data from New York City Schools to create models. Many states relied on state-specific studies that used models; the data may not be reliable in another state. Boyd et al. (2010) used transfer request data and neighborhood characteristics to create models that helped to understand how neighborhood and school conditions impacted the career decisions of teachers. Ronfeldt et al. (2012) conducted research that used schools' standardized student achievement test scores and school characteristics to determine the correlation between student achievement as measured by test data and teacher turnover.

Quantitative research methods had a limited use when the findings of urban schools were reported, but quantitative methods were employed to show attrition trends that existed within schools. Statistical data had often been included in studies on urban schools to help describe the dynamics of schools participating in the study. The information needed to report the findings of urban schools was not quantifiable.

**Qualitative methods.** Teacher attrition research that was qualitative seemed to have involved individuals who provided first-hand accounts of their experiences, individuals who have observed settings that were impacted by teacher turnover, and individuals who researched to confirm their analysis. These qualitative methods may have been more prone to teacher biases and relied heavily on research studies that involved quantitative methods.

Interviews and case studies helped to report details of the research findings. McKinney et al. (2008) indicated that short-term internship experiences did not adequately prepare teachers;

interviews were used to assess the development of student interns at the beginning and end of their internship experience. Tamir (2013) utilized longitudinal case studies with teachers from elite colleges; the study proved that average statistics did not convey the entire story, and qualitative methods were necessary. Patterson et al. (2004) employed qualitative methods to describe resilient urban school teachers and leaders; participants shared why they chose to work in urban schools.

Guin (2004) conducted case studies to examine the characteristics of schools that experienced chronic teacher turnover and the impact that constant turnover had on the working climate. Fifteen schools were selected, but only five agreed to participate. The case studies provided detailed information, but if schools were not doing well academically, they might have been reluctant to participate. Schools with high turnover rates more than likely had teachers who lacked trust and may not have been forthcoming with valuable information. Quantitative methods revealed numbers that may not have always given the full story behind those numbers like qualitative methods. Hanushek et al. (1999) presented district data linked to teacher quality and salary; teacher quality is challenging to quantify and measure.

Farber (2010) examined the conditions that impacted a teacher's decision to leave the profession. The information indicated that there were various reasons teachers quit. Interviews allowed Farber to gain greater insight into why teachers left the profession. The findings could have been alarming to individuals who were not in the trenches of the educational field. The analysis of the study was based more on personal beliefs, opinions, and experiences when quantitative data was not included. For persons who were more data-driven, Farber's (2010) study may not have seemed valid.

**Findings.** The findings from the research on teacher turnover were inconsistent and narrow (Sawchuk, 2015). Federal reports have tried to address shortcomings in research on teacher attrition. Most of the study indicated that teachers left schools within their first five years and that teachers were more likely to remain at schools with high student achievement and high proportions of White students (Boyd et al., 2008). Boyd et al. (2008) stated that much of the discussion on teacher retention was from the system-wide perspective; the focus should have been at the local school level to improve outcomes. Findings from studies that employed interviews and case studies provided more in-depth information. Qualitative methods allowed researchers to include more details about urban schools that helped to reveal participants' experiences and motivation for continued service in these schools.

Urban school research studies have typically used qualitative methods to present more in-depth descriptions of school conditions and perspectives of study participants. Most of the research conducted about teacher attrition had been quantitative. When looking into the teacher turnover rates, the quantitative data helped to begin the conversation about why teachers left or quit their jobs. However, qualitative research helped make attrition data more realistic. This study utilized qualitative methods to explore why urban teachers chose to stay at schools that face challenges; statistical data helped the researcher to identify potential participants, which included teachers with at least 10 years of experience in urban schools.

### **Synthesis of Research Findings**

Current and past research studies have revealed that teacher turnover rates were on the rise, urban schools demand reform, and minority students had the potential to improve achievement levels. The achievement gap that exists in education continues to be a concern for America (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2006). Educational leaders and politicians have tried

many tactics to identify the cause of the achievement gap and potential solutions for closing the gap. According to Miller (2001), most educators agreed that failure should not be an option for students because the consequences negatively impact greater society and could eventually cause the U.S. to lose its competitive edge completely.

**Urban schools.** Teachers in urban schools face many challenges daily that have proved to be too overwhelming. On the other hand, some teachers have been personally invested in urban schools and remain at these schools because they are passionate and dedicated; resilience has helped to keep some teachers committed to these, otherwise, hard to staff schools (Yonezawa et al., 2011). Resilient teachers were less likely to leave urban schools; teachers with personal values related to social justice and education contributed significantly to urban schools and student achievement, according to Patterson et al. (2004). Unfortunately, the knowledge that urban students have received is insufficient; teachers have not always been highly qualified, technology and textbooks have been outdated, and students have been left to struggle while simultaneously trying to escape poverty (Hudley, 2013).

There were successful urban schools that could have been used as models to help improve low performing urban schools. Improving the conditions and academic achievement levels of some urban schools takes more than money, according to Hudley (2013). Hudley (2013) recommended the teaching staff be considered when planning improvements for urban schools; most qualified teachers were less likely to teach at high-poverty schools. More diverse teaching methods were required in response to the minority-majority populations of some urban schools that were comprised of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians. Successful urban schools had high expectations of students and staff, extended learning time coached and trained

teachers, standards-aligned curricula, and data-driven instruction that helped to create a culture of accountability and goals (Johnson & Asera, 1999).

The federal law, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), was created to increase academic achievement levels at low-performing schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). NCLB included two mandates. The first mandate required all states to have highly-qualified teachers teaching core subjects. The second mandate restricted poor and minority students from being taught by inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers at higher rates than other students. In December 2015, NCLB was replaced with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as the nation's leading education law that holds public schools accountable for how students learn and achieve (Illinois State Board of Education, 2018). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2008) stated that having an ineffective teacher for one school year was equivalent to the loss of more than one full year of standardized achievement. Students needed to have several effective teachers for a few consecutive years to repair the academic deficiencies of having one ineffective teacher. Average statistics did not tell the full story of what took place in urban schools, but the data revealed that there were opportunities for urban schools to improve.

**Low attrition.** After being naïve and excited to begin a new career, more and more new teachers have started questioning their reasons for becoming a teacher. Research showed that one in five teachers left the profession within their initial year; three of five teachers left within five years (Farber, 2010). There seemed to be limited knowledge on how to best prepare urban teachers for their actual teaching experience. Tamir (2013) stated that non-traditional programs helped prepare teachers for hard to staff schools, and after about two years, knowledge from preparation programs was replaced by experience. McKinney et al. (2011) found that short-term experiences did not adequately prepare teachers for urban school teaching; only mature, highly

qualified teachers should staff high-poverty schools. Many studies relied on data from the NCES to make projections, analyze trends, and justify findings regarding teacher turnover rates.

Some research on teacher turnover may have caused some individuals to believe that the primary source of teacher turnover was the difficulty in retaining teachers who were willing to commit to the field for 30 years; thus, many left within the first five years (Farber, 2010). On the other hand, Ingersoll and Smith (2003) disputed this theory and concluded that teacher turnover was the result of the inability to recruit candidates who were interested in the teaching profession; there was a teacher shortage. Fiore and Whitaker (2005), Ingersoll (2001), Ingersoll and Smith (2003), and Morello (2014) all reported that teachers were dissatisfied with their jobs and left the profession for reasons that included the lack of autonomy, low salaries, student misbehavior, lack of support, poor student motivation, and large class sizes.

Most schools took actions to combat teacher turnover to some degree, but schools that served low-achieving students had greater difficulty retaining teachers (Hanushek et al., 2002). This idea was supported in the Boyd et al. (2010) study, which showed that teachers favor schools in communities with higher median family income and less violent crime. Perhaps teachers equated high family income to better school conditions and higher achieving students, which left low performing students with the least qualified teachers, as demonstrated in an earlier study by Boyd et al. (2005). Funding formulas in some areas gave all communities the same amount of funding as mentioned by Kirp (2013); this funding trend could potentially alleviate teachers leaving one school in search of another one with higher salaries and better resources.

Most research on teacher turnover rates focused on the negative impacts, but some studies indicated that turnover could be positive. Attrition was not a concern for one principal who looked forward to building a stronger team that could most effectively serve the student

population (Guin, 2004). Some school leaders viewed turnover as an opportunity to balance the budget by hiring more beginning teachers at lower salaries (Phillips, 2005). The literature revealed how turnover impacted schools and students negatively with few positive impacts.

**Improving attrition.** The literature suggested practical ways to reduce turnover that were more effective than merely hiring more teachers. Phillips (2015) mentioned induction initiatives for beginning teachers, which included using more veteran teachers as mentors. Ingersoll and Smith (2003) and Long (2015) analyzed data from the Teacher Follow-up Survey that was conducted by the NCES to suggest solutions. Solutions directly tied to the data included salary increases and improved working conditions. Hanusek et al. (2002) mentioned student loan forgiveness, housing, and expansion of alternative certification programs. The consensus was that the solutions suggested for combatting teacher turnover were financial.

Fiore and Whitaker (2005) and Brown (2002) stated that taking heed to the teachers' feedback would help to combat teacher turnover since the issues that seemed to have caused turnover rates to increase could have been addressed and corrected at the local school level. The most rewarding solution to decrease turnover rates mentioned in the literature would be to retain the great teachers (Fiore & Whitaker, 2005). Teacher retention was an interesting development in the research and provided a more innovative approach to tackling teacher turnover since most of the studies focused on why teachers left schools. Brown (2002) suggested that prospective teachers not apply for jobs in urban areas if they do not have the skill set to succeed there. Kirp (2013) and Baldacci (2004) shared a more modern solution to improve schools with charter schools, vouchers, and alternative certification programs, but some believed that these entities contributed to the turnover issues.

The literature suggested that America had a teacher turnover issue that needed to be addressed efficiently, and there were researchers such as Kirp (2013), who expressed a need to fire more teachers. Kirp's suggestion would have created higher rates of turnover if implemented. Some states have changed tenure laws to make it less cumbersome to terminate veteran teachers who have become ineffective. One may have anticipated that the change in tenure laws would also contribute to high turnover rates.

**Student achievement.** Educational research explicitly discussed how the level of student achievement was an indicator of turnover trends since teachers mostly preferred higher achieving students (Boyd et al., 2005; Boyd et al., 2008). School factors also contributed to low academic achievement (Conchas, 2006). Boyd et al. (2008) linked teacher retention rates to student achievement and mentioned that closing the achievement gap was contingent upon improving teacher quality and pedagogy. Guin (2004) also concluded that schools with higher rates of turnover had fewer students meeting and exceeding standards on state assessments. Researchers have demonstrated the correlation between high teacher turnover and student achievement levels. Some scholars presented evidence showing that teachers with higher student achievement were less likely to leave their schools (Roenfeldt et al., 2012). The literature used student achievement on statewide assessments and employment trends from state and national agencies. Studies were based on reliable data, which helped to make studies valid.

**Urban schools and minority students.** According to Boyd et al. (2010), low-performing urban schools have a difficult time recruiting and retaining teachers. Guin (2004) also found that the least qualified teachers taught low-performing students; turnover contributed to the low number of high-quality teachers for students who needed them most. Hanushek et al. (2002) suggested a 10% salary increase to neutralize the likelihood of teachers leaving schools with

10% more Black students. Jenco (2007) reported that two high schools created programs to provide additional assistance to minority students to address the achievement gap between White and minority students. Most of the research discussed students in urban areas not performing up to par; some studies indicated that some students were defying these odds (Conchas, 2006). The case studies from Conchas' research (2006) provided a voice to those who were achieving academic success and challenged the social inequalities that existed in schools in the U.S.

**Conclusion.** The literature indicated that teacher turnover rates were on the rise, and the increased rates were attributed to student achievement. Minority students at urban schools faced a deficit in highly effective teachers. The causes for teacher turnover and possible solutions had been revealed in past studies. Research should focus on improving the conditions and teacher attrition rates at schools with low student achievement. This study collected information from current urban school teachers that may provide insight to help other teachers improve in certain areas of their teaching responsibilities.

### **Critique of Previous Research**

**Turnover rates.** According to the literature, there appeared to be valid data to suggest that teacher turnover rates were increasing. The current and past research exposed turnover rates that were particularly high for urban schools. The study was reliable, but effective strategies had not yet improved the turnover trend. The sturdy base of evidence would lead one to think that discussions should be more solution-based, considering turnover costs more than two billion dollars a year (Phillips, 2015). Ingersoll mentioned that other professions understood the cost of turnover, but the turnover costs in education had not been recognized.

**Combating turnover.** Broad solutions required strategic planning to ensure that solution efforts would be practical. Teacher turnover was costly, and there have been expensive

reform efforts that have yet to decrease turnover rates. The financial aspects of reform seemed to have caught the attention of many politicians and business people, as mentioned by Teske et al. (2006), when discussing schools in urban areas. Fiore and Whitaker (2005) provided a perspective that seemed bold and practical; they questioned if people even wanted to solve the teacher turnover issue or identify the problem. The problem and realistic solutions were detected many years ago, but studies continued to be conducted to remind educators of what was already known.

**Academic achievement.** Data from the Center of Educational Policy revealed that 71% of schools had reduced instructional time spent on history, music, and other subjects as a way to provide more reading and math instruction (Faber, 2010). The studies mainly used data from standardized testing to help support their findings. Teacher turnover impacted student achievement and vice versa. Ronfeldt et al. (2012) found that student achievement was only harmed by teacher turnover because it changed a school's teacher composition.

Educational reform has been a well-discussed topic long enough for real change to have been in place by now. If there were high performing schools within school districts, it would seem appropriate to study what these schools were doing and then replicate their practices. Reeves (2003) stated that focusing on achievement led to curriculum choices and required a frequent assessment of student progress.

**Urban schools and minority students.** There was more research showing how poorly minority students at urban schools were performing than in the studies similar to Conchas (2006), which showed there were minority students in urban areas who were high achievers. The lack of data reported about high achieving students in urban areas validated Conchas' (2006) idea that American public schools discriminated against minority groups. No Child Left Behind

(NCLB) policies were created to afford all students a fair chance at success. When NCLB policies were mentioned in the literature, it was not in a positive aspect and stated the plans were underfunded. Union City Schools in New Jersey served as a model of good urban education, and the state achievement test data showed that the students in the urban areas competed with their suburban counterparts (Kirp, 2013).

## **Chapter 2 Summary**

Urban schools were overcrowded and had a lack of resources leaving students at risk for failure (Gehrke, 2005). Some urban school teachers overlooked the negative aspects of the schools to ensure students were provided a quality education. High expectations and believing all students could learn helped improve the conditions of urban schools. Feeling sorry for students and lowering expectations did a disservice to students, according to Gehrke (2005).

The literature indicated that urban schools had high teacher turnover and the least qualified teachers (Boyd et al., 2005; Ronfeldt et al., 2012). Research studies had been conducted that included surveys and interviews that outlined the attrition issues and other challenges that plagued urban schools. Garcia and Weiss (2017) indicated that the U.S. government had not yet responded adequately to the decades of research and opportunities to improve urban schools. Ramirez (2007) reported that federally funded schools failed to have most students performing on grade level; reform efforts had not yielded adequate results fast enough.

Successful urban schools had worked to yield positive results that would help students prepare for higher education. Kirp (2016) identified initiatives and strategies that schools implemented to increase student achievement levels and graduation levels. The expectations that school leadership and teachers put in place were vital to the success of students (Miller, 2001).

Attrition impacted the culture and achievement levels of schools; it was essential to discover ways to maintain a consistent teaching staff.

Based on this review of literatures, which developed a unique conceptual framework using the constructivism, functionalism, and the theory of change to understand urban schools, there was sufficient reason for thinking that an exploration of the lived experiences of urban school teachers who chose to remain in these schools would yield findings that would be significant to the field of education. The researcher, therefore, claimed that the literature review provided strong support for pursuing a research project to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of teachers working in high-poverty, urban schools?
2. What successes and challenges do teachers in high-poverty, urban schools experience?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction to Methodology**

The purpose of this research study was to gain an understanding of the successes and challenges of high-poverty, urban elementary schools and to investigate the personal lived experiences of teachers who chose to teach in these particular schools continuously. The researcher expected to gain insight from the lived experiences of the teachers to describe the school and student conditions that may have contributed to teacher attrition. The study utilized a phenomenological research approach. The rationale for this study was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of high-poverty urban school teachers to provide information that could improve the conditions of these schools in a way that may produce more minority college graduates. The literature review indicated that teacher turnover rates had increased substantially since the mid-1980s (Ingersoll, Merrill, Stuckey, & Collins 2018); turnover rates were higher in high-poverty, urban schools compared to schools in other communities (Tamir, 2013). One in five teachers left the teaching profession in their first year of teaching; three in five teachers left within the first five years (Farber, 2010). The literature also revealed that teachers in urban schools faced more significant challenges than their suburban and rural counterparts (Curwin, 2010; Miranda et al., 2017).

The research methods used in this study derived from the investigation, evaluation, and application of the research methods in the existing literature. The researcher intended to explore the lived experiences of teachers in a high-poverty, urban school district. Phenomenology allowed the researcher to examine and describe urban teachers' individual lived experiences in one school district. One-on-one interviews served as the data collection method to gain the perspective of a small group of teachers and their understanding of their lived experiences in

high-poverty, urban schools. The researcher presented the teachers' stories and highlighted commonalities.

Chapter 3 describes the purpose of the study and research questions. The instruments used to collect data, the study sample, and the research procedures are also described. Following the procedures, the forthcoming results, research limitations, and ethical concerns are reviewed and explained.

### **Research Questions**

Curwin (2010) and Miranda et al. (2017) indicated that there were many similarities between urban students and their suburban counterparts; however, the challenges that teachers in urban environments experienced were unique and more challenging. Students in low-income urban environments often experienced low teacher retention rates; urban schools had complex problems that had varied causes mostly attributed to school and student conditions (Hanushek et al., 2002). The average teacher preferred to avoid schools with students who perform poorly (Boyd et al., 2005; Chambers & Tate, 2013). The following questions were devised to explore high-poverty, urban schools:

1. What are the lived experiences of teachers working in high-poverty, urban schools?
2. What successes and challenges do teachers in high-poverty, urban schools experience?

### **Purpose and Design of the Study**

For this study, the researcher selected a qualitative research approach that involved exploring and understanding the meaning in which individuals attributed to a particular social or human problem (Creswell, 2013). According to Poggenpoel, Myburgh, and Van Der Linde (2001), the main goal of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of social life and the

meaning in which individuals place on everyday life. Data were collected in the participants' setting, and the results are interpreted by the researcher to outline the purpose of the data in a written report that was a flexible structure. Qualitative studies are often judged by quantitatively-oriented readers (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

The researcher elected to use qualitative research because the focus of the study was based on the participants' experiences in high-poverty, urban schools. Quantitative research approaches, on the other hand, test theories by testing relationships among variables that are measurable on instruments (Creswell, 2013). The researcher explored the participants' experiences, teacher attrition, conditions in the school, and conditions for the students to highlight characteristics that could improve high-poverty, urban schools. Quantitative approaches would have restricted the researcher's ability to be innovative and creative while employing personal writing skills to report findings from personal interviews of the participants.

Creswell (2014) defined five qualitative research strategies: ethnography, grounded theory, case studies, phenomenological research, and narrative research. Each strategy involved inquiry with a distinct goal. Ethnography is a strategy that consists of a researcher in the study of a cultural group over an extended period in the group's natural setting; observational and interview data is collected. Hoey (2014) refers to ethnography as the "thick description" because the description of everyday life and practices is in-depth. The grounded theory strategy involves the researcher in an abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction that is based on the views of participants. Grounded theory research strategies aim to develop approaches that come directly from data analysis (Charmaz, 2004). Data for grounded theory can come from various sources; interviews and observations can reveal answers to research study questions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Case studies allow researchers to familiarize themselves with a program, event,

activity, process, or individuals over some time; this method answers descriptive or explanatory research questions (Yin, 2004). The narrative research strategy allows the researcher to study the life of individuals based on stories and are retold by the researcher in a narrative chronology. Sandelowski (1991) reported that narrated versions of life events in studies had gained renewed attention. Finally, phenomenological research allows researchers to identify the nature of human experiences about a specific phenomenon as participants of the study have described it; subjects, in limited numbers, are studied to explore patterns and relationships.

