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Los Angeles

Staying Power:

Retaining Teachers in Title I Schools

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

Tomoko M Nakajima

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Staying Power:

Retaining Teachers in Title I Schools

by

Tomoko M Nakajima

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Megan Loef Franke, Chair

This dissertation features the three-manuscript format, and each inquiry was designed with different research aims, theoretical frameworks, and analytical methods. Their abstracts are presented below.

Paper 1. Although teachers of color (TOC) are often assumed to be better suited to serve students of color, little is known about how TOC navigate to such settings and what motivates them to stay. In this exploratory study, TOC in Los Angeles County high schools were interviewed about their career pathways, identities, and sense of fit. Participants were most driven to serve students with whom they shared compounded traits beyond race, like having the same ethnic/cultural identities and hometowns, and similar experiences with poverty.

Additionally, TOC shed their own assumptions of congruence in order to grow in the profession.

Paper 2. Heavy personnel turnover persists across U.S. public schools. In this exploratory study, I examined interview data with 20 teachers employed in Title I high schools in LA County, each

with 6-14 years of classroom experience, to determine why they stayed in their jobs. The most frequently-mentioned source of educator satisfaction was the familial sense of love they felt for and conveyed to the students, that motivated teachers to improve their pedagogies, to learn about and from the youth, to better prepare relevant lessons. Teaching with love was fun for the educators and brought a cascade of other career-sustaining benefits. First, student discipline issues disappeared and learning outcomes improved, as engaged students came to class on time, behaved respectfully, and took greater learning risks for teachers who loved and supported them. Teachers who were respected by students also earned the admiration and trust of colleagues and supervising administrators, as well as greater classroom autonomy. Thus, educators who held this radical, liberatory, and engaged pedagogical worldview (hooks, 1994) redoubled their commitments to remain in the service of their students.

Paper 3. Research of teacher dissatisfaction often focus on the perspectives of educators new to the profession or former educators. This study examined the expressions of workplace dissatisfaction of high school teachers, to reveal key motivators and moderators of their turnover intentions. Through affective coding, expressions of workplace dissatisfaction and turnover intentions were excerpted then categorized, using Johnson's *schools as workplaces* framework (1990). Teachers' job persistence was most challenged when authority figures intruded on *instructional* features (e.g., classroom teaching approaches, workload) or disrupted the structures that reified teacher specialization and classroom autonomy. Their dissatisfaction was allayed through acts of defiance, individually (e.g., transferring schools) and collectively (e.g., designing new schools with a value-driven community of peers, joining the teachers union). My new *urban schools as workplaces* model illuminates what teachers most value about their work. Applying

the framework will help educational administrators improve relationships with educators in their employ, resolve sticky staffing issues, and strengthen collegial culture at their schools.

The dissertation of Tomoko M. Nakajima is approved.

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2022

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the educators who shared their stories of persistence with me, without whom this dissertation would not be possible.

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PREFACE

This dissertation is presented in the three-paper format, with three manuscripts suitable for submitting separately for possible publication in academic outlets. UCLA permits three-paper dissertations as an alternative to the traditional, chapter-based dissertation, in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the PhD degree in Education. The three papers that follow are distinct in focus, theoretical approach, and findings, and all three were successfully defended in May 2022. None of the manuscripts had been published at the time of filing.

This work was originally conceived of as a traditional dissertation with several research questions (RQs), all pertaining to the umbrella theme of teachers' career pathways and decision-making, from their childhood to the current day. As such, the data presented in all three papers came from the same sources: semi-structured individual interviews with 20 mid-career educators in Los Angeles County Title I high schools, collected between August of 2017 and July of 2018. In my first analytical pass through the 20 interview transcripts, I excerpted quotes for the different RQs and quickly realized that study results could be better interpreted separately.

Paper 1. My original RQ1 focused on teachers' origin stories and their pathways. In analysis, I noticed that the educational pathways of the people of color in my sample, as well as what motivated them to become teachers, were often different than White educators'. This observation was likely influenced by my own positionality as a person of color who had also taught in urban Title I sites. For example, the teachers of color in my study commonly spoke about wanting to be role models for students who were like themselves, who had had similar life experiences. As I realized that these identities and affinities had shaped their career decisions and their career entry in powerful ways, and I decided to narrow the scope for Paper 1, to only highlight the eleven teachers of color in the sample. I also framed this inquiry to more closely

study teachers' identity constructs and initial sense of job fit, hence, focused only on the past, on mid-career educators' narratives up to and including their first year of teaching.

Paper 2. RQ4 addressed, what I originally had conceived of as a seesaw holding two conditions in a balance: What factors *enable* or *challenge* mid-career teachers' ability to stay at Title I schools? Thus, I initially conducted emotional coding to excerpt for aspects of the job that satisfied teachers and those that dissatisfied them. This revealed that what educators most enjoyed about teaching was building relationships with students, learning about them, planning lessons for them, and ultimately watching students grow, in and beyond the classroom. There was so much data about how much teachers loved their students and how their pedagogies centered teacher-student relationships, and Paper 2 eventually formed theoretically around how the joys of teaching fostered the conditions that sustained educators, to stay longer in their jobs and in their profession. This inquiry included the whole sample (n=20) and their statements about what contributed to career longevity, from their first year of teaching to the present day.

Paper 3. Paper 3 addressed the other side of RQ4 in examining what challenged teacher retention. The same transcripts from all twenty teachers were analyzed in this inquiry. I observed that most of the excerpts referred to organizational issues, specifically whenever authority figures and/or policies intruded on when, how, and what the educators taught in their classrooms. These conflicts led to teachers feeling depleted, in need a like-minded community of practice and more classroom autonomy, and the dissatisfaction that ensued nearly always magnified teachers' turnover intentions. Most importantly, findings report the workplace factors that mitigate turnover and the actions teachers take to remain in the profession, in spite of these challenges.

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- Nakajima, T. M. & Goode, J. (2020). Lighting up learning: Teachers’ pedagogical approaches for mak(e)ing computing culturally responsive in electronic textiles classrooms. *Computing in Science & Engineering*, 22(5), 41-50. <https://doi.org/10.1109/MCSE.2020.3007164>
- Nakajima, T. M. & Goode, J. (2019). Transformative learning for computer science teachers: Examining how educators learn e-textiles in professional development. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 85, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.05.004>
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- Nakajima, T. M. (2020). Judging a book by its contents: Reconceptualizing teacher-student racial, ethnic, provincial, and socioeconomic congruence. Annual Mtg of AERA, canceled due to COVID-19, Apr. 2020
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Goode, J. & Nakajima, T. M. (2019). Lighting up learning through electronic-textiles: Culturally responsive pedagogy in computer science education. Annual Mtg of AERA, Toronto, ON, Apr. 2019

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PAPER 1

Beyond Race:

Teacher-Student Fit in Urban Title I High Schools

Teacher turnover is an ongoing “crisis” in the US public education system (Sutcher et al., 2016) that disproportionately affects students of Color¹ (SOC) and immigrant communities concentrated in urban Title I schools² (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). However, teachers of Color (TOC) are symbolically and substantively important when examining teacher job longevity in these high turnover settings (Carver-Thomas et al., 2017), as such schools are staffed by nearly 75% of all TOC in the teacher workforce nationwide (e.g., Ahmad & Boser, 2014). TOC also leave urban Title I schools much less frequently than White educators do (e.g., Ingersoll & May, 2011). In this exploratory study, I sought to illuminate: RQ1) What motivates TOC to work in urban Title I schools? RQ2) To what extent do TOC perceive an alignment of identities with their students in urban Title I schools? and RQ3) In what ways do TOC grow with experience when serving urban Title I schools?

TOC employed in Los Angeles (LA) County public high schools were interviewed for this inquiry. I asked them broadly about their pathways into the teaching profession, how they perceived their own identities and how well-suited they felt to serve working-class communities

¹ I capitalize all racializing terms assigned to groups of people, to denote a proper noun (Crenshaw, 1988) and as “an act of recognition... for those who have been for generations in ‘the lower case’” (The NYT, 1930; as cited by Thorps, 2014). The pan-ethnic umbrella phrase “of Color” includes all racialized ethnic groups (e.g., White Latinos, people of mixed racial backgrounds); this use is consistent with Pew Center’s finding that the majority of Americans of Latin-American ethnic heritage consider “Hispanic” or “Latino” racial identifiers (2015).

² Urban refers to locales in and around large, densely populated cities with 250,000 or more residents, and Title I refers to campuses that receive federal funding for students living in poverty (NCES, n.d., b).

of Color, to reveal how they ended up choosing to teach in urban Title I schools and why they stayed. Guided by *social constructionism*, a theory of how groups form along essentialized identity constructs and how these paradigms become accepted as truth (Burr, 2015), I found participants' conceptualizations of identity and teacher-student fit included a cluster of under-researched traits and affinities beyond racial congruence (e.g., socioeconomic congruence). I also report how TOC—who are assumed to have an affinity and a natural propensity for working with students who look like them (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011)—overcome initial teacher-student incongruences with experience in the field.

Literature Review

Despite doubts about its affordances and its extensive theoretical and operational challenges, there is a long history of specifically recruiting TOC to serve urban Title I schools (e.g., Driessen, 2015; Philip et al., 2017), based on the notion that educators are best fit to work in schools where they reflect the racial³ demographics of the student community (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). This rhetoric was first reported in federal campaigns in the 1860s, when African American teachers were recruited to educate formerly enslaved children in all-Black schools (Renfer & Sandifer, 1997). Experienced, highly qualified TOC nationwide were then dismissed, demoted, or forced to resign after the *Brown vs Topeka Board of Education* ruling in 1954, when the US Supreme Court ordered public schools to racially integrate (Walker, 2018). But recruitment of TOC to serve “high-poverty urban areas” recommenced with urgency in the 1990s, when then-Education Secretary Riley renewed the imperative in a speech titled “Our

³ *Race* is a construct of classifying people along similar characteristics like shared ancestral origin or phenotypical traits like skin, hair, and eye color, and *ethnicity* is a distinct grouping determined by primary language, country of origin, nativity/generational status, religious expression, or socioeconomic background (Stamper, 2019).

teachers should be excellent, and they should look like America,” (1998, p. 26), which was supported by another series of Supreme Court decisions to address de facto racial segregation in schools (Frankenberg et al., 2019).

Recruitment and related research activities continue today to examine TOC as a strategy for mitigating teacher shortages in racially segregated, income-stratified urban schools (e.g., Carver-Thomas, 2018). These efforts have been somewhat successful. Far more TOC than White educators teach in public schools in working-class neighborhoods (Simon & Johnson, 2015), evidence that TOC may be motivated by a sense of congruence with students along identity constructs in their career-affecting decisions. However, these mostly quantitative queries into racial congruence offer little of teachers’ own perspectives and rationales for their job choices (Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

Conceptual Framework: Person-Environment Fit

Career psychology theories suggest that a key to employee retention in any setting lies in *goodness of fit*, how well a worker feels suited to different aspects of their work (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), and education scholars have begun to examine how “fit is particularly vital” for teacher retention (Liu & Johnson, 2006, p. 349; Perrone & Eddy-Spicer, 2019). The most commonly used organizational psychology framework for studying fit is of person-job (P-J), which was first conceptualized by Edwards (1991), was developed further by Kristof (1996) and eventually renamed *person-environment fit* (P-E fit; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Simply put, P-E fit is the compatibility that occurs when an employee (person) and the workplace environment are perceived to be well-matched (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). P-E fit has several manifestations, because the “environment” part of the equation “can be conceptualized as an entity with its own unique characteristics or as an aggregate of its members’ characteristics;” it can also be

subjective or objective (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). In this inquiry, I used P-E fit in its broadest definition, to frame and contextualize TOC's motivations to serve urban Title I schools.

The most theorized forms of P-E fit in occupational literature are person-job (PJ fit; e.g., tasks, responsibilities), person-group (PG fit; e.g., teammates, cohort), person-supervisor (P-S fit; e.g., manager, superior), and person-organization (PO fit; e.g., workplace/community climate; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005, p. 282). In teacher retention scholarship, PO fit was found to be strongly correlated with novice educators' intentions to remain in the profession (Pogodzinski et al., 2013) and stay at their original teaching assignments (Jones et al., 2013). Initial sense of PO fit among newly hired teachers (e.g., teachers new to a job, including novices and veterans) also predicted later work satisfaction (Perrone & Eddy-Spicer, 2019) and intentions to stay at their schools for the foreseeable future (Ellis et al., 2017). Most studies of P-E fit in education research had a focus on PO fit, were predominantly quantitative in approach, and included the viewpoints of others (e.g., supervisors, colleagues) in assessing teacher fit.

In contrast, I employed a qualitative approach to generate empirical findings from the perspectives of TOC, and sampled educators with at least five years in the profession to reveal new connections between P-E fit and career longevity at schools that traditionally experience high teacher turnover. Based on prior scholarship and my own preliminary analyses of data, I identified characteristics that I suspected would be most salient for TOC in their sense of fit and aimed to conceptualize a new P-E framework of fit for examining teacher compatibility with their students (teacher-student; T-S fit).

Although scholars have just begun to adopt P-E concepts to study teachers' career outcomes in educational settings, studies of TOC congruencies are not new. In nationwide public school data collected and analyzed since the late 1980s, educators, students, schools, and even

neighborhoods are essentialized based on familial and household attributes like race and household income (Martin, 2011). These constructs are regarded as static and immutable individual and community demographic traits (NCES, n.d., a), and provide the data for many of the teacher-student match and educator retention studies that informed my inquiry. Social constructionism invites a critical view of these assumed divisions and affinities among people (Burr, 2015), and helps to expose how problematic discourses can shape notions of identity and fit. I review (and later critique) these social pre-conditions—the rhetoric, identity constructs, paradigms (Burr, 2015)—that prevail in staffing urban schools where most students are non-White, often immigrant, and live below the federal poverty line (Frankenberg et al., 2019).

T-S fit: Race

There is strong evidence that the racial composition of a school's students matters to teachers in choosing where to work (e.g., Borman & Dowling, 2006; Renzulli et al., 2011). For example, researchers found that many people of Color enter the teaching profession expressing intent to serve urban Title I schools and work with same-race students (e.g., Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Carver-Thomas, 2018). Mounting scholarship on the positive, cumulative socio-academic effects that TOC have on all of their pupils, particularly for own-race SOC (for review, see Redding, 2019), might also fuel the idea that people are naturally better suited to teach students who look like them (for review, see Villegas & Irvine, 2010). My qualitative approach and social constructionist lens advanced this work by exploring TOC's own conceptualizations of identity and fit, to identify how teacher-student *racial congruence* drives individuals to enter the occupation, choose to serve urban Title I schools, and their ongoing commitments to stay.

T-S fit: Ethnicity/Culture

However, racial labels can be problematic because they are imposed on communities by hegemonic bodies (Burr, 2015), often resulting in people being grouped inaccurately into communities with whom they do not share affinities. For example, government entities (including the US Department of Education) aggregate anyone with Latin-American heritage as Hispanic, a recategorization and racialized “Othering” (Arroyo, 2010, p. 199) of culturally distinct people. In fact, most Hispanic people (53%) view themselves as mixed race, acknowledging other racial roots as well (Pew, 2015). Given the heterogeneity of racially grouped peoples, teachers and students who are seemingly matched racially could in fact be mismatched by *ethnicity* (Garza, 2019), which suggests that P-E fit and retention are experienced as more than skin-deep for TOC.³ As a result, I included *ethnic congruence* as an additional identity construct in my study.

T-S fit: Hometown Locale/Proximity

Other education researchers found that teacher-student ethno-racial congruence was not as significant a predictor of job longevity as other factors (Scafidi et al., 2007; Hanushek et al., 2004). Synthesized with related occupational psychology research, a small but developing scholarship supports the idea that a school’s location may be more endogenous to job choice and satisfaction than race or ethnicity for teachers. For example, the majority of new teachers (61%) live within 20 miles of their high school alma maters, resulting in schools heavily staffed by locals; this statistic is magnified to nearly 92% for teachers who attended a high school where more than 75% of the students identified in a racially minoritized group (Reininger, 2012). Teacher candidates from the communities they serve indeed express a deeper commitment to the profession and their school sites and are more likely to remain in their initial assignments for at least three years (Irizarry, 2007). Contrastingly, educators whose hometowns are farther from the

school they serve are more likely to leave jobs (Boyd et al., 2008). Educators also tend to teach in communities similar to their hometowns (e.g., Boyd et al., 2005). Together, this literature suggests that *localism* (or *propinquity*) compelled TOC in my study to teach in LA County, too.

T-S fit: Socioeconomic Status

Preservice teachers who grew up in the same neighborhoods as their students may also share other background traits (Irizarry, 2007). For example, teacher candidates of Color from urban neighborhoods oftentimes endured concentrated poverty, attended under-resourced public schools themselves, and shared the financial burdens of their families (Villegas & Davis, 2007). This means that local teachers may also be *socioeconomically congruent* with their students, having similarly experienced restrictions to upward social mobility. However, beyond a few studies of teacher preparation programs that showed that financial assistance is vital for the academic success and longevity of locally recruited TOC (e.g., Bonner et al., 2011), little is known about how teacher-student socioeconomic congruence plays into educators' decisions to work in urban Title I schools, and if it is a key factor apart from other aspects of demographic match. No prior studies have reported class-based differences in P-E fit for local teachers either.

This plurality of prior work from distinct fields of study points to the possibility of different identity constructs that matter to TOC in their decisions to serve urban Title I schools. Teacher-student congruency across racial, ethnic, hometown locality, and socioeconomic traits were reviewed here, though my social constructionist lens revealed other identities and affinities constructed based on our own perceptions of reality (Burr, 2015), which I share in my Results.

Methods

Sampling/Data Collection

Perrone and Eddy-Spicer recommended more contextualized explorations of how different traits interact and contribute to homophily before applying a model of P-E fit to the teacher workforce (2019). Social constructionism suggests that these individually-nuanced conceptions of self and others are better observed through interview data (Burr, 2015). My data were collected as part of a broader phenomenology of the working conditions for LA County teachers in Title I high schools. Research subjects were recruited through social media sites and various area education schools' alumni listservs. Teachers self-selected by completing a short Google Survey indicating interest in study participation, provided basic demographic information, and answered multiple-choice questions about their professional plans (e.g., whether they planned to stay in their jobs in the short term). To qualify for the study, educators had to be mid-career (6–14 years of teaching experience) and employed full-time in a high school where the large majority (>75%) of the student population was Title I. I did not employ snowball sampling and participants were limited to one per school, to solicit a diverse sample among teachers with similar professional experience.

