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New teacher isolation and its relationship to teacher attrition

David S. Sleppin
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David Sleppin

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2009

ABSTRACT

New Teacher Isolation and its Relationship to Teacher Attrition

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B.A., University of Delaware, 1986

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
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Administrator Leadership for Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

Studies suggest that many promising new teachers who experience isolation do not reach their full potential and may leave the teaching profession prematurely. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between the experience of isolation among new teachers and the potential for teacher attrition in an urban school district in the northeastern U. S. Grounded in constructivist theory, the phenomenological research design examined in-depth interview data collected from 8 new public elementary school teachers with three or less years experience. A coding procedure began by extracting key phrases and statements from the raw data and reduced information into categories and themes based on frequency and alignment to the research focus. An analysis of the thematic data revealed several shared factors regarding mentoring and isolation including consensus that mentoring was instrumental in reducing feelings of isolation, that isolation is experienced in different ways and to varying degrees, and that new teachers have a strong desire to remain in the profession, but might leave their current assignment due to feelings of isolation. It was concluded that new teachers participating in the study found that mentoring and a strong belief in the importance of education helped them feel less isolated and more connected to their learning community. Recommendations for action included implementing quality induction programs for new teachers, requiring participation in these programs for at least two years, and providing better peer mentoring experiences for new teachers. These recommendations have the potential to create a more positive experience for new teachers. This study has implications for positive social change in new teacher training which involves mentors, school leaders, peer coaches, and communities of teachers working together to meet the needs of today's new teachers.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my loving wife, Wendy, and my father, Michael, for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout this endeavor.

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I would first like to thank Dr. Thomas Stapleford, my doctoral study chair, for his support, guidance and encouragement throughout my journey in pursuit of this degree. Additionally, I would like to thank my second committee member, Dr. Edward Kim, for his recommendations and expertise that enhanced and strengthened my work.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The impact of new teacher isolation on teacher attrition has become an ever increasing problem in the United States and is an important issue in the field of education on local, state, and national levels. The high rate of teacher attrition is causing concern in the teaching profession. In fact, the annual turnover rate for teachers is close to four percent higher than the average of all other professions (Carroll & Fulton, 2004). The problem of new teacher isolation and its relationship to teacher attrition rates is a vital area of research for all public education stakeholders.

All members of the learning community have a vested interest in helping new teachers succeed in their first assignments. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2005),

The exit of teachers from the profession and the movement of teachers to better schools are costly phenomena, both for the students, who lose the value of being taught by an experienced teacher, and to the school and districts, which must recruit and train their replacements. (p.1)

New teachers should be offered quality induction activities when they enter a new school system. If new teachers are not offered these support programs, they may become disillusioned, which in turn, may cause them to leave the teaching profession. Renard (1999) explained, “I was told that new teachers – both those new to the profession and those new to a district or school – face a world of challenges, and disadvantages” (p. 2). For this reason, new teachers who enter the field of education should be provided with quality mentoring or induction opportunities in their schools. According to a report by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2004), “Strong principals maintain the quality of

induction by ensuring that mentors and novices are well matched, have enough release time to work together, and direct their work toward improving student learning” (p.22). New teachers can benefit by participating in school sponsored induction activities with the full support of the school administration.

The issue of teacher attrition in the United States needs to be addressed on local, state, and national levels. Despite investing many years obtaining a college education, and after spending hundreds of hours observing teachers in the classroom, 46% of new teachers nationwide leave the profession within the first five years of service (Ingersoll, 2002). It is important for school districts to support new teachers in an effort to reduce teacher attrition rates. One way to do this could be through increased collaboration between new teachers and mentor teachers as they begin the induction process.

Problem Statement

Many new teachers are not offered the support and guidance they need to succeed as educators through sustained induction and mentoring programs during their first year as instructors. Darling-Hammond (2003) noted, “In all schools, regardless of school wealth, student demographics, or staffing patterns, the most important resource for continuing improvement is the knowledge and skill of the school’s best prepared and most committed teachers” (p.3). Social change is necessary in the area of new teacher support and induction programs. School districts need to offer quality induction and mentoring programs in order to prepare new teachers to successfully navigate the difficult obstacles they face as they enter the field of education.

Many promising new teachers are not able to reach their full potential as educators and may leave the teaching profession prematurely. Educational researchers have shown that there are many possible factors contributing to this problem, including (a) school culture issues, (b) lack of administrative support and (c) inadequate induction or mentoring programs. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge necessary to address this problem by seeking to determine if participation by new teachers in support programs will help to prevent isolation and improve retention rates. Cookson (2005) explained, "One of the ironies of teaching is that it is one of the most social occupations, but is also one of the most isolating professions" (p. 14). In order to help new teachers acclimate to their new learning environments, school leaders should formulate strategies to reduce or prevent new teacher isolation which could help to decrease teacher attrition rates.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how new teachers perceive and experience isolation and how this influences teacher attrition and retention rates. Interviews were used as the method of inquiry in this phenomenological study.

In response to the problem of teacher isolation and its impact on attrition, school districts across the country are in the process of developing and implementing sustained induction and mentoring programs aimed at retaining new teachers and reducing their feelings of isolation. Breaux and Wong (2003) noted, "Induction programs are a smart investment in the ongoing training, support and retention of beginning teachers who, as a result of the programs, become more qualified, capable, and effective teachers" (p. 11). In

2001, 38 states were offering some kind of mentoring or induction program for new teachers (Hirsch, Koppich & Knapp, 2001).

Teacher attrition caused concern in the field of education throughout the United States. According to Feiman-Nemser (2001),

In far too many places new teachers must learn the ropes on their own. The cost is high. Up to one third of new teachers leave the profession within the first three years, a fact that falls heaviest on urban schools. (p. 1030)

The problem of teacher turnover is an important issue on local, state, and national levels because it is costly for school systems and can negatively affect teacher retention efforts. Minarik, Thornton, and Perreault (2003) noted, "Recruitment and replacement of quality teachers are costly annual events that take money away from other important needs such as classroom supplies, teacher pay and facilities" (p. 203). The average cost to recruit, hire, prepare and lose a teacher is \$50,000.00 (Carroll & Fulton, 2004). This money could be spent much more effectively on school improvement and teacher induction or mentoring activities.

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2002) stated, "The era of solo teaching in isolated classrooms is over. To support quality teaching our schools must support strong professional learning communities" (p. 13). New teachers need a supportive school culture, dedicated administrators, and quality induction programs to be truly successful. Rubalcava (2005) stated, "Many new teachers will stay in the classroom if administrators give them time, space, and support to foster human connections and creativity. When teachers feel empowered to create professional meaning and community at school, they stay" (p. 70). In order for school systems and

stakeholders to be unified in their efforts to help new teachers adjust to their new surroundings, there must be common ground or understanding of these goals. Smith (2005) noted that “effective mentoring must be based on respect for the personhood and professionalism of the beginning educator, and it must help that individual find his or her own professional voice” (p. 63). It is crucial that school systems implement effective induction and mentoring program to ensure that new teachers are not isolated and can develop the necessary skills to reach their fullest potential.

Nature of the Study

The following research question was addressed during the study: What is the relationship between a new teacher’s experience with isolation and teacher attrition?

The research objective explored the impact that isolation has on a new teacher’s decision to remain in or leave the teaching profession. This objective was met through the use of interviews. A phenomenological design was selected for this study because it examines human experiences regarding a phenomenon. A more detailed explanation of the study design will be discussed in chapter 3. The researcher met with all new teachers in the district at a meeting that was be scheduled after IRB approval, to explain the purpose and scope of the study. Qualitative analysis was used in the study.

Conceptual Framework

The social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) is related to new teacher isolation. Bandura emphasized the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Bandura explained, “Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms

an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action” (p. 22). In the context of this study, the theory is that new teachers could benefit from observing and modeling the behaviors of veteran teachers, school leaders, and mentors while participating in induction or mentoring activities.

Another theory related to new teacher isolation is the social development theory (Vygotsky,1978). This theory emphasizes the connections between people and the cultural environment in which they act and interact in shared experiences. He believed that the life long process of development and learning was dependent on social interaction and that social learning leads to cognitive development. Vygotsky explained it as, “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86).

As applied to this study, the theory demonstrates that new teachers benefit from participating in mentoring and induction activities with peers, veteran teachers, and mentors in an environment of interaction and collaboration that becomes a community of learning. This theoretical framework is relevant to the problem of new teacher isolation because it explains that human experiences influence how people react to and handle themselves in difficult and stressful situations. New teachers can use the valuable experiences gained from participating in sustained induction or mentoring activities to positively impact their learning communities.

Definition of Terms

Communities of Practice: groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4).

Induction: an organized, sustained, multi-year program structured by a school or district, of which mentoring may be an integral component. It guides teachers through the professional development process and ensures that they learn to teach to established standards and thrive in the culture of a school (Wong & Wong, 2005, p. 5).

Learning Community: an informal group of interested people who begin networking to find enough common ground among members for them to feel connected and see the value of sharing insights, stories and techniques (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 71).