The research design of this study was phenomenological; the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of teachers at high-poverty, urban schools and understand best practices for creating an increased number of high-achieving minority students who become college-educated. Studies have revealed high teacher turnover and student mobility rates in high poverty schools (Boyd et al., 2008; Long, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The researcher focused on the teachers' reasons for continuing to teach in high-poverty, urban schools, which could potentially help to reduce turnover rates. Past research primarily focused on the average number of teachers who chose to leave the teaching profession annually. Guin (2004) focused on the shortage of quality teachers in low-achieving schools as a result of teacher turnover. There was a need to examine the circumstances that attributed to some teachers' decisions to remain in high poverty, urban schools. This research study focused on high poverty, urban schools, explored the lived experiences of the teachers, and revealed conditions that may have impacted teacher attrition.

Phenomenological research reveals a collective meaning for a group of individuals' experiences of a shared concept or cultural phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of phenomenological research was to share insight that described experiences shared by a group of

individuals who have lived experiences of a common phenomenon. The researcher interviewed participants who worked in high-poverty, urban schools, and shared their insight to help other teachers to gain a broader understanding of this particular setting. Phenomenological research helps to provide professionals with a deeper understanding of shared experiences in a more focused manner.

### **Research Population and Sampling Method**

The general population for this research study was urban, elementary school teachers in Illinois. The researcher selected teachers in an urban school district as the target population due to its poverty status. This school district is a high-poverty school district; more than 90% of students received free/reduced lunch. The school district has six elementary schools (kindergarten through sixth grades) and three middle schools (seventh and eighth grades).

The participants included 16 teachers who had been teaching in the school district for at least 10 years and extensive experience in the specified learning environment. Boyd et al. (2008) revealed that 25% of public school teachers left the profession within their first three years of teaching; the researcher aimed to conduct research with teachers who had surpassed the number of years that teachers traditionally leave the profession. It was believed that teachers with at least 10 years of experience had reliable insight that could help to improve the conditions of high-poverty, urban schools; teachers with fewer than 10 years of experience may have had limited knowledge to contribute to the study.

Richtie and Lewis (2003) suggested qualitative studies have sample sizes of less than 25 participants. The researcher planned to interview a total of 20 teachers. The sample size was reduced to 16 teachers based on the number of respondents who followed the researcher's protocols to establish a one-on-one interview date and time. The researcher was prepared to

reduce the sample size and/or adjust the participant criteria to include teachers who taught in other urban schools outside of the targeted school district for a combined total of at least 10 years. However, this adjustment was not necessary because the researcher recruited and interviewed 16 participants who had taught in the targeted school district for at least 10 years. The researcher identified a group of male and female teachers of various ages for the sample population. Coyne (1997) defined purposive sampling as a sampling method in which the researcher selects the appropriate sample participants based on the purpose of the research study. The researcher chose this sampling method as it allowed a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied to be obtained from the more experienced high-poverty, urban school teachers.

### **Instrumentation**

Creswell (2013) stated that the researcher was the primary tool of data collection and processing in qualitative investigations. The researcher personally engaged in interactions with the study participants during the interviews. A description of the physical instruments that were relevant to the study and the process that the researcher employed the instruments are explained.

**Interview protocol and structure.** According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research studies should yield in-depth, detailed information about a topic. Creswell (2014) stated that phenomenology allowed researchers to study small numbers of subjects while setting apart personal experiences to better understand the participants' experiences. The researcher used open-ended questions (see Appendix A). The researcher asked probing questions when clarification of a participants' response was needed. The researcher conducted a pilot study using the interview questions with two teachers who fit the study criteria; the results of the study did not include the pilot study data. The pilot study aided the researcher in assessing the interview

questions, identifying necessary changes, and gaining feedback before conducting the actual interviews. Pilot study participants completed the feedback form (see Appendix B) after the meeting.

Participants for the study were selected from the employee information provided to the researcher by school district personnel. The researcher was given the student enrollment, student achievement, teacher mobility, and attrition data that are included in this study for identification purposes only. The participant demographics sheet (see Appendix C) was used to gather information about each participant. The demographic questions asked participants to share their personal contact information, ethnicity, work history, and educational background. The participant consent form (see Appendix D) explained the research study and outlined the participants' role in the study. The participant demographics and consent forms were submitted to the researcher on the day of the interview.

The interviews were conducted in person, one-on-one, in a private room at a location that was mutually agreed upon based on each participant's desires and comfort levels. The researcher read each interview question aloud, gave sufficient time for the participant to respond, and used memoing (see Appendix E) to document pertinent information that described the participants' impressions and the environmental features (e.g., room features, where and when the interview took place, and other relevant information) that helped facilitate the researcher's memory and reflection during the data analysis stage. The audio-recorded answers to the interview questions helped the researcher gain insight into participants' lived experiences in high-poverty, urban schools, and personal beliefs about specific aspects of these schools. The interview questions were crafted by the researcher to gain information about the participants' lived experiences and perspectives about certain aspects of the schools where they work. Participants were asked

questions about their general knowledge and understanding of high-poverty, urban schools, as it relates to teaching experiences; participants shared opinions about their school's attrition rates, community relationships, curriculum, and student/school characteristics. The average interview lasted for approximately one hour.

### **Data Collection**

Multiple sources of data were employed as allowed by phenomenological research. The primary information-gathering method used by the researcher was interviewing. Before the data was collected, the researcher scheduled a meeting with the superintendent and assistant superintendent to discuss the relevance of the study and to ensure district policies for dissertation research were communicated. The researcher provided a written request (see Appendix F) to the school district's administrators requesting permission to conduct the study; copies of all research instruments accompanied the written request. The school district did not require the researcher to obtain School Board authorization to conduct the research study. The school district's administrators granted the researcher permission to conduct the study and utilize facilities for the interviews. All district protocols, as outlined by the administration, were followed.

Upon gaining permission to conduct the research study, the researcher scheduled a meeting with the school district personnel to gather the employees' years of service information that guided the participant sampling. The school district's data analyst provided data regarding student enrollment and achievement, teacher mobility, and attrition. The data was reported in the study to help create a broader view of the current status of the school district about the research study. There was an ongoing analysis to understand the implications of the data to understand the school district better. The data was shared electronically and secured on the researcher's password-protected, personal computer. The teacher retention data was used to identify teachers

who have taught in the district for at least 10 years. The participant recruitment email (see Appendix G) was electronically sent to about 100 teachers who met the criteria; the consent form and demographic sheet were attached. The recruitment email explained the purpose of the study, population, procedures, and requested personal telephone numbers and email addresses, as well as possible interview locations.

The researcher communicated with 30 potential participants, who responded to the recruitment email, via email and telephone, based on individual preferences within three days, and a total of 26 interviews were scheduled. Communication with four of the original 30 potential participants who had initially responded to the recruitment email ceased because there were no further responses to the researcher's repeated requests for interview dates and times. Ten of the initial potential participants were not able to commit to the researcher's available interview dates and times; after several attempts of scheduling and rescheduling, communication ended. Consent forms and demographic sheets were available during the 16 interviews conducted. The researcher communicated via telephone calls and text messages with each of the 16 participants one day before the previously agreed-upon interview date to ensure that the scheduled date and time were still feasible for the participant. All interviews were conducted in person and in a private room to ensure that the conversation was not overheard by anyone else.

The one-on-one interviews were audio-recorded by the researcher using an Olympus portable digital voice recorder, model VN-541PC. The researcher took minimal notes, which allowed the focus to be on the conversations and not note-taking. Data was also gathered by memoing during data collection and analysis. Memos were written on a template designed for this study and added to the interview transcripts; the date and time were documented with general notes and details about each participant's body language and reactions to the interview

questions. The researcher asked the interview questions and gave ample time for each participant to respond. The researcher notated the participants' impressions and the room's environmental features to help aid memory and reflection during the analysis stage.

After each interview, the researcher used Temi, an online audio to text transcription service, to transcribe the audio-recorded interviews. The verbatim, electronic notes were downloaded and securely stored on the researcher's personal computer. The researcher edited the transcripts using the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. The written transcripts of each participant's interview were then emailed to the specific participant using a password-protected Google shared drive. The member checking email correspondence (see Appendix H) asked each participant to thoroughly read the transcripts and report any errors back to the researcher within three days. Each of the 16 participants approved the individual written transcripts of their interview; five of the participants reminded the researcher to be sure to remove all identifying information from the transcripts. The researcher assured all participants that the final report would not contain any information that would breach their confidentiality agreement; participant names and schools were not revealed. All audio recordings were deleted from the voice recorder once the transcription process was completed and approved by the participant. Member checking helped to strengthen the researcher's credibility.

Once approved by the participants, interview transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose, a qualitative, secure, web-based application that required a monthly paid subscription. The researcher's Dedoose account helped to organize and analyze the interview data, identify common themes/concepts, and communicate results. Patterns in the interview data were color-coded using Dedoose's online highlighting tools to help reveal themes. The coding helped the

researcher to understand the phenomenon, as discussed by the participants in the study. The data was later compared to previous research findings.

### **Identification of Attributes**

**High-poverty schools.** According to the NCES (2017), 76%–100% of the student bodies at high-poverty schools were eligible for free or reduced lunch through the National School Lunch Program. Schools with less than 76% of the student body eligible for free and reduced lunch are classified as low poverty. In the U.S. about 20% of public elementary schools and 9% of public secondary schools are considered high-poverty using this definition. High-poverty schools are responsible for educating approximately six million elementary school students and 1 million secondary school students.

**Low-achieving schools.** Schools were considered low-achieving when they fell in the bottom 10% of performance in the state (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Schools were also classified as low-achieving if there were significant achievement gaps based on academic performance on standardized assessments. Graduation rates also identified low-achieving schools.

**Urban schools.** Urban schools are large city schools in comparison to suburban and rural schools. The NCES (2017) stated that urban schools usually have higher poverty rates when compared to rural and suburban schools. Urban schools are generally in need of teachers and resources.

**Teacher turnover.** Ingersoll (2015) defined teacher turnover as the issue of teachers not returning to their schools in subsequent years. It was believed that teacher turnover was driven by school conditions, mainly salary.

**Teacher attrition.** Attrition rates indicated teachers leaving the profession (Di Carlo, 2015). Some studies labeled teachers who did not return to the profession in subsequent years as leavers. Researchers use attrition rates to study trends related to teacher turnover.

**Teacher mobility.** Mobility rates indicate teachers who switch schools (Di Carlo, 2015). Some studies refer to teachers who change schools as movers. Researchers use mobility rates to study trends related to teacher turnover.

**Student achievement.** Typically, high stakes, standardized assessments are used to measure student academic growth over some time. Students' academic strengths and weaknesses are identified using achievement data. Most states measured students' knowledge of state learning standards to determine achievement levels.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The first research question sought to understand the lived experiences of teachers who worked in high-poverty, urban schools, while the second research question sought to reveal the successes and challenges teachers in high-poverty, urban schools experienced. The one-on-one, in-person interviews conducted by the researcher solicited responses from participants of the study to collect rich data to answer the two research questions. The researcher also collected data in the form of memoing (Creswell, 2013). Each participant was asked to describe the personal demographics that the researcher used to describe the population sampling. The student achievement and teacher turnover data, as presented by the data analyst for the school district and mandated state reports, was included to help understand teacher attrition and mobility trends for the past three years. The student achievement data from standardized assessments was added to aid the researcher's understanding of the school district's academic achievement levels. The participants' responses and the researcher's memoing notes were analyzed using a

phenomenological data analysis method that abetted in understanding the participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Bracketing (Moustakas, 1994) was used to remove the researcher's personal biases and preconceived notions regarding the participants and topics discussed. Before conducting the pilot study, the researcher responded to the interview questions and documented previous knowledge and experiences related to the potential participants. The researcher's memoing notes included a description of each participant's nonverbal actions displayed during the interviews, including the participants' body language, reactions to questions and topics, and emotions. Memos also included a description of the setting for each meeting and the possible influence each environment may have had on the participants' responses to the interview questions.

After the researcher had accurate transcripts of the 16 audio-recorded interviews, the data analysis process began for this study followed by a phenomenological analysis (Patterson et al., 2004). The data collected was examined by reviewing the 15 hours of transcripts from the interviews four times. The researcher listened to the audio-recorded conversations first to ensure Temi, the online transcription service, had accurately transcribed the raw data. The raw data remained on the researcher's password-protected computer. All identifying information was changed to protect the identity of all members of the sampling and their colleagues. The initial reading of the transcripts allowed the researcher to understand the phenomenon and data regarding the lived experiences of urban school teachers.

Each interview transcript was imported into the web-based application, Dedoose. The Dedoose program helped to make coding the data more manageable; it also allowed the coded data to be exported and analyzed. The coded data was stored securely in the researcher's password-protected Dedoose account. The initial coding was completed during the second

reading of the interview transcripts; the researcher compiled a preliminary list of 36 categories and themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The researcher used the Dedoose online highlighting tools to organize critical statements and actions into codes to serve as evidence of shared experiences and themes. All quotes from each participant were listed and treated equally. Coding helped the researcher separate redundant and ancillary information, and it indicated patterns and themes to identify connections across themes from participants' responses (Moustakas, 1994).

The third reading of the interview data allowed the researcher to check the 36 themes against the interview data. The researcher decided that the list of 36 themes was too specific and reduced the list to 26 themes (Creswell, 2013). The interview data was very lengthy and contained information that did not directly relate to the two research questions. Pertinent information was highlighted, and the data was sorted and grouped according to the two research questions (Creswell, 2013). The researcher recognized the opportunity to combine and eliminate some of the themes to focus on the lived experiences and the purpose of the study. As a result, the first research question had six themes, and the second research question had three themes.

The fourth and final reading of the data allowed the researcher to use the finalized list of themes to analyze each response and to ascertain that the findings were consistent with the interview data. Initially, open coding was used to label the data and link it to one of the nine themes (Creswell, 2013). After several rounds of recursive coding, the coded data was exported into a Microsoft Word document securely stored on the researcher's personal computer.

Next, the researcher summarized themes to tell the shared lived experiences of the participants and created individual textual and structural descriptions. Memos were analyzed to describe how the setting may or may not have influenced the participant's experience; this

initiated the initial interpretations of the data. The researcher categorized the specific conditions at high-poverty, urban schools, as mentioned by participants; the goal was to identify those conditions that could have been capitalized and changed to improve teacher quality and satisfaction. The researcher began the process by examining the emotional, social, and cultural connections which may have included the race and socio-economic level of the participant. The data was synthesized to give a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of urban teachers and answer the two research questions.

The final written report of the interviews summarized the experiences of the participants and described commonalities. The report was written in a manner that could potentially allow other educators to understand the phenomenon and perhaps recognize aspects of themselves in the study participants. Curwin (2010) stated that individuals that comprised any urban education system represented the most significant challenge and were the well from which tools and resources could be drawn to bring about change. The researcher aimed to provide valuable insight that could help to promote positive changes in high-poverty, urban schools.

### **Limitations of Research Design**

Limitations of the research study were beyond the control of the researcher; they existed as a result of the chosen methods and design of the study. The limitations of this study were as follows:

1. Qualitative methods gave the perspective of the participants in the study, but they did not allow the researcher to make correlational relationships or causal inferences. The methodologies were developed after a review of existing literature related to the research study.

2. The phenomenological design made it more difficult for the researcher to summarize a common understanding of the phenomenon among the study participants (Creswell, 2014). Educators could gain an understanding of the shared experiences of the participants; the researcher listened to the recordings and read the transcripts multiple times to ensure individual perspectives were clearly and accurately interpreted.

The delimitations were the boundaries set as a result of the researcher's intentional choices related to the study. The delineations for this study were as follows:

1. The study only focused on high-poverty, urban school settings. The researcher selected this specific learning environment based on the ongoing challenges that remained present in many urban schools. Curwin (2010) stated that the challenges teachers in urban schools faced were unique and overwhelming.
2. The study's participants were from one school district. Using teachers from one school district may not have allowed the researcher to gain broader insight into urban schools in general, but the study could help to make improvements within the chosen school district.

## **Validation**

Creswell (2017) defined qualitative validity as procedures the researcher followed to check for the accuracy of the study's findings. Validity strengthens qualitative research as it determines if the results were accurate from the views of the researcher, the study's participants, and the reader. Creswell (2017) suggested that researchers employ multiple validation techniques to convince the reader of the accuracy of the findings. The data collection procedures increased the credibility of the researcher and the validity of the study.

**Credibility.** The researcher's credibility was strengthened through careful data collection procedures, which included the interview instrument, audio recordings of the interviews, and the transcripts being reviewed by the participants to check for accuracy. Member checking allowed the researcher to clarify and verify themes with study participants. The researcher was engaged with the data for a prolonged period while reading the interview transcripts four times. The reported findings of the study used detailed descriptions of the participants' responses to the interview questions. The researcher increased credibility by using direct quotes from the interviews.

Saturation is a term used to describe the point in which the researcher has a full understanding of each participants' perspective (Saunders et al., 2017). The term saturation describes the point in which there is no need to continue collecting data. For this study, the researcher had sufficient data after interviewing 16 teachers. For each interview, the researcher probed the participants when necessary until the point of saturation was reached.

**Dependability.** The researcher ensured the data was consistent and stable. The pilot study was conducted with two participants to ensure interview questions were relevant and addressed the focus of the study. The pilot study participants provided feedback to the researcher regarding the interview instruments, the demographic form, and interview questions. Creswell (2014) advised researchers to pilot test interview questions to ensure the items were appropriate and elicited effective responses. The interview questions would have been changed, added, or dropped based on the pilot study. The feedback from the pilot study participants did not indicate the need to make changes to the interview questions or protocols. The pilot study participants reported that the researchers should use a more conversational style of interviewing. It was also

recommended that the researcher provide clarification of the difference between interview questions 11 and 12 before asking the participants these questions because they were similar.

### **Expected Findings**

The researcher expected the results of the study to confirm and reveal that teachers in high-poverty, urban schools remain dedicated to these particular types of schools despite the challenges and lack of improvements. The teachers have a deep desire to help resolve the issues that plague these learning environments in hopes of changing the trajectory of their students' academic careers. The study was expected to identify school and student conditions that may attribute to teacher turnover rates. The study results could help to alleviate potential attrition issues among teachers in the school district and other schools with similar demographics.

The researcher anticipated that teachers in high-poverty, urban schools were intentional about their choice to teach in these schools. While these teachers experienced many challenging experiences, they also had rewarding experiences. Teacher attrition rates have been a concern for teachers who remain in high-poverty, urban schools, but there may have been positive school and student characteristics that continued to attract teachers. The findings in this study were expected to support Boyd et al. (2008) conclusions that indicated teacher turnover rates were higher in schools with high poverty rates. Guin (2004) confirmed that low-income, minority students experienced higher teacher turnover. The schools with poor, non-White, low-income students had difficulty attracting and retaining teachers, according to Boyd et al. (2010).

The results of the research study may have also revealed school and student conditions that attribute to some teacher's decision to leave high-poverty, urban schools. The researcher expected the school and student conditions to include teacher salary, student achievement levels, and teacher ethnicity. Boyd et al. (2005) proved that class size, location of schools, and teacher

ethnicity were variables that contributed to high achieving teachers leaving low-achieving schools. Low salaries, low standardized test scores, and minority students with high poverty levels contributed to high teacher turnover, according to Hanushek et al. (2002).

On the other hand, the researcher also sought to reveal the school and student conditions that attributed to a teacher's decision to return to high-poverty, urban schools. The expected results included teacher salaries, teacher ethnicity, and student behavior. Minority teachers typically remain in schools with large populations of low-achieving minority students (Boyd et al., 2010). Higher salaries and few student discipline problems seem to contribute to high teacher attrition.

The results of this study would add to current literature related to improving teacher attrition and increasing student achievement among some minority students. The results include teacher mentor programs, higher salaries, and specific teacher philosophies and methodologies. Phillips' (2015) findings suggested that mentorships during the first year of teaching helped to improve teacher attrition. Sawchuk (2015) found that mentorship and starting annual salaries over \$40,000 contributed to combat teacher turnover.

### **Ethical Issues**

Ethical concerns such as informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and integrity were addressed by the researcher's approval from the school district administrators to conduct the study. A benefit of this study was that some stakeholders gained valuable insight that would help to improve certain aspects of the school district. All participants were asked the same 12 interview questions with the same protocols instituted during each interview.

**Conflict of interest assessment.** The researcher was employed in a high-poverty, urban school. Therefore, the potential for researcher bias existed. To minimize conflict of interest, the

researcher only gathered data from participants outside of school hours. The communication between the researcher and participants was conducted in a credible manner to ensure the researcher remained credible. This helped to ensure reliability and credibility throughout the study. Voluntary participation of study participants and confidentiality were safeguarded by the researcher. Written consent was obtained from all participants via email and a signed consent form; the purpose of the study was explained verbally before the interview. Some participants had a preexisting working relationship with the researcher; this may have helped to diminish any anxiety and trust issues for some of the participants. However, the researcher remained objective throughout the study's data collection and analysis and did not allow working relationships to conflict with objectivity and credibility.