Data were acquired through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 individuals in a study-specific, open-ended inquiry designed to impose little to no limitations on the information shared (Chenail, 2011). Teachers were encouraged to narrate their experiences in an untimed, conversational format (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), to interpret how their identity categorizations developed (Burr, 2015) and influenced their sense of P-E fit. This also helped to avoid biases that can emerge when participants feel forced to answer difficult questions. Interviews were in person, took place during non-school hours in a place chosen by each teacher, and sessions lasted between two and four hours. Participants were not monetarily compensated and no adverse

effects were reported. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcripts were returned to respondents as member checks.

The transcripts were coded in Atlas ti in two phases. In the first, I excerpted teachers' expressions of fit, which I had elicited in two interview questions after providing participants Kristof-Brown and colleagues' (2005) definition of P-E fit: How did sense of fit come into play in your first year of teaching? and: How does sense of fit affect your decisions to stay in your job now? Although the original sample was racially diverse and included White teachers, I noticed that themes emerging from the TOC coalesced closely and that this subset interpreted "fit" very similarly. Analysis was then paused, for me to deepen my knowledge of literature pertaining to the career pathways and retention of TOC, as part of my rigorous, inductive study of the emergent data (Gioia et al., 2013). I then decided to narrow my sample to the 11 TOC, shifted my research questions, reframed my inquiry, and re-reviewed the scholarship for this manuscript.

In my next coding phase, I focused on answering RQ1 and the factors that motivated these TOC to work in urban Title I settings. I excerpted responses to another interview question—Describe the circumstances and factors that led you to this job—and its subsequent probes: Did you feel you were the right person for this job when you applied for it? What made you think that? What other schools did you consider and why didn't you go there? Amplified sampling, or the analysis of distinct data after initial coding, is a form of secondary analysis to synthesize new patterns in findings (Thorne, 1994). This process revealed even more expressions of identity and P-E fit beyond teacher-student racial congruence, as well as areas of perceived mismatch. Social constructionist theory enabled me to theme the most common of those essentialized categories (Burr, 2015): race (R), ethnicity/culture (E), propinquity/locality (P), and

socioeconomic status (S), branded *REPS congruence* for short. Additional identities that influenced the professional decisions of TOC (e.g., oldest in sibling birth order, “nerds”).

Participants

Table 1 presents the participating teachers, some of their self-reported identity attributes, and the demographic profiles of the schools where the individuals worked at the time of data collection. Five participants were men, six were women. The group all identified as *racially congruent* with most of the students they served. All were US-born except for the one who had crossed the US-Mexico border as a toddler. Nine (9/11) had grown up within 20 miles of the schools they served and graduated from LA County high schools; this group was categorized as *locals*. The nine teachers who had experienced poverty in their youths and were the first in their families to graduate from college were deemed *socioeconomically congruent*. All 11 were credentialed through different teacher preparation programs in LA County with an explicit urban school focus. All participants held taught core subjects—English (4), mathematics (5), science (1), history (1). All but one had completed Master’s degrees in education, several were pursuing doctorates. They served a variety of public high school types (e.g., traditional comprehensive sites, community schools, academies, pilot schools, network charters). Other expressions of TOC identity are unpacked later in my Results.

Table 1

<i>Participant and School Demographics</i>							
Teacher	Teacher Demographics					Student Demographics	
	Race ⁴	Ethnic/ Cultural Heritage	Graduated HS in	SES	1 st Gen. in College	Largest Racial Group(s)	Title I
Aaron	Mixed	African American, Jewish	NY State	Low	N	90.3% Hisp. + Black	82.1%
Carla	Hispanic	Mexican	LA County	Low	Y	86.6%	87.5%

⁴ Racial labels (e.g., “Hispanic,” “Mixed”) were self-identified and not imposed by the researcher. They are used throughout this manuscript for consistency.

Gregory	Black	African American	SD County	Low	Y	Hispanic 86.3% Hisp. + Black	77.4%
Isabela	Mixed	German, Mexican	LA County	Upper- Middle	N	93.4% Hispanic	96.3%
Julia	Hispanic	Mexican	LA County	Low	Y	98.5% Hisp. + Black	98.5%
Korey	Black	West Indian	LA County	Middle	N	89.7% Hisp. + Black	90.7%
Len	Hispanic	Mexican	LA County	Low	Y	95.8% Hisp. + Asian	98.2%
Miguel	Hispanic	Mexican	LA County	Low	Y	98.6% Hispanic	93.2%
Naomi	Hispanic	Mexican	LA County	Low	Y	91.0% Hispanic	90.4%
Olivia	Hispanic	Mexican	LA County	Low	Y	97.3% Hisp. + Black	95.1%
Talia	Hispanic	Mexican	LA County	Low	Y	97.4% Hisp. + Black	93.1%

NOTES: All names are pseudonyms. Teacher demographics were self-reported by the participants. “SES” is the self-described socio-economic status of the teacher’s family of origin in childhood, “1st Gen in College” refers to teachers whose parents did not have bachelor’s degrees, when the study participant entered college. Student population demographics and were retrieved from site-level data reported to the California State Department of Education (Dataquest, 2019).

Results

Findings are divided into three sections and include themed exemplars of participant quotes (Maxwell, 2013, p. 106) naturalized to conform to written conventions (Bucholtz, 2000). Section 1 describes how TOC chose to work in urban Title I schools (RQ1). Through vignettes of their career entry experiences, Section 2 focuses on my participants’ identity constructs and illumines the extent to which congruence mattered (RQ2). Section 3 focuses on participants’ experiences with student discipline through a social constructionist lens, which identifies one of the avenues through which TOC gained critical competencies that enabled them to stay and grow in the profession (RQ3).

Section 1: The Choice to Serve Urban Title I Schools

P-E fit, broadly defined, was the strongest motivator for TOC in my study to teach in urban Title I schools. The majority of these participants chose to teach because they were “good at school” and loved school. Eight (8/11) were academically exceptional and very involved in

school activities in their youth. Talia, for example, was valedictorian: “I fit really well into the school setting, the school environment, and I was a good student. I always, always, always thought it would be so great if I could be a teacher to make other kids feel about learning the way that I did.” Carla had not followed a traditional schooling pathway—she attended community college first, entered a credentialing program after attaining her Bachelor’s degree later in life—and similarly recalled: “I liked school so much. I got my AA with a 3.9 gpa.” Aaron also earned very high marks in school, so teachers often asked him “to help other students in class.” Even Korey, who described himself as “a bad kid,” tutored his friends in math in high school and community college; one of them suggested, “Why don't you become a teacher? I like the way you explain and I’m doing a lot better in my class.” Being academically successful positioned my sample to have formative experiences with learners. Nine participants had worked as tutors, mentors, classroom aides, or substitute teachers in urban Title I schools before commencing their teaching professions.

All 11 teachers also chose neighborhood public schools in urban centers to make a strong societal impact. Julia “made a conscious choice” to work among minoritized communities, telling me: “As a social justice educator, I am not satisfied with students getting two different life experiences. We need things to be equitable. Students in [affluent city] should not experience high school differently than a student in [working-class neighborhood].” She could work in better-resourced schools, Julia explained, but she wanted to shift systemic inequities. Olivia recalled having “very supportive, approachable, good teachers,” but her childhood friends were not as lucky. She wanted to dismantle those disparities: “Some students don't have those resources to access, so we have to be their resources. I wanted to be a teacher that could do this for students.” While Gregory’s parents and his relatives had all grown up in South LA, Gregory

graduated from high school in San Diego, where he was often the only Black student in his classes: “My dad joined the Marine Corps so that I wouldn't have to grow up here, so I wouldn't go to the schools here. That's not fair; you should be able to go to the school in your community.” Gregory returned to his “roots” to teach “kids that look like me.” These educators deliberately chose schools in urban Title I environments, with albeit heroic intentions, to level the educational playing field for minoritized communities.

The five socioeconomically congruent and locally raised teachers had attended inequitable, under-resourced schools firsthand. This group felt added responsibility and self-pressure to work in neighborhoods similar to their hometowns because they knew that they had achieved an uncommon level of academic success, as close peers and family members fell through cracks in the education system. Naomi described herself as a “poor and incredibly disillusioned, at-risk, latchkey kid,” growing up in “gang territory with a lot of drugs.” But a middle school counselor “helped me realize that the only way to get out of poverty was through my education.” Naomi lamented, “We couldn't keep my brother Danny away from that. No teacher was able to get to him, he was in and out of foster care, juvenile hall. He's been in prison for ten years for a crime he didn't commit.” Talia also saw her brother underserved in the same public schools she had attended:

We had the same genetic makeup, we got brought up the same way—same parents, same house—but he struggled his whole life. He dropped out of high school when he was a tenth grader; very, very different outcomes. Many students like my brother did not enjoy school.

You realize how impactful school is on a person's life.

TOC recognized how easily they could have had less favorable life conditions, which weighed heavily on their preference to serve in Title I schools.

Len was a classroom aide at his alma mater in LA County after graduating high school, to “help out my mom and my brothers financially” when his father became unemployed. Several deaths in the family left Len and his wife to raise his teenaged brother-in-law. “My wife and I are both first children, so we feel very responsible [to take] care of the family,” Len said, narrating how he stayed in LA County for college. Carla also took custody of her nephew after losing her brother and both parents, shortly before enrolling in community college. Talia was accepted to Stanford but attended a state university that offered more aid: “The financial aspect is ultimately how I narrowed it down, and geographically, the fact that the other schools are far from home. It just made sense for me to end up here.” She had wondered: “What happens if they have an emergency and I have to come back? Am I interrupting my family life further? I always had those types of things at the forefront of my decision-making because I’m the oldest in my family.” Miguel was accepted to UC Berkeley but chose a local university as well: “I didn’t want to be more of a burden to my family, as far as money goes... I got a job [and] helped my parents.” These statements led to another finding: four (4/11) of these TOC were the oldest among their siblings and three were only children, so seven among the 11 told me they were in positions of responsibility in their families because of their birth order and chose remain near their families and provide support.

Teachers who had not known poverty had more indirect pathways. For example, Isabela grew up in LA County like her students, she explained, “I’m part-Latino but I had a sheltered, suburban upbringing in an upper-middle class family.” A movie influenced her to become a teacher: “*Fear and Learning in Hoover Elementary* got me [thinking that] I’d want to work in a school like that. Maybe it sounds White savior-ish, but I didn’t want to keep tutoring rich kids in Palos Verdes (affluent neighborhood).” Korey also hailed from LA County and was “very

middle-class; I wasn't raised in the 'hood;" he learned about "gangbangers" and "the projects" through movies. Aaron was raised by a single mom who taught in a "low-SES school" in New York. Though his family was poor, Aaron attended a more affluent public school. When asked what motivated him to work in Title I schools, Aaron said he had followed in his mother's footsteps. However, he too referred to a film: "I don't know that I thought to myself: I want to be like Jaime Escalante (from *Stand and Deliver*)... I just wanted to teach kids who needed help and were underserved, make a difference." All three teachers who referred to movies in the interviews had college-educated mothers.

Summary. All nine TOC who had experienced poverty in childhood (9/11), regardless of where they grew up, endured traumas in their immediate families, like the death or terminal illness of a parent, divorce of parents, substance abuse, or incarceration. The seven REPS congruent teachers worked in urban Title I schools to remain near family through surmounting adverse circumstances; that included attending college and credentialing programs in LA County. Locality was a key factor for this group of TOC in their decisions, long before entering the profession.

Section 2: Identity Constructs That Mattered to TOC

My participants spoke of the constellation of demographic traits they shared with their students, as these multiple points of perceived congruence, rather than race alone, had attracted my sample to urban Title I schools and contributed to their expectations of T-S fit. But only two TOC felt an immediate sense of fit in the field; the majority (9/11) recalled initial feelings of T-S identity mismatch in their first year of teaching. In this section, I also share educators' reflections in temporal vignettes that demonstrate how TOC acquired new competencies in that first year.

My sample had expected to serve as role models for students in environments where they perceived sameness across multiple identities. Carla thought: “My background is their background. I came from a poor family in East LA and I’m Hispanic.” She wanted to “be the difference between a kid being successful and not being successful.” Aaron identified as “a person of Color from a poor neighborhood... I was always aware; money was tight... the same as the students that I’m working with.” He thought sharing his story with “underserved kids” would help them “see themselves in me[, like] ‘I could do that, I could be like that!’” Olivia also told me, “My family was poor; we faced the same struggle and situation as these students because of the color of our skin.” She wanted students who would look up to her, thinking “‘You grew up the same way I grew up, so your word has more value because you’ve been in similar situations. If you went to college, I could do that.’”

Being an exemplar was paramount for TOC who didn’t have models. “I never had a teacher who looked like me—first generation Mexican-American,” explained Talia. She had grown up poor in LA County, the first in her family to go to college, and was attracted to urban Title I schools where “I am my students.” Talia wanted to convey: “If someone like them could do it, they can do it, too. I didn’t have that. I didn’t have a me, for me.” As academically exceptional people of Color, these TOC taught at sites resembling their communities of origin, as Talia said, to “be a guide” for students who struggled in school.

However, nine of the TOC in my sample experienced culture shock when they first became teachers in urban Title I schools. I noted that participants used racial *dog whistles*—coded language and imagery that reinforced racial stereotypes—in referring to their first classes of students as “thugs” and “gang bangers,” who were “rough” or “difficult” to teach. These

evidenced a sense of T-S mismatch and incongruencies with the students in their first appointments as educators, the very individuals with whom TOC had expected a close affinity.

Miguel's first teaching position was in a predominantly African-American community with an increasing Hispanic immigrant population. His first year was tough—"I felt sick to my stomach," he told me—punctuated by SWAT teams locking the campus down when "racial tension between the kids" escalated to violence. Despite having grown up just miles away in a nearby neighborhood, Miguel had no lived experience managing identity-based conflict and did not immediately connect with students. His own educational path had felt "sheltered," having only socialized with "the nerds" in AP classes where he had no Black or Hispanic friends. Within months, however, Miguel began conveying that he "cared about [the students]" and was "interested in them," and these relationships blossomed, eventually convinced him that he had made the correct career choice.

Korey, a Black man who also grew up in LA County, was "really scared and nervous about teaching primarily Black students [in South LA]" because of his past experiences:

I was ostracized by people that looked like me in high school because my parents came from an island that used proper British [English]; that's all I heard, that's all I spoke. Other Blacks were like 'You're White-washed.' They called me an Oreo. I got teased a lot.

In his first year of teaching, Korey reflected on his identities and resolved to learn more about his students after being advised to "emphasize the relationships. I'm still learning to adjust my approach to gain more insight."

Naomi's return to her alma mater as a teacher "was the hardest year." Although she was REPS congruent, Naomi wasn't prepared for "rude, disrespectful, verbally abusive, rowdy, cocky" ninth graders, because "I was in the magnet [program] when I was in high school there

because I didn't want to be with all the clowns. The magnet had only students who were there to learn and college-bound." She realized that "the only way to get through the year was to try to relate to those students on a life level. I listened to their troubles. I felt like they had to get to know me before they respected me." Naomi built in class time to share food and discuss current events, built community, and structured learning differently from what she had experienced at the same school years earlier.

Summary. Although many of these TOC shared congruencies across multiple facets of identity, they quickly learned that T-S fit had to be cultivated in the classroom. In coming to this realization, educators had to reflect on and shed some of their own schooling experiences.

Section 3: The Trouble with Discipline

Section 3 further explores the educators' shifts in teaching approaches brought on by uncomfortable incidents that evidenced T-S mismatch. Behavior management emerged as a theme across interviews, and even individuals with strong sense of P-E fit gained new insights after realizing that they knowingly brought culturally inscribed practices into the classroom.

Although Len first taught at his alma mater where he felt he "understood the students," he expressed a sentiment shared by most of the nine Hispanic teachers in my sample: "Latinos are raised in a very punitive [manner], that's all we know and we bring that to the classroom." Miguel also recalled: "I was super strict because that's what I knew. I wanted a sense of discipline and respect." Naomi similarly described her first year: "I was strict, I felt like I had to be a certain type of teacher. I made a lot of my students cry!" Black teachers had similar approaches: Korey had made a student stand in the corner holding his belongings as a punishment. "I didn't know that was illegal," he reflected. With disruptive students, Gregory

emulated “what my mom did,” by taking them outside and giving ultimatums with a calm, gentle voice: “I call it the Come to Jesus moment.”

In contrast, Talia had a very strong initial sense of T-S fit, but a classroom discipline-related incident made her realize how much she relied on cultural congruence with “kids who are of my own background... I make a parent phone call; the next day, that kid will come in and you know it was addressed. But this looks very different for kids who don’t have Mexican parents.” Talia had called an African-American student’s mother in the same vein, but was told: “If you noticed that my daughter was having a bad day, couldn’t you pull her aside and ask her what she was going through, what might be troubling her... an indication that you should intervene?” This “reality check” gave Talia insight: “I could have handled that better [with the student].” She learned to “make sure that [students] feel respected” and recognized that “that may sound and look different for different kids.”

Although managing classroom behavior sometimes exacerbated identity incongruencies between TOC and SOC, all of the educators told me that they quickly “bought the Kool-Aid,” as Len called his process of awakening. Through listening to the students’ narratives, Len realized that being “punitive doesn’t work because [students] come with so much trauma. Before punitive measures, [teachers] have to be more understanding [and] get to know the student.” Miguel learned to “promote a sense of respect and discipline without yelling. It was just a matter of the kids and I getting used to one another. They feed off me being more relaxed, [and then] they are more relaxed.” Julia, a teacher who had consistently felt strong T-S fit, also said that the key component of that was acknowledging “the level of trauma that our kids experience.” Through talking one-on-one with troubled students, Gregory learned about the “violence outside the school, abuse. [My students] have real problems that they’re experiencing and they need

someone that can really help them cope. Before we teach them content, they need to be able to feel that their situations can change.”

Summary. Like in any personal or professional relationship, these teachers all demonstrated that T-S fit is more than skin deep and required *cultural competence*, that is, cognizance of how culture shapes themselves and others, including an awareness of their own prejudices and stereotypes (e.g., Brown, 2007). The narratives of TOC who had persisted in their urban Title I teaching positions also showed the importance of having a positive disposition to recognize and adapt creatively to new situations, as well as the determination to connect with students in their classes every year through mutual trust, respect, and care.