Mentoring: a one-on one process, concerned with simply supporting individual teachers (Wong & Wong, 2005, p. 5).

New Teacher: a teacher with three or less years of working experience in the field of education.

New Teacher Isolation: teachers in their first year experiencing alienation without adequate support from peers, mentors or their school leaders.

Peer Coaching: a professional development method that has been shown to increase collegiality and improve teaching. It is a confidential process through which teachers share their expertise and provide one another with feedback, support, and

assistance for the purpose of refining present skills, learning new skills, or solving classroom-related problems (Dalton & Moir, 1991; Galbraith & Anstrom, 1995).

Phenomenological Research: examines human experiences regarding a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2003, p. 15).

Qualitative Research: an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem (Creswell, 1998, p. 15).

School Culture: assembling teachers and staff in a faculty, a team or a committee where the social and political relationships among adults can be interrupted or suspended and a new working relationship generated within a school (Donaldson, G.A. jr., 2006, p. 26).

Teacher Attrition: a reduction or decrease in the number of teachers working in the field of education.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study focused on the central phenomenon of new teacher isolation. The study took place in an urban public school district in the northeastern United States. The school district's population consisted of 1,100 students and 120 teachers. There were 14 new teachers working in the school district at the time of the study.

Approximately eight of these new teachers were selected to participate in the study. The researcher interviewed each new teacher participating in the study for approximately 60-90 minutes. All new teachers in the school district (those with three or

less years of experience in the field of education) were invited to attend a meeting about the study. At this meeting, the researcher, who is a district supervisor of instruction, met with the new teachers to explain the purpose and scope of the study. The researcher did not directly supervise any of the new teachers in the district. The new teachers were asked if they were interested in participating in a research study involving interviews in which they would be asked about their perceptions and experiences regarding new teacher isolation. The researcher explained that the study would take place during the late summer and early fall of 2008 and that participation or non-participation in the study would have no impact on their employment for the upcoming school year.

The new teachers were then asked to read and sign a consent form that indicated interest in participation in the study. The form explained that the participants' rights and privacy were protected during the study and data collection process. This consent form also helped to reassure the new teachers that their participation in the study was completely confidential and would not in any way threaten their chances of being rehired. The consent forms were collected and placed into a box. The forms were randomly chosen from the box and the first eight names of new teachers who volunteered formed the study group. All new teachers that participated in the study were assigned a pseudonym and a randomly selected number, so that they remained anonymous during the study.

The delimitations of this study were the specific participants (new teachers) and the research design (qualitative phenomenological). The participants could have also

become more experienced during the study which affected their perceptions, attitudes and experiences regarding teacher isolation and the impact of teacher support activities.

The limitations of this study concerning interviews were that the researcher's presence could have biased responses, participants were not equally articulate, and that interviews might have been conducted in a designated "location" instead of in a natural field setting. In addition, interviews sometimes provided information that was filtered through the views and perceptions of the interviewees. A possible limitation of the study was the hesitance of nontenured teachers to say or do anything that might be construed as negative or uncooperative and might threaten their chances of being rehired or receiving tenure. The limitations regarding the use of audio equipment and materials during interviews were that the presence of an audio recorder could have been disruptive and impacted responses. In addition, the audio material collected by the researcher may have been difficult to interpret.

Significance of the Study

This study was of importance to practitioners in the field of education, new teachers, school administrators, community stakeholders, and college students who participated in teacher preparation programs. There is a gap in the literature concerning information and discussion on preservice teacher training and how it can be improved and updated to include information on new teacher isolation. The transition from being a student of educational theory to actually teaching in a classroom is a difficult and sometimes lonely journey. Hope (1999) explained, "This is the beginning of their sojourn in the isolation chamber known as the classroom" (p. 55). In the past, college students in

teacher preparation programs have been ill prepared for the realities of teacher isolation encountered in their first assignments. New teachers may find the study to be helpful in preventing or reducing feelings of isolation in their initial teaching assignments. Court (1999) stated, "Teacher isolation is clearly a many faceted phenomenon which requires ongoing attention by administrators, researchers, program planners and, most of all, by teachers themselves" (p. 2). The study may be helpful to college students preparing to be teachers by increasing their knowledge about the usefulness of teacher support programs. Cookson (2007) stated,

For people who have never taught it's difficult to understand how isolating the teaching profession can be. Teachers are in their classrooms with their students with very few breaks; the chance to interact with other adults is limited and very often there is no telephone or other way of communicating beyond the classroom. (p. 14)

The study may inspire school administrators and those who prepare preservice teachers to look more carefully at the problem of new teacher isolation and how it influences teacher retention and success. The knowledge gained about new teacher isolation could help to improve traditional teacher preparation programs by being included as part of the curriculum in colleges and universities. Lessons about new teacher isolation that are incorporated into teacher preparation classes could increase future teachers' awareness about this problem and may reduce or prevent the occurrence of isolation in their initial assignments.

The study has the potential to emphasize the importance of social change through sustained teacher support activities in a school district and may show new teachers how they can improve practice through collaboration with and observation of other teachers.

Wong and Wong (2005) explained, “New teacher induction programs build a community of teachers, bringing together beginning teachers, experienced teachers, and school leaders in a collaborative setting where they can observe each other teach and engage in a culture of cooperation and continuous learning” (p. 5). Additional benefits of this study may be the increased awareness of school administrators regarding new teacher attrition rates and the need to implement induction and mentoring activities while developing a school culture of cooperation and collaboration.

Summary and Transition

In response to the original inquiry regarding how new teacher isolation impacts teacher attrition rates, it was noted that the first few years of a teacher’s career can be a crucial time in their growth and development. Moir and Gless (2001) explained, “These initial years are also important in that early experiences serve to set the professional norms, attitudes, and standards that will guide practice over the course of a career” (p. 109). The research points to the need for better teacher induction programs with the support of the learning community.

School leaders need to provide new teacher induction programs and collaboration in their districts. Moir and Gless (2001) stated that “historically, little attention has been paid to the development, in particular the induction, of education’s prime resource-its teachers” (p. 110). It is not sufficient to simply greet new teachers at the main office on the first day of school and drop them off in their new classrooms. Wong (2002) explained, “The best way to support, develop, and cultivate an attitude of lifelong learning in beginning teachers is through a new teacher induction program focused on

teacher training, support, and retention” (p. 52). In order for induction programs to benefit new teachers as they enter the teaching profession, new teachers need to be supported in the field by dedicated and well trained mentors.

If school leaders are not supportive of new teachers by providing a positive and welcoming school culture, many of these instructors are at risk of becoming discouraged enough to leave their current school system, and in some cases exit the teaching profession entirely. Billingsley (2004) proposed that “one of the most important actions that schools can take is to provide support to beginning teachers during these vulnerable first years” (p. 371). The organizational climate developed by school leaders regarding the treatment of new teachers can be impacted by school culture.

The study focused on the relationship between new teacher isolation and teacher attrition and retention rates. It is important that school districts create a more supportive environment in which new teachers can succeed. As Hope (1999) explained, “The ‘sink or swim’ mentality that has historically been a part of teaching must be jettisoned” (p. 55). The impact of teacher attrition in America is clear when you look at the United States Department of Education projection that the nation will need more than two million new teachers by 2010 (Moir & Gless, 2001). Addressing the issue of new teacher isolation could improve teacher morale and instructional practice, which in turn has the potential to help to increase teacher retention rates. It is clear that school systems need to implement sustained induction activities in order to reduce new teacher isolation.

In the chapters that follow, the specific details of this study are discussed. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature related to the research problem and question,

background on new teacher isolation, and studies related to teacher support and induction programs. Chapter 3 defines the qualitative tradition and justifies its use in this study. The methodology employed in this study is described in detail. Findings and conclusions are explained in chapter 4, and the final chapter, chapter 5, presents conclusions and recommendations for future research.

The social need for acceptance and validation among new teachers is an important aspect of this study. New teachers can benefit from a positive working environment and support programs provided by their schools. All members of the learning community will benefit because if new teachers succeed, their students will succeed as well.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature review will be presented in two sections. The first section will contain a review of related research to the problem of new teacher isolation and its impact on attrition and retention rates. The second section will focus on teacher support programs and strategies that assist new teachers as they transition into the field of education. The first section will review the problem of new teacher isolation and the challenges faced by new teachers in their initial teaching assignments. The focus of the second section will be support programs for new teachers. In this section, research will be used to identify various types of new teacher support programs and the strategies that are needed to prepare new teachers for successful careers in the field of education.

New Teacher Isolation

Many new teachers enter the field of education because they have a desire to shape the future of our society by teaching their students to be productive and caring citizens. New teachers are faced with a variety of challenges as they begin their teaching careers. Many new teachers feel isolated and may encounter a lack of support from their peers and school administrators. Wong and Wong (2005) explained, “American education typically views teachers as independent operators, encouraged to be creative, and expected to do a good job behind closed doors. Collaboration is rare. Loneliness and lack of support further exacerbate the problems of beginning teachers” (p. 5). New teachers may feel overwhelmed by large class sizes and the lack of resources provided by their school districts. Some new teachers are also placed into positions that are outside

their area of expertise or certification which can be a frustrating and stressful experience.