**Researcher's position.** The researcher has experience as an educator in high-poverty, urban schools. Therefore, a potential moral concern was that of researcher bias. The researcher's biases were recorded before the participant interviews beginning. Bracketing was used to address concerns of researcher bias.

**Ethical issues in the study.** The researcher thoroughly explained to each participant the purpose of the research study and the procedures utilized to protect the participants' identities. The researcher respected each participant's right to share personal experiences and information related to the phenomenon. The study participants' identities were not revealed in any way; names and personal information were changed by the researcher. The researcher securely stored all documents from the study for three years in a locked file cabinet. All electronic data will remain on the researcher's password-protected computer for 3 years. Once 3 years have elapsed, the records from the study will be destroyed by the researcher. The researcher singlehandedly conducted the research study, including the interviews and data analysis. To ensure participants

did not experience any harm as a result of participating in this study, the researcher protected confidentiality by de-identifying participant information. Numeral pseudonyms protected each participant's identity. Participants were assigned a teacher number from 1–16. The numbers aligned with the interview order of the participants. All participants were treated fairly by the researcher during the study.

### **Chapter 3 Summary**

Teachers at high-poverty, urban schools encountered many challenges, and this is a phenomenon that is caused by various factors. Teacher retention rates could be improved by, first, understanding the student and school conditions that lead to a teacher's decision to leave these schools; school districts could use the study to improve conditions that lead to teachers remaining at particular schools. Some teachers may have been reluctant to disclose their personal experiences, opinions, and thoughts about the school district while employed by the school district. Other teachers might not have been as forthcoming with information if a good relationship with administrators were not previously established.

This explained the logical decision to use a phenomenological approach to explore high-poverty, urban schools. The section also detailed the study design and population that was used to explore the lived experiences of teachers in high-poverty, urban schools, and the conditions that impacted a teacher's decision to remain at these schools. The study employed qualitative research approaches to explore the lived experiences of teachers who have worked in the selected school environment for at least 10 years. The researcher utilized one-on-one interviews to gain insight into the teachers' experiences. Other data was gathered from demographic forms that participants completed before the interview. Participants' true identities remained unknown by anyone other than the researcher; participant names were changed to Teachers 1–16 by the

researcher to safeguard confidentiality. The researcher was also careful not to include any information that would reveal a participant's identity. Enrollment, achievement, and attrition data was included in the study to give a broader perspective of the school district.

The researcher examined the data that was gathered for this study. Transcripts of the interviews were reviewed and approved by each participant to ensure credibility and validity. Conventional understandings of the data and having one research setting were the limitations of this study. The pilot study of the interview questions further validated the research study. The appendix includes the interview questions. The researcher expected to show that teachers in high-poverty, urban schools remain in these schools because of personal dedication to this particular population of students. The data from the interviews provided insight that could lead to improved attrition rates, school conditions, and student characteristics within the school district and other high-poverty, urban schools.

## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results**

### **Introduction to Data Analysis and Results**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the data analysis process of the data collected during this study and report the findings. This qualitative phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of teachers who have chosen to remain at a high-poverty, urban school district for at least 10 years. The study interpreted the personal stories of a small group of teachers who reflected on their experiences in urban schools to provide a broader understanding of their reasons for continuing to teach in an urban school despite the challenges. The literature review, as outlined in Chapter 2, showed that exploring the lived experiences of urban school teachers who choose to remain in these schools would produce significant findings that could benefit the field of education. Johnson et al. (2014) indicated that most teachers were interested in identifying and addressing the school-wide challenges under their principals' leadership. Perry (2011), Thomas-El (2003), and Jensen (2013) were educators who dedicated their careers to urban schools and whose knowledge and experiences became widespread to improve urban schools. The data collection process sought to address the research questions presented in previous chapters:

1. What are the lived experiences of teachers working in high-poverty, urban schools?
2. What successes and challenges do teachers in high-poverty, urban schools experience?

This chapter describes the study's participants and data analysis. The chapter then presents the findings, data, and summary. A summary of responses was organized by themes that emerged from the results.

The qualitative study was conducted using one-on-one interviews to elicit descriptions of the participants' experiences in the school district. The interviews were conducted, and the data was recorded, analyzed, and coded using the Dedoose web application. The personal stories of each teacher helped the researcher to understand the lived experiences of each one and the reason for remaining in the high-poverty, urban schools.

The researcher has served as an elementary school educator for 24 years. The researcher's experience included 16 years as a teacher and administrator in high-poverty, urban schools. The humbling experience of attending an urban school as a student and returning to that same school as a teacher sparked the researcher's interest and passion for high-poverty, urban schools. The one-on-one interviews conducted for this study allowed the researcher an opportunity to have in-depth discussions with teachers who have worked for at least 10 years in urban schools.

### **Description of the Sample**

Data that guided the identification of the eligible participants for this study was obtained directly from the school district in a report that indicated the number of years of service for all teachers. At the time of the report, there were approximately 180 teachers employed by the school district. Of the 180 teachers, approximately 80 did not meet the criterion to participate in the study. Based on the report, about 100 of the teachers met the requirements of working in the school district at least 10 years for inclusion in the research study. A total of 16 teachers participated in the study. Brief biographies of the participants are presented. The researcher had varying degrees of contact with the participants over the past five years.

A target population of 100 teachers who taught in urban schools for at least 10 years was contacted regarding their eligibility to become a participant in this study, as outlined in Chapter

3. Thirty-one (31%) of the 100 qualifying teachers responded and expressed an interest in participating in the study. A total of 26 interviews were scheduled, and 16 interviews were conducted with the teachers who responded and expressed an interest in the study. Not every teacher who expressed an interest in participating in the study joined; this was mainly the result of scheduling conflicts and a lack of expected communication. Therefore, the participation rate was 51.61%. The invitation to participate in the study was emailed to the teachers' work email addresses during summer vacation, and the timing of the study may have impeded the response rate and speed.

The purposeful sample for the research study was 16 urban school teachers employed in the urban school district for at least 10 years. The study's participants included three males and 13 female teachers; seven teachers reported the ethnicity of Black and nine reported the ethnicity of White. The participants' years of overall teaching experience ranged from about 15 to 30 years, with a mean of approximately 20.63 years. The number of years teaching in an urban school ranged from 10 to 30 years, with a mean of 19.38 years. The range was 10 to 30 years in the school district, with an average of 17.19 years. About nine teachers had taught in their current urban school district for their entire teaching career. Fourteen of the participating teachers had only taught in urban schools, including schools in other urban school districts. Only two of the participants had teaching experience in schools that were not considered urban.

The researcher assumed that the study sample would include 20 teachers, but there were only 16 participants. The demographic data, each teachers' gender and years of teaching experience, is displayed in Table 1. The sample size was small, and every teacher was assigned a code (Teachers 1–16) to protect their identity and maintain confidentiality. There were 10 elementary teachers and six junior high school teachers in the sampling. The school district is a

kindergarten through eighth grade urban school district with six elementary and three junior high schools.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Information*

Participant	Gender	Years of Experience	Years in Urban Schools	Years in District
Teacher 1	Female	25	25	10
Teacher 2	Female	20	20	20
Teacher 3	Female	20	20	20
Teacher 4	Female	25	10	10
Teacher 5	Female	20	20	20
Teacher 6	Female	15	10	10
Teacher 7	Female	20	20	15
Teacher 8	Male	15	15	15
Teacher 9	Female	20	20	20
Teacher 10	Female	20	20	15
Teacher 11	Male	30	30	30
Teacher 12	Female	20	20	20
Teacher 13	Female	25	25	25
Teacher 14	Female	20	20	20
Teacher 15	Male	15	15	10
Teacher 16	Female	20	20	15

**Teacher 1.** Teacher 1 was female with 25 years of teaching experience. All of her teaching experience had been in urban schools, and she worked in the current school district for 10 years. Teacher 1 had three education degrees and completed her student teaching in an urban school.

**Teacher 2.** Teacher 2 was female with 20 years of teaching experience. She had only worked in low-income urban schools and had two education degrees. Teacher 2 came into the teaching field through an alternative certification program at a local university. She did her student teaching in an urban school district.

**Teacher 3.** Teacher 3 was female with 20 years of teaching experience. She had two education degrees. Teacher 3 completed her student teaching at an urban school and had only worked in the current school district.

**Teacher 4.** Teacher 4 was female with 25 years of teaching experience. She was intentional about teaching low-income students after teaching at a school with a different demographic for 10 years. Teacher 4 had two education degrees, and her student teaching was not in an urban school.

**Teacher 5.** Teacher 5 was female with 20 years of teaching experience. She had spent her entire career at the same school. Teacher 5 had three education degrees and described the school where she did her student teaching as “high poverty.”

**Teacher 6.** Teacher 6 was female with a total of 15 years of teaching experience. She had one degree in education. Teacher 6 spent less than five years teaching at a non-urban school after completing her student teaching in a predominately White suburban school.

**Teacher 7.** Teacher 7 was female with 20 years of teaching experience. She had three degrees in education. Teacher 7 completed her student teaching and taught in a different urban school before working in the school district used in the study.

**Teacher 8.** Teacher 8 was a male teacher who became a teacher through an alternative certification program. He had 15 years of teaching experience and two education degrees. Teacher 8 completed an alternative certification program that did not include student teaching. He had spent his entire career in the school district used in the study.

**Teacher 9.** Teacher 9 was a female teacher with one education degree. She had 20 years of teaching experience. Teacher 9 had spent her entire career in the urban school district where the study was conducted. Her student teaching was completed at an urban school.

**Teacher 10.** Teacher 10 was a female teacher who had 20 years of teaching experience at the time of the study. She had two education degrees. Teacher 10 taught in urban schools for her entire career after completing her student teaching at the same type of school. She spent five years in another urban school before coming to the school district, where the study was conducted.

**Teacher 11.** Teacher 11 was a male teacher with 30 years of teaching. He had two education degrees and spent his entire career in the school district where the study was conducted. Teacher 11 completed his student teaching in a rural school district.

**Teacher 12.** Teacher 12 was a female teacher with 20 years of teaching experience. She was a teacher who had only taught in the school district where the study was completed. Teacher 12 completed an alternative certification program and earned one education degree. Her student teaching was completed at an urban school.

**Teacher 13.** Teacher 13 was a female teacher. She had 25 years of teaching experience and had been at the school district, where the study was conducted for her entire career. Teacher 13 had two education degrees and completed her student teaching at a non-urban school.

**Teacher 14.** Teacher 14 was a female teacher with 20 years of teaching experience. She was a teacher with two education degrees. Teacher 14 had been at her current school for her entire career and completed her student teaching at an urban school.

**Teacher 15.** Teacher 15 was a male teacher with 15 years of experience. He had one education degree and completed five years of teaching at a different urban school. Teacher 15 completed his student teaching at a non-urban school.

**Teacher 16.** Teacher 16 was a female teacher with 20 years of experience. She taught for five years at a non-urban school and had two education degrees. Teacher 16 completed her student teaching at a non-urban school.

### **Research Methodology and Analysis**

**Phenomenology.** This study was phenomenological and sought to understand the lived experiences of urban school teachers who chose to remain in this setting despite the challenges and hardships. Phenomenology, a qualitative research method, allowed the researcher to explore and to report rich details that described the experiences of teachers in the urban school district as shared in one on one interviews. The researcher identified the phenomenon of high-poverty, urban schools. The researcher explored the phenomenon through interviews with teachers, which also provided teachers an opportunity to reflect on their personal experiences in urban schools.

Qualitative data was collected from 16 interviews with teachers who had taught in urban schools for at least 10 years. The interviews allowed the researcher to highlight the commonalities of the participants about teaching in an urban school district. The data collected helped the researcher gain an understanding of each participant's reason for remaining in the urban school district despite the challenges they may have experienced. The detailed findings of the study could improve the current conditions of urban schools. The study provided specific feedback that could help to strategically create plans for the improvement of urban schools.

During the research study, there were no substantial deviations from the method described in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. The details of the research protocol were outlined in Chapter 3. One change was made to the methodology; the researcher used a transcription service to transcribe the interviews. The transcription service helped to reduce the time devoted to producing accurate transcripts of the interviews. Another change occurred when the researcher

used a web application to code the interview transcripts. The web application was an efficient method of coding transcripts, organizing excerpts, and identifying themes in the data.

**Data sources and analysis.** The data for this study derived from interview transcripts and participant demographic forms (see Appendix C). Interviews were conducted with all 16 participants prior to and after the first month of the 2018–2019 school year. All participants gave their consent to being audio-recorded by the researcher.

Before the interviews, the researcher began the bracketing process as a way to avoid having the data influenced by personal biases and preconceived notions about the participants and topics. The researcher documented personal responses to each interview question to make it simple to identify potential biases. The researcher noted previous knowledge and experiences regarding each participant on a memoing sheet (see Appendix E). During the interviews, the researcher also used memoing to document the participants' body language, reactions, and emotions during specific parts of the discussion. The memos were analyzed to describe how the setting of the interview influenced the participants' responses. The researcher's instinctive reactions were bracketed.

Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were generated using the web-based service, Temi. The interviews totaled approximately 15 hours of data. The transcripts of the recordings represented a rich body of primary source data. The researcher reviewed the interview transcripts for accuracy and made the necessary corrections. The researcher also purchased a subscription to the Dedoose web application to facilitate further qualitative analysis. The interview transcripts were imported into Dedoose and coding was completed using the application.

The transcripts were subjected to several rounds of recursive coding until the researcher identified and categorized trends, themes, quotes, and categories. The first time the researcher

read the data to obtain a sense of what had been communicated. The open coding process was used and yielded a total of 36 codes. Although the computer program was used, the researcher had to decide what constituted the codes. During the second reading of the interview transcripts, parts of the text were highlighted and color-coded to fit the list of codes. Then the researcher revised the list of codes and removed 10 that did not match the purpose of the study. The interview transcripts were read for a third time to reduce the coding text and divide the codes into broad groups based on the research questions. Six main themes were developed for the first research question, and the second research question resulted in three themes. The coding analysis is presented later in this chapter using headings, subheadings, and quotations that emerged from the qualitative work of the researcher. The interview data was synthesized to give a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of urban school teachers.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings of the study focused on the lived experiences, successes, and challenges that urban school teachers in one Illinois school district encountered. Nine themes emerged during the analysis of the interview data. The themes were experiences and perceptions of urban schools, preparations for teaching in urban schools, rewarding aspects of urban school experiences, student achievement, motivation to continue teaching in the urban schools, relationships among stakeholders, student characteristics, school characteristics, and advice to new urban school teachers. The themes represented the participants' experiences and views regarding their responses to the study's interview questions. The themes also described the findings for this research study and are recorded in Table 2. The study findings discussed academic achievement, student behavior, relationships within the school community, school and student demographics, and advice the participants had for new teachers in the school district.

Table 2

*Themes Generated from Data Analysis*

Research Question	Themes that emerged
1. What are the lived experiences of teachers working in high-poverty, urban schools?	Experiences and perceptions Preparation Rewarding aspect Motivation Relationships Advice to new teachers
2. What successes and challenges do teachers in high-poverty, urban schools experience?	Academic achievement Student characteristics School characteristics

**Experiences and perceptions.** During the interviews, participants communicated both positive and adverse characteristics of urban schools and students. The information obtained from the sample regarding their knowledge and experiences of urban schools showed that the teachers were aware of the dynamics of their student body and school community. The teachers recognized the challenges that their students experience outside of school. Participants commended students for their ability to come to school in spite of personal difficulties which may include performing below grade level, atypical family structures, and a lack of necessities. The sample identified staffing issues that the school district had encountered. Despite the challenges, the participants expressed their dedication to the students and the school district.

**Preparation for teaching in urban schools.** The participants discussed how college courses prepared them to teach in urban schools. The general consensus among the sampling was college courses did not specifically focus on urban schools leaving the teachers feeling inadequately prepared to teach in an urban school district. The teachers learned to deal with the challenges of urban schools while working in these environments. One teacher referred to the “on the job training” as being “baptized by fire.” Only three of the participants intentionally

planned to teach in an urban school, and six of the teachers completed alternative teacher certification programs. According to the data gathered in the study, the alternative certification programs seemed to focus more on urban schools than traditional undergraduate teacher preparation programs.

**Rewarding aspects.** The participants shared the most rewarding aspect of working in their current school and school district. The information obtained from the participants showed that students were the essence of the rewarding aspects of the teachers' jobs. The sampling valued connections and relationships with students because these aspects made the job fulfilling. Participants in the study described how the gratitude that students had personally shown to them made their job rewarding. The social, academic, and emotional growth of students and student academic success were also mentioned.

**Academic achievement.** The participants provided insight into student achievement in the district. Eight participants of the sampling shared insight about low standardized test scores, and six participants discussed the academic growth that students made. The teachers shared things that seemed to hinder the academic progress of the student body; 13 teachers mentioned issues with the curriculum, and six teachers said discipline and social-emotional needs. The impact that administrators and parents had on academic achievement was discussed in five of the interviews.

**Motivation to continue teaching in urban schools.** Every participant had an opportunity to explain what motivated them to remain in the high poverty, low achieving urban school district. Based on the responses that participants provided, there were a wide variety of job features that motivated the sampling; however, some of the answers were grouped in a category related to longevity, job security, seniority, and being on the higher end of the salary

schedule as explained by 10 participants. The analysis showed that the most influential factors that motivated teachers to continue to teach in the school district were related to their investment in the school district, relationships formed with colleagues and families, and personal finances. The qualitative data showed that almost every participant discussed their investment to teach at an urban school in terms of growing up in the community and feeling the need to give back. Overall, all 16 participants mentioned at least two facets of their job that motivated them to continue to work in the school district.

**Relationships among stakeholders.** Each participant described the relationships among teachers, students, parents, and local agencies within the school community. Relationships among teachers were viewed by seven participants as positive. Five participants used positive adjectives to describe student-teacher relationships. The data revealed that nine teachers recognized that the staff's relationships with parents needed to improve. Staff relationships with administrators varied; five teachers described positive relationships, and four expressed concerns. The narrative from the interviews showed that eight of the 16 participants described positive relationships between the schools and local agencies within the school community.

**Advice to new teachers.** The sample was asked to share ideas for new teachers that could help them to be successful urban school teachers. Nine participants advised new teachers to get to know their students, establish relationships, and avoid making assumptions about students and their families. Flexibility, openness to feedback, and self-reflection were ideas suggested by nine teachers. The data showed that nine participants recommended new teachers have a mentor or informally partner with a veteran teacher as a source of support. Six teachers discussed the importance of classroom management.

**Student characteristics.** The sample provided both positive and challenging student characteristics. Twelve participants stated that most of the students had positive attitudes about school and wanted to learn. The data showed that seven participants recognized that students have excellent coping skills; nine participants stated home issues as a challenging characteristic. Eight participants discussed positive peer relations among students, and seven participants reported positive behavior traits of the students.

On the other hand, 10 teachers cited student behaviors such as defiance and disrespect as challenging characteristics. Many of the students had artistic abilities and other hidden talents that were mentioned by five teachers. Five teachers discussed how much of a challenge it is to work with students who do not live up to their full potential.

**School characteristics.** The participants shared the positive and challenging attributes of the schools within the district. Overall, all 16 participants described positive relations among staff. Fourteen participants shared positive aspects of their school's culture/environment. Six teachers mentioned positive interactions with building administrators. In three interviews, various programs that were present in the schools were discussed. The overall functioning of the school district was cited as a challenging aspect of the school district by six participants. Another challenging characteristic of the school district discussed in six of the interviews was a staffing issue. Parental involvement was mentioned in six interviews as a challenging characteristic of the school. The physical structure of the school buildings was another challenging characteristic stated by five teachers.

### **Presentation of the Data and Results**

The presentation of the data and results reflected the purpose of the data collected from the one-on-one interviews. Two research questions guided this study. The analysis of the data

garnered nine themes. This section contains a narrative explanation of the data organized by research questions, parallel themes, and information from the data analysis.

**Lived experiences of urban school teachers.** The first research question was: What are the lived experiences of teachers working in high-poverty, urban schools. Interview questions one through six, as well as eight and nine, corresponded with this research question. Participants were encouraged to speak openly about the current status of urban school in Illinois, their experiences in urban schools, college courses that prepared them to teach in urban schools, how they came to teach at an urban school, the most rewarding and challenging aspect of working at their current school, teacher attrition in their school district, what motivated them to continue working in the school district, and the relationships among administration, teachers, students, parents, and local agencies. The themes for the first research question were experiences and perceptions of urban schools, preparation for teaching in urban schools, rewarding aspects of working in urban schools, motivation for continuing to work in urban schools, and relationships among stakeholders.