Discussion

This exploratory study examined TOC, their career pathways, identities, and perceptions of P-E fit, to understand how they decided to serve urban Title I schools and remain in the profession. Seven of my participants evidenced the salience of REPS congruence—mirroring their students’ demographic traits on multiple levels—in their decisions to teach predominantly SOC experiencing poverty in LA County. However, other factors were also key in how teachers navigated to their places of work, like academic excellence in their youth (9/11), sibling birth order (7/11), families that required constant attention and proximity (10/11), to name a few identities and experiences that emerged from my interviews. Lastly, job persistence and growth in the profession was only enabled when TOC reflected on uncomfortable feelings of mismatch. Below, I further interpret my findings and develop a construct of T-S fit, with a dichotomy theorized in industrial/organizational psychology literature: *complement* and *congruence* (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987).

Complement

When P-E fit is *complementary*, the individual's knowledge and abilities are commensurate with the demands of their job (e.g., Edwards, 1991). In my study, TOC had perceived a need in urban Title I schools and felt they could meet that need with their specialized skills and dispositions for assisting other learners who struggled in school. Statements like, "I fit well in the school environment" and "I... would help other kids," illustrated how teachers considered themselves particularly apt to navigate marginalized communities in LA County, where they felt such role models were few and inequities in schooling abounded. Like found in studies of preservice TOC (Ochoa, 2007; Villegas & Irvine, 2010), my sample sought to make the strongest impact by working in impoverished neighborhoods rather than with privileged affluent families.

Congruence

Congruence also motivated all of the teachers to serve LA County public schools, which researchers of vocational behavior describe as the P-E fit observed when an employee "possesses characteristics which are similar to other individuals" in the workplace (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987, p. 269). When asked about their expectations of fit, participants expressed T-S congruency along multiple identities and shared experiences beyond race, like Talia said, "There's an understanding [among] kids [with] Mexican parents," indicating a sense of ethnic or cultural match. This was strongest among the seven locally-raised TOC who had experienced poverty in their youth and were the first in their families to attain college degrees, identified in my study as REPS congruent for closely matched their students on compounding levels. In discussing her sense of fit, Carla described degrees of congruence in a single sentence: "I came from a poor family in East LA and I'm Hispanic." This group had increased exposure to trauma, loss, scarcity, and discrimination in their own lives, and they wanted to work with students who "grew

up the same way.” The REPS congruent teachers felt better suited to teach in urban Title I schools than their peers.

Some distinctions among identity categories also emerged. Interestingly, racial match alone did not indicate congruence. Korey was an LA County native but felt incongruent with African American students because of his middle-class and Caribbean upbringing. Gregory and Aaron, the two teachers not from LA County, both perceived a family-like cultural affinity with same-race (Black) students. Isabela’s “sheltered, suburban upbringing” contributed to her outsider status in Title I schools, even though she identified as half-Mexican and a local. In fact, socioeconomic incongruence was most often a barrier to P-E fit, which affirms earlier findings that a contextual understanding of poverty is crucial for urban schoolteachers to relate culturally with their students (Duncan-Andrade, 2005). Teachers who were not structurally vulnerable to oppressions in income mobility and did not attend under-resourced schools themselves, referred to popular movies starring heroic teachers to supplement their limited knowledge of the politically-situated life experiences endured in working-class LA County neighborhoods.

Other Expressions of Identity Associated with T-S Fit and Mismatch

Other identities contributed to my sample’s career choices. Notably, REPS congruent teachers had high levels of responsibility within their families because of their birth order. Six of the seven teachers were the eldest or only children (one became an only child when her older sibling died) and the last participant was third in sibling position but the only one in his family to attend college. As natural leaders in their families, all seven REPS congruent educators chose to remain in LA County for both college and career, to support their communities through amalgamated traumatic events (poverty, terminal illness, incarceration, etc.).

Though their strong academic performance and positive experiences in schools had guided most of my participants to become teachers, their exceptional backgrounds impeded P-E fit in their initial classroom appointments. These TOC encountered *cultural dissonance* in the classroom—a sense of disorientation and inability to relate with students’ lived experiences of the education system (Bailey, 2013)—because their “college-bound,” “nerd” friends had socialized them to develop assumptions for how students should behave, think, and ultimately succeed in school (Nao, 2008). Hence, even TOC who grew up in very similar circumstances as their students, including two who taught at their alma maters, positioned their students as lacking role models, discipline, persistence, and not serious about learning, which challenged teachers’ perceptions of fit and reinforced the assimilation function of schooling.

Sense of fit based on assumptions of T-S congruence initially encouraged some of the educators to bring in their own cultural norms, specifically around classroom discipline. Prior research has found that even veteran TOC hailed as exceptional educators can be viewed as overly strict and uncaring, when they bring culturally situated demeanor and practices to their classrooms (Foster, 1993). Within a few months on the job and upon reflection, most of the teachers in my sample sought new ways of interacting with students. They raised their social consciousness by listening to and building individual relationships with students, finding a more effective way to manage classroom behavior at urban Title I schools, where students “come with so much trauma.” This finding reinforced previous reports that racially incongruent teachers can complement students as well as racially matched teachers, when they employ a culturally sensitive approach “designed to *fit* (sic.) the school culture to the students’ culture” by centering students in social interactions and knowledge construction in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p 314; Liu & Ball, 2019). Therefore, a teacher’s values, their worldviews, and how they

position themselves within the power dynamics of schools, are more salient than any identity construct based on a perception of teacher-student complement or congruent fit. This conclusion supports assertions that longevity in urban teaching jobs require educators to reconceptualize their own professional identities through reflecting on their sense of fit and adopting new classroom practices (Liu & Ball, 2019), a shift that usually comes after at least a few years of experience (Olsen & Anderson, 2007).

Limitations

These themes are not generalizable, as this study had a small number of participants and the TOC in the sample were atypical—e.g., most of them grew up in LA County and they all attended credentialing programs that placed new teachers in nearby Title I schools. The oversampling of high-achieving, highly educated teachers likely resulted from my recruitment through university education department listservs. The educators self-selected for my study and likely had preexisting interest in the topic of teacher retention, indicating an unknown level of participant bias. Also, research results may have differed, had I defined fit differently for participants or collected data with *a priori* hypotheses (preexisting analytical codes) rather than *post-hoc* (interpreted inductively). Although my social constructionist lens privileged the identity constructs that mattered to TOC in fit and job commitment, another inquiry might have focused on other categories, like educators’ generational or immigration status, or what they learned in their urban school-focused teacher preparation programs. A hypothesis-led approach would have shifted this inquiry completely.

Conclusion

This study adds to what we know about TOC who work in LA County Title I high schools, a sample of interest both because of the “revolving door” of teacher turnover at such

settings (Ingersoll, 2004, p. 2) and because TOC retention is a “demographic urgency” (Sleeter & Milner, 2011, p. 81). Though not representative of all TOC, the findings affirm literature cited throughout this paper and provide new evidence that P-E fit matters in teachers’ professional decisions. Examining race as well as other identities through a social constructionist lens illuminated a confounded set of relevant teacher-student congruences and complements. The focus on fit suggests further attention is needed on educators’ constructions of the world and how they are impacted by power relations (Burr, 2015, p 5), as well as new ways to support the job longevity of all educators.

Recruiting Congruent Teachers

Mid-career teachers in my study described P-E fit as sharing the same racial, ethnic, and hometown identities as their students, but TOC who had also experienced poverty in their youth had redoubled their commitments to remain local and help students like themselves navigate the structural oppressions of our income-stratified society. Compared to racial match, T-S socioeconomic congruence is little studied. My findings also support *homegrown* or *grow-your-own* (GYO)-type credentialing programs that recruit aspiring educators from a locality to teach in their neighborhood schools. GYOs often provide financial assistance, flexible and accelerated certification, and other incentives to REPS congruent individuals, and are touted for successfully building pathways for TOC to work in urban Title I schools (Carver-Thomas, 2018). However, existing research focuses on GYO candidate recruitment and retention until their initial job placements (Villegas & Davis, 2007); a longitudinal inquiry of GYO teachers’ career decisions into their mid-career phases would illuminate if and how program incentives contribute to job persistence of educators who had experienced poverty. Another study might compare the persistence rates of GYO educators with their colleagues from programs like Teach for America,

a certification pathway that explicitly denies the impact of poverty, not only on students and the education system, but on the teachers they recruit (Farr, 2010).

Supporting Congruent Teachers

While credentialing programs are tasked to fill teacher shortages in urban Title I schools, such efforts “have not had an evidence-based blueprint” for racially diversifying the teacher workforce (Howard, 2021, as cited in McDonald, 2021), and on-going professional support in the field is key to TOC job persistence (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Although my sample expected to be successful, stable role models for their students, the REPS congruent educators continued to juggle heavy family responsibilities along with the high demands of teaching, as societal obstacles persisted in the lives of their loved ones. Employers may not know enough about TOC who lived through and overcame poverty to go to college, earn a teaching credential, and remain in their neighborhoods to serve local Title I schools—who they are and what their needs for support might be. To begin such an exploration, I urge the national research centers to collect school district employment data on educators’ characteristics beyond the status quo (i.e., race/ethnicity, age, years of experience, education level, gender), by adding a field for teachers’ hometown ZIP code or the name/city/state of their high school alma mater on job application forms or hiring documents. Software can analyze teachers’ possible exposure to childhood poverty (e.g., Poverty Data Tools at www.census.gov). An inquiry group of GYO educators in urban Title I settings might help to build theory around the long-term impacts of poverty and investigate the salience of other factors (e.g., REPS congruent teacher’s sibling position, academic tracking, exposure to adverse childhood experiences) on educators’ career pathways. This could inform scholars and school administrators about the unique challenges faced by the REPS congruent TOC, to better retain our workforce.

Recruiting/Supporting All Teachers

TOC may be “particularly adept” (Mitchell, 1998, p 105) when serving in their hometown communities (Gist et al., 2018), because they likely inherited the knowledge, skills, and abilities to effectively teach minoritized young people in their own upbringing, called *community cultural wealth* (Yosso, 2005). However, recruiting teachers solely on the basis of race or propinquity is not practical (Villegas et al, 2012), nor does congruence automatically elicit a strong sense of P-E fit in Title I schools, and other identity constructs beyond REPS impact teachers’ career decisions. This affirms the argument that all teachers benefit from supports and spaces to reflect on the “presumed relationships” of congruence and translate their individual positionalities into effective, critical pedagogies (Philip et al., 2017, p. 75). Additionally, explorations of T-S match based on differential *levels of acculturation* (the degree to which individuals adopt the social norms of the hegemonic culture) or on immigration or generational status (de Ramírez & Shapiro, 2005) might reveal how even TOC experience “culturally subtractive schooling,” socialized to accept the historical legacies of racism, segregation, and hierarchies, and reify them in their urban Title I classrooms (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011, p. 8).

A New Teacher-Student Fit Focus

Regardless of any perception of P-E fit, educators who do not cultivate communication and understanding in urban classrooms can exacerbate the “widening cultural chasm” between educators and SOC and increase teacher turnover (Villegas & Irvine, 2010, p. 175), especially when teachers have limited experience with the systemic oppressions of racism and poverty (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Acknowledging this shifts the fit discourse toward a new complement-centered framework that requires teachers to hold a certain set of skills,

dispositions, and values appropriate for and effective with all students. Many credentialing programs in urban settings thus promote critical and asset-based pedagogical approaches that reposition and uplift SOC in working class communities, to help teacher candidates build sociopolitical awareness and competencies to support students who are demographically incongruent (Donaldson, 2005; Quartz & TEP, 2003).

Most of the teachers in my study said they explicitly employed *culturally relevant pedagogy*, an approach that requires educators to reflect on their own identities and privileges, acknowledge the politics of their relationships with students, empathize with their learners, and navigate all students to meet and exceed high academic standards (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This mindset may have helped participants overcome their congruence-based assumptions and nurture P-E fit in their workplaces. Although preparation in such pedagogical orientations can stave off the cognitive dissonance that can result when their work environments are very different from what they experienced in their own schooling (Ashforth et al., 2000), few studies to date have examined teachers' cultural competencies beyond career entry. Relatedly, the concept that enacting culturally responsive teaching approaches in everyday practice transforms the practitioner, to supplement or even supplant teachers' other identity constructs or affinities, is understudied (e.g., Ullman & Hecsh, 2011). Further inquiries into educators' identities and orientations will likely reveal even more effects on their sense of P-E fit and career longevity in urban Title I schools.

PAPER 2

Those Who Love, Teach: The Career-Sustaining Power Of Engaged Pedagogy

Teacher staffing continues to be a primary concern in high-poverty public schools in the US, where the rate of educator attrition is nearly double compared to campuses in affluent neighborhoods (NCES, 2015). This disparity is alarming, as students of color and immigrant families who attend urban Title I schools⁵ are disproportionately impacted by teacher turnover (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). Job retention, particularly of experienced teachers, is therefore both an occupational dilemma for those within the profession and a matter of educational equity. Organizational psychologists theorize that a primary predictor of both job satisfaction and persistence is how an individual feels about “the work itself,” or the tasks and content of the work performed (Herzberg et al., 2011, p. xv). Empirical teacher retention studies affirm that educators are most compelled to choose and stay in the profession when they enjoy the actual work of teaching (e.g., Scott et al., 2001), but few studies have examined how the work impacts practitioners’ long-term career decisions (e.g., Rolls & Plauberg, 2009).

This study investigated educators’ feelings about their teaching practice and why they continue working in urban Title I schools. Guided by Cochran-Smith and colleagues’ qualitative exploration of novice teachers’ career decision making (2012), and an earlier international quantitative inquiry of working teachers’ job satisfiers (Scott et al., 2001), I interviewed 20 *mid-career* educators (with 6-14 years of classroom experience) employed in Los Angeles (LA) County public high schools. The inquiry was guided by this research question: What strengthens

⁵ *Urban* locales are in and around large, densely populated cities with 250,000+ residents. *Title I* campuses receive federal funding for serving disproportionately high numbers of students living in poverty (NCES, n.d.).

mid-career teachers' commitments to remain in urban Title I schools? Through analyses of what persisting educators most enjoyed about teaching, I argue that educator ideology—their values, beliefs, and theories they bring—reveals powerful clues for strengthening teacher retention.

Literature Review

Although scholars of new teachers in urban Title I schools find that improving workplace climate and employment conditions (e.g., compensation, administrator support, facilities, induction, mentoring, collaboration) contribute to job longevity (for a review, see Guarino et al., 2006), experienced teachers differ in how they make career-affecting decisions (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009). Job commitment for established educators is more correlated to how they feel about the work itself (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012), but there is limited research of how those sentiments contribute to career longevity for individuals with five or more years in the field. This study focuses on *pedagogy*, or “the core business of teaching students” (Dinham & Scott, 1998, p. 364): facilitating student learning in and out of the classroom (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017).⁶ Three key competencies together drive pedagogy (European Commission, EC, 2019) and are foundational to teaching: *knowledge*, *skills*, and *attitudes/dispositions* (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, NCATE, 2008). I review how NCATE and the EC (the agencies that set standards for teacher credentialing in the US and the European Union, respectively) describe these aspects of the work, then link each to prior research on teaching and

⁶ *Pedagogy* is definitionally complex. It is also considered a knowledge (Shulman, 1987), consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2014), professional orientation or role (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017), a philosophy (Tintiangco-Cubales, 2010, as cited in Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015), or an approach or method (Tate, 1995). The broader definition framed my study, but in my Discussion, I rely on these other definitions for alternative interpretations of how pedagogy contributes to teacher retention in urban Title I schools.

teacher retention in urban Title I contexts. I also identify commonalities and overlaps among the three constructs to consider in examining teachers' sentiments about their work.

Conceptual Framework

Knowledge. Pedagogical *knowledge*⁷ is the established concepts, facts, figures, and theories that educators work from (EC, 2019). Teachers must have in-depth content and curricular expertise, which are simultaneously accessed in lesson preparation and execution (NCATE, 2008), and advancing their knowledge through professional development and on-the-job experience is also endemic to the work of teachers (Shulman, 1986). Familiarity with their learners and their backgrounds is also part of teachers' working knowledge systems (Shulman, 1986). Additionally, "outside of school" knowledge—including but not limited to the socioeconomic, geographic, and cultural dynamics of the local community—is critical, particularly when serving linguistically and racially marginalized students in urban Title I schools (Milner et al., 2015, p. 529); acquiring community cultural knowledge to weave into instruction is also foundational to teachers' work (Gay, 2002). Clearly, a boundless breadth of knowledge is required in the classroom, but I could not find research of how consciously and proficiently enacting these domains of knowledge in their teaching improves educators' own perceptions of job satisfaction or their career longevity.

Skills. Educators use their existing knowledge to carry out processes and achieve results; these *skills* are often the most emphasized function of teachers' work, as they can be easily observed in class (EC, 2019). NCATE defined effective pedagogues as teachers who utilize multiple instructional strategies to present academic content in clear, accessible, and meaningful

⁷ Although a core function of teaching is to help students acquire knowledge, pupil knowledge was not considered a teacher competency in my study.

ways, connecting concepts to students' prior experiences (2008). These methods might include *scaffolding*, which provides temporary curricular supports for students to experience academic success that they might not have achieved on their own (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017), and *differentiation*, a flexible, individually responsive strategy for teaching mixed ability levels (Santamaria, 2009). Experienced pedagogues might also invite students to engage with authentic texts and real-world prompts that are more relevant than the standard curricular canon (Kumashiro, 2000) or teach the canon through non-traditional methods that attend to student development beyond course content (Cook, 2019; Kumashiro, 2000). In addition to instructional strategies, successful teachers demonstrate interpersonal skills.⁸ They build relationships and facilitate learning communities wherein individualities—including students' traditional and evolving cultural identities (Paris & Alim, 2014)—are valued and uplifted (Gay, 2010a), a skill that has been called “the most essential element of teaching in urban social contexts” (Milner, 2010; cited in Milner et al., 2015).

While some classroom strategies like differentiation are linked to teacher efficacy, job satisfaction, and longevity in urban Title I settings (Tricarico & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014), instructional skills are generally understudied for their effects on the educators who employ them and on their career decision-making. However, educators' interpersonal skills are strongly associated with educator retention in high-poverty, urban schools (McKinney et al., 2007) and can make or break an educator's career (Haberman, 2018).