According to Fulton, Burns, and Goldenberg (2005),

New teachers often find themselves in similarly dire situations-in the most troubled schools, working with the most difficult students-and without the requisite supports. Too often, these frustrations quickly drive teachers out of the schools that need them the most-or out of the profession altogether. (p. 299)

The content of the literature review encompassed ideas, experiences, perceptions and solutions pertaining to the problem of new teacher isolation. It included information on school culture, teacher retention, communities of practice, collaboration, induction and mentoring programs and peer coaching. The review consisted of journal articles, research papers, books and United States government studies on teacher isolation and attrition rates. The strategy used for searching the literature consisted of finding reliable sources of information regarding new teacher isolation, induction programs, and retaining new teachers. This was accomplished through the use of EBSCO Research Databases, university and public libraries, ERIC database, acceptable peer-reviewed journal articles, Academic Search Premier and academic (research-based) journals and research papers.

McCormack, Gore, and Thomas (2006) suggested that:

When early career teachers face their new school and classrooms for the first time knowing that they are truly responsible for all that occurs, and that they may have no one to support or guide them through their initial teaching, the realities they encounter help form part of their induction to teaching and their professional learning. (p. 102)

New teachers need the support and guidance of their peers and administrators when they begin working in a new school. According to Metz (2007),

Many new teachers who leave schools after the first year report lack of support and poor working conditions as the primary reasons for leaving. New teachers can feel alone and vulnerable even when working in a school building alongside scores of other teachers. (p. 8)

New teachers need a supportive school culture, dedicated administrators, and quality induction or mentoring programs to help ensure a successful first year of teaching. According to Fluckiger, McGlamery and Edick (2006), “Mentors do make a positive difference in teacher quality. Mentors intervene in timely ways to help novice teachers develop expertise” (p.12). Implementing an effective mentoring program ensures that new teachers are not isolated and can develop the necessary skills to reach their fullest potential. As Trubowitz (2004) explained, “The practice of mentoring new teachers is spreading widely. School systems are finding that beginning teachers who have access to intensive mentoring are less likely to leave teaching” (p. 59). Mentoring programs should be offered as an integral part of a school system’s induction program.

The use of induction and mentoring activities has greatly reduced the occurrence of new teacher isolation and improved the success and retention rate of new teachers in their learning communities. Wong and Wong (2003) stated, “Effective induction programs not only retain highly qualified new teachers; they also ensure that these teachers are teaching effectively from the very first day of school” (p.1).

It is important for school districts to focus on the prevention of new teacher isolation and to create a supportive community of teachers and administrators in order to reduce teacher attrition rates. According to Brownell, Hirsch, and Seo (2004), “Beginning teachers are the most vulnerable to attrition and should be the target of any major retention effort” (p. 57). By 2013, 3.5 million new teachers must be hired to support

increased enrollment in public schools and to replace retiring teachers (Hull, 2004).

School systems need to begin implementing induction and mentoring programs that will improve new teacher retention rates in the near future. According to Ingersoll and Smith (2003), “The data on new teacher attrition suggest that efforts to recruit more teachers- which have been the focus of much policy-will not, by themselves, solve the staffing problems plaguing schools. The solution must also include teacher retention” (p. 33).

Articles by Ingersoll and Smith (2003), Carroll and Fulton (2004) and Hull (2004) addressed similar issues concerning the high rate of teacher turnover, teacher shortages and teacher attrition that the United States will be facing in the near future.

Feelings of isolation are typical for many new teachers and make the transition into their initial teaching assignments a stressful experience. Feiman-Nemser (2003) suggested the following:

We cannot assume that grade-level teams or other school structures automatically provide a forum for addressing new teachers’ learning needs. Without the school’s explicit endorsement of induction as a shared responsibility and a professional culture that supports collaboration and problem solving, new teachers may still find themselves alone with their questions and problems. (p. 28)

When a new teacher begins working in his or her first teaching assignment it is the primary responsibility of school leaders to ensure that school-based induction and orientation activities are in place and available to support the new teacher. Stolpa Flatt (2006) suggested, “Experienced teachers and administrators need guidance, support, and release time if they are to truly help new teachers” (p. 5). Many new teachers find themselves isolated from the first day they enter the school building. The articles by

Wong and Wong (2005) and Cookson (2005) demonstrated the difficult situations that new teachers face on a daily basis.

The district administration is responsible for nurturing new teachers and should make them feel welcome and accepted in their new surroundings. Articles by Cookson (2005) and Court (1999) provided insight into the feelings of isolation that new teachers experience and how administrators can help to recognize and reduce them. Renard (1999) explained the following:

In this age of abbreviated teacher-training programs, alternative certification, and emergency teacher placements, a growing number of teachers have the potential of arriving in classrooms feeling inadequately prepared. Instead of arming themselves with the additional resources that they will need to be successful and sane during those first years, too many stand isolated, wondering bitterly where their welcoming committee could be. (p. 3)

School leaders should be more in tune to the needs of new teachers and provide them with common planning periods, a quality induction or mentoring program, and placement in a teaching assignment within their area of expertise. Cookson (2005) explained, “One of the ironies of teaching is that it is one of the most social occupations, but is also one of the most isolating professions” (p. 14). Implementation of these approaches will help to minimize the feelings of isolation that are common among new teachers. Educational leaders must provide support and guidance to new teachers and not just briefly welcome them to their new school. Hope (1999) suggested that a positive experience for new teachers, “Involves systematic contact with the intent of assisting new teachers’ professional growth and development and engaging in collegial conversation about the work of teaching” (p. 50).

New Teacher Support Programs

An induction phase offers opportunities for new teachers to become habituated to learning from the beginning, and be afforded opportunities to consult and collaborate with their colleagues to engage collectively in the learning profession (Killeavy, 2006). School districts have been developing sustained induction or mentoring programs which have been successful at retaining new teachers and reducing their feelings of isolation. Watkins (2005) stated, “Effective mentoring alone does not constitute the total induction process. The novice, regardless of teacher preparation, must have opportunities to connect with like-minded colleagues. These relationships will sustain the teacher well beyond the first year” (p. 85).

Just as young, bright people in the business world succeed with proper mentoring, new teachers require mentors-not buddies, but veteran teachers who have been carefully selected and fully trained (Meyers, 2006). School systems need to continue building and expanding these programs to ensure that new teachers remain in the profession. Moir (2003) explained, “Mentors also decrease the isolation of the new teacher. Their emotional support is essential when the obstacles seem too great, and allows the novice to take risks and grow while still keeping the classroom functioning” (p.3).

Communities of Practice

It is important to help new teachers who enter the field of education make a smooth transition into their initial teaching assignments and not feel isolated. The idea that creating a community of practice reduces isolation and contributes to the success of new teachers is an important concept. Wenger (2004) stated, “Communities of practice

are groups of people who share a passion for something they know how to do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better” (p. 1) All members of the learning community have a vested interest in helping new teachers succeed in their first assignments and ensuring that they have a positive impact on student learning. Little, Gearhart, Curry and Kafka (2003) explained “Teachers are usually alone when they examine student work and think about student performance” (p. 184). New teachers should be an integral part of the school community and improvement process. By including new teachers in this process, district administrators can lead their schools in the direction of excellence and make school improvement a reality for their learning communities. According to Schlichte, Yssel, and Merbler (2005),

Another possible antidote to loneliness and alienation experienced by many beginning professionals is socialization and collegiality, especially for novice teachers who find themselves in a new job and new community and with new colleagues who have replaced their trusted college friends. (p. 36)

School leaders must realize that the support and guidance they give new teachers is essential to maintaining a productive learning environment for all members of the learning community. Communities of practice can be effective in reducing isolation and can create a supportive, friendly environment for new teachers as they enter the field of education.

Collaboration

A collaborative learning community is necessary to build teacher confidence. As discussed in the conceptual framework, Vygotsky’s theory of social development highlights the importance of connections between people and the cultural environment in

which they share experiences. Collaboration among teachers is most effective when it is part of the school culture and induction activities. Cookson (2005) related an experience as a new teacher and remembered, “While a few teachers said hello, I certainly did not have a mentor teacher. It really was like being dropped into the deep end of a swimming pool in order to learn how to swim” (p. 14). These situations are typical for many new teachers and make the transition into their initial teaching assignments a stressful and isolating experience.

Improving collaboration between new and experienced teachers is an important aspect of breaking down the barriers of teacher isolation. As established in the conceptual framework, the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) emphasized the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors and attitudes of others. New teachers can benefit from observing and modeling veteran teachers, peer coaches and mentors. Luft, Bang and Roehrig (2007) stated,

The most important asset to a beginning teacher is the experienced teacher next door. This is the person who will provide materials, offer suggestions, and give strategic support that will help the new teacher through the first years in the class. (p. 28)

One of the keys to reducing new teacher isolation is to encourage collaboration among professional colleagues. New teachers must develop collaborative skills in order to reduce isolation and better serve the learning community. This can be accomplished by communicating, listening, sharing ideas and understanding other educator’s points of view. Bondy and Brownell (1997) explained the following:

Although the need for collaboration among those who have knowledge and expertise about student learning is clear; a number of factors can make

collaboration difficult. These factors include teachers' beliefs about themselves and others, professional isolation, and weak collaborative skills. (p. 112)

The articles by Feiman-Nemser (2003) and Bondy and Brownell (1997) addressed the importance of implementing sustained induction programs for new teachers, reducing isolation and improving student achievement. They provide strategies that will help new teachers to become successful and join a collaborative community of teachers.