***Experiences and perceptions of working in urban schools.*** Teachers described their experiences and perspectives of urban schools. The school district was described by the teachers as being unsafe, overcrowded, economically struggling, academically declining, and having inadequate resources despite the additional funding received from the federal government. The teachers recognized the school district had neighborhood schools that were operating on uneven playing fields in comparison to schools in wealthier suburbs and rural areas. Every participant mentioned staffing changes in some regard. Seven teachers discussed staffing issues such as low application pools, the lack of full-time teachers teaching core subjects, and too many long-term substitute teachers. Twelve participants had either recently applied for a position within and

outside of the school district or had a change in their job assignment. The reasons cited for the desired or actual changes include higher salary, issues with administration, no room for advancement within the school district, a lack of resources, and changes in the teaching profession in general. Every participant shared personal thoughts of being invested in the students and the school district.

During the interviews, participants communicated both positive and adverse characteristics of urban school students and parents. Teacher 5 discussed how the students were very needy and required more from teachers than just academics. She described the need for the extra attention from teachers as “both beautiful and sad . . . that you [students] need me to do that for you, and you can’t get it anywhere else.” Teacher 10 shared the positive characteristics of the students:

They are a loving, loving children. They are, they love and need to be loved. They love recognition. They are easy, easy, easy to mold. Easy to develop, and it depends on [the] type of hands that and who’s molding them, who’s handling them. That can either make them sturdy or fragile for the next teacher. . . They’re bright students, bright students. They’re intelligent, very intelligent. They have excellent coping skills. Adaptable.

Two participants described the students as not being much different from students in other types of schools; students go through the same developmental stages and experience typical challenges such as puberty, bullying, and identity issues. The participants described the student body as being mostly African Americans, a few Hispanics, and “hardly no Caucasians.” A majority of the students came from low-income families who struggled financially. Six of the participants mentioned specific incidents of colleagues making derogatory racial comments about the student

body. The participants recognized the lack of cultural connections between some teachers and their students.

Half of the sample characterized the parents of the students in the school district as hardworking and loving towards their children, but not very involved and supportive of the schools. Four of the participants noted that most of the parents spend more time on their job than with their children; parents were not always able to miss work for school events. Teachers mentioned teenage pregnancy, high crime rates, gun violence, gang activity, drug usage and sales, and an overall lack of dedication to education when reporting general thoughts about the school community. Ten participants mentioned the differences between the current status of the school community to the way it was 15 to 20 years ago. Six of the teachers (Teachers 4, 5, 7, 1, 13, and 14) mentioned the changes in the racial composition and socioeconomic levels of the families who resided within the school district currently.

***Preparation for teaching in urban schools.*** The sample was asked to discuss their intentions for teaching in an urban school district and how college courses prepared them to teach in urban schools. Thirteen of the participants had not planned to work in urban schools, and four mentioned they came to the district because they “needed a job.” Teacher 5 “wanted to teach high school” and “it didn’t really matter where.” Teacher 9 never considered where she would teach, “It was just like I need a job, and I need consistent income.” Teacher 12 did not have any preconceived notions about where she would teach; for her, it did not matter “where the students were.” Teacher 13 recalled applying “everywhere” because she “just wanted a job.” Teacher 15 always thought of being a teacher but had not thought “far enough ahead to think about where I [she] would teach.” Teacher 7 came to the district from another urban school, and she “purposely wanted another urban school because children in these schools are

misunderstood.” However, Teacher 7 mentioned that she had worked with many teachers who accepted a job offer in the district because “this is the only place that was hiring.” Teacher 7 laughed while asking the researcher, “Have you talked to people that accidentally ended up in our urban school?” The school district is outside of the city limits, and the question referenced teachers who assumed the district was not urban because of its geographic location.

Based on the participants’ responses, college courses in traditional undergraduate teacher preparation programs focused on theories and methods but failed to adequately prepare teachers to handle the challenges faced in an urban school. There was not a focus on urban schools in any of the participants’ undergraduate and graduate-level college courses. Teacher 7 stated that urban schools were not “necessarily a focus” and added, “They didn’t prepare us for it.” She was unaware of the difference in the amount of tax money that schools were allotted by the state because “they would never really talked [sic] about the separation of money.” She named two wealthy suburban school districts that “has [sic] more money than urban schools.” Teacher 5 shared that her undergraduate program did “nothing, absolutely nothing” to help prepare her for teaching in urban schools; she mentioned that the teacher preparation programs “all needs to be overhauled.” Teacher 14 stated, “You had to figure it out on your own.” Teacher 1 reported not feeling prepared for teaching in an urban school; “Unfortunately, my college classes did not help me,” she stated, and her student teaching was in a rural school. Teacher 11 expressed, “There was nothing, [discussed in college courses about the] “different types of schools.” Teacher 16 referred to her undergraduate courses as “a waste of money” because she was not using “anything that I [she] learned in undergrad.”

The six teachers who completed graduate-level alternative teacher certification programs at two local universities conveyed feeling prepared to teach in an urban school. Teacher 2

attended a program with professors “that were used to our urban schools” and “knew the urban school student.” She recalled professors preparing her “specifically for our low-income students, and how to address issues that they’re going to have.” Teacher 15 felt that his program developed him and taught “strategies to deal with the students [urban students] that we have in our classroom.” Ten of the teachers completed their student teaching in urban schools and relied on those experiences to help prepare them for their classroom. Three teachers credited the school district’s mentoring program with helping to provide support and feedback during the early years of their teaching careers. Teacher 2 felt that “the support of the mentoring program was really good.” Teacher 9 realized that “it was more mentorship throughout the district that helped.” Teacher 8 co-taught with a mentor and “copied him.”

***Rewarding aspects of working in urban schools.*** The sample was asked to share the most rewarding aspect of their school and school district. All 16 of the participants’ most rewarding aspect of their job centered on various facets of their students. Teacher 1 discussed discovering the “hidden talents” of students who “may not be able to read and comprehend well.” Teacher 5 shared the most rewarding aspect of her job had been “reaching kids who have been unreachable.” Teacher 7 revealed her “most rewarding aspect is I feel they [students] try.”

Six participants in the study described how the gratitude that students have personally shown to them made their job rewarding. Teacher 2 expressed attaining “fulfillment from working with the students who really need help.” Teachers 3 and 4 felt satisfied when former students came back and expressed an understanding of why they were tough on them. Teacher 3 stated that she likes receiving “feedback from former students” and found it rewarding being invited to former students’ graduations, college trunk parties, and other life events. Teacher 4 shared how the students “make me [her] feel like you [she] did the right thing, and you’re where

you need to be.” Teacher 9 conveyed what she found rewarding had been “the love that they [students] show you back and the thoughtfulness that they come back, and they say, thank you.” Teacher 12 reflected on when students “say something about my [her] teaching style, and they remember this, or they remember that.” The reflection was rewarding for her, and she could not think of any other way to “describe it because they bring me [her] joy when they come back.” Teacher 15 also acknowledged “the gratitude that you get from the students” as rewarding. He described how “somebody makes you feel real good and wanted, and they thank you; you know it’s worth it.”

Students’ social-emotional growth and academic success were also mentioned during the interviews. Teacher 6 reported the most rewarding experiences have been “seeing growth in students” and “seeing the changes that they’ve experienced” as they become young adults. Teacher 8 disclosed that he enjoys “remembering where they were [socially] then to see them now.” Teacher 11 recalled having students “do really well on the state testing” and shared “that it was really rewarding seeing the kids succeed.” Teacher 13 mentioned student growth, and “seeing them over the years is probably the most rewarding.”

The teachers in the study valued their connections and relationships with students and how it made the job rewarding. “Relations with the children and parents and some of your most challenging students” had been most rewarding for Teacher 10. Similarly, Teacher 14 stated, “I think the most rewarding is making connections with my students.” Teacher 15 also valued the relationships that he established with students over the years. He stated, “We can get our little victories when our students graduate.” Teacher 15 shared his experience of having a former student come back during her high school years to share that she had been accepted to Princeton.

Teacher 16 also articulated her experiences of seeing students grow older, go to college, and still remember her.

While students were the essence of the teachers' responses to being asked to describe the most rewarding aspect of their job, two teachers expressed the camaraderie among their colleagues as satisfying. Teacher 2 voiced her delight "to work with colleagues that are forward thinkers." For Teacher 12, "getting to know your [her] coworkers" and seeing them over the years "makes it easier to stay [in the district].

***Motivation for continuing to work in urban schools.*** The sample of teachers for this study was asked to explain what motivated them to remain in the school district. The participants shared their genuine love and concern for the students. For Teacher 2, the motivation to stay in the community was "because the students were in need." She felt that "students benefit from [her] style of teaching." Teacher 3 continued to "stay in the district [name redacted] in particular because it's the district I came from, and I want to give back." Teacher 5 expressed that she stayed in the district because she really truly believes that she is making a difference.

Similarly, Teacher 15 "likes the job" and "trying to make a difference." Teacher 4 expressed, I enjoyed seeing a child that has gone through the district [name redacted], and they're doing well, and I had a part of that. It gives me hope that we can reach some other students." Teacher 4 recalled an encounter with a former student who was now grown and gainfully employed. She stated, "I was proud because I had a hand in that. So that's why I'm still here." Her motivation was stated simply as "these children." Teacher 7 considered herself "an advocate for the kids" among colleagues that "aren't here for the kids." Teacher 10 shared how she "gives 100% in the classroom and with students cause [she] enjoys that" and "that's what keeps [her] coming back."

Relationships with colleagues, students, and families motivated some participants to remain in the district. Referring to her colleagues, Teacher 5 explained how having “people that [she] loves that work in this district” motivates her to continue working in the district. Teacher 6 shared similar sentiments about coworkers being “like family,” having “awesome friendships and relationships, both personal and professional,” and loving the students. She described a “sense of belonging” that the relationships provided. Teacher 9 described her “support network” of coworkers as motivation to continue working in the district. Teacher 10 shared how she “took time to cultivate [and] build relationships” and that leaving the district would be “just like leaving home.” Teacher 11 attended school and grew up in the community. He shared “what kept [him] here was the relationships that [he] had with people, the staff, and the successes that [he] had with the kids.”

Although many of the participants did not intentionally come to work in the urban school district, they eventually became personally invested. Teacher 1 “was not motivated to stay” in the school district and “was only going to do one year and be out.” However, after that one year, “the principal [name redacted] saw my leadership, and I was asked to stay.” Teacher 1’s motivation became “seeing what good I [he] could bring to the school district.” After admitting to “looking hard” for employment outside of the district a few years ago, Teacher 8 added, “the grass isn’t always greener.” Teacher 8 originally wanted to teach high school, but he now enjoys “doing stuff with the younger kids.” Teacher 13 accepted the teaching position in the district to escape a less desired job; she “loves teaching the babies because it is rewarding.”

The participants had all worked in the school district for 10–30 years, meaning the teachers were all tenured, and a majority of the sample was on the higher end of the salary schedule. The teachers in the study conveyed their investment in the district. Eleven of the

teachers shared their thoughts about feeling “stuck” in the district. Half of the participants discussed not being able to make a comparable salary if they left the school district. Teacher 5 explained how she might have missed her “window to leave” because she would not make the same salary. She then expressed how her motivation had been intrinsic to do the job that she was “meant to do.” Teacher 9 did not think she would leave the school district “if it wasn’t more, financially,” and she doubted that she would “jump ship” because she realized that half of her “years [of service] are going to be gone.” Teacher 11 had also considered leaving the district and “had [his] resume ready and applications filled out.” He explained, “it would be hard to go anywhere else and make comparable money,” and that made him remain in the school district.

The sample disclosed participants’ motivation for remaining in the district, and a few shared attempts to leave the school district. Teacher 2 expressed a desire “to be utilized to my [her] fullest potential” and having “a personal inner battle” about leaving the district to pursue an opportunity to “be of service to students who need” her in a leadership capacity. Teacher 5 “can’t think of a single thing” that she would rather do if she were to stop teaching. The desire to leave the district was curbed by the dislike of interviewing and “selling themselves” for a few participants. One participant mentioned not wanting to pack up years of teaching materials as the reason for staying in the district. A few participants voiced their dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities for professional growth and advancement in the district, especially once they obtained higher college degrees.

Retirement was a topic discussed in several interviews. Teacher 4 stated, “I talk about retiring and all this other stuff, but ain’t gonna happen [sic].” Another participant, Teacher 12, expressed that her “only motivation at this point is [she] would like to retire in a few years.” Teacher 15 is motivated about retiring soon and “sees the light at the end of the tunnel.”

The participants voiced their motivation behind their personal choice to remain in the school district, and they also shared their views on why other teachers leave the school district. The most reoccurring response was systematic issues, such as a lack of accountability, changes in teaching assignments, and frequent changes in administration. Participants also shared that many teachers leave the district in pursuit of leadership positions and higher-paying jobs. Other reasons participants gave for teachers leaving the district included signs of teacher burnout, the perception of a lack of support, and teachers not being a good fit for the district.

***Relationships among stakeholders.*** The sample described the relationships among teachers, students, parents, and local agencies within the school district. Overall, the participants identified strong connections among stakeholders and opportunities for growth. Some participants chose to elaborate on one type of relationship more than others. In most cases, the researcher decided not to probe the teachers to get their perspective on every kind of relationship. The researcher mostly allowed the participants to focus on the relationships that may have been the most meaningful to the individual participant.

Teacher 1 stated, “I don’t think it [the relationship] is as cohesive as it needs to be,” and expressed feeling, “like we’re discombobulated.” She explained a lack of alignment to the district vision and a desire to know “what is the focus of the district.” Teacher 4 summarized her views of the relationships among stakeholders; “I mean they can be improved upon a lot. All of them.” Teacher 7 shared how “the union’s been talking a lot about; you have happy teachers; you are going to have happy kids.”

The described the relationships among teachers as positive and negative. In Teacher 7’s school, there “is a culture problem” that was unexpectedly “causing a bond” among the teachers. In previous years, the teachers did not know one another’s names “because we all mind our

business - came in and did our job and went home.” This year, Teacher 7 shared how she and a few veteran teachers had been “trying to make them [new teachers] feel welcome.” The experienced teachers have been more social than they were in past years. Teacher 7 explained how she felt different administrators had impacted different teachers’ work ethics:

When you have good leadership and you’re raised as a teacher under that good leadership like we were underneath [name omitted], and then you have bad leadership. We continue to thrive. Good, because we were trained in that and we know [name omitted] was bad. But again, we’re going to be here, you’re going to leave. But what we have in the culture among teachers who are fairly new to the district is they were hired under bad leadership, so they don’t know what good leadership is. So when you get a good leader in here, [who] tries to slap down some rules on you, it causes . . . It’s like it causes an uproar and they fight back, which is not good for the culture, and then you have people like us. Yes. We need some rules. Can you please write me up?

Teacher 15 emphasized positive relationships among teachers. “The relationships, I think they’re positive, and I think they’re good. I think the teachers get along. I really do.” He stressed that in his building, “We’re a team. We work together.” Teacher 16 was the only teacher who expressed negative aspects of relationships among teachers. It had been her experience that “people are out for themselves . . . and that’s just everywhere I’ve been within this district and other districts, like nobody looking out for anybody else.” Teachers 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 14 acknowledged positive relationships among teachers without providing details.

The participants mostly used positive adjectives to describe teacher-student relationships. Teacher 5 shared that she was open and personal with students. She explained how relationships with her students formed:

Restorative Justice has come in the last couple of years. And I love it. I love sitting in circles. I love talking to the kids because that's how you get to know them. Right? And that's how you build that sort of trust with them. And that is something that they don't have with adults.

Teacher 6 reported that she “developed some wonderful relationships” with her students. She described an instance where she had recently made contact with a former student on social media:

He had posted something that he was really struggling with. His heart was really heavy and he needed someone to talk to and I said, hey, you know if you need to talk, I'm here. We ended up talking on the phone for like an hour. So I still keep in contact with a lot of my students that, you know, I had several years ago. Um, I remember a lot of them, you know, and I'm always just kind of thinking about them. Like, you know, I wonder what happened to that student or I wonder what happened to this student and students do come back. They come back. They want to see their teachers. And um, I think that's one of the greatest things about education is you get to see them, you know, grow up and. Yeah. And become successful.

Teacher 11's thoughts about teacher-student relationships were “kids are kids, you know. Most of them come to school happy to a certain extent. Most of them will give you a chance until you do something to lower the trust. . . They'll give you that opportunity.” Teacher 16 built “relationships with the kids, so they know [who she is].” She liked to get to know all of the students in her building and “meeting [figuratively speaking] them where they are, being that village it takes to raise a child.”

The teachers in the study discussed mostly positive relationships between school staff and parents. There also seemed to be opportunities for improving these relationships. Teacher 2 acknowledged “we know our parents” and referred to some families as “stabilizers.” This term described the families who have been in the district for many years and attend annual school events. Teacher 2 expressed how there is “a whole new generation of parents that are not connected.” Sometimes positive relationships with parents were established, and “then sometimes it’s a negative relationship,” according to Teacher 3. She did not feel that parents “hear anything positive about their student.” The district conducted parent advisory meetings as shared by Teacher 3, but she expressed that, “Some parents come; some parents don’t come.” Teacher 3 stated, “We definitely don’t have a connection with the community.” Teacher 4 thought relationships with parents would improve “if we continue to try to show as a district that we really care about students.” She would like for the staff to consider that “some parents may not have had a good experience in school and it’s carrying over.” Teacher 5 disclosed, “We’ve had very hostile parents, and they come in, and they just want to yell.” She also shared how “parents like to fight with administration because they don’t like what they’re hearing.” Teacher 5 explained, “If they [parents] like you, they’re less likely to fight [verbally] with you.” It had been Teacher 5’s experience that “parents become more hands-off as the kids get a little older.” A part of the issue, suggested Teacher 5, is “we don’t have a PTA,” and there is “very, very little parental involvement.”

Teacher 6 stated that she would like to see parents “more involved with the actual education process.” Teacher 6 indicated that the schools “have tried to involve parents” by hosting family events like reading and math nights, but “there doesn’t seem to be that much of a turnout.” Teacher 8 described his experience with parent relations:

I still think teacher-parent [relations] is always, at least in this district, a work in progress. It's very . . . I think it's very difficult to reach out to the parents. . . . I don't like that aspect of the job. I feel uncomfortable with that, and I'm sure some of the parents can kind of tell that with me. I do think there's a racial thing where some parents would rather not talk to me. . . . And I'm always willing to work with them, but I just think . . . I don't know if there's anything to change that outside of getting to know the parents more. But, but again, like the students, I'm at a disadvantage because I see all the parents. I've been able to build some good ones [relationships] like [parent name stated but omitted], [another parent's name stated but omitted]. . . . And they're usually the ones that have multiple kids. . . . I have two or three of their kids, so I have an opportunity to see them or speak with them way more often.

Teacher 10 suggested that "parent-teacher relationships are good, but it can be better."

According to Teacher 12, relationships between teachers and parents were "not the best." She felt that "it's challenging" because teachers "still haven't found a way to include parents. . . and parents have not taken their rightful place in this whole process." Teachers "tend to almost have a hands-off approach with them [parents]" but, "we say we want them to be involved." Teacher 12 explained that "when they're too much involved, then we tell them, okay, be quiet." She did not "think that we [teachers] really try to help parents be involved."

Teacher-parent "relationships are usually mostly positive, especially with the teachers who've been here for a while because you're able to establish a family connection" based on Teacher 14's experience with teaching siblings or members of the same family. Teacher 15 reflected on the positive relationships with parents that once existed at his school and credited the former administrator; "She knows [sic] the community. She knows [sic] the parents. She

knows [sic] the students, and she's created those relationships which helped." When asked about relationships with parents, Teacher 16 first mentioned there was only one school in the district that had a PTA. She then focused on what she had seen done in schools around the district to get parents to come to school events. Teacher 16 recalled, "They were doing raffles for the parents." She remembered going to one school for an event:

You would think that he was giving \$100 away for every person that walks through that door. It was packed, and I had never been in [the name of the school was omitted] . . . it was just so they could be out of uniform the next day. When I tell you that was the most people at any other school. . . They got little treats and stuff, but . . . this is how it should be.

Teacher 16 also discussed how a former administrator built relationships with parents by taking the time to explain to parents, "this is why this is what we do." The administrator "had more [parents] that liked her than that didn't like her. . . . The kids seem [sic] happy . . . about being here at school."