⁸ Although relationship-building can be considered a part of an educator's knowledge or disposition (Shulman, 1987), my framework aligns with scholars who found that the ability to connect with and create community among students is a skill that develops in time (Villegas, 2007), that can “change, grow, and ripen” with classroom experience (Turner, 2018, p. 119).

Ideology. Although “the education profession has reached a general consensus about the knowledge and skills educators need” (NCATE, 2008, p. 7), the NCATE Standards were notably vague about educator *dispositions*, how they are acquired or demonstrated. The EC described this third competency as *attitudes*, an individual educator’s mindset or worldviews, the antecedent to how the teacher acts or reacts to ideas, persons, and situations (2019). Gay similarly wrote about *ideological anchors*—an educator’s personal underlying value assumptions, attitudes, principles, beliefs about teaching and the students—that heavily inform the individual’s pedagogy (2010b). Teaching is rooted in the educator’s own frame of reference; their every decision and action stems from that worldview (Gay, 2010b). I adopted her definition and use similar terms like *mindset*, *worldview*, *orientation*, *stance*, *positioning* interchangeably. Teaching is most rewarding for educators who work in alignment with their own ideologies (Santoro, 2011), hence, examining ideology is essential in any study of teaching practice and teacher longevity in urban Title I schools (Haberman et al., 2018; Warren, 2018). Also key to persevering in urban Title I settings is teachers acknowledging that their orientations are dynamic and that a “growing awareness” of defeating and problematic ideologies are gained in “the long haul” (Nieto, 2003, p. 91-92). Thus, Villegas (2007) asserted that working according to their principles and re-aligning their values and convictions in relentless support of social justice, are crucial for educators who teach in urban Title I schools.

Additional Conditions

Teaching requires content expertise, keen understanding of students, and pedagogical knowhow (Berry et al., 2008; Shulman, 1987). Pedagogues must articulate, enact, and apply theories while using tools, strategies, and assigning tasks to manage classroom learning, discourse, and behavior (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Pedagogy is also situated within a broader

context and how educators perceive those contexts colors every decision made in and out of the classroom (Lipsey, 2013).

Several points emerged in this review. Although NCATE and the EC define pedagogy as distinct competencies, educators use them *transversally* in teaching (Caena, 2011) and the resulting interplay can render the three dimensions more ambiguous and overlapping in practice. Pedagogy also shifts as educators, content standards, and the world around them evolve, and teachers must develop an *adaptive capacity* to respond to students' learning needs in the moment (Caena, 2011). Therefore, a critical condition of the work and of teacher retention is professional development, the "formal and informal means of helping teachers learn new skills and also develop new insights" (Grant, n.d., as cited in Sarpy-Simpson, 2007), to support growth along the three competences (EC, 2019). Ongoing staff development and collaboration with other teachers are strongly correlated with urban educators' intentions to stay in the field (Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Olsen & Anderson, 2007).

Lastly, the review elucidated that teaching is "fundamentally a decision-making process" (Smith, 1996) based on individual educators' tacit and intuitive tendencies (Rolls & Plauberg, 2009, p. 25). For educators to work in a morally driven manner, they must have a "considerable degree of control" (Bayer et al., 2009, p. 3) and "capacity for autonomous action" (Calhoun, cited in Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 5). Teachers with more classroom autonomy indeed perceive greater empowerment, professionalism, and job satisfaction (Guarino et al., 2006; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). However, less known is how that autonomy is earned and how educators' perceptions of and need for autonomy changes as they gain classroom experience.

Summary

Prior scholars of experienced educators have explicated that, 1) What teachers know, the methods they employ in and out of the classroom, as well as who they are, what they believe and value, encompass pedagogy; 2) The distinctly identified knowledge, skill, and ideology aspects of the work likely blur and overlap with experience; 3) Teaching includes ongoing professional growth on the part of the educator, and 4) Teachers are enabled to develop and improve when they have the authority to make pedagogical decisions autonomously. These must all be considered when exploring what teachers most enjoy about their practice and how the work affects their decisions to stay in urban Title I schools.

Methods

Data were collected through interviews with twenty mid-career educators who responded to an advertisement posted on multiple online platforms (Facebook, university teacher education alumni listservs, NextDoor, etc.).⁹ Volunteers completed a Google Form to determine eligibility (participants had to be a full-time educator with 6-14 years in the profession and serve a high school in Los Angeles County with 50% or more Title I students). To mitigate instrumentation and investigator bias inescapable in qualitative data collection, I adopted a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin, 2006). The semi-structured, open-ended questions were study-specific and discovery-oriented to welcome participants' perspectives, and imposed little or no limitations on their contributions to the study (Chenail, 2011). Interviews were scheduled on teachers' time (i.e., not during work hours) and took between two and four hours. Their narratives were audio-recorded, transcribed, then sent to the participants as member-checks.

⁹ The call for participants contained the criteria for study selection, and this text: "This is a study of mid-career educators. If selected to participate, you will participate in an hour-long interview and be asked about your current job, what brought you there in the first place, and what factors enable or challenge your ability to stay at your job." Interviewees were not compensated.

Participants identified as White (9), Latinx/Hispanic (7), African American (1), West Indian (1), and Biracial (2). Twelve were women and eight were men. More than half of the participants grew up in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, and almost all had attended public schools as children themselves. They entered the field through different teacher preparation pathways, including traditional, accelerated (e.g., paid teacher-intern programs, emergency credential), and online. Their Title I sites also varied, including large traditional and community schools, small academies and pilot schools, network charters and independent public charters. The sample taught a variety of high school subjects including English, science, mathematics, history, and electives like computer science, yearbook, leadership, business.

The interviews covered a wide range of topics that centered questions about the twenty participants' impressions of their current teaching appointments, their roles and responsibilities, their working conditions, and their intentions to stay or leave their jobs. I used a general inductive approach for data analysis to answer my research question (Thomas, 2006). Using Atlas Ti, my first coding pass sought instances in the transcripts where participants spoke about satisfying aspects of the job. Affective analyses—coding for emotions and values—can reveal core motives for human action and unpack their cognitive processes, attitudes, and beliefs (Saldaña, 2013). Most of the excerpts emerged in Section III of the interview, when participants reflected on different work-related conditions and how much each motivated them to stay in their current jobs, and in Section IV, when I asked participants, “What helps you thrive or regenerate, continue to find joy and meaning in this job?” This analytical pass revealed 899 excerpts pertaining to job satisfaction.

After second phase structural coding (Saldaña, 2013), 504 excerpts clustered broadly around the work of teaching. This emerging theme prompted changes to this manuscript. Before

proceeding with analysis, I studied literature on teacher's pedagogy and reviewed how it can relate to career longevity. In the third analytical phase, I categorized the 504 excerpts into subthemes that were common across most of the interviews.

Results

Statements of job satisfaction that coalesced around mid-career educators' teaching practices are organized here into the three aspects of pedagogy, in the order of importance conveyed by most of the participants: ideology, knowledge, then skills. When certain ideas were repeated by five or more participants, I organized exemplar excerpts into themed paragraphs within each subsection. Throughout, I also address how categories overlapped.

When asked what kept them in their jobs, almost everyone referred first to the high value they placed on being with their students and positioning themselves in the relationships that blossomed in the classroom. Closely following in importance to teacher longevity was their own love for learning and knowledge-building. Lastly, these mid-career teachers enjoyed using varied strategies in instruction.

1) Ideology: "The way you view yourself"

Although the interview protocol had no questions asking participants how they felt about their pupils, all 20 teachers responded that they stayed in their jobs because they loved the students; this emotion drove nearly all of the decisions they made in and out of the classroom. In analysis, I recognized that ideology—what teachers believed and valued, their worldviews, and their teacher identities—was intertwined with participants' expressions of what they knew (knowledge) and how they taught (skill). The desire to connect with learners in myriad ways was linked to participants' persistence in the field. These findings begin with demonstrations of

educators' love for their students, then I elaborate on the belief systems that guided how they positioned themselves in relation with their students.

“I love the kids.” When asked what helped him continue to find meaning in his job, Joe, a computer science teacher, said, “I love the kids. I enjoy waking up because I know I’m going to laugh throughout the day with my students. The kids are hilarious and we have fun!”

Leadership and English teacher Julia remembered her first experience working in a Title I school in South LA: “I felt like the students were real. They would tell it how it is, say how they feel; I just liked them!” Approaching youth and their work with abounding love—the 20 participants collectively used iterations of the word *love*¹⁰ hundreds of times—appeared to also sustain their job commitment. Teachers’ affection for their students was a prerequisite attitude for the profession. English teacher Olivia asked matter-of-factly, “Why would you be a teacher [if you] don’t like being around young people?...I haven’t had a year where I’m like ‘I don’t like these kids!’ It’s never been that way.”

“This was for me.” Educators enjoyed teaching their favorite subject matter. “I like teaching,” Faith responded, “This was for me, definitely, [and] it had to be science.” She constantly added ideas to her arsenal of lessons, which represented Faith’s own passion for teaching and customized content to make biology and health content more relevant to students. “I’m gonna have to get two more [binders] because they’re filling up,” she showed me. On the first day of school, Will projected to his social studies classes: “I’m a nerd about history, I love this stuff! Hopefully, you’ll love it, too.” Most of the participants taught because they wanted to share their love for these topics with students.

¹⁰ A common definition of teacherly love is beyond the scope of this study.

“Fundamental essence.” Many of the teachers believed that honesty and integrity were key to teaching. Sami, who taught English, explained: “Kids do know when you're being inauthentic, [so] I'm just honest with them. [It's] so integral!” Five educators referred specifically to the adage that teachers in Title I schools should affect a strict persona in order to command student respect. Julia said, “I’ve never been one to not smile until Christmas.” Math and physics teacher Avery laughed: “I know it’s weird that teachers talk to their students, but I don't see an issue with it...If they don't hear that you’re real, how they gon’ listen to you?” She added, “Otherwise, it's boring!” Being herself was part of Avery’s belief system, which guided her stance with students and made the work fun. “I like to be authentic,” science educator Gregory said, “If I didn't do that, I don't know that I would be as passionate or happy.”

For some teachers, valuing authenticity and honesty meant that they named the inequitable dynamics of schooling. “School is not meant for [a lot of students,] it hasn't been designed for them,” Science teacher Gregory explained, “and I'm a part of that system that's a disservice to students.” Aaron, a math teacher, concurred. “Your first challenge as an educator is having a conversation around that[,] about your fundamental essence, the way you view yourself compared to your student...You have to be authentic [as] a prerequisite for having that conversation; [the] kids will feel you out if you don't have their best interest at heart.”

“Family.” When asked what enabled them to stay in their jobs, many of the study participants responded that the bonds they shared with students made them feel like family members. For example, Rory addressed students as “mi’jo” and “mi’ja” (*my son, my daughter* in Spanish, the primary language of most of his students), a practice that normalized the use of Spanish in his AP English classes. “I [unconsciously] say these things all the time, it’s probably because I literally think they’re my own children,” Rory laughed. Faith called her students “a

little family. [The classroom is] my second home; I spend as much time there as I do at home!” “I always feel like these are my kids,” Gregory also confessed, “I’ll [still] try my best to teach them [content, but that] experience of being in a safe space and be comfortable and be valued and able to contribute—part of (arms make a hug gesture)—might be the most important thing that they get out of the classroom...Not necessarily biology.”

These connections often extended beyond the end of the school year. Specifically, eight participants talked about how student cohorts engendered that familial feeling, especially when educators *looped* with them. English teacher Isabela said, “Being able to see kids through four years is something I didn't really think about very much before. It's cool...you're able to form stronger bonds.” Olivia exclaimed with tears in her eyes, “The class that just graduated, I had them as freshmen, I taught most of them four years so they're very close to my heart. When they graduated, I was a mess, I cried!” Thinking of their students as family impacted study participants’ career decisions. Math educator Zoe had wanted to quit teaching but decided to “stay until they finish[ed],” referring to the students that she was “a little mom for, [that I] took from ninth grade through twelfth grade.” Years ago, when social studies teacher Len considered transferring schools, he realized, “I can't leave...We follow students for four years. That’s how they get you...You feel responsible” for ninth graders until they graduate. When I asked Len why he no longer wants to leave, he replied:

I like the students...(his voice trails off, tears flow). I'm here [because] that connection with the students is what’s important. That's a lot of times what keeps me at this school.

~ Len, social studies teacher

Summary. Collectively, these mid-career educators approached their work and their students as if they were part of a tight-knit community, with integrity, and above all, love for their students. This kept them in their jobs in urban Title I high schools.

2) Knowledge: Learning about the Students

In their expressions of job satisfaction, many participants prioritized their own knowledge development to better facilitate student learning.¹¹⁷ Specifically, they enjoyed learning about their students, what mattered to students, students' assets and learning needs. Within excerpts coded to Knowledge, teachers emphasized *why* acquiring knowledge was important (ideology) and *how* they learned (skill), evidence that these constructs are synchronal and integrated in describing what educators enjoyed about teaching. The following section embraces this convergence by recognizing that all expressions of knowledge are undergirded and framed by participant ideology, and that learning about students requires skill. Pedagogical techniques for assessing student knowledge are shared later in the Skill section.

“Talk about...just whatever.” Most of these mid-career teachers deepened their knowledge of students to improve pedagogy, which increased their job commitment. Carla chatted with students outside of class. “I ask them: ‘Hey, how was your game?’ Sometimes we talk about music, just whatever, [and I] learn what they're interested in...find a common *something* [and] connect with them. It’s fun!” Math teacher Korey’s door was always open; at “lunchtime, students will come in and eat [and talk] about life.” Julia said this affected her job

¹¹ Participants also expanded their knowledge of subject-area content and pedagogical strategies. Although these findings were relevant, I omitted them in the interest of brevity, because teachers referred with much more frequency to building knowledge about their students. Also, not one teacher described their work as transferring privileged knowledge from themselves to their students and very few participants talked about teaching-related knowledge they acquired prior to entering the classroom.

commitment: “I showed an eagerness in learning about [the students] and they gave it right back... Yeah, so I stayed.”

“Their body language.” Sami stood at her classroom door before every class, as a “first check with how the students are doing each day, if somebody's upset or somebody's especially happy.” At her classroom door, Julia “read [students’] body language—who’s in a bad mood, who's sick, who's tired, who's angry—it's my first clue of how the [class will go], of who I need to check in on.” Teachers ascertained at the door if students had everything they needed for class. Julia knew that many students were hungry or unwell. If a student’s “head was down, they wouldn’t look at me, talk to me, shake my hand,” she offered them “food and snacks” from her “bevy of things that kids might need, [to] show I cared and that I wanted them there. They like it!” Sami knew that some pupils had difficulty obtaining materials, so she had extra on hand. “I don’t think [it’s] a bad thing to give out school supplies... I don't agree with giving candy to kids, but I'll give pencils, erasers, things I get at the dollar section in Target. It doesn't cost a lot, [maybe] \$50 throughout the year.” English and psychology teacher Elena gave students bottles of water because “staying hydrated is important!” English teacher Naomi was livid to know that her colleagues “send kids to the dean for not having a pencil. Give them a fucking pencil! They [also] didn't have breakfast today!” Through check-ins, teachers learned about physical and emotional barriers to students’ holistic wellbeing.

“What got them interested.” Teachers learned about students in class, too. Math educator Miguel embedded silly questions into quizzes, like: “What'd you have for lunch yesterday? What's your favorite movie?,” because he “was interested in my students and this was my way to communicate that I cared” about students’ lifestyles, what motivated them. Olivia prompted students to “write about their lives or themselves. I found that that’s what got them

interested.” “Learn about your students,” Isabela stated, “[It’s] one of the most important qualities of a good teacher,” believing that this knowledge was a professional responsibility.

“What’s really going on.” About half of the teachers said they differed from their peers in classroom management ideology, because they endeavored to determine the root causes of disruptive behavior that arose in class, rather than being punitive. “I don’t send my kids to the Dean...I keep my kids in my class,” Naomi explained. She knew that “behavior happens for other reasons, [so I] deal with discipline in a very different way.” She preferred for students to “stay after [class], tell me what’s really going on.” After “assess[ing] what’s going on,” Faith often suggested for students to take a break or “step outside for a minute—just don’t go anywhere—and come back...when you feel ready.” Through these conversations, Gregory learned that “a lot of kids grapple with real adult things.” While other educators blamed and punished students, these mid-career teachers in Title I schools knew when to inquire further, offer support, or intervene. Olivia realized, “You can’t just stand there and teach and your job’s done. You have to really be aware of what’s going on.” Faith agreed: “It’s our job to know what’s going on, [based on what you] see and what you can draw from their behavior.”

Summary. Most of the educators in this study said that a critical and enjoyable aspect of teaching is deepening their own knowledge about the individuals in their classes; this knowledge pursuit was driven by teachers’ love for their students, genuine interest in students’ lives.

3) Skill: Using Pedagogical Tools

This section includes only skills that were mentioned by my participants in their expressions of job satisfaction. As noted before, interpersonal skills were emphasized throughout the interviews, as most of the sampled teachers prioritized teacher-student relationships over content instruction. However, to them, pedagogy was a successful melding of ideology,

knowledge, interpersonal skills, instructional strategies, and personal style. Teachers also acknowledged that pedagogical skills required their time and capacity change, experiment, and reflect in a constant cycle.

“Envisioning lessons.” According to these educators, teaching entailed making the subject matter relevant and engaging to students, and teachers’ ideology, knowledge, and skill converged with their passion and personal interests in the planning stages. “I love lesson-planning, that’s one of my favorite parts,” biology teacher Valerie responded, “trying to figure out what’s gonna work for these kids; it’s like problem-solving for me.” Miguel also shared, “I like puzzles, and every kid’s a puzzle, trying to figure out how they learn well and what I can do to facilitate that.” Now in her fourteenth year of teaching, Naomi found that some aspects of the work, like the content standards and expected learner outcomes, were on “autopilot, but the method of delivery is what adjusts every year.” She told me, “If I’m not having fun at work, why would I go to work?,” resolving not “to lecture and then give a handout” like other English teachers do. Instead, Naomi masterminded her “performance art...like it’s my Miss Cuesta Show!” when “envisioning lessons” that would be engaging for students and also for herself.