It is apparent that by helping new teachers to develop collaborative skills, schools can improve retention rates and student achievement, while at the same time reducing teacher isolation.

School Culture

A positive school culture can have a beneficial impact on new teachers. If new teachers feel isolated when they enter a school district and are not offered quality induction activities, it will be difficult for them to flourish as educators. Court (1999) explained, "Breaking isolation is a matter of changing attitudes and changing culture. Such changes do not come quickly but they can be brought about" (p. 2).

Isolation can cause new teachers to become disillusioned, which in turn, may cause them to leave the teaching profession. However, if more new teachers feel comfortable and supported in their new learning communities, they will be productive, remain in the profession and create a positive teaching and learning environment for their students. The problem of new teacher isolation and its impact on teacher attrition rates should be of great interest to educational leaders, parents, and community stakeholders. DuFour (1999) explained,

Few educators argue with the characterization of teaching as the “lonely profession.” Separated by their isolated classrooms and tightly packed daily schedules, they seem resigned to the fact that they rarely work with colleagues on matters related to teaching and learning. (p. 61)

Teacher attrition is causing concern in the field of education throughout the United States.

Each of the articles presented in this section demonstrate the strengths of providing quality support programs for new teachers.

Conceptual Framework

As discussed in chapter 1 a theory related to new teacher isolation that will be used to substantiate the rationale for this study is the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). It was developed by Albert Bandura and emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Bandura (1977) explained, “Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action” (p. 22). As applied to this study the theory demonstrates that new teachers will benefit from observing and modeling the behaviors of veteran teachers, school leaders and mentors while participating in induction or mentoring activities.

Another theory related to new teacher isolation is the social development theory (Vygotsky, 1978). It emphasizes the connections between people and the cultural environment in which they act and interact in shared experiences. Vygotsky believed that the life long process of development and learning was dependent on social interaction and that social learning leads to cognitive development. Vygotsky explained it as, “ the

distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978, p. 86). This theoretical framework is relevant to the problem of new teacher isolation because it explains that human experiences influence how we react to and handle ourselves in difficult and stressful situations. New teachers can use the valuable experiences gained from participating in sustained induction or mentoring activities to positively impact their learning communities.

Potential Themes and Perceptions

The research suggested that several potential themes and perceptions should be explored in this qualitative study. The creation of a community of practice is one theme that is important and contributes to the success of new teachers. Cookson (2005) stated, “Too much of teaching is isolated. The real value of teaching is the collective effort of teachers who work together to create schools where learning is a joy and where continuous improvement is the unspoken motto” (p. 13). New teachers need to feel that they are valued and part of a learning community in which they can grow professionally. Barlow (2005) stated, “One of the immediate benefits of professional learning communities is a reduction in teacher isolation” (p. 64). Districts can prevent or reduce feelings of isolation that commonly occur among new teachers by providing a healthy and positive culture within their learning organizations.

The literature has demonstrated that school districts must support new teacher induction programs in order to sustain teacher quality and improve teacher retention

rates. Wong, Britton and Ganser (2005) suggested that, “A new teacher induction program can acculturate those newcomers to the idea that professional learning must be a lifelong pursuit” (p. 379). New teachers need to participate in quality induction and mentoring activities. Danielson (2002) states, “A successful learning community involves mentoring, which breaks down the barriers of isolation and revitalizes commitments to teaching” (p. 184).

It is evident that school districts must be proactive in providing a supportive learning community in which all new teachers can thrive and grow. Improving the collaboration between new and experienced teachers is an important aspect of breaking down the barriers of teacher isolation. Walsdorf and Lynn (2002) explained, “Isolation and loneliness may be a greater problem for beginning teachers because they have just left an environment where the university supervisor, cooperating teacher, and pre-service teacher colleagues provided frequent feedback” (p. 191). Collaboration among teachers has the most impact when it is part of the school culture, professional development plan and mentoring activities.

It is important for new teachers to communicate with their peers in an open forum and speak freely about the issues and challenges they face as new teachers. School districts should be moving in the direction of replacing the traditional atmosphere of teacher isolation with a more collaborative environment which includes the following: collective inquiry, reflective dialogue, and peer mentoring. These approaches will enhance school achievement and greatly reduce new teacher isolation. As Court (1999) explains, “And so we close our doors, build protective shells of isolation and do not share

ideas and discuss problems very often with colleagues” (p. 2). This type of behavior among teachers needs to be changed.

Literature Related to the Method

The literature related to various research designs and methods has been reviewed and a phenomenological design was chosen for this study. It was selected because it examines human experiences regarding a phenomenon. According to Creswell (1998), “a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (p.51). The idea that qualitative data more accurately describes a phenomenon is important not only from the researcher’s point of view, but from the reader’s perspective as well. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained, “If you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them information in the form in which they usually experience it” (p. 120).

Qualitative research often takes place in the natural setting or environment of the participants. This allows the researcher to develop a sense about the individuals or location and to remain aware of the actual experiences of the participants. As Chawla, (2006) explained, “Qualitative research is generally assumed to focus on the emotional and interpretive side of human experiences; and it is, in fact, designed to do so” (p. 360). Qualitative researchers use various methods of data collection and strive to involve their participants in the study. Creswell (2003) explained, “Qualitative researchers look for involvement of their participants in data collection and seek to build rapport and credibility with the individuals in the study” (p.181). Qualitative research is constantly changing and will be refined as the process of data collection progresses.

Qualitative researchers often use an observational protocol when collecting data through personal observations and field notes. These notes may reflect the researcher's personal ideas and thoughts, such as "speculation", feelings, problems, ideas, hunches, impressions, and prejudices" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 121). A qualitative researcher constantly reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry process and is aware of his or her personal beliefs and how they shape the study. Kilbourn (2006) suggested that, "In the case of qualitative inquiry, for instance, we construct an interpretation (make a claim or come to a conclusion) based on our analysis of observations, interviews, memories, documents, and so on (the data)" (p. 533). In an effort to reduce potential bias in this qualitative study, the process of member-checking will be used so that participants can screen collected data along with the researcher for interpretive errors.

Bias clarification using self-reflection by the researcher was implemented in an effort to ensure that researcher bias did not occur. Creswell (2003) explained that when conducting research "The qualitative researcher systematically reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study" (p. 182).

Literature Related to Differing Methodologies

The qualitative tradition of a phenomenological study met the needs of the researcher of recording the lived experiences of new teachers regarding teacher isolation and is better suited to carry out this study than the other qualitative traditions. Almasi, Garas-York and Shanahan (2006) proposed, "Because qualitative studies permit naturalistic study of the context of a learning event, they perhaps are better suited for

describing the conditions and context under which readers use their prior knowledge or make predictions” (p. 56). Other possible qualitative traditions are as follows: (a) biographical study - the study of an individual and his or her experiences as told to the researcher or found in documents and archival material, (b) ethnography- which is a description and interpretation of a cultural or social group system (c) case study- the exploration of a case or many cases over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information. (d) grounded theory study- the purpose of this study is to discover a theory, an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon, that relates to a particular situation.

The literature related to the use of a mixed-method, sequential exploratory strategy was also explored as a possible methodology. As Creswell (2003) explained, “Unlike the sequential explanatory approach, which is better suited to explaining and interpreting relationships, the primary focus of this model is to explore a phenomenon”(p.215). The initial phase of the study would focus on qualitative data collection and analysis which would be followed by a phase of quantitative data collection and analysis. When describing the benefits of the sequential exploratory strategy, Creswell (2003) suggested, “It is useful to a researcher who wants to explore a phenomenon but also wants to expand on the qualitative findings” (p. 216). Based on this information, the sequential exploratory approach meets the goal of the researcher to expand on the qualitative findings in the study as well as to explore the phenomenon of new teacher isolation and could be the best mixed-methods strategy for this particular study.

The literature related to the use of a preexperimental, quantitative study using a one-group, pretest-posttest design was also considered as a possible methodology. As Creswell (2003) explained, “With preexperimental designs, the researcher studies a single group and provides an intervention during the experiment” (p.167). This strategy could be used to compare the teacher isolation attitude ratings among randomly selected new teachers in an urban public school district in the Northeastern United States prior to participating in a sustained induction or mentoring program to the attitude ratings of the same group of new teachers after participating in a sustained induction or mentoring program.

A phenomenological study design was used in the research. According to Nelson and Quintana (2005), “Unlike traditional quantitative approaches to understanding human behavior, which typically use numbers to represent behaviors or survey responses, qualitative methods allow for examining experiences and meaning in participants’ own accounts or meaningful patterns in participants’ behaviors” (p. 344). This design was chosen to carry out in-depth research on a single group of new teachers in one school district in the Northeastern United States.