The insight that was provided by the sample regarding the relationships between the staff and administration was mostly negative. Some participants reflected on past years and previous administrators. Teacher 2 seemed to "think there's a disconnect between the administrators and the teachers and the staff [sic]." She compared the current relations to when she started working in the district, and there was "the camaraderie" and "no separation." Teacher 2 felt "there's a lot of backbiting now going on." Teacher 3 shared "the communication between district and building administration doesn't seem to be as clear as it as it could be." One school was commended by Teacher 3 for the relationship between the administrator and staff. She reported, "We have one building I call the happy school, and it seems like their administrator is very

supportive and understanding and keeps teachers informed.” Teacher 7 discussed adverse relationships between stakeholders. She matter-of-factly stated, “They don’t trust them,” referring to a lack of trust that the staff had for School Board members and district administration. When discussing the relationship between teachers and building administration, Teacher 7 mentioned having a new principal and her feelings about teachers feeling “entitled in this building.” Unfortunately, the principal had already experienced a negative interaction, and Teacher 7 “was just sad that it was happening already.”

Teacher 9 had experienced positive relations between teachers and administration. She “feels like teachers feel safe, and they feel like they can trust their administration . . .there’s collaborative work.” Teacher 9 had worked in other schools in the district and shared her insight about the relationship between teachers and administrators:

The support system is, is overwhelming, it’s beautiful, but it’s like really people do their job here. I’ve been in other buildings where it’s been, uh, unfortunately, you know, a jealousy thing or immature or gossip goes on and it just destroys a community of people. I think some buildings, where the leadership is poor, people get away with things that they probably would never get away with. . . . As far as our building goes, I think that the teachers trust our administration, [administrator’s name given, but omitted] is supportive and he’s supportive towards us.

Teacher 10 discussed her relationship with her current administrator and how she “feels a sense of dedication” because of their relationship. She shared, “there’s a trust factor, and administration is depending on” her.

Teacher 11 recalled the past relationship between building and district level administration and the School Board stating how “all that seemed to go pretty smoothly.

Teachers got raises on a consistent basis, you know, the Board took care of the district financially.” He mentioned the turnover in the superintendent position and how “some things started to erode the trust that was between teachers and district office, and teachers and administrators, and administrators and district office.” Teacher 13 had noticed the recent change in administration had been a tough adjustment because of teachers’ relationships with the former administrator:

So that part I think has been difficult for many people. They felt comfortable with her [former administrator] . . . A lot of our staff, I think, felt lost . . . because they only had one administrator as opposed to me. I’ve had nine administrators in my time. . . You learn what they like . . . what they want and you do it. I think if you’re a good teacher, you’re going to do your job . . . well with any administrator. . . . Administrators can make it hard on you too, but I think if you do your job, I don’t think . . . you’ll have a problem.

The sampling reported positive aspects of the relationships between the school district in general and its stakeholders. There were some well-established relationships between particular schools and local agencies, but overall, the school district could improve its community relations according to the study participants. Teacher 1 described the relationships among stakeholders as people “putting up a united front” because from her perspective, “there doesn’t seem to be a good, strong relationship.” She mentioned how publications tell a different story showing pictures of local politicians, parents, teachers, and students together at local events. Teacher 1 went on to say, “You hear the bickering. You hear the finger-pointing that often times you really don’t understand the relationships.” On the other hand, Teacher 2 stated, “we have a pretty good relationship with churches,” local government, and other school districts that are “just beginning.”

The connection to the community, according to Teacher 3, “all depends on the administrator and how invested they are with wanting to get to know the police departments and fire departments, and the park district and library boards.” Teacher 3 added, “I don’t think teachers really have a connection with the community in a sense of knowing what’s within the communities and [how] to access it.” Teacher 7 expressed that “we don’t really have any relationship with local agencies besides the police.” She was mainly referring to the resource officers that worked in the schools.

Teacher 9 shared how her principal was “community centered. He’s involving parents with the different events, the church faith, reaching out and partnering with different businesses. I think that’s huge.” Teacher 10 reported that her administrator was the type of “principal that’s very heavy on community involvement.” Although her principal “promotes a lot of their real relationships and then bringing speakers in and asking people to support” the school, Teacher 10 thinks that community relations “could be improved” and would like to have a PTA.

Teacher 12 shared why she felt the school district did not have the best relationship with community agencies:

We would go out in the community, and we asked them to help us with something; a project or when we need funding or something like that. We really don’t include them in the process of deciding what projects or what things that we want will be of benefit for the school. They don’t include them; police officers, the local library. I think some schools reach out, but for the most part, we keep them out of our business and we don’t include them unless we need something from them.

Teacher 13 explained that she did not “think her school [the name of the school was omitted] has done the best job it could,” but “there are some buildings that have worked really well with

community.” She then mentioned another school in the district that “hooked up with the Steel Plant and got huge grants, 10 grand or 20 grand a year from them.” Teacher 13 also mentioned a grandparents’ program at another school in the district where “they [the other school] have grandparents come in and work with the kids.” She shared, “maybe the change in administration” is the reason her school has not yet “focused on that [community relations] as much and that maybe we should.”

***Advice to new teachers.*** Participants shared information that could help new teachers achieve success in urban schools. Some advice was general and focused on new teachers embracing the challenge. The participants also advised new urban teachers to get to know their students and establish relationships, avoid making assumptions, be flexible and open to feedback, take time to self-reflect, and focus heavily on classroom management.

Participants provided general advice to inspire and encourage teachers who were new to urban schools. Teacher 4 stated, “If what you’re doing is coming from your heart, . . . it comes natural. It’s not a job. It’s a career. You never clock out.” She spoke about the field of education, in general, to warn and encourage new teachers, “you don’t get paid for what you are worth, but you impact so many lives. You never know which one of your students will come back and say thank you.” Teaching in an urban school could be a challenge, and Teacher 5 wanted new teachers to “be prepared to give everything you have.” She also mentioned, “I don’t know another career that takes so much out of you.” Teacher 9 advised new teachers to “pray all the time.” Teacher 11 warned, “Be ready for the challenges . . . be ready for the students who aren’t gonna [sic] like you.” Teacher 13 advised new teachers to “relax. It will all get done.” Teacher 12 encouraged new teachers to “hang on in there. It’s going to get better . . . each year is going to

get different.” Teacher 14 reminded new teachers, “Rome wasn’t built in a day. Start slow; implement one thing at a time.” Teacher 16 stated, “It’s a great profession . . . respect your boss . . . do what you’re supposed to do . . . take care of yourself.”

The sampling advised new urban teachers to establish relationships with colleagues, students, and parents. Teacher 2 advised new teachers how to treat their students “as if you would treat your own [children].” Teacher 4 proposed that new teachers “think about these [students] as if they were your own children.” She shared how she used to ask herself, “would I want my own child in my same class” as a way to reflect on her classroom practices. Teacher 5 stressed the importance of “getting to know your kids [students].” She provided realistic advice:

Win them over . . . it’s not hard if you love them, and you’re there for the right reasons.

And they trust you and they see you every day and they know, this woman or this man is here for me . . . if I have something that I need to say, I know who I can go to . . . They know who I am simply by my reputation by kids that have come and gone . . . until you have that sort of like a street creed, they don’t know who you are. Figure out who you are and be that person consistently. You can’t flip the script on them. They’re going to be like . . . how I can I trust you if I don’t know who you are.

Teacher 8 reflected on his own experience and recalled as the year went on, “I got to know the kids better, and they got into routines.” Teacher 11’s advice was directed at getting to know the students, “The first thing you gotta [sic] do is get to know the kids. Get to know your students . . .. Have them get to know you . . . within reason. They need to know something about you.”

Teacher 15 advised new teachers “to have an understanding of the students that you are going to get.” He mentioned how teachers were not “really taught to be prepared for children of poverty, children of low socioeconomic means.”

Teacher 5 suggested that new teachers get to know their students and “reach out to parents” to establish relationships with them. She also recommended that new teachers “build a personal community . . . and not be afraid to look for help when [they] you need it.” Teacher 6 instructed new teachers to “definitely build those relationships. Get to know students. Get to know a little bit about their families.” Teacher 2 expressed the need to “be respectful to these students and their families, no matter what you see.” Teacher 7 discussed the “misconception that all urban areas are so bad that they [students] all need saving,” and she wanted new teachers to understand that “sometimes they don’t need helping. They just need educating.” Teacher 15 advised, “don’t make assumptions.”

Teacher 1 advocated for forming “partnerships with teachers who they observe doing right by students.” She also mentioned how new teachers should “use their planning time wisely to do classroom observations to get a feel for the teachers . . . who can pour into them.” Teacher 3 advised new teachers to form connections to colleagues to “ask questions . . . and have someone model for you.” Teacher 9 advised new teachers to “have a mentor that you can kind of talk to and bounce ideas off of . . . be able to accept constructive criticism.” Teacher 15 promoted the district’s mentor program:

Reach out. Don’t think that you are an island by yourself because you are not. The teachers in the district will help you . . . we have a mentor program that’s a real mentor program that does help. That’s a positive for this district. Whereas, I’ve heard in meetings . . . that a lot of schools don’t have a mentoring program like we do. Ask for help. . .

That’s why I think we’ve kept a lot of teachers because . . . there’s a lot of support.

Four participants suggested the new teachers be flexible and open to feedback. Teacher 2 advised new teachers to “be open and flexible. Be flexible when things don’t go your way.”

Teacher 9 also advised new teachers to “be flexible . . . be open to support. . . Try not to self-protect cause you’re not gonna know everything.” She cautioned, “Usually, you don’t get your flow until about five years.” She reflected on her own experiences, and Teacher 12 mentioned, “Everybody’s looking at you all the time . . . get used to that and be flexible.” Teacher 16 recommended new teachers “expect change.”

New teachers were instructed to make time for self-reflection by three participants. Teacher 1 advised, “Continue to professionally develop themselves . . . build their own portfolio and make themselves greater.” She encouraged new teachers to reflect on their skill set and what areas needed further development. Teacher 4 suggested new teachers reflect on the “reason why you majored all those years in education. . . Keep that child first and your days may not be so hard.” The advice Teacher 9 provided was to “do a lot of self-reflection.”

Five participants focused on the need for new teachers to have practical classroom management skills. Teacher 9 advised new teachers to “shadow somebody who has an excellent classroom management system.” Teacher 10 suggested “get your discipline, your classroom management in order first. Then teach.” She mentioned how new teachers were typically “full of all this knowledge that they want to impart for student achievement, but they [students] won’t hear you if they have their own subgroups going on.” One of the most salient points that Teacher 11 made was, “If you want to get a second contract, you have to be able to manage the students.” Teacher 11 shared practical advice:

You’ve got to be able to manage the classroom . . . and that doesn’t mean yelling and screaming and detentions and threatening. I mean, that means building relationships with students . . . have a plan as to how to get them [students] on your side . . . trying to plan ahead for things that are going to happen. Students are going to probably use foul

language in your room at some point . . . have a plan . . . so you're not thinking so much on your feet . . . not having to think emotionally about, and you've already thought it through logically. . . . It makes it easier."

Teacher 13 advised new teachers to "spend a lot of time with routines within the classroom."

Teacher 14 advocated for "having a behavior plan in place, and you have to stick to it . . . follow through." She recalled a turning point in the early years of her career when she reached out to the principal to get her class under control. The administrator told Teacher 14, "You've got to figure this out . . . if you do not have a system in place in your classroom for classroom management, it is not going to be successful." Teacher 14 advised, "Lay down some sort of consequences and set the tone . . . having structure, and the students understanding what your expectations are, and following through with it."

**Successes and challenges of urban school teachers.** The second research question was: What successes and challenges do teachers in high-poverty, urban schools experience. The interview questions 7 and 10–12 corresponded with this research question. The sampling shared insight on student achievement, positive and challenging characteristics of students and schools in the district, and advice that would help a new teacher achieve success in urban schools. The themes for the second research question were academic achievement, student characteristics, and school characteristics.

**Academic achievement.** The sample was asked to share insight on academic achievement in their respective schools. They discussed academic performance concerning standardized test scores, academic growth, the curriculum, social-emotional needs, and the impact staff had on academic achievement. The school district's state and local standardized assessment data can be found in Appendix I.

Standardized test scores were used to measure students' academic achievement levels. Participants mostly shared concerns with the testing and the resulting data. Teacher 2 stated, "30 and 40 and 50 percentiles is horrible. . . . We don't seem to be getting up to that 60 and 70 and 80% that we need. . . . I'm not happy about that." Teacher 3 expressed disdain for standardized test scores:

I think we honestly put too much [emphasis] on student achievement. I know it's important but by keeping kids to a score and holding them to just that score. We're limiting the potential that they may have . . . to just reading and math. We might have some kids that can create music . . . We may have some fantastic choreographers . . . artists that can paint and draw and visualize, but we don't give them that opportunity . . . We don't even take an opportunity really to look at social studies and history now. . . . I think it's key, especially for black and brown students to know their history to know where they came from. Not just, oh, we were brought here as slaves in America, but that we were kings and queens and that math and science originated with us.

Teacher 5 expressed, "Testing means nothing to them [students]. They don't see any validity in these tests." She recalled how the previous district-level testing system [Scholastic Reading Inventory] would show students' scores instantly, and "the onus was on them [students]. . . . Now they're like; I have no idea how I did. I think I did great." The school district used Renaissance STAR testing for local standardized assessments, and students were not aware of their performance scores until teachers shared the data.

Teacher 6 mentioned that she had recently looked at the test scores, and "there were some eye-openers," but scores for her grade level "were really good." Teacher 7 recalled her first few years in the district, "We were at the top of the game on ISAT [Illinois Standard Achievement

Tests]. We weren't on any lists. We were making AYP [adequate yearly progress]." She then expressed how she thought the tests were racially biased and "we're [teachers] the cause of the achievement gap." Teacher 9 thought that her school was performing well based on the district's local testing data, "but then the PARCC scores were low." She discussed her thoughts about standardized testing:

Students learn in different ways and so as far as achievement goes . . . it goes back to your leadership. I think that when your leadership is more servant based like they're there to support you and have your back and lead by example, the teachers are free to make mistakes and still . . . teach outside the box and bring their own kind of style to it. Yet I, still teach the standards.

Teacher 10 discussed the school data which showed that "the mobility rate . . . is high across the district. . . . That has a great impact on the student achievement." Teacher 13 expressed disappointment in the current test data. She stated, "Only two eighth-graders passed PARCC." Then she asked, "They're coming in two grade levels below . . . how are they going to pass PARCC?" Teacher 15 recalled how "people wanted to go to the school [name omitted] because the former principal [name omitted] was there and . . . we were a school of choice back in the day . . . we were outperforming everyone." Teacher 15's school once had the highest test scores in the district and was honored for being a Spotlight School. He shared, "Scores are based on a test . . . some people are good test-takers. I'm a good test, taker. Some people aren't . . . they freeze up, and they don't do well." Teacher 15 discussed how test scores could be a result of students' home environments.

In recent years, the school district focused on student growth data, and teachers were evaluated on the amount of academic growth of their students. Teacher 4 strongly believed "all

children can learn if you set the expectations high . . . they may not reach where they need to be, but they can grow where you thought they couldn't grow." She advised teachers to "show them that you believe in them . . . provide the tools they need to help them grow." Teacher 4 reported, "We have a lot of students showing growth . . . it's not enough to close the achievement gap." Teacher 5 expected students to "make some sort of closure in their gap . . . at least one year." Teacher 6 prided herself "on the growth that we've had over the years." She had "some great successes with student growth over the past several years."

Teacher 8 expressed that students could "go from scoring a 15 to 30 . . . that would still be failing, but that's a big jump, improvement." Teacher 10 shared, "Classroom management has a lot to do with the student achievement." She also shared, "You may not see all the great gains on the state test . . . you can see the gains, the growth." Teacher 14 shared that the district had a "large population of children who are struggling and even though they're showing growth. I don't really know if we could consider that achievement." She questioned, "Did they achieve, or did they just show growth?" Teacher 14 also shared how there were "more and more children who are way below grade level" than when she first started working in the district. Teacher 15 shared, "the principal [name omitted] seems . . . concerned about moving the school [academically]."

While discussing academic achievement, teachers mentioned curriculum concerns. Teacher 10 said that technology was "a vital piece" of the curriculum, and "it seems to be a challenge." Teacher 12 claimed that "no district would outshine any other district, not in this area anyway." She admitted that her claim was merely an assumption and not supported by any research data. Teacher 12 speculated that "everybody's looking for the same thing . . . a magic

bullet or a magic potion that can get these kids on board. It's not happening, and I don't think it's happening anywhere close by us."

A few teachers discussed social-emotional learning, which can play a vital part in students achieving academically. Teacher 6 shared that "you have to put confidence in your students." She "instills in them that . . . I believe in you. You can do this." Teacher 10 discussed how teachers have been "doing it all where we're truly the parent when the parent is not here. . . Children are looking for that home, that home sense. They feel . . . they can get the attention that they're usually not getting at home." Teacher 13 stated, "We're dealing with so much emotionally . . . it makes sense to have conversations with kids about how to deal with situations, so they don't act out." Teacher 16 articulated her thoughts regarding the unmet needs of students. She stated that teachers "get caught up in the rigmarole" and missed opportunities to "talk to these kids, deal with these kids." She referenced a documentary that she had recently watched that said: "when they see who they are, that they come from greatness, kings, and queens, they [will] want to learn."

Academic achievement impacted teachers, and three teachers discussed the impact during their interview. Teacher 10 shared that teachers "learned how to use resources available to us." She also discussed her thoughts about discipline and principal support. According to Teacher 10, "If you don't have discipline in place, children will not learn . . . we have a supportive principal, and that makes a difference with student achievement." Teacher 11 stated student success "really comes down to the teacher," and he recalled, "My students were successful when I took time to get to know them and put in the extra time with them." Teacher 15 mentioned test scores again during the interview "whatever we can do to help the students learn and increase our scores . . .

again we get to that scores thing . . . until we change our evaluations, scores are always going to be important until then.”

***Student characteristics.*** The sample described positive and challenging student characteristics. Every participant provided positive characteristics of the students in the school district. The challenging features were also mentioned. The sample seemed to understand that working in urban schools was hard work and required dedication. The discussions about students demonstrated that teachers across the district enjoyed working with the students and had established positive relationships with students. Teacher 6 mentioned, “Students that are . . . that come from urban areas, you [teachers] do form a deeper relationship with them because they do need your help with so many other things.”

Several teachers discussed the creative talents of their students. Teacher 1 was very excited to discuss the students. She voiced:

I have been blessed to work with some phenomenal children who happen to be African American, who have brains that will blow you out of the water, and to watch it unfold is just remarkable given the fact that a lot of them are overlooked because they’re not looking at their IQ. They’re just looking at the school that they’re assigned to. . . . Some students who are RTI [Response to Intervention] qualified also who have a lot of hidden talents, and they may not read and comprehend well, but you give them a mic, and they can sing. And it’s just if we had more teachers who could transfer, oh, you know how to sing and remember the lyrics to the song. This is how you can read and apply some of the same skills and the same concepts. I think they will be successful.

Teacher 5 expressed students' talents, "Some kids have such wonderful artistic gifts." She also discussed, "Some kids are wonderful with academics. They bring what they've got to the table. They just need somebody to . . . pull it out of them. If they buy into what you were selling." Teacher 13 stated, "They're fun. . . . They want to learn. They come with so many different talents. . . . Some are really good at speaking, and some of them are really good at art drawing. They are good kids."

The participants mostly described the students as caring, loving, and kind. Teacher 3 recalled what she had witnessed, "I see that there are kids that are genuinely concerned for other kids and their wellbeing that when something's going on in the classroom, they will take the time to circle up [Restorative Justice Peace Circles] trying to find out what's going on." Teacher 8 shared his insight on the students; "they are very family-wise, and they're very protective of each other. All the older kids want to know what's going on with the younger brother, younger sister. They make sure they're safe coming home." The students were described by Teacher 9, "They're not like bullies like they're kind-hearted kids. They have a sense of restitution when they wrong somebody; they want to make it right. They want to apologize. They like to have fun. They're happy."

The sample recognized that students liked school, wanted to be there, and wanted to learn. Teacher 2 believed that students had "brilliant minds that are ready to learn and eager. You know, we have some good kids." Teacher 6 also recognized that "most students have a desire to learn . . . they participate . . . they get excited when they show improvement . . . they have that desire to move forward." Teacher 7 conveyed that "the kids really want to come to school and learn . . . they love school. They want to please the teachers, but they want to do it their way." Teacher 10 described the students as "loving . . . easy to mold and develop . . . intelligent . . .

excellent coping skills, . . . adaptable.” Teacher 16 noted that students “want to please their teacher.” Students had shown Teacher 12 that “they’re present. They do what we asked them to do. They come in their uniforms. They want to be a part of something.” Teacher 14 shared a few positive characteristics of the students:

All the kids coming to school so early all the time, they want to be here. That, to me, is huge. They want to be here. They’re excited to learn. I have many students that if they have to take a day off the next day for something for family or out of town, they were actually disappointed that they’re not going to be here the next day. . . . I’ve seen just a lot . . . more kindness between . . . kids in the classroom being kind to each other . . .