“Weird wacky teacher.” Below are a examples of lessons that teachers themselves enjoyed, that they felt made content come alive and accessible for students. Contesting that stereotypical math “teacher up there, writing on the board, writing a bunch of numbers,” as Carla described, Joe took his AP Calculus “students out to the quad, [drew] axes on the ground with chalk, and then students had to form points on a line in teams.” Smiling, Joe told me, “I earned the reputation around school: ‘Oh, there’s Joe, the weird wacky teacher!’” for incorporating “hands-on activities.” In Olivia’s AP English class, students wrote argumentative essays on “what makes America great again...using concrete evidence, credible evidence.” Her school

served mostly “students of color—African-American and Latino—they had opinions about [the election of Donald Trump.” The assignment “worked with our kids,” Olivia said, “I’m so happy to see them read, engaged, interested.”

Zoe felt that “looking at 25 problems for 30 minutes sucks and it’s boring,” so her students worked collaboratively: “I create a worksheet with problems on it, but it looks like an appointment book, [and students] schedule different classmates.” Every few minutes, partners switched to solve another set of algebra problems in a flurry of temporary “madness.” The activity created space for Zoe to also schedule short, individual appointments with students who were struggling in her class, and students interacted with others beyond their friend groups.

Naomi’s ninth graders had a Socratic seminar after reading “the first chapter of *House on Mango Street*.” Naomi told me that students “were like: ‘That one lady—*se la robaron* (they stole her, in Spanish)!’ Although the academic language was lacking,...they were engaged, they all talked[.] It was beautiful, I loved it!” Elena said, “There’s something tiring about” being around her energized students, “but there’s always something life-giving about that. You feel really alive [because] teaching is never boring.”

“Fresh data.” Teachers also employed informal assessments to gauge student mastery. Miguel administered a “one question door-check” that he graded and immediately returned, so that students could “talk about what their problems were.” This provided him “fresh data or fresh reflections” on students’ comfort with the concepts. Joe had students scan a QR code at the beginning of each period to answer three benchmark questions that “informed me of where misconceptions were. It made their thinking visible.” Joe then determined if concepts had to be retaught or “if I could move on” to the new teaching foci for the day. The activity “got them interested...The kids loved it and I loved it. It was awesome.” Talia also administered a daily

quiz that students “peer-score[d].” These assessments provided her “feedback on where they are and what gaps I still need to fill,” which helped determine “the direction my lesson will take for that next portion of the class.” These routine, low-stakes assessments informed many of my participants whether concepts had to be retaught or reinforced.

“Take their feedback.” Assessments and social-cultural cues revealed when lessons were not effective, propelling mid-career teachers in this study to learn more and improve pedagogy. Sami said she told her students, “I’m trying something new, you’re the first,” and later asked “what they liked, what worked, [and] take their feedback into account.” Len floated new lessons in first class of the day, announcing: “If things don’t work so well, I’m gonna change it for the next period, and I’m sorry about that.” This process boosted his career longevity, Len told me: “If I was held back, [unable] to make those mistakes [in First Period] shackled in some way, I wouldn’t feel like I’m thriving.” In her “early years in teaching,” Isabela imposed “the strategies and the structures” she grew up with. “I think most teachers do that,” she told me, but “that might not be what [students] need. [I’m always] striving to improve.” Julia was “a chameleon, constantly changing and evolving...Every year, I’m looking at: What’s new? What do [students] like, what do they want?...What worked? What didn’t work?” Valerie smiled, “The kids from the previous year always get upset when I try new things...like ‘Why didn’t you do that with us?!’” Valerie challenged her students’ “static belief of teachers” by announcing, “I’m going to get better every year!! [I] did lessons with you that I didn’t do with the previous kids.”

“Make this work.” Often, the students required differentiated attention and strategies. Sami prepared “vocab supports” for her quizzes in advance, telling individual English learners privately: “I’m not offering this to everybody, but here are some words you might have a hard time with. Look up the ones you don’t know beforehand.” Unlike mandatory remedial work,

these supports were intentional and customized for students to use discreetly if they chose to. Sami knew that students “realize they need the supports [but] they don't want it,” and eventually take “the crutch” away on their own. With his perpetually-absent student who was home “tak[ing] care of his siblings,” Gregory suggested, “Have your girlfriend get the work from me...She can be our correspondence and we'll make this work. [And] he did!” Talia's math “students don't have a lot of confidence yet...especially at the beginning of the school year,” so she offered more difficult problems with their solutions to students, telling them “I'm not holding you accountable to it. I'm telling you it's extra and you're ready for it.” Seeing students grow more confident and independent was the ultimate reward to Talia. “The joy that I get from being able to go to work every day. You can't buy that...I love doing what I do!” These were just three of many individualized approaches that my participants operationalized, that drew on their ideology, knowledge, and skill to meet students where they were, and fulfilled their sense of professional purpose.

Summary. When asked what teachers found most rewarding about their work, most of the participants said that they enjoyed planning metacognitive and collaborative learning activities that incorporated movement, dramatic elements, and current events that required much more preparation and resources than didactic teaching (lecture), but better engaged their students. Teachers also accommodated and accelerated students in small groups and individually. Their pedagogical toolkits grew with more time in the field, as they planned lessons, experimented, and checked in with students, which stemmed from caring about students and seeking to serve individual learners better every year.

The Rewards

This last section reports mid-career educators' descriptions of their work that further confirms that they perceived their pedagogical practice as fully integrated entities. Experienced teachers synthesized these domains were artfully, earning them special rewards that made their jobs even more satisfying: a) Witnessing students' aha moments; b) Students taking ownership of their learning; c) Being recognized as a good teacher; d) Complete classroom autonomy.

“Visceral satisfaction.” Aaron said, “No job is perfect, [but] on any given day, I'm also having great moments with my students and those still outweigh.” He experienced a “visceral satisfaction...on a day-to-day basis,” as students moved “from not understanding to understanding. That's what I love,...seeing the Aha Moment [and getting a] ‘Thank you, Mr. Knoll!’” While other teachers might silence students literally and intellectually, to my participants, loud classes evidenced that their pedagogy was effective. Sami told me about the noise that emanated from “students [who] don't want to leave at the bell because they're still discussing the question that we're talking about in class.” She said, “I just love teaching, honestly. [T]hose discussions are amazing.” When I interviewed him, Rory spoke about his mixed-grade, mixed-ability, and mixed-language proficiency English class that appeared “so chaotic because [there was] so much going on. But that chaos signaled “a really good day...I can't imagine doing anything else, nor can imagine anyone else doing what I do.” Lit lightbulbs, evidenced by talkative and lively students, were the ultimate pedagogical thrill. Zoe responded, “When I see that light go on, it's the most amazing feeling!”

“[They] do more for me.” Some of the educators spoke about other special benefits they reaped. Olivia realized: “If I have a stronger curriculum that's relevant to students, a lot of behavioral issues go away. Now I don't question [my decision to stay in the classroom].” Elena also noticed, “[When students] liked me, they trusted me, they would do more.” Students who

felt valued, supported, and loved, arrived on time for class, behaved respectfully, worked harder, and took more learning risks for teachers and classes they liked. Talia, the math teacher who started every class period with a quiz, said that, by the third day of school, there would be “no tardies,” because students learned to use those quizzes to monitor their own growth in the class over time. Pupils often came to her, saying, “‘On this [upcoming] test, I’m going to get a B. But if you have tutoring, I’ll come; I’m ready to get an A.’ The kids set their own personal goals. It’s a beautiful thing,” Talia told me. This effect was not a function of the quizzes alone, but it was Talia’s style, her values, instructional strategies, the relationships with students, collaborations with other teachers, professional development that came together in her lessons. “All these things that I do, they’re not disjoint. There’s an overlap and everything helps the machine runs smoother... They’re making me a better teacher; I can feel it. That is so motivating!”

“The word spreads.” These mid-career teachers enjoyed other rewards that strengthened their job commitment and persistence. Miguel remembered, “[After] we began to trust each other, the kids told the other kids, and it just became a fact that I was a good teacher...that I was better than other teachers at the school.” The parents of Joe’s students told the principal that Joe was “the best teacher on campus.” Zoe’s principal “got this impression that I’m super great” and treated her as the “golden girl” of the math department, even though she didn’t think she was “an amazing teacher.” “The word spreads [like] gossip, *chisme*,” Len explained, “the students...saying how much they enjoyed my classes.” This reputation seemed to affect students who Len did not know, as even new students greeted him “with this ‘teach me’ [attitude,] all of their eyes looking at me, telling me they want to learn.”

“Complete autonomy.” A positive reputation earned my participants even more extrinsic rewards, like classroom autonomy. Naomi shared, “I love teaching because I have this

autonomy in my classroom.” When asked how she earned it, “I win my kids over, [and] kids talk,” Naomi explained, “Reputations make or break you especially in school settings, [but] Admin leave me alone because they know that I’m doing what I have to do [and] I don’t send kids to the Dean.” Aaron was “well-liked by the kids, [and] that became my reputation amongst teachers and Admin, even though none of them spent any time in my class.” Olivia explained how classroom autonomy affected her career decision-making: “My principal trusts me, and that’s really empowering.” Although she felt that she was “pretty good at what I do,” the principal’s affirmations helped her “feel more like, ‘I like my job.’”

“I like this struggle.” When asked what helped them thrive in their jobs, almost all of the interviewees replied that learning was critical to their sense of professional growth and fulfillment. Gregory said “learning is a lifelong journey! That lesson I gave yesterday? That was really great; I could still make it 20 times better tomorrow.” As a pedagogue, Joe constantly redefined his goals, and “that’s fun...because I’m always focusing on something different.” Zoe “revamp[ed] our math program [because,] as a learner, I like doing all the different stuff, having my hand in [everything; it] keeps me on my toes.” Will was driven by the Japanese business concept, *kaizen*, to change for the better: “Try to [teach] better each day. That has guided my philosophy...continuous improvement.” He told me, “I like this struggle...I like the journey of it.” Naomi summed up “what I love about teaching:”

I do my own thing. I’m a professional, I have a license to do what I do and I know what I’m doing. I think that’s why I get even more autonomy, so I feel comfortable doing what I want to do. I have a different lens and I have a different background; that’s why I go about things the way I do.

~ Naomi, English teacher

Discussion

Connections to Literature

This study revealed several discursive themes that both affirm and extend prior teacher retention scholarship. Additionally, my empirical findings parallel the guiding principles of hooks' (1994) radical, liberatory, and engaged pedagogical worldview that helped her recognize that teaching was her "destiny" (p. 5). In the following section, I explain how my study contributes to conversations about teachers' job satisfaction and longevity.

Love. Teaching in Title I high schools was a true labor of love for my participants; specifically, love for their students and their subject areas, were at the heart of everything they enjoyed about teaching and why they stayed in their jobs. Strong teacher-student bonds and student-centered philosophy drove and informed every aspect of their pedagogy, contributing to their sense of connectedness and job commitment. These relationships are reportedly central to teachers' career choice and persistence (Saks et al., 2021); a survey of 8,000 public school educators similarly revealed that "interpersonal relationships with students" were teachers' primary motivations for remaining in the profession (Mertler, 2016). hooks also theorized that joy experienced by educators and learners within a "classroom community" is "fundamentally rooted in a love" (p. 195), resulting from "our interest in one another (1994, p. 8). When teachers facilitate a "climate of openness and intellectual rigor" (hooks, 1994, p. 40) through caring and relating, academic performance and other outcomes of students of color can also improve (Nieto, 1994; Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

Learn. Educators were excited to continue learning about students and using that knowledge to better relate with their pupils, which was described both an interpersonal skill and a wisdom that grew with time and experience. To echo hooks (1994) again, who felt sustained as an educator by "the great gift" of learning with and from her students: "I humble myself and

respectfully learn from [students, a] is a richer way of knowing” (p. 89). This epistemology requires instructors to be “wholly present, [sharing] various forms of sustenance...with students in need” (hooks, 1994, p. 20) and “being vulnerable in the classroom” (p. 21). Similarly, teachers in my sample collectively conversed with students to learn “what’s up,” “what’s your favorite,” and “what’s important,” positioning themselves as fellow learners in the classroom community. A teacher told me, “[The students are] making me a better teacher, I can feel it.”

Link. Almost all of the participants felt that a primary task of teaching is designing lessons that are “relevant, meaningful, worthwhile to fit the kids,” as one explained. Although verifying my participants’ practices through classroom observation was beyond the scope of this study, many of them self-identified as culturally sustaining pedagogues,¹² and one main principle of the approach is that teachers identify and nurture students’ unique strengths in promoting academic achievement, building community, and bolstering students’ individual sense of wellbeing and belonging in the world (Ladson-Billings, 1992). hooks also believed that when students bring “experiential knowledge, [it] can indeed enhance our learning” (1994, p. 84), making the classroom “an exciting place...even fun” for instructors and learners alike (p. 7). For many of my participants, lesson-planning was “one of my favorite parts [of the job].”

Liberate. The mid-career teachers in my sample favored classroom activities that involved student talk, collaboration, imagination, and movement. They spoke with pride about the times when students were seemingly “chaotic” and lively, because the flurry signified “a really good day.” These educators also smiled and laughed liberally in class: “The kids are

¹² Ladson-Billings’ label is “culturally sustaining pedagogy” (2014) though other virtually identical names (*culturally relevant, responsive, sensitive, centered, congruent, reflective*) are used in the literature (Gay, 2010a).

hilarious and we have fun!” hooks actually linked these practices to teacher joy. She asserted that “pedagogical strategies that affirm [students’] presence, their right to speak” are emancipatory for everyone in the classroom (hooks, 1994, p. 84), because the noise, movement, and excitement generated through learning activities establish “one another’s presence” (p. 8); this is another “pleasure of teaching [and] make[s] us whole” (pp. 10; 195). An interviewee described teaching as “life-giving...to see [students] engaged, interested,” and another called this “visceral satisfaction” the most rewarding aspect of the job.

Loyalty. Noddings found that “children will work harder and do things—even odd things like adding fractions—for people they love and trust” (1988, p. 10). My participants also noticed that students “do more for me” when “they liked me, they trusted me,” and student outcomes improved, which was “so motivating.” Conversely, interviewees warned that not connecting with students can “break” a teacher. In Milner’s case study of a culturally sustaining pedagogue exemplar, the teacher “developed a relationship and reputation...with students who were not even in his classroom [that] we are family and a community” (2011, p. 86). My sample felt that the positive endorsement around school ensured student fidelity to their teachers and productiveness for years to come, respect from colleagues, and autonomy and hands-off management style from supervisors. A participant commented, “My principal trusts me and that’s really empowering.” As hooks predicted, a “special bonding” when “teachers who love students and are loved by them,” making “the exchange of information and ideas a kind of ecstasy” (1994, p. 202), where educators also “flourish” (p. 198).

Recommendations for Further Study

These findings point to several recommendations for those in teacher preparation, school management, and teacher retention research. First, participants’ philosophies and worldviews

drove constant knowledge acquisition about their students and shifted their teaching strategies, texts, and materials. Interpreted slightly differently, hooks theorized that educators' "quest for knowledge" culminates in teacher *praxis* (1994, p. 195), the process by which theory, knowledge, and skill are enacted and embodied through informed and committed actions (Smith, 2019). More scholarship on how three domains overlap and influence one another, on praxis and their effects on teacher satisfaction and retention, are in order.

Additionally, the mid-career educators in this study illustrated how job satisfaction was greatest when students were engaged and motivated, a demonstration of the successful "social and political negotiation" of their own competencies and classroom dynamics (Caena, 2011, p. 9). "Strong subject matter knowledge alone is not enough" to predict teachers' classroom efficacy or longevity (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012, p. 875), hence, providers of professional development and performance evaluators might focus on how in-service teachers enact knowledge, skill, and ideology simultaneously and seamlessly in praxis, rather than focusing on their deficiencies in one area (e.g., content knowledge, classroom management skills). As my participant said, many issues disappear when lessons are captivating and relevant, classwork is challenging but meaningful, and when students feel cared for by their teachers.

It is also critical for teacher candidates to both study educational theory, methods, and subject-matter content, *and* negotiate these elements in clinical settings before entering the profession, as job satisfaction seems to hinge on educators' abilities to connect these domains in praxis. A longitudinal study that examines how pre-service teachers develop, meld, and apply their knowledge, skill, and ideologies through their unique pedagogical style during student-teaching practica, along with an inquiry of how student-teachers connect with students, might reveal more accurate markers of future teacher quality, satisfaction, and longevity.

These interviewees reported that student-centered philosophy had a direct impact on teacher retention. As hooks wrote, for educators “to feel the joy of...mutual engagement” (1994, pp. 204-205), students must be “central and significant” (p. 37) and classroom interactions must be “rooted in a love” inspired by instructors and students working together (p. 195). My findings also suggest that further research focus on how educators “stand on emotional ground” in their classrooms (hooks, 1994, p. 198) might contribute to improving teacher-student relationships and teachers’ sense of job satisfaction and longevity in the profession. Relatedly, scholars have called for evaluating candidates’ belief systems about children (Villegas, 2007) and assessing their “dispositions to be effective teachers in urban schools” before admission into educator preparation programs (Waddel & Marszalek, 2017, pp. 3-4). However, in observations of teacher dispositions in urban Title I schools, researchers noted that effective educators¹³ were teacher-centered, rarely or never differentiated instruction, and rarely or never provided opportunities for students to make their own decisions or collaborate on group projects (Thompson et al., 2005). Pairing interviews with classroom observations might help to clarify how teachers’ approaches (e.g., student-centered or teacher-centered) both sustains them professionally and objectively improves the academic outcomes of their students in urban Title I schools.

While education policy (Harvey, 2014) and teacher evaluation practices continue to be undergirded by the management theory that teachers are motivated primarily by monetary means (Ford et al., 2018), these interviewees were inspired to stay in teaching for the long-term on the basis of their relationships with students. When students responded positively and enthusiastically, teachers were given autonomous freedom by administrators who recognized

¹³ These educators were deemed “effective” by their principals because their students consistently outperformed their peers in standardized exams.

their pedagogical competence. Studied widely to increase intrinsic motivation in business settings, Pink's management theory similarly identified *autonomy*, *mastery*, and *sense of purpose* as the keystones to improving employee satisfaction (2009). Recently, education researchers applied this theory by infusing pedagogy with student autonomy, mastery, and purpose, to transform classroom learning experiences (e.g., Azzam, 2014). I wonder if the theory could be used to also reimagine an organizational culture that centers teachers' need for the same. Such an experiment has not been done to improve teacher satisfaction and retention, to date.