Relationship of Study to Previous Research

The previous research on this topic indicated that many new teachers entering the field of education were not participating in sustained induction or mentoring activities and were leaving the profession prematurely. Wong and Wong (2005) explained, “New teacher induction programs build a community of teachers, bringing together beginning teachers, experienced teachers, and school leaders in a collaborative setting where they

can observe each other teach and engage in a culture of cooperation and continuous learning” (p. 5).

One study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics found that 70% of new teachers who met with a mentor once a week said that their instructional skills improved “a lot” because of contact (Samuels, 2000). Wong (2002) noted that the Lafourche Public Schools induction program in Louisiana found that new teachers will use a variety of effective teaching techniques that they learn in the district’s induction program, which is different from the old lecture-and endless-worksheets approach. Wong (2002) also pointed out that, “Ninety-nine percent of new teachers who have participated in the district’s induction program have successfully completed the performance based Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program, required for teacher certification in the state” (p. 54).

Wong and Wong (2003) discussed that the Newport-Mesa Schools induction program reports that the retention rate of new teachers was 85% in 1997. However, after they implemented a two-year induction program based on California’s Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment model, they found that their retention rate increased and is now at 97%. Wong and Wong (2003) also commented on the success of the Islip Public Schools new teacher induction program and explained that, “In the 1998-1999 school year, before a formal induction program was installed, Islip retained 29 of the 46 new teachers hired. In the subsequent three school years from 1999 to 2002 when the formal, three year new teacher induction program was in place, they retained 65 teachers out of 68 hired” (p. 4 of 6). Eisenman and Thornton (1999) suggested the following:

New teachers need support. They need ongoing professional development. They need a sense of belonging, of common cause, and the knowledge that over time they will make a difference not only in the lives of individual children they teach, but in their profession. (p. 79)

There is a growing amount of literature that studies new teacher isolation and how it influences teacher attrition rates. As it relates to previous research, this study explored the impact that participation in a sustained induction or mentoring program has on new teachers' perceptions and experiences with isolation and their decision to remain in or leave the teaching profession.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

A phenomenological design was selected for this study because it examines human experiences regarding a phenomenon. The qualitative approach of a phenomenological study addressed the research question: What is the relationship between a new teacher's experience with isolation and teacher attrition? According to Hayhow and Stewart (2006),

Qualitative research is largely concerned with studying things in a natural setting rather than in manipulating a particular element and then looking at changes that occur as a result. Qualitative researchers will study phenomena as they appear, interpreting or making sense of what is happening in terms of the meanings people apply to them. (p. 476)

Through the use of interviews using open-ended questions the researcher explored the impact that isolation has on new teacher attrition and retention rates. A problem in many schools was that new teachers experienced isolation in their initial teaching assignments. Many new teachers were not offered the support and guidance they needed to succeed as educators through sustained induction and mentoring programs. This was a problem because many promising new teachers are not able to reach their full potential as educators and may leave the teaching profession prematurely. Research completed during the literature review has shown that there were many possible factors contributing to this problem, among which are school culture issues, lack of administrative support and inadequate induction or mentoring programs. This study contributed to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by seeking to determine which support

systems for new teachers helped to prevent new teacher isolation and improve retention rates.

The researcher is a supervisor of instruction who has an interest in reducing the occurrence of new teacher isolation in the field of education. Learning about the issue of new teacher isolation has helped to bring about positive social change in learning communities by improving teacher morale and instructional practice, which in turn could help to reduce teacher attrition rates.

Research Design

The constructivist paradigm in the qualitative tradition was used for this study. As Hatch (2002) explained, “While acknowledging that elements are often shared across social groups, constructivist science argues that multiple realities exist that are inherently unique because they are constructed by individuals who experience the world from their own vantage points” (p. 15). The phenomenological research in this study focused on the experiences of new teachers regarding isolation. The constructivist paradigm examines lived experiences of individuals. Levering (2006) stated, “Phenomenology distinguishes itself from other methodological approaches by concentrating on the phenomena” (p. 454). A phenomenological design was selected for this study because it examines human experiences regarding a phenomenon. Based on this definition, the qualitative tradition of a phenomenological study met the needs of the researcher of recording the experiences of new teachers concerning teacher isolation and was better suited to carry out this study than the other qualitative, quantitative or mixed-method traditions. The qualitative

research approach, by nature, encourages a high level of interaction between theory, research design, data collection, and analysis (Berg, 2004).

The researcher wanted to understand the phenomenon of new teacher isolation and its impact on teacher attrition from the perspective of new teachers. Wertz (2005) explained, “The most outstanding quality of data sought by the phenomenological researcher is concreteness, that the descriptions reflect the details of lived situations rather than hypotheses or opinions about, explanations of, interpretations of, inferences, or generalizations regarding the phenomenon” (p. 171). The study was conducted in natural settings. Data collection was conducted using face-to-face, in-depth interviews that were audio taped and transcribed.

To increase the validity of the study the researcher used several strategies as a means to check the accuracy of the findings. Creswell (2003) noted that validity is “seen as a strength” of qualitative research (p.195). Rich, thick description was used during the study. This helped to connect the readers to the setting and gave them a sense of shared experiences. Self-reflection was used to prevent the researcher from bringing bias to the study. Creswell (2003) clarified that it is important to remember when conducting research that “the personal self becomes inseparable from the researcher self” (p. 182). The researcher also utilized member checking as a method of quality control in the study. This was used in order to verify the accuracy of the interview findings by taking a final report of interviews back to participants to determine whether they felt they were accurate. This was important because the participants may have felt obligated to give positive feedback to the researcher during the interviews. Triangulation of the data from

interviews and the review of interview transcripts were used to examine evidence from these sources and build coherent justification for themes developed in the study. The researcher would have also presented discrepant cases if found. The discussion of negative or contrary information can add to the authenticity and credibility of the research.

Gaining Access to Participants

The researcher invited all new teachers in the district with three or less years of teaching experience, to participate in the study. The researcher explained the purpose and scope of the study during an initial meeting with new teachers who responded to the invitation. This took place after the researcher received permission from the IRB. The IRB approval number for this study was 07-29-08-0326366. The new teachers who attended the meeting were asked if they would like to participate in a research study involving interviews in which they would be asked about their perceptions and experiences regarding new teacher isolation. The researcher explained that the study would take place during the late summer and early fall of 2008 and that participation or non-participation in the study would in no way impact their employment for the upcoming school year. The researcher contacted the local board of education through the superintendent of schools to request permission to study the participants and use various buildings in the school district. The researcher obtained a letter of cooperation from the school district. The researcher obtained permission to conduct the study from the IRB and protected the rights and confidentiality of all participants during the study.

Role of the Researcher

According to Merriam (2002), “A second characteristic of all forms of qualitative research is that *the researcher is the primary instrument* for data collection and data analysis” (p. 5). The researcher is a supervisor of instruction who has been the staff development coordinator in the district for six years, works with new teachers in the professional development program and has an interest in reducing the occurrence of new teacher isolation in the field of education. The researcher interacted with the participants during the study to gather, analyze, and report the data findings and conclusions of this study. According to Janesick (2004),

One of the amazing strengths of the qualitative researcher, as I have written previously, is the ability to use all the senses to undertake the research act. Sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste often must be used to collect data. (p. 107)

The researcher actively participated in the collection of data through audio taped interviews using open ended questions, and by conducting discussions during the member checking process. The researcher interviewed each participant at least once for 60-90 minutes during the study, for a minimum of eight interviews. The interview data were collected weekly during the study.

Protection of Participant’s Rights

Every effort was made to ensure that the individual rights of the participants were protected before, during and after the study was conducted. Roulston (2006) suggested, “Qualitative research design requires systematic, well-supported, and ethical choices at every step-in design, analysis, and interpretation” (p. 157). Approval from the IRB and signed consent from participants assured that there was minimal risk involved and that

participants would not be subjected to embarrassment, coercion, stress, or any other type of harm (Roberts, 2004). The study was reviewed by the IRB, and an informed consent form was developed for the participants to sign before they engaged in the study.

Approval for this study was granted from Walden University. The Walden University IRB approval number was 07-29-08-0326366. The consent form acknowledged that the participants' rights would be protected during the data collection process. The consent form included the following parts: (a) the purpose and scope of the study, (b) a timeline of the study, (c) procedures of the study, (d) the right to participate voluntarily in the study and withdraw at any time without being coerced into participation, (e) the right to question the results of the study and receive a copy of the results, (f) the right to have their privacy respected, (g) the right to have the benefits of the study explained, and (h) the signatures of the participant and the researcher agreeing to these elements. The informed consent form is attached (see Appendix A).