They’re not socially advanced; they’re just more innocent.

Teacher 15 reported, “they want to learn. They want to be successful. . . . I think our students are nice kids. Um, they are pretty honest. They will tell you what is going on in their lives”

It had been Teacher 11’s experience that “most of our students seem to be excited about life. Most of them seem to be pretty optimistic. You know, things may not be going exactly how they want, but they’re, they’re tough.” Teacher 4 had witnessed the character of the students in her school, particularly one student:

I’ve had the opportunity to see a student help another student up. I’ve had the opportunity where a child lost something, and I mean money, and that child brought it to an adult. Um, I’ve even seen where a child stepped in the middle of another one getting bullied. . . . The students have a caring attitude. . . . One student [name omitted] did that wash day. She would notice that a lot of our students came to school with their clothes dirty. It was on the news.

The challenging student characteristics expressed by the participants focused mainly on student behavior. A few participants shared challenges with academics, parents, and students' future goals. The sample provided detailed descriptions of their problems.

Student behavior appeared to be the biggest challenge for teachers in urban schools. The specific challenging behaviors were disrespect and defiance. Teacher 3 specified "disrespect in the sense of them [students] not realizing that cursing out a teacher is disrespectful." "The child that just don't care about anything" was a challenge identified by Teacher 4. Teacher 5 considered "oppositional defiance" as a challenging characteristic of some students. "The most challenging is definitely dealing with certain behaviors. . . the lack of parental support . . . parents blame me for their child's behavior," expressed Teacher 6. Teacher 7 identified "respect" as a challenge, and she stated students "want earned respect," and teachers "tend to demand respect." She expressed that the disrespect was an issue "because we're misunderstanding them. They feel violated." Teacher 9 found it challenging trying to get students to be responsible "as far as remembering to keep up with their stuff, their homework." Teacher 10 mentioned the lack of "respect and defiance . . . gaining their trust . . . alcohol or drug dependencies . . . mainstreamed students" as challenging student characteristics.

"Student behavior is really the most challenging thing . . . they [students] act a lot older than they are," according to Teacher 11. He admitted to allowing "kids push my buttons" when he was a novice teacher. Teacher 12 stated, "It is difficult for them [students] to practice self-control . . . they seem to be very adamant about doing it their way." A challenging student characteristic for Teacher 13 was "defiance." Teacher 14 stated, "Behavior issues" as a challenge and then specified "defiance, anger issues . . . and home issues." She then shared how home issues resurfaced at school:

I had a little girl yesterday that told me that she was at the hospital all night long. I thought she was sick, and she said her brother was shot. I asked, “Here in [name of city omitted]?” She said yes. . . . She said, oh, he’s okay. It didn’t even phase her. . . . The lack of the support for children that have emotional behavior issues. I just don’t feel like we have enough in place for them. One social worker in a building of what, almost 300 kids is not enough . . . these kids have a lot going on, and my one psych 101 class is not going to qualify me to help them. We’ve had a couple trainings on restorative justice, but me learning how to do a peace circle is not going to help that child process that her brother was shot last night.

Teacher 14 also shared that she once had a student in her class whose parent died and how colleagues advised her to “talk to him about it.” She did not feel that she was “qualified to do that,” and she did not “want to make it worse.” Teacher 14 articulated, “I’m not a therapist, and I don’t feel comfortable doing therapy with my children [students] because I don’t want to do something wrong.” Teacher 15 discussed the challenge of “the idea that social skills . . . does not seem like it is being taught or it’s a focus, and respect actually means something else than when I was a boy.”

Teachers 3 and 9 expressed challenges with academics in terms of student performance. Teacher 3 identified an area “that we need to grow in is what do we with our students that are coming in so many years below grade level.” A challenge for Teacher 9 had been “follow through as far as turning in work, homework.”

Five participants (Teachers 1, 2, 6, 8, and 15) discussed external factors that were beyond their control but created challenges in their classrooms. Teacher 1 stressed the need to “move past the era of students that know how to do that [sit and learn from a lecture] because they are

so easily distracted. It's due to all the stimulation that we have outside of school. Social media, video games . . . everything is real fast." Teacher 4 articulated, "They're [students] very needy and not just the kids, parents too . . . while we're educating the children, we have to educate the parents as well." Teacher 6 shared how one of her most challenging students "had a lot of ACES [Adverse Childhood Experiences] . . . mother's in prison, living with stepmom and dad, but they're never around. It was a challenge because I tried to build a relationship with him, and he wasn't open to it." Teacher 8 stated, "Some of the crap they [students] deal with at home . . . they don't have enough of those male role models." Teacher 15 expressed the challenge of technology "maybe in the school it's good but our home . . . technology is not good. Our students do not know how to communicate. They are not as socially."

Teacher 5 stated, "Another really challenging thing is they don't see long term for themselves, and I don't know why that is." Teacher 8 shared that students have "unrealistic goals" for their future; "they don't see the connection between what they're doing now to that goal later." Some parents had been a challenge for two of the participants. Teacher 5 discussed "another challenge . . . having them see their worth." She mentioned that "a lot of kids come from parents who get assistance [welfare], and they don't work." Teacher 5 discouraged students from getting "caught up in the [welfare] cycle" and not getting out. Some "parents who are not literate and cannot help their children . . . these children come into kindergarten not knowing how to spell their name or knowing the alphabet" according to Teacher 5. Teacher 13 identified "parents that challenge you . . . and maybe don't trust your judgment."

***School characteristics.*** The sampling was asked to articulate what they thought were the most positive and challenging characteristics of the school. Most of the discussions focused on

the relationships among the staff, the culture of the school, and staffing. A few teachers discussed other characteristics, like the physical structure of the school and the School Board.

Some of the teachers in the district had established positive relationships among themselves. A few participants considered staff relationships as one of the most positive characteristics of their schools. Teacher 3 discussed “the sense of unity” among teachers:

We’re there to help each other out. I haven’t seen any teacher tell another teacher. No, I can’t help you. Everyone’s pretty much willing to help each other out, to assist . . . whether that’s finding materials, sharing resources within the classroom, books. I’m helping out with students.

Teacher 6 said, “The most positive . . . is the fact that we all work as a team. We are a family, so if a teacher is struggling with something or maybe with a student, they’ve got support.” She also mentioned, “if I’m struggling with something, I know exactly who to go to get help. We’re all a team, and we work together to back each other up.”

The staff was the focus of Teacher 9’s discussion. The staff “has just really been helpful. We work as a team. There’s no kind of one man show thing going on.” Teacher 9 described the staff of her school as “supportive of each other . . . the community . . . feels like a family.” She also mentioned “support from the administration.” Teacher 10 stated, “We have access [to the copy machine]. I felt a sense of freedom. This . . . gives you a good sense . . . belonging, and then with the whole community atmosphere. Everybody knew each other and developed relationships with students.” Teacher 12 noted, “Teachers working together . . . working to make things different for the kids . . . helping the kids to look better, feel better, do better.”

The overall culture of the schools was a positive characteristic that many participants discussed. Teacher 1 shared that students are “always doing something good around the school.”

The teachers are:

Building their character through character education . . . explaining to them that they are scholars and they can make something of themselves. They can be who they need to be.

We try to push kids to be leaders. You know, pull some out of their own element . . . just them being good citizens. You know, be good to people. Be good in your community.

Just being naturally good.

The positive school characteristics of Teacher 2’s school-related to the culture. She discussed that “people that greet the students in the morning, every morning.” The staff members without classrooms talked to students, “getting a temperature of our students, knowing what kind of day they had, ready to set the tone for them before they come in with all the rigmarole that they have, may have gone through just getting into school.” The students were shown love at the first meeting, outside greeting them at the door. The staff was compared to “soldiers ready to take on and hug and give them what they need.”

Teacher 4 reported, “We have two staff members that would on the weekends take the clothes [students’ uniforms] and wash them . . . we have some caring individuals. We don’t get a lot of thanks. This is a . . . thankless job, but you’re not doing it for that.” The students at Teacher 7’s school have been made to “feel at ease when they come through the door.” She described her school as having a “welcoming environment.” Teacher 8 also referred to his school as “welcoming,” as he stated:

Teachers do a good job of making it a place students want to be. I’ve never seen so many kids that don’t go here [anymore] want to come get into school on a daily basis. It’s an

easy place for teachers to work. They don't always have to worry about somebody looking over their shoulder, breathing down their neck. Teachers get to do their thing, and if there's an issue, it's taken care of, closed door. Nobody else knows about it, and then you're trusted to go make those changes. It makes it a lot easier to work when you don't have to worry about what's going on behind your back.

Teacher 10 shared that her school had "a lot of teachers who are willing to try new things, and they're open to change." The teachers were also helpful to one another.

Teacher 13 indicated that the school uses PBIS [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports], takes part in "community activities and activities where we come together as a school." Teacher 14 described the culture of her school as "student-centered." She mentioned teachers "support each other and administration isn't punitive, lets you do it your way." Teacher 15's school was "peaceful . . . and collaborative," and the staff "liked coming to work" under the former administration. He noticed that teachers are "buying into the new administration more." Teacher 16 noted, "they [students] know the routine . . . creed."

The school district had recently undergone numerous staff changes. Some participants expressed their views of the staff changes. Teacher 4 conveyed, "The teachers are not the greatest teachers . . . it's almost like you have to just fill a spot, and you're not taking the seriousness of the education of the lives that you're impacting." Teacher 5 expressed her views of the teachers "we have great teachers . . . willing to try new things . . . open to change . . . helpful." There had been several staff changes at Teacher 7's school, and she believed "we [the staff] have made some differences in some kids." She was concerned about the impact the changes in staff had on the students; "I don't know what's going to happen. I don't want them to go backward. I don't want them to feel like they weren't good enough." Teacher 13 stated, "We

have positive teachers.” Teacher 11 identified the teachers as “dedicated people” and “one of our strengths.” The staff at Teacher 16’s school “have a good rapport” and respect one another.

Other characteristics that were discussed include the physical structure of the buildings, the School Board, and student accomplishments. The physical structure was described as “a nice environment . . . a big school” by Teacher 7. Teacher 11 referred to the School Board as a strength of the school district because they have “been on the side of labor” and “there hasn’t been any strike threats” or “salary schedule freezes.” Teacher 11 was proud of some honors that students had accomplished. He mentioned, “We have students go to the state science fair and do well. The fact that we can have . . . our sports teams go to state tournaments and do well.”

The sample shared what they each considered challenging school characteristics of urban schools. The challenges were related to staffing issues, the curriculum, external factors, the physical facility, and a few other topics related to the job in general.

Six participants (Teachers 1, 3, 7, 9, 10, and 11) expressed challenges related to staffing. The “most challenging part of working in the school district” for Teacher 1 “is being able to retain teachers. These teachers don’t have the same love and passion for teaching.” She wanted to find out why some of the newer teachers came into the profession. Teacher 3 identified “teachers taking things personal as a challenge:

In a sense of thinking, maybe kids are doing things on purpose when that’s not really the case or if there is a situation like a conflict of what have you between the teachers, letting that overlap into their professional relationship. There’s a difference between friends and then being professional.

Teacher 7 felt “stuck” because she wanted “a challenge” that her current position does not afford her. Teacher 9 shared, “I was not taught Black history, so learning how to teach . . . you kind of

have to submerge yourself in a whole new culture.” Teacher 10 identified “upward mobility” as a challenge for teachers who may want to move into leadership positions. Teacher 11 shared, “one of the challenges of our district is . . . the district office administration with the turnover there . . . hopefully, that becomes a little more stable.”

The curriculum was a challenge for six of the participants (Teachers 2, 7, 9, 11, 12, and 13). Teacher 2 mentioned, “Continuity between schools . . . between classrooms” as a challenge in the district. She stated, “The curriculum really should be for our students . . . I know we’re trying to do that but on the building level . . . there’s no reason for teachers to be so isolated . . . the door is not really open for other teachers to collaborate. There’s no collaboration . . . no cohesiveness . . . not a seamless transition.” Teacher 7 expressed that “we’re [teachers] the cause of the [achievement] gap.” She heard teachers make racial comments like “these Black kids can’t do math” and felt those teachers are “setting them [students] up for failure.” Technology had been a challenge for Teacher 9; “we never have technology . . . there is always something; Smart Board doesn’t work, printers not working, laptops don’t work, we can’t get on the Internet.” Teacher 11 stated, “The new programs that we bring in can be challenging.” “The lack of resources . . . and not enough materials, books . . . not having a hardcore curriculum” created challenges for Teacher 12. Teacher 13 named the “disconnect between elementary and junior high” as a challenge. She felt “bad for the junior high teachers because . . . they’re getting slammed . . . and I feel it’s the elementary fault because if they’re [students] walking over to the other side, two grade levels below. Whose fault is that?”

External factors related to the school were cited as challenging for Teachers 1, 5, 6, and 13. Teacher 1 explained the “influence outside of school” as a challenge. She told that “you’re trying to build their character . . . they have a brother who perhaps sells drugs or smokes it . . .

it's a negative influence on them." Teacher 5 stated, "There's so much external noise that they can't focus on what's happening . . . in the classroom." She also mentioned the violence in the community that caused her to lose "probably 17 kids [former students] to gunfire" in the past several years. Teacher 6 recalled when "politics never used to get involved in education, and now they're controlling everything. I think teachers become disheartened with that." Teacher 13 recommended that more social workers were needed in the school district. She thinks, "We need two at each building, one to help the parents and one to help the child because . . . our social workers [are] helping the parents almost more than the child that's having the social-emotional issue."

There were challenges discussed related to the role of a teacher in general. Teacher 3 explained, "The most challenging isn't even the kids. It's the adults. It's having everyone . . . having the same vision of . . . moving forward." "Getting teachers all on the same page is a struggle . . . there's always those teachers that just want to do things their way and not collaborate," expressed Teacher 6. Teacher 15 discussed, "The challenging thing is change. . . . It is challenging . . . accepting the change that needs to happen to move our students." Teacher 11 stated, "Some teachers aren't on board with teaching the whole child." Teacher 12 identified "lack of communication . . . lack of integrity . . . and the salary" as her challenges. She expressed, "Other districts right over the other side of Street A [the name of the street was changed] or on the other side of Street B [the name of the street was changed] makes probably \$10,000 more than the teachers do on another side of the same area." Teacher 16 stated, "There's no communication . . . no follow through . . . everybody is on their own thing . . . nobody looks out for anybody."

Teacher 4 cited, “Support from administration” as a challenge; “sometimes you need your principal to have your back.” Teacher 7 shared, “Teachers don’t feel supported when you don’t see administration.” Teacher 15 stated, “All the administrative things that teachers have to do” make it “hard just to focus on teaching . . . you’ve got paperwork” to complete. Teacher 2 stated, “It’s [the building] nasty. The paint is chipping off the wall.” Teacher 9 said, “The whole structure of the building is a challenge; the leaking roof . . . air doesn’t work.” Teacher 12 discussed Board members “don’t know what they’re talking about and making decisions for a district; that’s challenging.” Teacher 16 expressed, “Discipline should be flowing a lot better.”

#### **Chapter 4 Summary**

Chapter 4 explored the lived experiences of urban school teachers. The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with 16 urban school teachers. A description of the sample was presented, and the methodology and analysis were discussed. Phenomenological interview methods were used to gain insight for the participants to understand their experiences. Through the use of coding, the researcher identified nine themes. The nine themes that emerged from the data were: experiences and perceptions, preparation for teaching in urban schools, rewarding aspects, academic achievement, motivation to continue teaching in urban schools, relationships among stakeholders, advice to new teachers, student characteristics, and school characteristics. A summary of the findings was presented. Patterns and comparisons for coding were identified. A presentation of the data was organized by the research questions and themes and presented rich, detailed descriptions of the findings. The name of each participant was changed, as well as any identifying information that was specific enough for a participant’s identity to be revealed. There were instances where the names of other individuals, schools, and cities were mentioned during the interviews, and this identifying information was omitted from direct quotes from the field

notes. The descriptions of the lived experiences of the sampling allowed the researcher to address the research questions. The following chapter will provide a summary and conclusions for the entire study. The next chapter will also review the research topic and explain how the results contributed to educational research and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Introduction to Discussion and Conclusion**

This chapter presents a summary of the research study and essential conclusions drawn from the seminal literature, data collection, and data analysis presented in Chapter 4. It provides a discussion of the implications for action and recommendations for further research on high-poverty, urban schools. Data was obtained from 16 in-person one-on-one interviews with urban school teachers with varying years of teaching experience. The participants provided insightful information about personal lived experiences in the study. The data analysis revealed nine themes that contributed to the main findings and an interpretation of the data.

This final chapter of the dissertation provides a conclusion for the completion of this research study. The section summarizes the results of the research and discusses the researcher's interpretation of the findings. The researcher also reveals how the results of the study connected to the educational community and literature. Lastly, this chapter details the limitations of this study, the implications for practice, policy, and theory, recommendations for further research, and a conclusion to this study.

### **Summary of the Results**

Many urban schools had high rates of poverty among students and experienced difficulties attracting and retaining high-quality teachers (Dolph, 2017). Despite the challenges of teaching in urban schools, some teachers chose to remain at these schools. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to explore the lived experiences of urban school teachers. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of teachers working in high-poverty, urban schools?

2. What successes and challenges do teachers in high-poverty, urban schools experience?

**Theory and significance.** The constructivist learning theory is the foundation of the conceptual framework for this study. The constructivist learning theory places the learner at the center of the learning process (Kalpana, 2014). Functionalism is another theory used as a part of the conceptual framework of this study. The functionalist educational theorists believe that although inequalities existed in any society, education provides equal opportunities regardless of ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status (Sadovnik, 2017).

The theoretical concepts support the views of the sample. Participants communicated their beliefs that the learner should be the center of the learning process. Several participants expressed the unique needs of students at urban schools and the need for the curriculum to match the demographics of the student body. According to study participants, some students were being “short-shifted by society” and had “emotional and economic deficiencies” that negatively impacted learning. Teachers in the study expressed thoughts of working in urban schools as a way to help students have a fair chance in society; therefore, the theoretical perspectives support the findings from this study regarding the function of education for urban school students. A constructivist approach is appropriate because there seems to be a need for urban schools to use the whole child approach and provide support services to students in a variety of areas that impact their educational success as described by Miranda et al. (2017).

Urban schools have been the main focus of educational reform because most of these schools have lower academic achievement levels (Ravitch, 2013); therefore, the significance of the study sought to contribute to the literature by exploring the lived experiences of teachers who chose to remain in urban schools. The importance of the research focused on the utilization of

the results and how these results could provide educational leaders information as to what motivated urban school teachers to remain in these learning environments despite the challenges. The results of the study could also help to improve urban schools to increase the number of urban school students who are on track to become college-educated adults.

**Review of seminal literature.** One of the most stubborn problems in U.S. public education is many urban schools failing to effectively and consistently serve high-poverty students (Johnson et al., 2014). A review of the literature showed that various factors impacted a teacher's decision to teach at a high-poverty, urban school. One factor that affected urban school teachers focused on the individual teacher's level of preparedness. Not all preservice teachers had the disposition to be considered a good "fit" for urban schools (Bauml, Castro, Field, & Morowski, 2016). It had become a priority for many teacher education programs to focus specifically on preparing preservice teachers to work in urban schools. There were some school and student conditions that influenced a teacher's decision to teach in high-poverty, urban schools. Some conditions of urban schools and students could improve if strategic and comprehensive sustained supports were implemented. According to Miranda et al. (2017), most of the previous reform efforts for urban schools have focused vastly on closing the achievement gap, but there has recently been an increase in initiatives focused on the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual needs of students. Wrap around schools, full-service schools, professional development schools, and university-assisted community schools all aim to improve the quality of teaching and student learning (Miranda et al., 2017). Urban schools may improve if there was a more resolute plan focused on teacher preparedness as well as enhancing school and student conditions.

**Methodology and summary of findings.** The phenomenological research design allows researchers to focus on a specific phenomenon as described by participants of a study (Creswell, 2014). The focus of this study was to identify the nature of human experiences about the specific phenomenon of the challenges of high-poverty, urban schools. A phenomenological approach was most suitable to explore experiences and highlight commonalities across a small group of teachers who experienced a common phenomenon. This qualitative phenomenological study used one-on-one interviews to collect data. The discussions helped the researcher acquire detailed information to explore the lived experiences, successes, and challenges from the perspective of experienced teachers who worked in these contexts for at least 10 years.