Conclusion

Much of what we know about enabling teacher longevity is derived from largescale educator turnover data and are based on "society's assumptions about teaching in the most depressed schools" (Nieto, 2003, p. 7). Thus, prior qualitative studies of "why they stay" oversampled educators with over 20 years of classroom experience, some of whom were motivated to remain in the profession by educational inequities and the perpetual need to fundamentally improve the conditions in schools that served marginalized students (e.g., Nieto, 2003). In contrast, this paper focused on the joy by asking mid-career educators what aspects of their jobs they found most satisfying. I learned that, indeed, "practice coincides with career decisions" (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012, p. 873).

Teaching was most rewarding for my participants when their student-centered ideologies, knowledge of students, and pedagogical skills were seamlessly integrated and infused with their love, because that was when students were also most engaged. hooks identified that embodied feeling as *eros* (1994, p. 195), "a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that it can provide an epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know, enables both professors and students to use such energy in a classroom setting in ways that invigorate

and excite...I am often most joyous in the classroom, brought closer here to the ecstatic than by most of life's experiences" (p. 206). Many of the interviewed teachers were teary-eyed as they spoke about that force that kept them in their jobs. The power of eros was clearly at work.

PAPER 3

“I Can’t Work With That”;

The Political Deal-breakers and Clinchers of Teaching in Urban Title I Schools

Massive teacher demonstrations beginning in 2019 drew attention to problematic working conditions in school districts nationwide. In Los Angeles (LA) County, the site for this study, 30,000 members of the local teachers union led a six-day strike as part of an “unprecedented wave of teacher activism” (Wong, 2019), when labor negotiations stalled over low teacher pay, the dismissal of nurses and counselors, increased police presence at schools, encroaching charter organizations, and class size. The picket lines disrupted schooling throughout the region and other community members rallied in solidarity, drawing attention to factors that foment teacher dissatisfaction and challenge teaching and learning in urban public schools.

The close association between teacher dissatisfaction and teacher attrition has been “heavily documented” (Culver et al., 1990), especially at schools located in and around very large cities in the US, where perpetual staffing shortages disproportionately affect low-income families, immigrant communities, and students of color (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). Teacher dissatisfaction is generally examined through surveys of “former members of the teaching profession” (Casey, 2003, pp. 187-8), but researchers can only “speculate on teachers’ motivations... at best” through analyses of turnover data (Goodson, 2003, p. 12-13). Moreover, we know that individuals can be simultaneously satisfied, dissatisfied, and motivated to stay or seek job change, because the same workplace factors can be perceived differently depending on context and conditions (Herzberg, 1959). Despite its breadth, education research has arguably “not produced a very compelling body of cumulative evidence... of key moderators” of teacher turnover (Borman & Dowling, 2008, p. 400).

Teachers who continue to serve urban Title I¹⁴ schools, however, can contextualize their career-affecting decisions, such as how they stay despite occupational challenges (e.g., Nieto, 2005). To explore the phenomenon further, this qualitative inquiry adopted Johnson's (1990) conceptual frame of *schools as workplaces*, which named seven components and conditions that can holistically affect teachers' attitudes toward their jobs and influence their actions. I individually interviewed a diverse group of *mid-career* educators (6-14 years' experience) serving different Title I high schools throughout LA County, to gather participants' perspectives of workplace factors that roused job dissatisfaction and turnover intentions.¹⁵ Two questions guided the inquiry: 1) What challenges teacher longevity in urban Title I schools? 2) How do teachers adapt to stay in their occupation, despite those challenges? Inquiries of in-service educators' dissatisfaction and turnover intentions can help develop a comprehensive, nuanced perspective of urban Title I campuses as workplaces (Johnson, 1990); attend to and alleviate structural problems revealed in the process (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Mueller & Price, 1990) and encourage longer teacher tenure in historically underserved schools (Ingersoll, 2003).

Literature Review

Schools as Workplaces

The *schools as workplaces* model illustrates seven features: the *physical, organizational, sociological, political, economic, cultural, and psychological* (Johnson, 1990, pp. xviii-xix). This framework functioned as a "loosely defined" map for me to organize prior scholarship (Collins

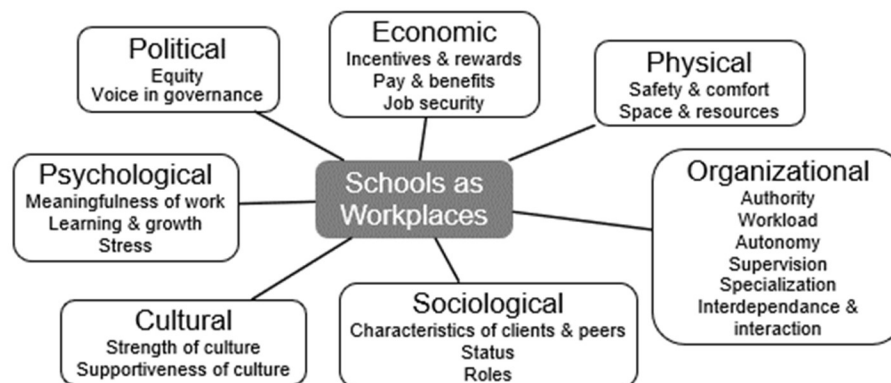
¹⁴ *Urban* refers to locales in and around large, densely populated cities with 250,000 or more residents, and *Title I* refers to campuses that receive federal funding for serving disproportionately high numbers of students living in poverty (NCES, n.d., b)

¹⁵ *Turnover intentions* refer to an educator's attitudes that favor leaving their workplace, which include staying reluctantly in their current position, planning to leave their job or the teaching profession (Qin, 2019).

& Stockton, 2018, p. 2) of the challenges that educators experience in urban Title I school workplaces, into which I situate my study. I selected this seminal model as it is comprehensive in the inclusion of broad factors that influence how teachers think about work (McLaughlin, 1992) and continues to be widely cited today, largely without critique. In recent years, scholars used it to analyze interviews with teachers at urban Title I schools and interpret educators' sentiment about educational reforms (e.g., Cucchiara et al., 2015). In this brief review, I define these categories and terms that guided my inquiry, lingering longer on the political and organizational dimensions, which researchers before me, my pilot study, and preliminary data analyses indicate are the greatest sources of workplace dissatisfaction.

Figure 1

Johnson's (1990) Constellation of Workplace Variables



The *physical* inadequacies of “inner-city schools,” which include unsafe workplace facilities, and insufficient textbooks, supplies, and other resources (Johnson, 1990, p. 58)¹⁶ at urban Title I sites, are strongly correlated with teacher dissatisfaction (Buckley et al, 2005; Loeb et al., 2005). *Economic* factors, namely, monetary compensation, benefits, incentives, and job

¹⁶ Johnson defined “safety and comfort” as purely corporeal features of the physical workplace.

security (Johnson, 1990),¹⁷ also receive significant attention in teacher retention literature, and many researchers focus specifically on the “low pay” at Title I schools as a major cause of educator dissatisfaction (Santoro, 2015, p. 175).

Sociological factors pertain to teachers’ experiences with their own identity attributes, sense of status, and ascribed professional roles, in relation to other stakeholders in the workplace (Johnson, 1990). Teachers’ “deficiency of skills and dispositions to work with high-need students,” due to demographic incongruences between educators and urban communities, garner much attention among research on teacher dissatisfaction, attrition, and mobility (Santoro, 2015, p. 175). To Johnson (1990), *psychological* workplace features provide teachers opportunities to set challenging career goals, learn, reflect, and grow in the profession.¹⁸ For example, teacher retention can be strengthened when educators design their own professional developments (PDs) to improve their capacity to serve students, support one another, and reflect on and shift practices to actualize the democratic promise of schooling (Picower, 2015). However, PDs in urban Title I settings can be perceived by educators as ineffective, irrelevant to their core work, and is not linked to teacher satisfaction nor job retention (Anderson & Olsen, 2006). *Cultural* variables engender strong feelings of belonging and camaraderie among a school’s staff, which are built

¹⁷ Johnson’s description of workplace economic features included both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards garnered by teachers in their line of work. However, because intrinsic rewards are not inherent to the workplace, but rather teachers’ emotional responses to aspects of the job, I limited this theme to monetary compensation such as pay and benefits (e.g., salary, healthcare, loan forgiveness programs) and job security.

¹⁸ Although Johnson (1990) also identified “stress” and “work-life balance” as psychological factors in her preface, they were absent from the respective chapter in her book. I concurred with scholars who conceptualized that teacher stress, like dissatisfaction and anger, is “a syndrome of negative affects” that respond to workplace causes (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978), and excluded affective states from the framework. In addition, other researchers categorized “professional development” as an organizational, not psychological, workplace feature (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2020). I upheld Johnson’s construct in this inquiry.

on a shared sense of unity, purpose, and coherence among colleagues (Johnson, 1990).¹⁹ The most salient predictors of teacher satisfaction and retention in Title I schools were social factors like collegial relationships and positive school culture (Simon & Johnson, 2015).

Public schools are rigidly structured and operate as centralized bureaucratic institutions. According to Johnson (1990), this *organizational* feature of schools matters to teachers in their observations of the hierarchy of specialized roles within the institution (including those in executive offices who are less visible to employees at school sites), the functions of those roles and how they interact and impact one another, and their assigned workload (like the nature of their assignment, their teaching schedule, and their job-related responsibilities beyond the classroom).²⁰ Johnson (1990) dedicated two chapters to describing the different organizational features of schools, more than any other topic in her book, evidencing both the nebulous definition of what she considered endemic to schools as organizations, as well as the breadth of teachers' observations pertaining to these aspects of their workplaces. Title I schools tend to be “top-heavy and bureaucratic, which may negatively impact teachers” (Grissom, 2011, p. 2569). Based on nationwide school administrative and educator survey data, Ingersoll (2003) posited

¹⁹ To clarify, Johnson (1990) referred to an individual's cultures of origins as part of the sociological feature; for her, cultural features are those that distinguish and define the uniqueness of any school workplace from other sites.

²⁰ Johnson (1990) included “roles” in the sociological feature. However, as she described organizational factors (like who was assigned to perform which tasks), it was clear that roles, functions, and specializations belonged together. I therefore shifted roles to the organizational.

that addressing organizational sources of teacher dissatisfaction would greatly diminish the school staffing problems and turnover.

The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind; NCLB) obligated many Title I campuses to new multi-year, comprehensive improvement plans that threatened school closure, government/charter receivership, or complete systems redesign (CADOE, 2020; NCLB, 2001). These conditions changed schools as organizations dramatically and structurally, likely negatively affecting teachers' job persistence (Reardon & Owens, 2014). A more contemporary inquiry of sites that underwent structural transformation could also help to contextualize teacher dissatisfaction..

Although the official distribution of authority in workplaces is an organizational feature, Johnson (1990) categorized a teacher's ability to exercise power relative to that formal structure, as *political*. Political domains include classrooms, departments, schools, districts, unions, state, the courts, and beyond, and how much influence educators feel they have over the policies that play out in each bureaucratic entity (Johnson, 1990). This was reportedly the "most important" feature for teacher stability in a Chicago Public Schools study, which found that educators remained much longer at schools where they had "substantial" influence in school governance and decisions that affected their work environment (Allensworth et al., 2009, p. 26).

In general, educators prefer not to be told what or how to teach within the classroom domain (Williams, 2003), and are more likely to leave jobs where rigid standards and methods are imposed upon them (Sass et al., 2012). Teachers are dissatisfied about accountability systems forced upon them or their students in urban Title I schools (Crocco & Costigan, 2007), where heightened scrutiny and governmental sanctions frequently infringe on local control (Bryk et al., 2009), and there is significantly less classroom autonomy than at other sites (Sparks, 2012).

Relatedly, “problematic power relations” (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011, p. 72) with individual administrators can also motivate job change as teachers feel unsupported or undermined in their work (Miller, 2010; Santoro & Morehouse, 2011). In Kukla-Acevedo’s (2009) study, lack of administrative support was the only significant predictor of teacher turnover. Other researchers of high-poverty schools also found that site leaders’ policies and support were the strongest predictors of teacher turnover (Kraft et al., 2016), and educators who left high poverty schools report dissatisfaction with their administrators as the chief reason (Simon & Johnson, 2015).

According to Johnson (1990), these seven features are present in all industries, but teachers in public schools might perceive some factors as more prominent or interactions among them. I framed my participants’ perspectives along these features and explored how the categories overlap and interplay in narrations of work dissatisfaction and turnover intentions.

Methods

This is a secondary analysis of interview data collected in 2017-18 for a study employing a social constructivist theoretical lens (e.g., Young & Collin, 2004) to examine individual teachers’ narrations of the various factors that contributed to their career pathways. The sample included 20 mid-career educators employed in LA County public high schools. Twelve were women, eight were men, and the teachers were racially diverse: African American/Black (2), Hispanic/Latinx (7), White (9), Multi-racial (2).

Table 1

Study Sample

Name	Teaching Experience (in years)	# of School Transfers	School Types Served
Olivia	10	1	District Pilot; District Magnet
Rory	7	1	District Pilot; District Magnet
Julia	8	2	District Pilot; Affiliate Charter; Independent Charter
Len	10	1	District Pilot; District Traditional
Valerie	6	1	District Pilot; Independent Charter
David	13	-	District Traditional
Elena	12	-	District Traditional
Faith	11	-	District Traditional
Isabela	9	1	District Traditional
Miguel	11	1	District Traditional
Naomi	13	3	District Traditional
Avery	11	1	District Traditional; District Magnet
Korey	8	2	District Traditional; Independent Charter
Carla	10	4	District Traditional; Independent Charter; District Magnet; District Pilot
Talia	10	3	District Traditional; Independent Charter; District Pilot
Joe	9	-	Independent Charter
Sami	7	1	Independent Charter
Will	6	-	Independent Charter
Gregory	9	1	Independent Charter; District Traditional
Zoe	13	1	Independent Charter; District Traditional

Note: All names are pseudonyms. Participants are sorted by the school type of their most recent place of employment. Public school types represented by the sample are traditional (district schools managed by the school district), magnet (voluntary integration district schools), pilot (autonomously-governed district schools), affiliate charter (managed by a district partner organization), or independent charter (managed by organizations not affiliated with a district).

My general inductive analytical approach (Thomas, 2006) revealed unexpected themes that emerged from the “fluid and flexible, data-driven, and context-sensitive” nature of semi-structured interviews (Mason, 2002, p. 24), findings that did not align with the concepts guiding the larger study. Using distinct frameworks informed by different bodies of literature, I reinterpreted those as “separate substantive themes” (Bowen, 2010, p. 867).

Data were first excerpted using affective coding (Saldaña, 2013), to identify teachers’ expressions of dissatisfaction about their work generally or specific to any teaching position they

currently or previously held. My second analytical step was causation coding (Saldaña, 2013), which illuminated the mediating and precedent variables or circumstances that caused dissatisfaction, the emotional reasoning for educators to change schools, grade levels, and subject area authorization. The majority of the excerpts referred to unfavorable changes made to organizational aspects, especially those pertaining to instruction, that were made by site or central office managers without teacher input (*political*; Johnson, 1990).

Finally, I reread the verbatim interview transcripts that had not been coded to *dissatisfaction* in the first round that provided context for the dominant themes, like narratives of how educators navigated or averted conditions that aroused dissatisfaction. Through this iterative process, I developed a composite depiction of these dynamics, as well as the factors that enabled or challenged teachers' commitments to their jobs, using data that arose frequently across interviews (Gibson & Brown, 2009). As this concept map helped me re-examine the themes top-down for threads of cohesion among the participants' responses (Bazeley, 2013), I share this revised model in my Discussion section.

Results

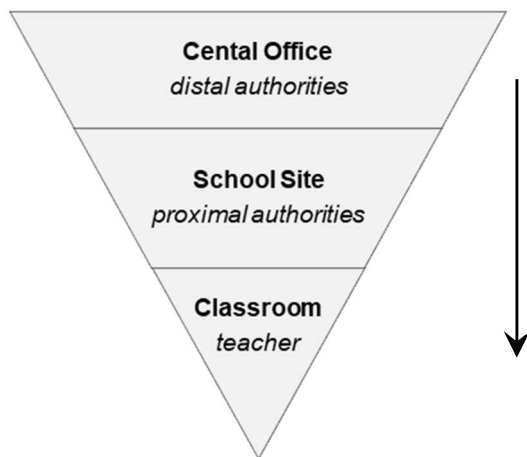
Findings below are organized into two sections. The first describes political intrusions by *distal authorities*, the decision-makers who managed LA County schools from offsite central or regional offices, including district superintendents, charter management executives, and the like. Conflict also resulted when *proximal authorities*, namely on-campus administrators, enforced policies and supervised teachers in ways that made work unbearable for those in their employ.

Results are presented thus because analyses my participants perceived their workspaces as situated in realms of influence, in which school personnel had clearly delineated roles and functions that were, in many cases, bound by employment contracts. From teachers' perspective,

school organizations were structured spatially to protect their work from interruption and keep all employees, even authority figures, in their designated lanes. In classroom spaces, my sample perceived the strongest sense of localized control as they performed the highly specialized work of providing instruction, physically isolated from other employees. Educators also expected infrequent classroom observers from the proximal realm (i.e., site supervisors), who annually or biennially evaluated teacher performance as a part of their school management responsibilities. Farther distally were district executives, governing boards, county and state-level policy-makers who rarely, if ever, visited school campuses. Dissatisfaction and barriers to job persistence ensued when campus-level or executive-level authorities agitated or eroded these workplace role expectations. Teachers also felt disempowered in events and conditions when powerful actors changed when, how, and what educators taught in their classrooms without teacher input.

Figure 2

Structure of Schools as Workplaces, as Perceived by Teachers



I refer to all participants using pseudonyms and all central offices as LEAs (local education agencies) to protect teacher anonymity. Demonstrative excerpts are presented in sub-themes, along with prior scholarship that affirms the negative effects that each have on teachers and their career decision-making. Participants also shared how they weathered these events and

remained in the occupation serving LA County schools. In the Discussion section that follows, I further unpack how these insights inform Johnson's (1990) schools as workplaces framework.

Conflicts Featuring Distal (LEA-Level) Authorities

When asked what challenged job commitment and longevity, seventeen of 20 participants spoke about LEA-wide administrative initiatives enacted within their already troubled school systems, like reductions-in-force and turnaround reforms. Although my sample was small and uniquely affected by extraordinary conditions of the early 2000s in LA County, I highlight their narratives because similar educational reforms continue to disrupt teachers' work nationwide and around the world (Sahlberg, 2016). In the spirit of transformation and improvement, these large-scale, top-down efforts pathologize and uproot teachers from their classrooms and students, causing toxic and unsustainable working conditions for all educators.