The participants were asked to review the research questions prior to data collection in order to reduce the possibility of coercion and abuse of power during the study. Because of the possibility of harmful information being disclosed during the study, appropriate measures were taken to protect the privacy of the participants. According to Creswell (2003), "As researchers anticipate data collection, they need to respect the participants and sites for research. Many ethical issues arise during this stage of the research" (p. 64). The inquirer assigned a pseudonym and number to each participant in the study instead of using their real names, in order to protect the identity of the individual. After the study is completed the information and data about the participants

will be kept for approximately five years and will then be destroyed so it does not fall into the hands of other researchers. An agreement to designate ownership of the research data was made between the researcher and participants at the beginning of the study. This was done to guard against sharing or disclosing the data with people who are not involved in the study. The researcher used member checking to ensure the accuracy of the data with the participants.

Language or words that were biased against individuals because of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, disability or age were not used. The researcher did not engage in the practice of suppressing, falsifying, or inventing findings to meet the goals of the research and did not misuse the results to the advantage of any group. Information pertaining to the research and study design was released to the audience of participants in order to verify the credibility of the study.

Criteria for Selecting Participants

There were 14 new teachers working in the school district. The participants in the study included eight of these new teachers. According to Shank and Villella (2004), “Almost by nature, qualitative researchers enter into some form of partnership with the participants in their studies. Whether researchers observe, ask questions, or work side-by-side to institute changes, they are on the spot and involved” (p. 51). In a phenomenological study, the fewer the participants, the more in-depth the inquiry will be about each individual. Maxwell (2005) explained, “Qualitative researchers typically study a relatively small number of individuals or situations, and preserve the individuality of each of these in their analyses” (p. 22). The sample of participants used for this study

was taken from a group of new teachers working in an urban elementary school district. According to Creswell (2003), “The idea behind qualitative research is to *purposefully* select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (p. 185). The new teachers participating in the study had all been assigned a mentor during their first year of teaching in the district.

Each participant was a new teacher in a public elementary school with three or less years of teaching experience. The new teachers that participated in the study were assigned to teach in grades pre-k-8, special education or special subject areas. After receiving IRB approval, the researcher invited all new teachers in the district with three or less years of experience to attend a meeting in the summer of 2008 to explain the purpose and scope of the study.

The new teachers were asked to indicate if they would be willing to participate in the study by reading and signing a consent form. The form explained that the participants’ rights and privacy would be protected during the study and data collection process. This consent form also helped to reassure the new teachers that their participation in the study was completely confidential and would not in any way threaten their chances of being rehired. The consent forms were collected and placed into a box. The forms were then randomly chosen from the box and the first eight names of new teachers were selected for the study group. All new teachers who participated in the study were assigned a pseudonym and a randomly selected number, so that they remained anonymous during the study.

Data Collection

The data collection method used for this study was audio taped, face-to-face, in-depth interviews. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005),

If what you need to find out cannot be answered simply or briefly, if you anticipate that you may need to ask people to explain their answers or give examples or describe their experiences, then you rely on in-depth interviews. (p. 3)

Each of the interviews was scheduled for 60-90 minutes and when possible were conducted in the school building where the teacher was assigned to work.

Prior to the beginning of each interview, the researcher reviewed the teacher consent form (see Appendix A) and the purpose and scope of the study with the participant. The researcher then answered any questions concerning the study and the interview process. An audio tape recorder was used to record the interviews.

The interviews were designed to start with several general questions about the participant's background and pre-service teacher training to ease the participant into the interview process. The researcher used open-ended interview questions and took notes during the interview about topics, themes, phrases or key words that needed clarification.

The data collection phase of the study was conducted for six weeks at a mutually convenient time and location (in district school buildings) before and after school hours during the late summer and early fall of 2008. Appendix B shows a listing of interview questions.

Recording Data

The data collected during the interviews were recorded using an audio recorder. Careful consideration was taken to ensure that the audio recordings were coded to

maintain the confidentiality of each participant. At the conclusion of each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed into printed words for future reference. All audio recordings, interview transcriptions, and other information that was collected in relation to this study will be destroyed within five years of the completion of the study.

Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis was used to analyze the data. The data analysis began after the first interview was conducted. The audio recordings were played back and transcribed to identify possible themes, categories and patterns that could be used to clearly organize the data. This procedure was repeated after each meeting with a participant. As the researcher noticed common patterns and themes developing, adjustments were made as needed for upcoming interviews with the other participants. As Creswell (2003) explained, “The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data” (p. 190). The researcher analyzed and made note of any patterns or repeated themes that developed during the study.

The researcher was aware of the possibility of encountering discrepant cases during the study and understood that discussing contrary information adds to the credibility of the study. The data were carefully reviewed during the study to reduce the risk of inadvertently overlooking a discrepant case. However, if a discrepant case was found, the researcher would have presented the information to the reader or audience even if it did not agree with the expected themes or patterns of the study. As described by Creswell (2003), “Because real life is composed of different perspectives that do not

always coalesce, discussing contrary information adds to the credibility of an account for a reader” (p. 196).

A coding procedure for reducing information into categories and themes was utilized during the data analysis. The codes were developed by going through the interview transcripts, developing definitions related to the topic and then placing a code (or label) next to each piece of data that correlated to the theme or concept that was focused on. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), “Coding involves systematically labeling concepts, themes, events, and topical markers so that you can readily retrieve and examine all of the data units that refer to the same subject across all your interviews” (p. 207). The researcher concentrated on looking for examples of themes and concepts that were present in the interview transcripts based not only on a word or phrase but from broader statements. The research topic of new teacher isolation lends itself to developing codes about how the interviewee experienced perceived and defined isolation. Codes that helped to answer the research question were developed. An in-text coding system was used. Rubin and Rubin (2005) explained, “Coding allows you to sort statements by content of the concept, theme, or event rather than by the people who told you the information” (p.219).

Because the expression in the text of the transcript might not be the same as the codes to be used, codes with brackets around them were inserted into the text of the transcript and the codes were darkened using bold face type. This method was an effective and easy way to quickly locate concepts, themes or excerpts from the interview transcript. The data collected concerning specific building, or other environments was

separated and analyzed according to its location. Patterns were noted concerning new teacher responses by location, grade level and subject areas in which they were teaching. The reduction of data using categorization and coding made the amount of data collected more manageable and the interpretation of the experiences and perceptions of the participants easier to understand.

This study used triangulation to check the accuracy of the findings and address validity concerns. According to Creswell and Miller (2000) as cited in Creswell (2003), “Validity, on the other hand, is seen as a strength of qualitative research, but it is used to suggest determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account” (p. 196).

The data in this study concerning new teacher isolation were collected through in-depth interviews conducted with eight different new teachers. The interviews were audio taped and each tape was transcribed by the researcher. During each interview and visit to school sites, the researcher took notes as needed to clarify information gathered during the interviews. By following these procedures, rich, detailed data were collected from each participant to analyze.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

Interview questions were used to generate data. In-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted to gather data during the study. Each interview took place in the school where the participant was a teacher. Each interview was conducted using the same set of open ended interview questions as shown in Appendix B. No interview took longer than 90 minutes. The researcher used an audio recorder to collect data during the interviews. The recordings were transcribed verbatim immediately following the interviews or as soon as possible thereafter.

Tracking Data

Data were collected from audio taped interviews with new teachers. An interview schedule was kept weekly to organize the interviews and to keep the researcher on track during the study. The interview schedule is shown as Table 1. The researcher also used member checking to ensure the accuracy of the data that were collected from participants. A member checking schedule was utilized after the completion of the interviews. The member checking schedule is shown as Table 2.

A summary of participant data was presented in a participant data chart. The information about each participant was gathered from a participant data sheet shown as Appendix C and was compiled into a single chart shown as Table 3. Participants in this study were referred to by pseudonyms such as *Karen* (female participant) and or *John* (male participant) with a randomly assigned number after their pseudonym to protect the confidentiality of the new teachers. For example, the code for Karen 1 would be K1.

According to information collected for the participant data chart, only one of the participants had earned a master's degree at the time of the study. All other participants had a bachelor's degree. The majority of participants in the study were second year teachers. Only one was a third year teacher and two were first year teachers. Two participants were special education teachers, four were special subject teachers and two were primary elementary teachers. Some of the participants indicated that they worked at both the elementary school level and the middle school level as part of their job assignments in the school district.

The oldest study participant was Henry, a 49 year old special subject teacher with standard certification, who entered the teaching field after working in the business world for many years. Robert a 38 year old special subject teacher was the only participant with a master's degree and a standard teaching certification. Johanna a 36 year old special subject teacher working under a provisional license, was the oldest female participant. She was working towards her master's degree at the time of the study. Tina a 26 year old, second year teacher with a standard elementary teaching certificate felt that mentoring played an important role in her success as a new teacher. Andrea and Larry were both 25 years old at the time of the study. They both had standard certifications, Andrea in elementary education and Larry in special education. Kathy a 24 year old special education teacher with standard certification was recently married at the time of the study. She enjoyed teaching and was interested in pursuing a master's degree in the future. Mark was the youngest participant at 23 years of age. He was the only male first

year teacher working under a provisional certificate. Mark worked in an elementary school two days a week and a middle school three days a week.