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants for this study, and an email was used to contact potential participants directly formally. Each participant was assigned a numerical code to protect their identity and maintain confidentiality. Participants described their lived experiences and insight into urban schools during the interviews. The researcher conducted a phenomenological data analysis of the interview data that involved recursive coding in identifying the commonalities of the lived experiences of teachers who chose to remain at high-poverty, urban schools. The nine themes that emerged from the data represented the findings of the research study. The participants shared their lived experiences, which resulted in six themes: experiences and perceptions, preservice preparation, rewarding aspects, motivation, relationships, and advice to new teachers. The sampling also shared successes and challenges experienced at high-poverty, urban schools. The three themes that emerged were related to academic achievement, school characteristics, and student characteristics.

## **Discussion of the Results**

The data collected in the research study demonstrated that the sampling was willing to share insight into their experiences, successes, and challenges concerning urban schools. The methodology for this study provided the participants with a platform for open dialogue and a welcomed opportunity to address successful and challenging aspects of the urban school district. The findings reflected the attitudes and priorities of the participants at a high-poverty, urban, kindergarten through eighth-grade school district, and readers should be mindful about the contextual dependence of the findings; thereby, the results of this study are not generalizable to all high-poverty, urban schools; however, the study is transferrable to other high-poverty, urban school districts with similar demographics.

The two research questions were designed to explore the phenomenon of high-poverty, urban schools that struggled academically. The first research question was used to acquire information about the lived experiences of teachers at high-poverty, urban schools. The data from this study showed that every participants' experiences and perceptions of high-poverty, urban schools were both positive and adverse. Of the 16 teachers who participated in the study, 12 have worked in the school district for at least 15 years; therefore, the teachers interviewed more than likely had valid and reliable insight about the school district.

The findings seem to suggest that changes in the racial composition and socioeconomic levels of the community had negatively impacted the schools - in that students were struggling academically, socially, emotionally, and economically in the absence of stable family structures, parental involvement, and adequate resources. Urban schools failed to offer quality education to low-income students and students of color (DeArmond et al., 2015). Changes in the racial composition and socioeconomic levels of the community were mentioned by 10 of the

participants. According to participants, the racial makeup of the city changed to include fewer White residents, while at the same time, the socioeconomic levels decreased as more low-income families moved into the community where the school district was located. A few teachers stated that over time there had been a decline in the schools' academic achievement levels and an increase in teenage pregnancies, gun violence, gang activity, as well as drug use and sales. Jackson (2015) and Miranda et al. (2017) showed how high-poverty, urban schools often had challenges within the school community that impeded academic improvements. Parents were described as hardworking but not involved in school events by half of the participants in the study. Most parents were said to have spent more time on their jobs than with their children by 4 participants of the sampling. The participants seemed to have witnessed negative changes in the school district over the years.

The data showed that only three of the participants were intentional about wanting to teach, specifically at an urban school. The other 13 of the sampling appeared to have come to teach in the school district for no particular reason other than being employed. A few participants' reasons for staying in the school district were related to social justice. The seven participants whose college courses prepared them to teach explicitly in urban schools were those who completed alternative teacher certification programs on the graduate level. The factors that appeared to motivate 10 of the participants to continue working in urban schools did not appear to be directly related to students; the motivating factors that were shared related to job security, seniority, and being on the high end of the salary schedule. Data from this study suggested that teachers who worked at high-poverty, urban schools may not always aim to work in this capacity and could have entered the profession without having adequate undergraduate preparation; however, after significant years of service at urban schools, some teachers developed a niche for

this setting and developed the necessary skills to endure the challenges. Tamir (2013) found that the knowledge that preservice teachers acquired in non-traditional teacher preparation programs helped to prepare them to work in challenging schools; experience eventually replaced the knowledge.

Analysis of the data showed that the participants' most rewarding aspects of working in urban schools focused on the students. The researcher interpreted the data to indicate that working with urban students satisfied some teachers' need to contribute to social justice. The teachers may have remained at urban schools to contribute to their students' abilities to beat the odds and rise above the social ills that plagued their community. Paterson et al. (2004) found that teachers who were committed to urban schools held personal values related to social justice and equity. Despite the low academic achievement levels of students, teachers relished in the effort that students put forth. When students who were once unreachable showed growth, teachers had a sense of efficacy and felt most productive. Student success may have contributed to their teachers' resilience and choice to remain at urban schools. From time to time, students expressed gratitude to teachers for helping them achieve academic goals and progress; this made the job worthwhile for teachers. Specific examples of students expressing gratitude were discussed in six of the interviews. Only two of the participants mentioned feeling fulfilled because of the camaraderie among colleagues. Urban school teachers were likely to feel most rewarded by their job, when students showed growth academically, socially, and emotionally.

This study focused on teachers who worked in the school district for at least 10 years. Although the sampling included only 16 teachers, 83 more teachers met the criteria for the study. The longevity of the teachers' years of service in urban schools suggested that teachers are dedicated to this particular school district. All of the participants shared testaments of being

personally invested in the school district and its students. Yonezawa et al. (2011) reported that the personal investment teachers had to teach in urban schools is what sustained the teachers working in these contexts.

Nevertheless, 12 participants of the sampling also shared that they had recently changed positions or applied for a different job assignment within and outside of the school district. The reasons participants reported as wanting to change job assignments showed that teachers had a strong desire to increase their salary and advance in their careers. Research showed evidence that salary matters in a teacher's decision to remain or leave a school (Lindqvist & Nordanger, 2016).

The data showed that students motivated urban school teachers in general. The teachers seemed to genuinely care for their students, who made it easy for the teachers to deal with the daily challenges of being an educator in an urban school. Teaching in urban schools allowed teachers to fulfill the moral purpose of giving back and making a difference in society. Being on the high end of the salary schedule caused 11 of the participants to feel "stuck" in the school district, but the teachers interviewed did not appear to have a desire to leave the teaching profession or urban schools. The findings indicated that many urban school teachers felt needed by their students, which caused the teachers to have a sense of loyalty to the students.

Expressions of frustration and disappointment with the school district would not cause teachers to change jobs. Johnson et al. (2014) found that teachers in high-poverty, urban schools wanted to take part in developing and implementing solutions to the challenges at their schools; school leaders nor individual teachers could single-handedly meet the needs and challenges they faced.

The data indicated opportunities for growth in terms of relationships among most stakeholders. It was important to note that not all participants discussed every relationship that could exist among the students, teachers, parents, administrators, and community agencies;

therefore, the data was expressed in actual numbers and only provided insight related to the relationships the participants chose to discuss. Every participant expressed positive relationships between the schools and at least one local community agency. An analysis of the data suggested the school districts would benefit from increasing the number of connections it had with community agencies. Schools should not attempt to support the needs of their students single-handedly; local teacher preparation programs, and social and health services should be utilized (Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Partnerships between schools and community agencies were a viable alternative to obtaining the additional supports that schools and students need (Miranda et al., 2017).

The data revealed opportunities for teachers to build more positive relationships with students, administrators, and parents. Trust issues were discussed in several interviews and contributed to the lack of positive relationships. Some of the participants in the study shared stories about the struggles that other teachers had with student behavior and culture. Another factor to consider was three of the schools in the district had administrators who had worked in the district for less than two years. Turnover can be a relationship barrier with staff, students, and families (Miranda et al., 2017); however, over time more positive relationships could cultivate. The teachers' relationships with students and parents may have been related to other issues that were not fully disclosed in this study. Some teachers may not yet be proficient at managing the challenges of urban school students, which would negatively impact positive relationships with parents. Relationships among teachers were perceived to be positive by 15 teachers in the sample. Positive relationships among teachers were more than likely indicative of a large number of veteran teachers who had worked together for many years. Only five of the participants described the student-teacher relationships as positive. The relationships among teachers and

administrators were characterized as positive by five teachers; four participants described these same relationships as unfavorable. Teachers and parents also had negative relationships, according to nine of the participants. Findings in this study divulge the need for more positive relationships within the school community.

The findings from this study supported the notion that working in urban schools was challenging and overwhelming for educators. The veteran teachers in this study reflected on their beginning years as a teacher in high-poverty, urban schools and provided advice to teachers who were new to these schools. The findings showed that veteran teachers recognized the necessity to reject any deficit perspectives of students. Ullucci and Howard (2015) urged teachers who taught in high-poverty schools to re-conceptualize the notions of poverty and its effects. The data showed that nine of the participants encouraged new teachers to avoid making assumptions about students and their families; new teachers were inspired to spend time to get to know students, establish relationships, be self-reflective, and open to feedback. Classroom management must be a priority for new teachers to achieve success. Participants urged new teachers to establish routines and expectations; consistent implementation of effective behavior plans was also stressed. Findings from the data indicated that new teachers would benefit from having a mentor to work with them during the initial years of their career as an urban school teacher; partnering with a veteran teacher would suffice when an established mentoring program did not exist. Phillips (2015) revealed that induction initiatives that aimed to support novice teachers should use experienced teachers as mentors.

The second research question fostered an understanding of the successes and challenges of teaching at an urban school. The data about the academic achievement levels of urban schools showed that teachers had been successful in helping students grow academically, socially,

emotionally, and behaviorally; however, the data regarding academic achievement-focused mostly on standardized testing. Teachers noted that students performed better on the local standardized tests, like STAR, than they did on the state assessments, Partnership for Assessment for Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). Standardized test scores were linked to teachers' evaluations, which made the testing relevant to teachers. The district's test data was said to have been similar to other school districts in the same area.

On the other hand, teachers expressed challenges that hindered academic achievement. Standardized testing did not consider the different learning modalities of students, which meant that scores may not have necessarily been an accurate reflection of students' academic abilities. Findings showed that academic achievement was negatively impacted by student mobility, lack of confidence and motivation, a fragmented curriculum, and subpar technology. DeArmond et al. (2015) studied 50 cities and found that less than one-third of the cities made gains in reading or math over three years. The school district's assessment data followed this trend (see Appendix I). Overall, the data showed that the high-poverty, urban schools were struggling academically, and they had not yet achieved success in addressing the needs of students in a way that consistently increased academic achievement levels. Quality and equity in urban education had been difficult to ensure (DeArmond et al., 2015).

The findings showed that positive relationships with teachers helped students develop and demonstrate positive characteristics more frequently. When students recognized that teachers were compassionate towards them, the students demonstrated positive behavior traits and peer relations. The findings reflected that the teachers in the study had shown support to students in urban schools by successfully establishing caring and trusting relationships in a way that improved the students' efforts, motivation, and academic achievement levels. The data showed

that 12 of the teachers interviewed recognized students' positive attitudes about school and learning. Students had demonstrated excellent coping skills according to seven participants of the sample. The data showed the most significant challenge that urban school teachers seem to encounter was students' disrespectful and challenging behaviors; 10 of the participants mentioned these behaviors. Schools should focus on improving student behavior and remember that some parts of a school's culture would be difficult to change; celebrate the small steps that elementary students make to improve their social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties no matter how small (Miranda et al., 2017). Students in urban schools faced challenges outside of school that hindered their ability to perform to their highest potential, academically and behaviorally consistently. Miranda et al. (2017) declared that students in poverty require a lot of support to be successful in school settings. Overall, urban school teachers can achieve success by forming positive relationships with students. Student performance is contingent upon the relationships created with teachers.

The findings indicated that the most favorable characteristics of the urban schools were relationships among staff and the culture of the schools, while the most challenging aspects were mostly beyond the teachers' realm of control. Every participant was eager to express the positive relations among teachers in their schools. Fourteen teachers in the study described the culture as a positive characteristic of their school. Urban school teachers recognize the challenging aspects of the schools that have a direct impact on students. The participants referenced staffing issues and unwelcoming physical structures as aspects of the schools possibly conveyed that students were not deserving of better conditions. Urban school teachers seem to have the tenacity to deal with challenges while maintaining positive learning environments for students within their classrooms.

Overall, the findings from this study supported the idea that despite the challenges, many urban schools had teachers who were dedicated and remained in these settings. The teachers were unlikely to leave these schools for many reasons, but the main reason is their belief that students needed them. Miranda et al. (2017) explained that school improvement was a complex concept that should personally reflect the needs of individual schools since what works at one school would not always work in the same manner at another school. Tackling the challenges of urban schools could begin with a more comprehensive focus on the needs of the students and following the practices of high-poverty, high-performing, urban schools.

**Practical implications.** School reform that focused explicitly on poverty would help to reduce some of the challenges of high-poverty, urban schools. Poverty was a complex issue that required a concentrated focus on the topic (Budge & Parrett, 2018). Gaining a better understanding of the complexities of poverty would help teachers to more effectively address the challenges within high-poverty, urban schools. School reform had to occur in schools and society; schools made a considerable difference in the lives of children who lived in poverty (Parrett & Budge, 2012). Ullucci and Howard (2015, p. 174) described class-conscious teachers as those who had “an understanding of how poverty does and does not impact students, nuanced reading of how race and poverty overlap and do not, and a keen eye to how stereotypes about poverty bias our interactions with poor children.”

Urban and rural poverty all looked different from one another, which dismissed the notion of a “typical” student, and created the need to convey the importance of context-specificity to preservice teachers in the field of education (Ullucci & Howard, 2015). The University of Chicago’s Urban Teacher Education Program (UTEP) was one model of a school of education program that had targeted the issue of context-specificity that helped teachers to

understand students better and manage the realities of urban schools. Partnerships between higher education institutions and high-poverty, urban schools would help to improve the current conditions of some urban schools and retain highly effective teachers. Miranda et al. (2017) showed how urban schools and the teaching profession, in general, benefited from partnering with universities. New urban school teachers who participated in the universities' partnerships would begin their careers with a clearer understanding of how to manage the challenges associated with urban schools. Jackson (2015) shared insight into the Urban Teacher Program, a teacher preparation program that successfully helped improve conditions at urban schools; teacher candidates were assigned to urban schools for clinical experiences and received coaching from veteran teachers. Teachers who had taken only one urban or multicultural college course were not prepared to teach in urban schools effectively.

The academic achievement levels of high-poverty, urban schools were likely to improve when educators better understood the ramifications of poverty and worked to address the educational, health, social, and emotional needs of students. Ullucci and Howard (2015) stated that it had been believed that children living in poverty were not as intelligent as other children; schools worked to produce children who "fit" their class backgrounds. Educational leaders needed to examine the curriculum, pedagogy, expectations, and practices of schools to ensure that students living in poverty were not further exacerbated with feelings of inadequacy. Schools and teachers needed to work against reinforcing cycles of poverty by maintaining high expectations and achievement goals and by not writing students off (Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Students in high-poverty, urban schools benefitted when schools connected families to community resources that addressed health and social needs. Poverty was not solely a school problem; it impacted "all aspects of children's lives from health care to depression to

homelessness to frequent uprooting. However, children in poverty were resourceful, had leadership skills, exhibited maturity beyond their years, triumphed every day . . . over those things that tried to (psychologically and otherwise) kill them,” (Ullucci & Howard, 2015, p. 173).

**Theoretical implications.** The researcher analyzed to disclose whether or not the data shared during the interviews aligned with the conceptual framework of this study. Theories raised by DeArmond et al. (2015) proposed the idea that urban schools failed to offer quality education to the majority of public school students, poor students, and students of color. The data revealed that participants believed that the lived experiences of high-poverty, urban school teachers were challenging as a result of the lack of preservice training that focused solely on urban schools. The data also indicated that teachers were confronted with academic deficits and challenging student and school characteristics. Nine of the 16 teachers in the study were not trained to teach explicitly in urban schools. The lack of adequate teacher preparation focused on urban schools created hardships for some teachers as they attempted to deal with the challenges of urban schools. The teachers who chose to remain at urban schools without sufficient preservice training may benefit from additional training specifically for urban school teachers. The teachers in the study had chosen to continue teaching at high-poverty, urban schools, despite the difficulties because of their quest for social justice and moral purpose. Some urban school teachers work diligently to help their students combat the challenges that may exist within their community. The results of this study support the need for transformational changes in the type of preservice training urban school teachers receive as well as ongoing professional development for teachers who are currently working in this context. High-poverty, urban schools must

examine their practices and policies and make necessary changes that better support students and families.

### **Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

The problem statement focused on the challenges that prevented academic progress at many high-poverty, urban schools (Jackson, 2015; Johnson et al., 2014; et al., 2017). The challenges at high-poverty, urban schools were attributed to several factors. One factor was the lack of specialized training for preservice teachers that specifically focused on urban schools. Ullucci and Howard (2015) suggested that preservice teachers, to educate students with impoverished backgrounds, participate in training programs that help them to understand their students better and that they become more equipped to manage the realities of urban schools more thoughtfully. None of the participants in this study had a focus on urban schools in their undergraduate college courses. Teacher 5 did not feel that her college classes prepared her to teach in urban schools and stated that the program should be overhauled. This study's findings support the current literature in that preservice teachers need training that focuses explicitly on understanding students' backgrounds and realistically managing their classrooms (Ullucci & Howard, 2015).

Garcia and Weiss (2017) disclosed social class as one of the most significant predictors of a child's educational success. Academic performance gaps began in students' early years and failed to narrow in later years; students who started behind, stayed behind, and struggled to catch up. The literature showed academic achievement levels increased when urban school educators had a comprehensive understanding of poverty and instituted the whole child approach to teaching. Schools that have embraced "whole-child" approaches to education have improved readiness for kindergarten, raised test scores, garnered higher graduation rates, and narrowed

gaps in academic achievement (Garcia & Weiss, 2017). Miranda et al. (2017) declared that students in poverty required numerous additional supports to succeed in school. Chambers and Tate (2013) advised school reformers to take notice of the features that classify a school as “bad;” these were the factors that strongly continued to predict student outcomes. Urban schools inherently have challenges, but these schools could and should serve as a place of hope that promotes growth and development for all students (Miranda et al., 2017). The study disclosed challenges with the current curriculums. There is a need for a more cohesive curriculum, more opportunities for collaboration among teachers, and more reliable technology. As teachers gain a better understanding of poverty and its impact on student learning, academic achievement will improve.

Challenging student characteristics must be met with support by using a whole-child approach. Miranda et al. (2017) researched a school in an urban area of a Midwestern city that used the whole-child method to address whole-child standards, health, safety, engagement, support, challenge, and sustainability, while also focusing on academic standards. The school staff continuously learned about the whole child approach and implemented practices that resulted in an increase in positive outcomes within the culture and climate of the school. Students received health and wellness services at school, and they began to feel safe in their classrooms and the school. The school used School Improvement Grant funds to help pay for some of the services. Teachers established relationships with students helping to engage, support, and challenge them. As a result, students were motivated to become better and do better. The staff expected academic data to improve because students were in class more, participated in self-regulation within the classroom, and were more engaged with the learning process than they were before the whole child standards were implemented. The study results indicated a need to

implement a whole-child approach to learning, possibly. A majority of the participants mentioned students' social-emotional needs that, at times, were not being met. Teacher 13 expressed that teachers had a lot of student emotional issues to deal with and efforts to prevent students from acting out. Participants shared their challenges when dealing with disrespectful and defiant student behaviors. The challenging behaviors may have stemmed from unmet social and emotional needs; therefore, the school district should consider moving to a whole child approach to address challenging student characteristics.

Teaching in urban schools needed to look more desirable and attractive to teachers. Chambers and Tate (2013, p. 735) urged urban school districts "to make poor-performing schools more attractive to teachers." The literature showed that teachers preferred to work at high-performing schools because they believed they would be more effective in comparison to working at low-performing schools because failing schools are more of a challenge (Chambers & Tate, 2013). Schools with high percentages of English learners and economically disadvantaged students had significantly lower standardized test scores. The results of this study support the need to make high-poverty, urban schools more desirable to effective teachers. Almost half of the sample discussed issues of schools not being fully staffed. Low application pools and a lack of fulltime teachers teaching core subjects plagued some schools in the school district.

Strong community relations are needed in which schools are the hub of the community. Chambers and Tate (2013) suggested that more emphasis be placed on the students, their neighborhoods, and the community labor markets. The aim of reform should level the playing field for students by providing the tools and capabilities that are necessary for effective education. Miranda et al. (2017) shared that partnerships with outside agencies will help to fill voids in schools. Preschool programs, afterschool and summer enrichment programs, home

visits, parenting classes, and school-based health clinics are the type of supports that compensate for the students' lack of access to critical resources, according to Garcia and Weiss (2017). When students' physical and mental health were supported, absences declined, and students were more focused on learning. The results of the study indicated opportunities to improve community relations. Some school leaders established relationships with community organizations. Other leaders should begin to create partnerships with community agencies to better support students and families.