Reduction-in-Force (RIF)

Workforce layoffs in the education sector are generally extraordinary and rare (Grissom, 2011), but RIFs are common in LA County schools. In particular, during the Great Recession, California's public education budget was slashed and many LEAs laid employees off (Nelson & Balu, 2014), resulting in an annual average of 13.3% of LAUSD teachers receiving a RIF notice between 2008 and 2012 (Goldhaber et al., 2016). This period coincided with the career entry point of many of the teachers in my study sample.

All of my participants were affected by budget cuts and more than half were laid off, challenging their ability to persist in teaching. These educators objected to the RIFs in principle and were profoundly discouraged by the process. Elena received "a pink slip" in her fourth year of teaching and again two years later, both after she was already tenured. "It seemed super unfair," Elena said, "Your sole value is based on a seniority date, [so some mediocre teachers]

were protected because they simply had more years of experience.” Olivia told me, “[My friend and I] were hired together, and my friend had a number that was one above me [on the] list of employee numbers.” In Olivia’s LEA, that number determined “whether you were [RIFed]. At one point, half of my friends were okay and half of us were not.”

LA County LEAs RIFed the newest hired teachers, rescinded a fraction of the RIFs in order of seniority, then froze hiring (Goldhaber et al., 2016), causing panic among Elena’s peers, who simultaneously faced joblessness and hoped for their notices to be rescinded. “It was so scary and really hard [to be RIFed in March and have to continue teaching until the end of the school year in June.] You don't know what's going to happen, if you're going to have a job; should you look for a job?” Early- and mid-career educators were particularly devastated, because districts and teachers union worked to protect teachers with more seniority (Goldhaber et al., 2015). “[Those] with my years of experience and less, who got pink-slipped, have been completely demoralized and betrayed,” Elena said, “Our commitment to [the LEA] and the union [were] totally undermined.” Reports from my participants were substantiated by Han and Keefe (2020), who found that labor unions can in fact “inhibit managerial flexibility and embed obsolete bureaucratic practices in schools,” at the disservice of their newer members.

My participants, who continued to teach through this instability, varied in response to receiving RIF notices. “I was still upset,” Olivia said, because the RIF “wasn't a reflection on my value as a teacher.” But she told herself: “I still want to teach [so] I'm going to keep trying. Let's see what happens.” Her notice was rescinded. Carla had thought, “I have a family to feed!”, started interviewing, and immediately had another job offer. Even though her RIF was also rescinded, Carla still transferred schools to escape a principal who “did not to treat me very well.” Social studies positions were “backed up with RIFed teachers” displaced from their jobs,

so Will was “desperate to take anything” and taught at a middle school. Gregory was at a middle school—“I was committed, my family lived around the corner”—but took a high school job.

Julia was laid off “but that position was still needed,” so her LEA hired substitutes:

You were RIFed, you had to sub for yourself; that's how you got to work. I was considered a substitute, but the class was under my name and I was the one teaching it.

[All of the teachers at my school stayed] but we were substitutes; that also affected us on the salary table. [The District] retroactively [gave] us a little bump. But for a long time, we were at the bottom of the totem pole every year and not able to move.

Julia subbed for two years, then transferred to an in-district charter school to continue accruing years of experience within the LEA; if she had left, “I would have been at the bottom” of the salary scale upon her return to her home LEA. Carla was “RIFed every year for the first five years,” but filed a “Charter Leave” before transferring, stating her intention to return when a position opened. That enabled her two years at a charter school to add to her LEA service credits.

Some educators persisted through layoffs because they were authorized to teach high-demand subjects. Faith, a health science teacher, was “RIFed three times,” but her notice was rescinded each year because she could also teach biology. Carla and another math teacher had “the least amount seniority,” but her colleague kept his job because he “also taught PE.” In her first year teaching, geometry teacher Talia was “pink-slipped” but when math and science RIFs were rescinded, teachers of other subjects were “visibly and verbally very upset,” Talia said.

“We felt just like they did, but we were in a position where we were now protected. It was a very, very difficult time to navigate that school culture...²¹ It felt like such an injustice.”

Some educators were fueled to advocacy and to stay in teaching at all costs. Len “was RIFed four years in a row,” but as a teachers union representative, he mobilized his community through “rallies,” “camp-outs,” and “letter-writing” campaigns, to demonstrate how he and his colleagues were indispensable to the LEA. Len conveyed to peers that the union “had their backs.” Although Korey was not RIFed, he covered classes for teachers picketing “outside in the parking lot. It was really bad,” he remembered. Olivia and her peers who were laid off formed a strong bond and “kept our situation at the forefront.” Her principal was also “very supportive” and “a lot of the [veteran teachers]—some of them had been teaching for five, ten years longer than us—were fighting for us.”

Turnaround Reforms

RIFs due to the nationwide economic recession caused dissatisfaction and disrupted teachers’ careers, but other politicized organizational changes also challenged my sample. Throughout LA County, schools were restructured as part of *turnaround* reforms to improve student performance (Strunk et al., 2016). When Len was in his first years of teaching, he heard veteran educators grumbling that these changes were just the “flavor of the month; they’ll go away and we’ll go back to the same ol’ thing.” But this was not the case in the aftermath of NCLB, which deemed certain Title I schools and LEAs “persistently failing” and forced them to defer or reduce their operational budgets, transform school leadership, and/or close altogether

²¹ In LAUSD, many teachers faced “peer-induced layoff threat,” a greater threat of losing their own jobs after seeing a substantial proportion of their coworkers lose their jobs (Goldhaber et al., 2016).

(NCLB, 2001). Drastic corrective actions ensued across LA County, such as simplifying and narrowing curricula to rigorously prepare students for standardized exams, extending instructional time to year-round schedules, and replacing personnel (Howley & Howley, 2015).

School Reconstitutions. “This is one of the horrific stories of LAUSD,” Rory narrated. In his first year, he taught at a turnaround school where the LEA had “taken over [and] fired all the staff.” Rory recalled some of those teachers expressing a sense of betrayal by educators who replaced them. As a novice, Rory was conflicted; he felt solidarity with peer educators but he also wanted to be a strong, progressive voice for students at that turnaround school. Rory ultimately joined the cadre of “mostly new [teachers and] a few vets [who] were allowed to reapply, [who] were bitter but still in-it-to-win-it,” even as others asked, “How can you possibly support this... attack on the [teachers] union?!”

Len taught at his alma mater, another turnaround school. In his first two years of teaching there, he remembered colleagues speaking about reforms with “animosity—teachers in [my] department were very ugly, mean, rude about people who wanted that change.” As a new educator, Gregory also recalled “veteran teachers complain[ing] and argu[ing] against” school reforms, colleagues who Gregory felt were “jaded... shitty teachers that [didn't] care... about the students' welfare.” Len asked himself: “Is this the environment I wanna work in?” and transferred to a “teacher-driven” school, where fellow educators were more “progressive,” “push[ed] boundaries,” and wanted to “teach differently.”

Site Management Overhauls. Aside from reconstitutions, more than 200 of LAUSD's low-performing sites were syphoned off by charters or seized by the City of LA and other school operators; principals also went through the ringer in the accountability era turnover (Postell, 2012). Julia was a first-year teacher when a “community partner” became the school's

“management organization. They changed our name and suddenly they were... making all these rules and controlling the principal.” As the school went through accreditation, these partners “did evaluations [in classrooms,] nitpicking every single little thing, [to determine which teachers were] up to par.” Teachers “didn't feel respected,” Julia said, “You felt like you were constantly being evaluated and judged.” Isabela commented similarly about her school’s partners: “I don't think that they [were] allowed to formally evaluate us, [but] they [could] walk into our classrooms whenever they want[ed] and take notes.” The management antagonized the teachers union, Julia said, so she transferred: “It was a horrible year... I didn't want to leave [but I] didn't want to be there anymore.” Many colleagues did the same. “In the years that I was there, I don't think anybody stayed more than two years,” Julia told me, “It ruined it for a lot of people.”

Others spoke of the effects of administrator turnover. Due to “the meddling... from the central office,” Isabela noted, “In my seven years, we had six principals... Some were not even there an entire year [and two] were interim.” Rory’s school had “twelve principals in three years... With that turnover, it really felt like whenever something was created, it would very quickly be taken down.” Even as teachers championed improvement, “the [LEA had] this magical way of destroying a lot of progress” by replacing school leadership, he said.

Korey transferred schools after his fourth year of teaching, when his principal was “canned” days before the start of the school year. “It was really sloppy,” Korey remembered, as the LEA placed their “Black administrator—one of the few—” on leave with no explanation and no replacement. As a fellow Black man serving a school with a predominantly Black and Hispanic population, Korey had appreciated that principal’s approach to student discipline, his culturally appropriate manner in building relationships with students, and attitude that conveyed, “We're running our school a little differently.” “Students were really fond of that principal,”

Korey said sadly, “That year was a wreck. [It was] the ultimate blow.” He said, “The thought of leaving the career never crossed my mind, but I needed a change [to enable] longevity in the profession” At the time of their interviews, fifteen of my 20 participants said that negative changes in school leadership would motivate them to transfer schools.

Important initiatives fell by the wayside due to administrator turnover. One principal might establish some norms, but “things would get dropped,” Isabela said, “there was nobody ensuring that things would continue” when the next principal came aboard. Deflated campus morale led to high turnover among educators as well. Isabela stayed beyond most of her colleagues in this toxic environment out of fear that her next position would be worse. But after she “talked to a lot of people,” she finally recognized “the sad state of affairs: [There was not that much worse than [that school] and I needed to leave!”

By contrast, when “things got terrible and a lot of people left” due to LEA-wide personnel overhauls, Aaron told himself, “this too shall pass!” and decided to stay at the same school. Aaron wanted to teach “for 40 years,” so quitting was not an option. He didn’t want to transfer schools because these issues were happening throughout the LEA, and changing LEAs meant possibly starting “at the bottom of the salary scale again [because who knew] if my years would've carried over.” He didn’t want to lose the privileges that came with department seniority, like choosing course assignments. Instead, he ascribed to an idea that “good times don't last, neither do bad times... Bad administrators come and go.” Even though it was “a bad place to work”—there were lay-offs, educators were moved “between sites without their consent,” LEA office staff were forced to teach and vice versa—Aaron was empowered by the “strong relationships” he had with colleagues across his “entire fourteen years” at the same site, which included “new people I've become friends with.” Rory concurred: “There were so many things

that were not okay that happened every day... but the ones who make it through with you [become your] core people.”

LAUSD Public School Choice Initiative (PSCI) /community-envisioned new schools.

Many participants were impacted by another effort to reform low-performing schools, institute more school choice, and relieve overcrowding in comprehensive high schools. The PSCI, adopted in 2009, invited the public to help restructure/divide existing schools and develop operational plans for small autonomous academies designed to better meet the diverse needs of their local community (Strunk et al., 2012). Several types of design teams emerged: *school-based* (teachers), *mixed local district* (teachers, parents, and administrators from a local community), *external* (charter management and nonprofit organizations), and others (teams with LAUSD and out-of-district members; Strunk et al, 2012). Other LEAs similarly restructured their schools.

Zoe had just started teaching when her campus was mandated to “restructure... before the State [took] over.” She co-chaired that effort in her second year: “Somehow,” she told me incredulously, “[I was] in charge of restructuring an entire school!” Zoe hadn’t expected to take a leadership role so early in her career, but she wasn’t alone; five (25%) of the educators in my study participated on a design team in their first three years of teaching. Rory was responsible for transforming his school into a small learning community (SLC) that would operate alongside three other academies on the same campus. Thinking back, Rory felt uneasy that “a first-year teacher was given so much say—truthfully, the person guiding a school’s vision should most definitely have experience!” But across my sample, participants said that veteran teachers seemed uninterested in the work of “saving” their schools. Zoe thought the task fell to her because her colleagues thought, “Let that little second-year teacher do it, better than me!”

Johnson asserted, “Only rarely do teachers, those who are most aware of the complexity of instruction, design schools” (1990, p. 145). But facing job insecurity, Rory felt it was “smart” to be on a team, which would “guarantee” him a position at the school if their SLC was chosen; otherwise, he had no “protection” and would have to interview “as a new teacher.” Despite the obvious work overload, Rory recalled this period as “probably the happiest” of his fourteen-year career. Interviewees across my sample enjoyed the adrenaline rush of juggling these tremendous challenges while envisioning their ideal schools very early in their profession.

This optimism was soon dashed for some of my participants. Educators on unsuccessful design teams were angry about how the winning schools were chosen. “[The LEA] made us compete against each other to prove why we deserved to be the [SLC] that stayed open,” Julia explained. Rory added: “The process that they were using to create academies was never legal, proper. [They] didn’t follow any [LEA] protocol [or] rubric. [It] was very political.” In LAUSD, the superintendent and school board chose the PSCI sites, not students, parents, school workers, nor members of the community (Strunk et al., 2014). So, design teams’ efforts “didn’t matter,” Julia felt, “All along, [the LEA] already knew which ones they were gonna keep; [the SLCs that] partnered with USC and other big organizations.” Rory recalled, “If your idea didn’t make it—you [were] instantly displaced [and] out of the [LEA]... It was pretty devastating.”

After this “horrible experience,” teachers in my study scrambled for jobs, and many found themselves on another SLC design team or as a teacher leader at a newly designed pilot, charter, or experimental school. Julia was recruited to “our dream school,” designed by former colleagues who shared “same-thinking, same-understandings of education.” That design team held “community meetings” with local families and had joined three other SLC teams to propose four, co-located “sister schools... where our core values, our basic structures, were all the same.”

After “the SLC that I belonged to collapsed into another one and disappeared,” Olivia also ended up at a small pilot school, where the founders and the principal were “very good friends of mine.” At the time of our interview, Olivia had served that school for four years and was English department chair. She loved her job because campus stakeholders trusted her leadership, and fellow teachers “have the same vision of teaching and are supportive of one another and the students.” Although “other schools don't require as much involvement,” Olivia said resolutely, “It's worth it for me to drive out there for my colleagues.”

Summary

Participants experienced workplace dissatisfaction due to extreme disruptions early in their careers, conditions that were beyond individual teachers' loci of control. Researchers of school administrative data also report a “substantial impact of RIFs and their recall” on teachers switching schools and exiting the district (Goldhaber et al., 2016, p. 530-1), but educators in my sample persisted in the profession. They navigated these restructurings by banding with “same-thinking” colleagues and administrators who shared similar worldviews. These relationships boosted my participants' spirits when futures were uncertain, providing a sense of solidarity and hope for ideal school workplaces where teamwork and service to students were valued above all else. During the rough years, these educators had divergent opinions of the “the veterans” at their sites; although some enjoyed and appreciated when more senior teachers stood in solidarity with them, other participants resented the apathy and negativity from more established educators who dominated their workplace culture and were protected from RIFs. Further dissatisfaction ensued from those interpersonal interactions.

Conflicts Featuring Proximal (Campus-Level) Authorities

Fourteen out of 20 participants had left jobs because of negative dynamics with a school administrator: individuals with executive and direct evaluative functions on a school campus (i.e., principals, associate/assistant principals; APs). In this hierarchical organizational structure observed at most schools, power struggles were so common as to be endemic (Johnson, 1990), and frequently engendered dissatisfaction and turnover intentions in my participants.

Administrators Managing School Operations

Teaching Assignments. Some site administrators have the final word on educators' assignments (Sterret et al., 2018). Sami understood that "teachers have to be able to swap in and out of courses more often... in eleventh and twelfth grades specifically," when student dropouts are most prevalent (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). However, according to my participants, authoritative principals can obligate educators to teach courses against their will, especially at sites without union representation. For example, when Sami's colleague "left mid-year," her principal forced her to take over "AP English on Monday," a class Sami was not prepared to teach. Experiencing "a major course change every year [in] my first three years" became a rationale for Sami to transfer to a unionized charter school for her fourth year. At her new school, "While Administration does choose the courses based on how many students, we [teachers] determine which ones we take," she told me happily.

Gregory's new principal assigned him a new course days before the school started and, six weeks later, replace that class with a subject that Gregory was not qualified to teach. "I would not have taken the job," had he known this would happen, Gregory told me. But his department was severely understaffed, a common occurrence in large urban areas where students can shift *en masse* between district and charter sites due to school choice (Baker, 2016), making it impossible to anticipate enrollment numbers. Gregory committed to staying to help a colleague with "80

students in his classes, but the principal's management style was still a deal-breaker. "This might be my final year of teaching," Gregory admitted, "I have this anxiety constantly because I'm teaching a class that I *know* I don't know how to teach, [with no] time to *learn* how to teach [it.] That's a disservice to students, that goes against why I became a teacher."

Although an additional course assignment can significantly shift a teacher's function and workload, teachers in Sami's department regularly discussed course assignments. This helped to diplomatically consider how the work was balanced across the team: "I don't really want that course but... it makes sense that I take it," or "I can handle that one this year." When such decisions were left to administrators to make last minute, teacher dissatisfaction and interpersonal conflict often ensued, especially among more-experienced faculty.

Scheduling. Administrators are typically tasked to establish and enforce the master schedule for their site, a temporal structure that ideally maximizes instructional time equitably for all classes and all staff, on a daily, weekly, and yearlong basis (Sterett et al., 2018). Knowing this, Naomi approached the AP, her evaluating supervisor, and asked to be late every morning for her "conference period" (paid, instruction-free preparation time), to transport her own children to school. The AP demanded that Naomi report that as sick time in a threatening e-mail: "If you don't like the solution, [our school] will go on without your services." Luckily, the principal supported Naomi's idea to make up the time afterschool without reporting it. Since this conflict, "[The AP] stands outside my door... watching me [and] keeps these paper trails [to] write me up," scrutiny that Naomi felt was excessive and unnecessary for a teacher in her fifteenth year. "I don't feel comfortable staying," she said sadly, "[The AP] killed my spirit." She wanted to transfer to a school where she could "fly under the radar."

Similarly, Faith couldn't teach seventh period. But she said she picked "up the slack on a lot of things," so "the admin who makes the master schedule [works] with me." For example, the AP wanted to give two periods of bio "to the new teacher" and switch Faith to health science mid-year. "I'd prefer to have had all the bios [but] that's alright," Faith replied, as long as her request to not teach seventh period was honored. Master schedule issues were ironed out when educators expressed their needs and priorities directly, administrators acted in good faith, and all stakeholders embodied both a "fill-the-need" and "work-with-me" attitude, she said.