Table 1

Interview Schedule

<u>Week</u>	<u>Johanna</u>	<u>Andrea</u>	<u>Robert</u>	<u>Henry</u>	<u>Tina</u>	<u>Larry</u>	<u>Mark</u>	<u>Kathy</u>
August 4-8	Th AM						W AM	
August 11-15				Th/F PM				
August 18-22								T/W PM
August 25-29			T AM					
September 2-5		W PM						
<u>September 8-12</u>					W PM		F AM	

Table 2

Member-Checking Schedule

<u>Week</u>	<u>Johanna</u>	<u>Andrea</u>	<u>Robert</u>	<u>Henry</u>	<u>Tina</u>	<u>Larry</u>	<u>Mark</u>	<u>Kathy</u>
Sept. 15-19	T AM		F AM		W PM			M PM
<u>Sept. 22-26</u>		M PM		W AM		Th PM	T AM	

Table 3

Participant Data Chart

Johanna J1	Andrea A2	Robert R3
First year teacher	Second year teacher	Second year teacher
BA	BA	MA
Elementary/Middle School	Elementary School	Elementary/Middle School
Special subject teacher	Elementary teacher	Special subject teacher
Provisional certification	Standard certification	Standard certification
36 years old	25 years old	38 years old
Henry H4	Tina T5	Larry L6
Second year teacher	Second year teacher	Third year teacher
BA	BA	BA
Elementary/Middle School	Elementary School	Elementary/Middle School
Special subject teacher	Elementary teacher	Special Education Teacher
Standard Certification	Standard certification	Standard certification
49 years old	26 years old	25 years old
Mark M7	Kathy K8	
First year teacher	Second year teacher	
BA	BA	
Elementary/Middle School	Elementary School	
Special subject teacher	Special Education Teacher	
Provisional certification	Standard certification	
23 years old	24 years old	

Findings

This multisite phenomenological study used the qualitative method of face-to-face, in-depth interviews conducted in the natural settings of each new teacher's school building to collect data. All participants in this study were full time employees of a public school system, assigned to teach in grades pre-k-8 at the time of the study. Four of the participants were male and four were female. As stated in chapter 3, participants in this study were identified as new teachers (with three or less years of teaching experience) by the district superintendent of schools.

Out of a possible 14 participants in the district who met the definition of a new teacher, nine initially volunteered and were chosen to participate in the study. One participant withdrew before an interview could take place due to difficulty in scheduling the interview; the individual was in the process of moving to another state. The study was conducted with a total of eight participants. Included in this phenomenological study were new teachers from four elementary schools in an urban school district. The grade alignment of the elementary schools differed by age and grade. As an example, one elementary school had students in grades two and three only, while another had students in grades four through eight. The smallest school had only 120 students. The largest school was reported to have 516 students.

In-depth, face-to-face interviews were used to collect rich, detailed data from the perspective of urban elementary school teachers to address the problem of new teacher isolation and the research question of the study. The research question was: What is the relationship between a new teacher's experience with isolation and teacher attrition?

A set of 11 interview questions (see Appendix B) was used to guide the face-to-face in-depth interview. The 11 interview questions were designed to provide data that would answer the research question.

The same questions in the same order were asked of each new teacher participating in the study. This aspect of the interview process provided a measure of consistency and commonality across all interviews. These new elementary teachers reported their own experiences and perceptions of isolation on a day to day basis.

Q1-Please tell me about how you entered the field of education, and about your preservice teaching experience.

The responses to question 1 were similar across all participants. Two themes emerged from responses to this question. The first theme was a positive preservice experience. The second theme was a strong desire to become a teacher from a young age. Each theme was addressed using comments taken from the participant interviews.

The first theme, a positive preservice experience, was addressed in a similar manner by the participants. All participants indicated in some manner that they participated in good student teaching and practicum programs. Andrea, a second year elementary teacher explained, "I remember having a lot of experiences and a lot of good professors to help me along the way." Most participants spoke in generalities and their responses covered such topics as a supportive student teaching or practicum experience and dedicated professors. Many respondents seemed to remember a particular situation that made a strong impression on them. Tina, a second year elementary teacher noted, "I did my practicum with a kindergarten, which was really good, but then I did my student

teaching with third grade which I absolutely loved and that was, that was it that was what I wanted to do.”

The second theme, a strong desire to be a teacher from a young age, also emerged from responses to this question. Kathy, a second year special education teacher said, “But I always knew, ever since I was little, I had a blackboard at home, I always wanted to be a teacher.” Tina explained, “Well I started working at a day care center when I was right out of high school and I worked there for about eight years with kids from infants all the way up until 12 years old and then from there that’s what made me want to go to school to be a teacher.” Some respondents described unique and special experiences that reinforced their desire to become a teacher. Larry offered this perspective,

My student teaching was very good, my teacher, I worked with ___ she let me take over from the first day, which was great, I dove right in the whole time, so I knew early on that this what I wanted to do. So it wasn’t like you wait till the last week and you’re like I’m not good at this, I should find something else, but it was fantastic and I was hooked ever since then.

This participant was enthusiastic and positive throughout the entire interview process.

To summarize, the two themes that seemed to emerge from the responses to this question were (a) a positive preteaching experience, and (b) a strong desire to become a teacher from a young age. All participants addressed both themes in their responses to the question.

Q2-Please tell me what the term isolation means to you.

One clear theme emerged from the answers to the second question. This was the theme of feeling alone or isolated. Participants cited this as an important aspect of a new

teacher's reality upon entering the teaching profession. Participants indicated that their perception of feeling alone and isolated had to do with the lack of a support system and being alone. Robert said, "It means feeling separated, isolated from the rest of the staff and students." Typically, participants spoke in generalities and their answers addressed their feelings and experiences regarding isolation. Tina explained it as "being by yourself, basically," or as Andrea suggested, "To be secluded, to be by yourself." Most respondents seemed to respond quite naturally and easily without having to think at length about their response. Kathy said, that for her, isolation was "mostly just having no one to turn to, just being to yourself, very withdrawn because there is no one to turn to, feeling like very odd, not just a right mix at all like you can't fit in."

In response to this question, most respondents spoke of isolation and its meaning based on their perceptions and experiences as new teachers. Mark stated:

Isolation...makes you feel more alone, just being alone from like the outside world, that's the best way obviously I could put it, that's the word what it actually means to me, that's why it just means being alone, set apart from the outside environment or factors from the environment, that's what it means to me.

One respondent Johanna talked about the isolation she felt as a new, first year teacher and explained that isolation means "to feel separated from others, some people do not notice that you are there and that you are someone new and that, what is obvious is that you are supposed to introduce that person to the new group of people for her or for him, so isolation is very clear for me."

The reoccurring theme of feeling alone, a need to have contact with peers as well as a strong desire to feel accepted into the school community was also voiced by most

participants. This was clearly illustrated by Henry who stated that, “Isolation means to me, feeling alone, to use an analogy, out on an island, maybe, not having much contact, if any with my peers, in this situation, and really feeling that internally.”

To summarize, the main theme that emerged from the responses to this question was feeling alone. All participants addressed the main theme in their responses.

Q3-Can you talk to me about your first month as a new teacher and what you experienced? and Q4-How do you perceive your treatment as a new teacher?

Two clear themes emerged from the responses to these questions. The first theme centered on the difficulty of adjusting to being a new teacher. This theme seemed to be viewed as a rite of passage for a new teacher. The second theme that developed centered on the importance of having a mentor. Each theme was addressed individually using excerpts taken from the participant interviews.

The first theme, difficulty adjusting to being a new teacher, was addressed in several ways and differed slightly from participant to participant. A unique perception was offered by Andrea who said:

My first month as a new teacher, it was very interesting considering the class that I had was very rough, it was difficult, it was confusing. I remember being in my classroom and crying the first day because I didn't know where to start. plus I started as maternity leave so that was, I was just kind of thrown into a situation and it took me a couple of months to get my bearings and understand the curriculum so it was very hectic, it was rough, it was rough.

Mark described his perceptions as a new teacher. In his complete response, he provided several examples that set him apart from other respondents. One example was his description of his experiences and his treatment as a new teacher. Mark explained,

I'll be honest with you, it was split right down the middle, some teachers were really helpful, they saw that I was a new teacher and they would really do whatever they can to help me out. On the other hand there were some teachers that really wouldn't care they would be like a little standoffish...I almost felt like some teachers...wanted me to...do everything. I wouldn't say it that way, but they wanted me to struggle a little bit, well for some of them...some teachers they really didn't care, they wanted me to go through some struggle, and stress.

Kathy discussed her experiences as a new teacher and stated,

As far as welcoming...I probably could have been better with the other teachers but they all mostly had their guard up too. Being new and also right out of college I remember my first month was really, really tough not that I, maybe I did almost regret coming into the district because I was like, oh my god, I didn't realize I would feel so isolated.

The second theme, the importance of having a mentor, also emerged from responses to these questions. Some respondents described the benefit of interacting with their mentor and how it clearly helped to reduce their feelings of isolation. Tina stated,

The first month was very, very crazy, but I had a mentor that stuck with me the entire time. She was there from day one all the way to the end, she was awesome, so anything I need she was there. Having a mentor was a very big help. Yeah also, the other teachers in that grade level were great, they helped me out, I did everything with them, they showed me how to do everything step by step.