Influential school leaders needed to work collaboratively with teachers to improve challenging school characteristics. The literature revealed that although schools were not typically organized in a way that generated and capitalized on the potential for leadership among the teachers, some teachers wanted to participate in developing and implementing plans of improvement for their schools (Johnson et al., 2014). The case studies showed that teachers were willing and ready to work with colleagues to take on active roles in school change beyond the walls of their classrooms. Principals served as the instructional leaders and played a vital role in determining how teachers engaged with school reform efforts.

School leaders and teachers need to invest and interact in ways that allow them to bridge boundaries and share responsibilities. Johnson et al. (2014) warned principals that recognizing the leadership within their organization would not mean they lost authority. When principals support teachers who are prepared to lead, their influence and effectiveness increase as they authorize others to conduct business on behalf of the school. Lindqvist and Nordanger's (2016) longitudinal study showed evidence that salary influenced a teacher's decision to stay or leave, but the lack of support from administrators, student discipline, and a lack of input and decision-making power also had an impact. In 2012, as a part of school reform, principals in Chicago

were given more hiring and firing authority; principals were also responsible for student performance (Chambers & Tate, 2013). School leadership and classroom instruction seemed to have the most significant impacts on student learning. The study results showed that the majority of the teachers interviewed were in search of opportunities to grow professionally. Leaders should be creative, consistent, and willing to “think outside of the box” to improve the challenging characteristics of their school. The literature supports this study’s findings regarding a shared leadership model. The participants in this study had a desire to help improve the conditions of their schools; principals need to capitalize on the teachers’ dedication and allow some teachers to participate in school improvement efforts.

### **Limitations**

The study contained limitations as the data collected came from only one research setting. The findings may not represent high-poverty, urban schools outside of the Illinois area, which decreased the generalizability of the results. There was not a triangulation of the data because there was only one source of data. The interviews provided sufficient details of the teachers’ experiences in high-poverty, urban schools. Researchers should replicate this study in a different geographical location to gain a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon. Another potential limitation of this study was the sampling. All participants taught in urban schools for at least 10 years. The study could be replicated to include teachers with five to nine years of experience in urban schools. Nearly 50% of new teachers in urban schools left the teaching profession after 5 years (Cohen, 2015). Therefore, urban teachers who had at least five years of experience could provide details of their lived experiences to add greater depth to the findings of this study possibly.

The 12 interview questions were open-ended and allowed participants to speak freely about topics. A few questions were broad and yielded a wide array of responses. Commonalities were not as easy to identify during the analysis. The participant demographics sheet asked participants to describe the school where their student teaching was completed. The study's participants provided a variety of information to represent the schools. The researcher wanted to find out if teachers completed student teaching at an urban school. The question could have been rewritten to directly ask if teachers completed student teaching at an urban school. A possible second part of the question could have given teachers a chance to describe the type of school it was if not urban.

The timing of the data collection impacted the researcher's ability to secure participants quickly. The data collection for this study took place in July during teachers' summer vacation, and the researcher's only means of communicating with potential participants was via work emails, which were not checked daily during summer vacations. Initially, the researcher planned to have a sample size of 20 teachers. Qualitative studies should have a sample size of no more than 25 participants (Richtie & Lewis, 2003). The researcher would have made adjustments to the expected sample size and participant criteria. The sample size would have been reduced to 10 participants if necessary. The participant criteria would then have been amended to include teachers who had a combined total of at least 10 years of teaching experience at their current school district and other urban schools. An adjustment was not needed, and the sample size was within reason for a qualitative study.

### **Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory**

The theoretical perspectives of this study supported the findings since it was believed that preservice training for high-poverty, urban schools needed to focus specifically on urban schools

and the educators who were currently working in these schools required ongoing professional development focused on the complexities of poverty and its impact on students' lives and readiness to learn. Ullucci and Howard (2015) declared that educators needed to abandon antiquated belief systems that harmed positive student–teacher interactions and realistically understand the students who were in their classrooms now. All students deserve to be serviced by teachers who have an understanding of the realities of communities and their impact on schools and student learning. Higher education leaders need to work collaboratively with local school systems to ensure that teacher education programs are producing highly qualified teachers prepared to serve in specific communities. School leaders need to ensure that ongoing professional development is provided and participation is mandated so that changes and increased equity among students actually take place in high-poverty, urban schools and classrooms.

To educate using the whole-child approach, schools must build partnerships with agencies that help to provide strategic and comprehensive support to improve students' overall social, emotional, physical, and intellectual needs (Miranda & Della Flora, 2017). The participants in this study acknowledged the social, emotional, physical, and academic needs of the students as well as some teachers' inability to address these needs successfully. Cultural, racial, and socioeconomic differences between teachers and the students were a reality. Teachers and students would benefit from teachers taking part in ongoing professional development that would help them to implement the standards of the whole child approach successfully. Garcia and Weiss (2017) recommended that schools invest in continued comprehensive support for students through their academic years in light of their unmet needs and untapped talents.

Researchers like Miranda and Della Flora (2017) view school improvement as a complex concept since programs and strategies that work at one school will not always work at another one. This knowledge made it imperative for principals to work collaboratively with their staff to identify the teacher and student needs that are most important and for them to provide supports that would address those needs first because often there were so many areas to tackle that it would be overwhelming. The participants discussed the curriculum and staffing issues and their impact on academic achievement. Challenging student and school characteristics were also highlighted. Principals must work with their building leadership teams to identify priority curriculum and staffing issues to handle at the building level. District-level issues would be addressed with the necessary district administrators. Challenges in high-poverty, urban schools were daunting, and the demands are high (Johnson et al., 2014); therefore, school districts would work to alleviate issues that were in their realm of control and involve community agencies as well as politicians when necessary.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The researcher's recommendations for further research are listed below:

- A study should be conducted with other educational stakeholders to gain insight into high-poverty, urban schools from their perspective. Stakeholders could include parents and administrators, in addition to students in upper grades. The data collected could be used to further understand the urban schools and focus on areas of needed improvement.
- A subsequent study could use a purposeful sampling method that would allow the researcher to select teachers who were most knowledgeable about urban schools and have achieved a certain level of success.

- This study could be replicated with a slightly different population that focuses on teachers with five to nine years of experience.
- This study could be changed to a longitudinal study that requires the researcher to interview the same participants more than once over an extended period of time.
- Further research could be conducted with teachers that completed teacher education programs that focused on urban schools specifically.
- This study showed that urban schools should use the whole child approach to better meet the needs of students. A future study would focus on schools that have implemented the standards of the whole child approach.
- A subsequent study would focus on high-achieving, urban schools and the results would help to better inform low-achieving, urban schools.
- Future research could focus on other high-poverty, urban schools in neighboring communities and other geographical areas for comparison purposes.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative phenomenological study revealed information about high-poverty, urban schools. The main research questions asked for information about the lived experiences of teachers who worked in high-poverty, urban schools and the successes and challenges that teachers faced in these schools. The data showed that most of the teachers in this study had experiences in urban schools that were challenging and overwhelming at times; however, the teachers in this study remained committed to the schools primarily because they were committed to the students. High-poverty, urban school teachers had successfully formed positive relationships with students and colleagues, on the other hand, the participants expressed student and school characteristics that were challenging.

Based on the data, it was found that participants thought the teachers' lack of preservice training focused on the demographics of the schools contributed to the challenges that existed. Some of the study's participants believed that educators' limited understanding of the ramifications of poverty caused some students' needs to go unmet and for challenges to persist. Nevertheless, other participants felt the difficulties of high-poverty; urban schools were the results of family and community issues. The participants in the study expressed problems with the curriculum and staffing that contributed to the lack of academic achievement.

The participants in this study were committed to high-poverty, urban schools. Expressions of their dedication resonated during the one-on-one interviews. Some of the participants shared their attempts to leave the school district in pursuit of new opportunities, but those attempts to change jobs were more associated with issues that extended beyond their classroom walls. Many of the participants expressed that their reasons for staying at the high-poverty, urban schools had to do with their moral purpose and social justice. Overall, the main reason the teachers seemed to remain at the high-poverty, urban schools was because their students needed them.

This study allowed the researcher to explore the lived experiences of urban school teachers to better understand why they chose to remain at these, oftentimes, challenging schools. The U.S. Department of Education was responsible for ensuring equal access to high-quality education for all students; however, the researcher believes that decades of research on urban schools has been disregarded and urban school challenges have been further exacerbated. Equity for all students has not yet become a reality; therefore, the researcher urges educators to continue to focus on reform that will improve urban schools in a way that supports students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally to change the trajectory of their academic careers.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1. What are your thoughts about the current status of urban schools in Illinois?
2. Tell me about your teaching experiences in urban schools.
3. Tell me how your college courses helped to prepare you to teach in urban schools?
4. If it was your original intent to teach at an urban school, explain why. If not, how did you arrive at an urban school?
5. What would you consider as the most rewarding aspect of working in your current school and school district? Most challenging?
6. What are your thoughts regarding teacher attrition in your school district?
7. What is your insight on student achievement in your school?
8. What motivates you to continue to work in this school district?
9. Describe the relationship within the school community among administration, teachers, students, parents, and local agencies.
10. In your opinion, what are the positive student characteristics that exist within your school? Challenging student characteristics?
11. What characteristics of your school would you consider the most positive? Most challenging?
12. What advice would you give to a teacher who was new to your school that you think would help him/her to achieve success?

## Appendix B: Pilot Interview Feedback Form

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Question	Feedback	Suggested Changes
Q1. What are your general thoughts about urban schools in Illinois?		
Q2. Tell me about your teaching experiences in urban schools.		
Q3. Tell me how your college courses helped to prepare you to teach in urban schools?		
Q4. If it was your original intent to teach at an urban school, explain why. If not, how did you arrive at an urban school?		
Q5. What would you consider as the most rewarding aspect of working in your current school and school district? Most challenging?		
Q6. What are your thoughts regarding teacher attrition in your school district?		

Q7. What is your insight on student achievement in your school?		
Q8. What motivates you to continue to work in this school district?		
Q9. Describe the relationship within the school community among administration, teachers, students, parents, and local agencies.		
Q10. In your opinion, what are the positive student characteristics that exist within your school?  Challenging student characteristics?		
Q11. What characteristics of your school would you consider the most positive? Most challenging?		
Q12. What advice would you give to a teacher who was new to your school that you think would help him/her to achieve success?		

### Appendix C: Participant Demographic Sheet

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Numbers \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity \_\_ Asian \_\_ Black \_\_ Hispanic or Latino \_\_ Native American \_\_ White \_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Current School and Assignment \_\_\_\_\_

#### Teaching Experience:

Please indicate the total number of years.

\_\_\_\_\_ Years in education

\_\_\_\_\_ Years teaching

\_\_\_\_\_ Years working in urban schools

\_\_\_\_\_ Years teaching in urban schools

\_\_\_\_\_ Years in current district

#### Educational Background:

Please list all college degrees that you have earned.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please describe the type of school where you completed your student teaching.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix D: Participant Consent Form**

Concordia University–Portland Institutional Review Board

Approved: April 5, 2018; will Expire: March 28, 2019

**Research Study Title:** High-Poverty, Urban Schools: A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lived Experiences of Teachers

**Principal Investigator:** Tasha Thompson-Gray

**Research Institution:** Concordia University

**Faculty Advisor:** Dr. Audrey Rabas

**Purpose and what you will be doing:** The purpose of this survey is to understand the lived experiences of teachers in high-poverty, urban schools by exploring the personal accounts of teachers. We expect approximately twenty volunteers. No one will be paid to be in the study. We will begin enrollment in July, 2018, and end enrollment in August, 2018. To be in the study, you will need to first respond to the email from the researcher and provide contact information. The researcher will contact you directly within three days to schedule the interview. You will need to complete the participant demographic sheet and consent form. These documents should be submitted to the researcher on the day of your interview. One day before your scheduled interview, the researcher will contact you again to confirm your interview. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. You will have an opportunity to review your personal interview transcripts to ensure accuracy. The researcher will email the transcripts to you directly using a password protected Google shared drive. When you receive the document, you will need to read over the transcripts and report errors to the researcher within three days. If changes are necessary, a revised copy of the transcripts will be sent to you for a second review. Doing these things should take less than 180 minutes of your time.

**Risks:** There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study other than providing your information. However, we will protect your information. We will conduct interviews in a private room to ensure that the conversation will not be overheard by anyone. All interviews will be audio-recorded. The recording will be transcribed by the investigator, and the recording will be deleted when the transcription is completed. Any data you provide will be coded so that people who are not the investigator cannot link your information to you. Any name or identifying information you give will be kept securely via electronic encryption on my password protected computer locked inside the cabinet in my office. The recording will be deleted as soon as possible; all other study documents will be kept secure for three years and then they will be destroyed.

**Benefits:** Information you provide will help educators to understand your lived experiences in high-poverty, urban schools. You could benefit from this by motivating and helping teachers to recognize the need to adjust his/her current practices to better serve their students.

**Confidentiality:** This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. The only exception to this is if you tell us abuse or neglect that makes us seriously concerned for your immediate health and safety.

**Right to Withdraw:** Your participation is greatly appreciated, but we acknowledge that the questions we are asking are personal in nature. You are free at any point to choose not to engage with or stop the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This study is not required and there is no penalty for not participating. If at any time you experience a negative emotion from answering the questions, we will stop asking you questions.

**Contact Information:** You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Tasha Thompson-Gray at email [redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email [redacted] or call [redacted]).

**Your Statement of Consent:** I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

_____ Participant Name	_____ Date
_____ Participant Signature	_____ Date
_____ Investigator Name	_____ Date
_____ Investigator Signature	_____ Date

Investigator: Tasha Thompson-Gray email: [redacted]  
c/o: Professor Dr. Audrey Rabas  
Concordia University–Portland  
2811 NE Holman Street  
Portland, Oregon 97221

## Appendix E: Memoing Template

Interviewee \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_

Question	Notes	Body Language	Reaction
Q1. What are your general thoughts about urban schools in Illinois?			
Q2. Tell me about your teaching experiences in urban schools.			
Q3. Tell me how your college courses helped to prepare you to teach in urban schools?			
Q4. If it was your original intent to teach at an urban school, explain why. If not, how did you arrive at an urban school?			
Q5. What would you consider as the most rewarding aspect of working in your current school and school district? Most challenging?			
Q6. What are your thoughts regarding teacher attrition in your school district?			
Q7. What is your insight on student achievement in your school?			
Q8. What motivates you to continue to work in this school district?			

Q9. Describe the relationship within the school community among administration, teachers, students, parents, and local agencies.			
Q10. In your opinion, what are the positive student characteristics that exist within your school? Challenging student characteristics?			
Q11. What characteristics of your school would you consider the most positive? Most challenging?			
Q12. What advice would you give to a teacher who was new to your school that you think would help him/her to achieve success?			

## **Appendix F: Letter to School District Administration**

February 2, 2018

Dear School District Administration,

It is with great excitement that I inform you of my intent to conduct a research study that will involve teachers who work in the school district. This research study is a part of the EdD doctoral program at Concordia University. The title of the study is *Staying by Choice: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Lived Experiences of Urban Teachers*. The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of teachers who choose to remain in urban schools. I expect to gain insight from the teachers that will provide information that could be used to help improve the conditions of urban schools in a way that produces more minority college graduates.

I am looking to interview twenty teachers who have been teaching in the district for at least ten years to learn about their experiences and beliefs regarding urban schools. If I am unable to secure twenty teachers who are willing to participate, I would then need the names of teachers who have experience teaching at urban schools outside of the district in addition to his/her experience in the district for a combined total of at least ten years. Upon your approval, I will conduct one-on-one structured interviews with each participant (See Interview Questions). I will audio record all interviews and send the written transcripts to each participant for approval to ensure accuracy.

I am very passionate about urban schools, which makes me excited about my research study. I am asking for your permission to conduct interviews with teachers in the district who meet the criteria. Each participant's identity will remain confidential. All names will be changed. Below you will find a list that outlines my needs. I look forward to further discussing my research study with you during our meeting. If you should need to contact me, please do not hesitate. I can be reached at [redacted].

1. Approval to conduct the research study within the district.
2. A list of teachers' names and district email addresses who meet the criteria.
3. Approval to use district facilities to conduct interviews.

Sincerely,

Tasha Thompson-Gray

## **Appendix G: Participant Recruitment Email**

Date

Dear Potential Research Participant,

I am contacting you because I would like to interview you for my dissertation research study as a part of the EdD doctoral program at Concordia University. The title of the study is *Staying by Choice: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Lived Experiences of Urban Teachers*. The purpose of the study is to explore the everyday experiences of teachers in urban schools, and I would like for you to share your story with me. It is my belief that your insight and experiences could help to improve the conditions of urban schools in a way that produces more minority college graduates. The research study has been approved by district administration, and your name was given to me because you meet the participant criteria of teaching in an urban school for at least ten years. Please understand that this research study is not an evaluation of our school district, and your identity will remain confidential. All participant names will be changed.

As a participant in the research study, I will interview you and give you an opportunity to share your experiences as a teacher in urban schools. I am looking to understand your experiences and beliefs about urban schools. The interview will last about one hour, and it will be audio recorded for accuracy purposes. After the interview, I will email written transcripts to you for approval.

I am extremely excited to be working on my research, and hope that you will choose to participate in the study. Please respond to this email to inform me of your decision to participate or not. I am also asking you to include your personal telephone number and the location that you would feel most comfortable being interviewed. Once you notify me of your willingness to participate, I will call you to set up the interview within three days and email you two forms to complete and bring to your scheduled interview. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions and/or comments regarding the research study. I can be reached at [redacted]. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Tasha Thompson-Gray

## **Appendix H: Member Checking Correspondence**

Date

Dear Research Study Participant,

I would first like to thank you again for your participation in my doctoral research study. Your interview is an integral part of my research, and I appreciate you taking the time to share your story with me. It is my goal to ensure that the information you communicated during your interview has been interpreted properly. In order to do this, I need you to carefully review the attached transcripts of your interview. If you approve the transcripts as they are written and no changes are required, please notify me when responding to this email. In the event that you feel there are errors or misinterpretations, please inform me in your response to this email. You will then need to document the required changes in one of the two ways:

1. Download the transcripts and use the Microsoft Word tracking tool to make corrections and comments. You will then need to email the marked up version of the transcripts to me.
2. Print the transcripts and make the necessary changes by writing directly on the document. You need to return the marked up transcripts to me in person or via email.

Once you have identified the changes that are required, I will need you to return the transcripts to me by \_\_\_\_\_ (date). The experiences, thoughts, and beliefs that you shared regarding your career as a teacher in urban schools will become a permanent part of my dissertation and it is my goal to have your words transcribed correctly. Again, thank you for your participation in my research study. If you have any questions and/or concerns, I can be reached at [redacted] or via email.

Sincerely,

Tasha Thompson-Gray

### Appendix I: School District Profile

	2016	2017	2018
PARCC ELA % Proficient	20%	20%	15%
PARCC Math % Proficient	10%	10%	10%
Average Class Size	15	20	20
Total Enrollment	2190	2100	2100
Racial/Ethnic Diversity-Students			
White	0%	0%	0%
Black	95%	95%	95%
Hispanic	5%	5%	5%
Asian	0%	0%	0%
American Indian	0%	0%	0%
Two or More Races	0%	0%	0%
Pacific Islander	0%	0%	0%
Low-Income Students	95%	95%	90%
Students with IEPs	15%	15%	10%
Homeless	5%	5%	5%
English Language Learners	0%	5%	5%
Average Daily Attendance	95%	95%	95%
Student Mobility	25%	20%	20%
Teachers	190	185	180
Male	20%	20%	20%
Female	80%	80%	80%
Racial/Ethnic Diversity-Teachers			
White	50%	50%	50%
Black	50%	50%	50%
Hispanic	0%	0%	0%
Asian	0%	0%	0%
American Indian	0%	0%	0%
Two or More Races	0%	0%	0%
Pacific Islander	0%	0%	0%
Not Reported	0%	0%	0%
Teachers' Education			
Bachelor's Degree	45%	45%	45%
Master's Degree or Higher	55%	55%	55%
Tenured Teachers	60%	60%	65%
Teacher Retention	75%	75%	75%
Teacher Attendance (<10 absences)	NA	60%	40%
Teacher Evaluation (Proficient/Excellent Rating)	NA	NA	95%

*Note:* All percentages approximate.

## **Appendix J: Statement of Original Work**

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

### **Statement of academic integrity.**

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

### **Explanations:**

#### **What does “fraudulent” mean?**

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

#### **What is “unauthorized” assistance?**

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

### Statement of Original Work (Continued)

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University–Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*.

Tasha L. Thompson-Gray

Digital Signature

January 11, 2019

Date