Classroom Autonomy. Johnson wrote in 1990: "Today's schools continue to operate as bureaucracies even though the work that goes on inside them cannot be productively standardized" (p. 107). In data collected thirty years later, politicized encroachment on how my sample provided instruction was a significant factor in their turnover intentions. Talia said that educators "have students' learning interests in mind and heart," and refused to "fall in line" with a "totalitarian" principal who demanded mid-semester that the entire school shift to "paperless, literally overnight." This was to impress donors/partners that the recently purchased student laptops had eliminated the need for paper. Talia left for another school that year. Sami's workload was suddenly tripled when her principal shifted the whole school to computer-based *station-learning*, a format that required teachers to prepare "three different lessons" per class that engage students in independent learning activities. When she saw "the autonomy going away, Sami thought, "I can't work with that... I need to leave." Similarly, when Joe's school adopted a test-based curriculum for Algebra, he "refused to do [that.] That's not who I am." At the time, Joe left faculty meetings "pissed off [that] the cards were stacked against me," and realized that "I had to focus my attention somewhere else." He obtained a computer science credential, to remain in the mathematics department but not have "to teach to [standardized] test[s]."

Administrators monitored instruction through excessive classroom observation. A curriculum coordinator was assigned to observe Naomi's classes all day every day, after the principal heard Naomi communicating fluently with Spanish-speaking students ("so that they recognize that I'm like them"), an apparent violation of the state law permitting only English in class (Ballotpedia, 1998). "It was really hard," Naomi recalled, "I was always on pins and needles." Before Joe switched to teaching Java programming, administrators visited "every day in my Algebra I classes,... taking notes on what I [was] doing in a very negative way." "I'm over this," he remembered thinking, "I was really unhappy." Five participants had endured excessive (e.g., daily, all day) observations of their classes.

Proximal authorities also required teachers to turn in written lesson plans for the purpose of monitoring classrooms. But "there was never any kind of feedback," so Sami and her colleagues would "change the date, change the title, change the file name, [and email] the same lesson plan all year" to the principal. Faced with a similar policy at her school, Valerie combined her plans into one document in outline form, because "I never got any feedback." Still, Sami called this process "redundant—literally just busywork that wasn't helpful" for educators' professional growth, and "within two years, there was a 90% turnaround of teachers." When Sami also transferred, she became active in her union's grievance team, to whom teachers report negative workplace incidents. "Part of the reason I moved was to be a part of a union. Seeing what [Admin] did at my last school, I really like having [that]."

Service. Mid-career educators often take leadership roles as they gain teaching experience (e.g., Brunetti & Marston, 2018). However, Isabela wasn't interested in adding more work, and refused longer-term service obligations (i.e., committees) in favor of one-day events (e.g., supervising school dances). She knew from a teachers union meeting that administrators

“can’t force you... to take on extra responsibility.” However, Talia recalled again, that “everyone has to do more at a place that’s smaller.” There were other political challenges to overcome at a pilot school that Talia had co-founded: her friend and boss, the principal, regularly obligated Talia to do things, “Like: I said no [but then] my name was right there in the agenda; I’m running the PD, what the f—?” She was assigned “boring... secretarial, managerial stuff” for school accreditation. These dynamics had enabled the principal to become “too comfortable... I was doing too much [and] it was really cutting into my quality of life, my health.” After being hospitalized for several months mid-year, Talia made the “really tough decision” to transfer: “It’s hard to have that conversation when it’s your boss [and] friend... It was just easier to leave [and] be relieved of some of those responsibilities.”

Professional Growth. My participants also expressed dissatisfied when administrators hindered teachers’ professional growth. In her first year, Valerie had asked her principal for guidance after a difficult teaching day, and “You should think about leaving the profession,” was that person’s response. Valerie remembered thinking, “[My boss] can fire me [or] make me leave... but she doesn’t have a right to dictate my career.” She changed jobs that year:

It was a hard choice to make that phone call, to quit—the kids all thought I was coming back—I felt bad for the kids and I felt bad for all the other teachers—my integrity... That was all hard! But I didn’t feel bad for [the principal.]

Naomi thought “I can’t stay here,” but couldn’t transfer without a recommendation letter from her principal, who was notorious for “breaking” teachers and impeding the credentialing process for novice educators. “Luckily, I got displaced” in the mass lay-offs, Naomi explained, happily accepting job insecurity to move away from that principal.

Summary

At the site level, teachers in my study expressed the most dissatisfaction when authorities forced changes on educators without their input. These behaviors included enforcing new and undesirable teaching assignments, schedules, pedagogical approaches, and service responsibilities, as well as micro-managing of classroom practice, and inhibiting teacher autonomy and growth; such political actions motivated educators to make career changes to avoid doing “busywork” or adopting instructional approaches antithetical to their values. On many occasions, it was “just easier to leave.”

These narratives of teacher dissatisfaction, divided into distal and proximal settings, validated the schools as workplace framework (Johnson, 1990) and demonstrated how educators serving LA County high schools considered and attended to a wide variety of factors. Collective and inductive analyses also revealed a complex interplay among these various dimensions and their implications on turnover intentions, which I unpack in the Discussion.

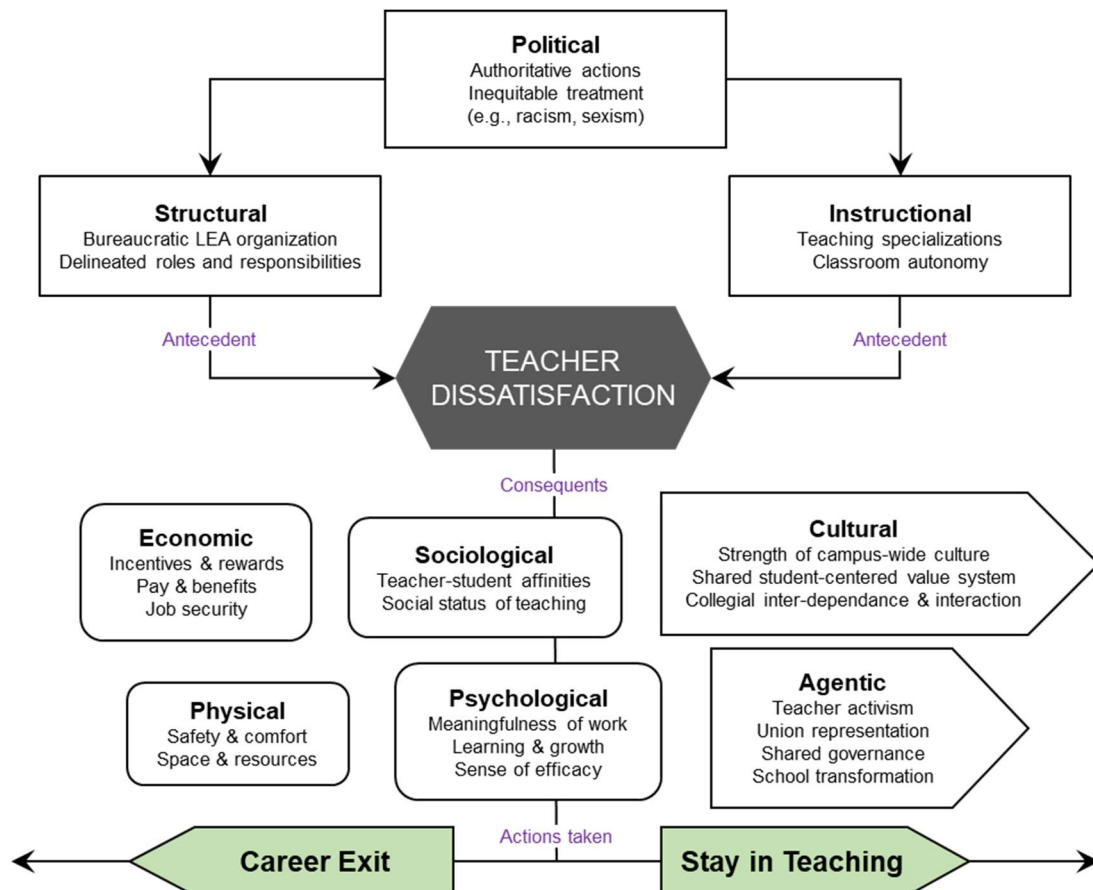
Discussion

In the 1980s, Johnson (1990) identified an array of features that seemed to matter for individuals in the teaching profession, after studying 115 elementary and secondary educators with varying levels of classroom experience who taught in public, private, and independent schools in urban and suburban settings. I applied this model to a sample that only included teachers at urban Title I high schools and analyzed only expressions of job-related dissatisfaction; this resulted in clearer distinctions and relationships among the seven workplace dimensions, the prominence of the political and organizational features as antecedents, and directionalities that was not originally identified. The model also helped to interpret experienced teachers’ turnover intentions as consequents of political actions and how educators primarily

leaned into cultural features to remain in the profession. Below is a concept map incorporating my findings and modifications.

Figure 3

Teacher Dissatisfaction in Urban Title I Schools



Notes: This model was adapted from the schools as workplace framework (Johnson, 1990) with data centering teacher dissatisfaction, its antecedent and consequent workplace features, as interpreted by teachers who remained committed to teaching in urban Title I public high schools.

Dissatisfaction ensued when people in power altered teachers' expectations of their workplace structures and of the roles and functions assigned to school personnel. The original model defined *organizational* as the bounded, situated, bureaucratic structure of school systems, as well as teacher workload and assignments (Johnson, 1990), but based on teachers' narrations of the antecedents to dissatisfaction, I found the term to be too broad. In refining the model to

reflect this, I split the category into *structural* and *instructional*. We can now distinguish between distress triggered by political changes made to LEA or campus-wide employment structures and encroachments by authorities on teachers' distinct roles and assigned responsibilities.

Centering workplace politics and their effects on structural and instructional features revealed consequents of teacher dissatisfaction not previously discussed in the model. Decisions made by authorities in the central office (political) fundamentally disrupted teachers' employment status and through system-wide personnel actions like lay-offs, hiring freezes, and reorganizing how schools are managed (structural). When their positions were threatened, participants questioned and weighed economic (e.g., Would I retain seniority; Will I move up in the pay scale), cultural (e.g., Will my colleagues and I share similar values and work toward the same vision; Would they have my back), and instructional (e.g., Will my workload be lighter; Will I teach classes in my specialty or should I add a credential) aspects in contemplating job change. Such concerns did not arise independent of these political events, that is, my participants only mentioned low salaries or contemplated career transitions when someone "killed" their spirits. Suddenly removing school site leaders also prompted dissatisfaction, even when teachers' own jobs were not threatened; in those cases, educators worried about their schools' culture and the continuity of teacher-led reforms.

At the campus level, authoritative changes (political) made to teachers' assigned courses, their teaching schedules, or non-instructional service requirements, severely altered and/or increased teacher workload for a term or year (instructional). Teachers were incensed when administrators dictated how they taught and surveilled their classrooms for compliance; this was perceived by teachers as de-professionalizing (psychological) and a profound disruption of their sense of classroom autonomy—"a central feature of [teachers'] work" (Johnson, 1990, p. 5)—

creating conditions that “detracted from the ‘real work’ of teaching” (p. 129). These intrusions prompted teachers to question their self-efficacy, the meaningfulness of the work itself, whether the stress level was sustainable, and if they were being nurtured professionally (psychological). Again, participants only spoke about psychological features of their workplace when their instructional routines and expectations were shattered by site-based authorities.

My refined framework also highlighted how teachers persisted through troubling times by heavily leaning on cultural aspects of their workplaces to exercise agency. Together with their collegial networks (cultural), educators took action to wrest power back (political) and harnessed their values and approaches to schooling to design “dream schools” (instructional, psychological, political). They rejected administrative demands that violated their employment terms, forged bonds with other school personnel to protect one another, protest together, to share the workload, and volunteered for leadership positions to disrupt the power dynamics that disadvantaged teachers. When all else failed and better opportunities arose, teachers transferred schools.

The assertion that teacher retention hinges on both mitigating political intrusions on the instructional domain and culture-strengthening is not new. It is well supported quantitatively and qualitatively by prior research employing the schools as workplaces framework (e.g., Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; McLaughlin, 1992) and other scholars of teacher dissatisfaction at urban Title I sites (e.g., Kraft et al., 2012; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Teachers’ perceptions of their site administrators has “by far the greatest influence on teacher retention decisions[, especially in schools] serving non-White, low-performing, and low-income students,” not the sociological (Boyd et al., 2011, p. 303-328) nor the economical (e.g., Rochkind et al., 2007). There is also evidence that the political domain extends beyond the school campus to the central office level, as I found; for example, new teachers who challenged the political status quo, who garnered

attention as “a powerful group with an agenda, not as individual teachers,” were released from duty by their LEA, which truncated their teaching careers (Freedman & Appleman, 2009).

In my data, I noted very few excerpts that could be identified as dissatisfying *physical* workplace features. Since Johnson’s (1990) publication, LAUSD received a \$19.2 billion settlement to a civil rights class action lawsuit (“Williams Case”) to construct 160 new campuses, and \$13.6 billion in voter-approved bonds for infrastructure and technology modernization (Rodriguez, 2006). These actions forced LAUSD and other LEAs to upgrade facilities and resources at the schools that my mid-career sample served. When features like the *physical* and *sociological* were not supported by my data, I assumed the omission was due to my sampling of experienced educators in this geographic region and left them in the framework.

I also encountered interpretive challenges in applying Johnson’s (1990) model. For example, the framework does not provide a means for understanding how teachers’ ethno-racial traits play into workplace dynamics. I noted that the White teachers had worked at an average of 1.56 schools and the teachers of color (TOC) had served an average of 2.91 schools, but I could not ascertain if race played a role in these disparate rates of school transfer. Other studies of TOC found that job dissatisfaction and school transfer did result from toxic relationships with administrators (e.g., Bristol, 2014; Kohli, 2018), and that mobility was more common among TOC due to the working conditions (Rodriguez et al., 2021), so I added inequitable treatment as a *political* feature to be studied beyond this manuscript.

Additionally, Johnson (1990) touched on the role and function of labor unions but did not include them in her model. In text, she reported that “collective bargaining provided teachers with leverage legitimated by law and leading to enforceable outcomes [and] policy making;”

thus their educator members had “a say in their working conditions” (1990, p. 196). The subject also arose frequently in my study, so I included it in the model as an element of teacher agency.

Implications

The education sector is one of the largest employers in our nation, and work satisfaction at schools is a matter of great societal importance. My study of educators who remained in the profession indicated that dissatisfaction actually stems from teachers’ interactions with authoritative and intrusive site or LEA administrators, which is allayed when educators belong to a unified, value-driven community of practitioners. Although other aspects of school workplaces, like “incentives, management structures, oversight and accountability, governance, technology and material aspects,” garner much attention in the bargaining room, the media, and in policy, shifting focus to environmental and community features would suggest “fundamentally different levers for policy and topics for research” (McLaughlin 1992, p. 20-21).

My updated schools as workplace framework offers ways to do this. As an illustration, I apply it to a demand that commonly arises in teacher protests: class size reduction. *Class size* is an instructional feature that caps the number of enrollees in any class, which can ease teachers’ workload (e.g., fewer students equate to less lesson preparation, grading, fewer parent-teacher conferences) and enable more individualized attention to improving student outcomes (Swain & Redding, 2022). My model revealed that problems result from authorities exerting power over instructional features, hence, class size is not an antecedent nor cause of teacher dissatisfaction. According to my participants, the true issue was feeling forced to teach a new prep in the middle of the school year to relieve extreme overcrowding in some classes (e.g., 80 students).

The managerial function of site administrators comes into focus when shifting attention from class size to the political feature. Applying my model to resolving sticky staffing issues

suggests that administrators ought to have constant and open communication with all stakeholders, value teacher agency, and seek to strengthen/broaden the school's collegial culture when making changes to instructional features. I outline one such option for addressing large class sizes. Administrators might ask for volunteers to obtain emergency credentials to teach impacted classes, rather than assigning teachers to take preps against their will (which might also violate federal policies and teachers union contracts that prohibit educators in Title I schools from teaching outside their credential authorizations). Volunteers might include teachers in the affected department or across campus, paraeducators, substitute teachers, and other school staff, pre-service educators in nearby teacher preparation programs, and parents of students. They can be incentivized with reduced teaching loads, reimbursement for attending PDs and credentialing programs, assistance from instructional coaches, or the opportunity to co-teach with a colleague. Diplomatic and communicative leaders can prevent political clashes around class size by maintaining a unified workplace culture that affirms teacher capacity and choice.

Beyond this singular dissatisfying issue, the modified schools as workplaces model points to the need to attend more closely to negative teacher-administrator dynamics. Surveying educators frequently with specific prompts would likely reveal replicable bright spots in leadership approaches, problematic trends in political infringements on instruction and classroom autonomy. Many educators conduct check-ins or checks-for-understanding—frequent, informal, assessments of student learning—in their classes; administrators might adopt a similar practice with teachers, asking a question or two about workplace climate, leadership, workload, scheduling, or autonomy on a weekly or biweekly basis. Informal and anonymous paper exit slips at staff meetings or pop up notifications when teachers log on to the learning management system would likely generate immediate data on teacher sentiment. My findings suggest that

such check-ins are especially critical to stave dissatisfaction when teachers receive their instructional assignments. Keeping a better pulse on teacher sentiment and workplace climate might provide opportunities to address issues immediately and avoid formal grievances, teacher attrition, or work stoppage.

Additionally, my model suggests that educators might enjoy taking collective action on issues that matter to them and that the bonds that form among teachers can enable job longevity. Beyond the union and campus service committees, teachers in my study enjoyed participating in collegial work groups (e.g., same-, cross-grade level, interdisciplinary, or departmental professional learning communities), cohorts (e.g., first-year teachers; national board certified teachers), cultural groups (e.g., racial, ethnic affinity), social clubs (e.g., weekly happy hour; running group; bunco), or just meeting over lunch. Communities of coworkers can provide vital support for teachers to remain in the profession through a common sense of purpose and meaning in the work (cultural), strength in numbers (political), healing and learning together (psychological) and, in many cases, friendship beyond the workplace (sociological).

Schools and LEAs are formal and bureaucratic workplaces where most educators teach in isolation from coworkers behind closed doors. When collegiality develops among the teachers, these relationships can help shape their workplace culture into a vital professional community. This cultural feature of schools “matters most to teachers and teaching,” the only condition that engenders a sustainable career-long commitment (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 21).

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