The benefit of having a mentor assigned to a new teacher was clearly illustrated by Larry who stated,

I remember when I came in the first day I was extremely nervous even though my mentor, I met with her, over the summer and she gave me some books and some materials to look over. I was extremely nervous but one of my friends that I made the first day helped me out my first day, and got me under way pretty much so that definitely helped. And I think by the second week I was in the groove, but that first week it was, I was feeling the kids out, they were feeling me out, it was pretty nerve wracking, but

that only lasted like the first couple of days and then it was either swim or get out.

One participant, Kathy, spoke about her experiences as a new teacher with her mentor,

It involved surprisingly having no classroom; I didn't realize there was not enough classrooms so I was sharing a classroom with ___ who actually ended up being my mentor. First I didn't even know how that was going to work either because personality wise she was a little withdrawn herself I think she did not know how my personality would mix with her. So that was a little I was nervous with that, then on top of it I was a little disappointed again because I didn't have a base, like a home base.

To summarize, the two themes that appeared to emerge from the responses to these questions were (a) difficulty adjusting to being a new teacher and (b) the importance of having a mentor. All participants addressed both themes in their responses. Q5-Please talk to me about whether or not you feel isolated in your school and from other teachers.

Three common themes evolved in response to this question about isolation. The first was the perception of feeling isolated from other teachers. The second was feeling isolated by the school building in which the new teachers worked. The third theme was not feeling isolated from other teachers. Some respondents answered the question quickly with out giving it a lot of thought while other participants thought very carefully about their answers. In their responses, the participants spoke about their personal experiences and perceptions regarding new teacher isolation. In each response the participant was concerned with providing the feedback needed to fully answer the question and gave insight into their own genuine experience as a new teacher. It also appeared that the

respect, caring and acceptance of new teachers was equally important to each participant.

Kathy, responded:

This building now that I'm in, I'm the only special ed teacher here that in and of itself is a little isolating and there is a little bit of, I guess the greatest attitude towards the districts special ed program as it is. So that was leashed out at least a few times right in the beginning they would say you know not, not to be offensive but we know that you are part of the child study team, when in reality I'm not, but and then there was a lot of resistance because the class was new this one, so it was a completely new atmosphere to this building and to the district.

Her perception of isolation was highlighted by her feelings that other staff members did not welcome her as a new teacher into the building. She also felt a sense of mistrust from the other teachers in the building which made her feel uncomfortable and unwelcome.

This response highlighted the frustration felt by many new respondents concerning their treatment as a new teacher. Andrea gave an interesting response to the question and said,

I don't feel isolated the only thing that I do feel is kind of a barrier is more of veteran teachers versus new teachers cause I think we do things differently so in that aspect I think I do think differently than other teachers but at the same time I think we're still on the same page so I really don't feel as secluded personally whether than as a group.

Larry explained, "Yeah there are some teachers that I can honestly say I haven't spoken five words to. I don't know if I didn't make the effort early on or if they didn't make the effort, but I can honestly say I know nothing about them." Henry responded,

One thing I work in different schools so that's a little unique, I travel, and again, now one school, school number ___ I'm in every day this year I'm teaching the same amount of classes there, but I don't feel as isolated there

because the staff now knows me better, so it's a combination of things, one I'm seeing them for a second year, but now I'm there every day I teach there first period they know my teaching style now and there's more, I'll call it warmth, but in a professional way, yeah cooperation.

In response to the question Robert said, "In the first year definitely I felt isolated, definitely, but in the second year when everybody, when everybody's talking to you when everybody they start to help you to talk to you about different things more than the first year." After thinking carefully about the question for several minutes Mark suggested, "I wouldn't say. I don't feel isolated, from teachers from my colleagues I don't feel isolated, there might be a few but overall, a few teachers, but overall pretty much I feel accepted from my colleagues. I feel if there was any like big issue, or if there's a problem that they would help me out."

When asked if she felt isolated from other teachers, Johanna answered, "Yes, yes of course yes, that happens because our busy lives sometimes make us, all of us so busy that people don't realize or they didn't hear that a new teacher started or maybe they didn't read the name or maybe they didn't go to the meeting where my position was announced it happens. Yes, usually the teachers they assume that the new teacher knows everything, but it's not like that." Johanna added that, "I think that the teachers that are in the district for many years should give a much better support to new teachers, like explain how the things work at school or interchange especially for special subjects it will be good if teachers from elementary, elementary teacher or from other subjects could interchange with a new teacher about the things that they are teaching."

To summarize, the three expected themes from this question were (a) feeling isolated from other teachers (b) feeling isolated by the school building in which you work

and (c) not feeling isolated from other teachers. It is important to note that these interviews were conducted shortly after the completion of the school year. Therefore, most of the new teachers who participated in the study had recently experienced the perceptions they spoke about.

Q6-What would you say are the three or four most important things a new teacher should expect when entering the field of education?

Two common themes evolved from participant responses to this question. The first was to expect to be flexible. The second was to expect to make classroom organization a priority.

Participants seemed to have definite opinions about this question. The tape recordings of their responses provided evidence of this. The participants easily answered the question and felt confident about their answers. The tone of their voices was often strong and deliberate while responding to the question. Several participants also talked about what other teachers should expect of new teachers and that they should be more sensitive toward them. The responses of the participants varied widely on this question. A sampling of the types of answers that were found in participant responses is shown in the list below. The participant that gave the response is also indicated.

1. Expect chaos. (Tina)
2. Expect to be flexible. (Kathy)
3. Expect to be organized. (Andrea)
4. Expect to be lost. (Larry)
5. Expect to put classroom organization at the top of your list. (Henry)

6. Expect the unexpected. (Mark)
7. Expect to work on the student/teacher relationship. (Robert)
8. Expect to be presented all the rules and routines of each school (Johanna)

Even though the responses varied widely, two themes emerged from the responses. The first was that new teachers should expect “to put discipline and classroom organization at the top of your list.” (Henry) Andrea stated, “How to deal with organizational skills, I think that’s a big plus how to get yourself organized cause its all very overwhelming” in her response. She also added, “So I think a new teacher would expect you know glitches here and there, but to work it out as the year goes on.”

Henry added to this idea and provided another perspective. He said, “But if you don’t get that first thing in, the discipline and the classroom organization especially in phys ed where you’re in a bigger room there’s not desks there are some lines if you don’t get that taken care of you’re not going to get a chance to impart my wisdom.”

The second idea that emerged as common across the responses of several participants was related to being flexible as a teacher. Mark talked about the importance of adjusting and being flexible. He added, “Always expect the unexpected, anything can happen, you know they are students, they are kids, but they are people and ... new teachers are going to be dealing with a lot a lot of people and anything can happen, so you always have to expect the unexpected.”

Kathy explained, “You have to be I guess flexible, yeah you really do, and you can’t take a lot of offense because you’re walking in and you know they have their own routine.” Kathy added, “But you also have to stick to your grounds if you are coming in

and you have all of this experience now education wise and you know you really need to say well this is what I believe in and this is it, because if you lose track of that to try to fit in then you lose the new way of teaching.”

In each of these responses, the participant was concerned with providing the feedback needed for new teachers to improve and be more aware of what is expected of them. However, it also appeared that respect and understanding for the new teacher were also important.

Q7-What is different about the treatment of new teachers as compared to veteran teachers in your school?

Several themes surfaced during the interviews with this question. One was that more respect and recognition was given to veteran teachers. The second theme was that veteran teachers were given more slack and were not held to the same high standards as new teachers. Another theme that came to light was that new teachers were ignored and isolated in their schools. Kathy suggested,

The difference is with sometimes, with the veterans is I think people always know to well, ok well she's been here X amount of years this is how she's going to do it this is her personality this is how she'll approach it so there's almost like a safe net there. Whereas with a new teacher you don't really know how they are going to approach it, but it also could be the flipside where you know you could have a complaint or parents might have a complaint with a veteran teacher and you know they are not going to change their ways because they will say well I've been here for 25 years and this is how it's going to be done and there is no changing it.

The responses concerning the perception of treatment of new teachers compared to veteran teachers were varied among the participants. Mark described his perceptions as simply:

I would say the veteran teachers that the administrators and other colleagues that they know what their routine is and they already know the teachers routine, they know what to expect and its almost like its almost set like you know veteran teachers they can teach this way or do these things and its no really big deal compared to new teachers, new teachers have to teach and they're being watched and you know you feel like so many eyes on you and sometimes you know it might be a little uncomfortable but you have to get through it, you have to adjust that's the whole key here, be flexible and you have to adjust.

Larry's perception of the difference in treatment between new and veteran teachers was very realistic and honest. He spoke about his perception and explained, "I think they definitely get more respect and I'm sure they deserve some of that for being in this business for so long yeah plus they know everyone already". When asked if he felt this was deserved Larry responded, "Yeah I thought it was deserved, I mean if someone if someone's been there for 20 years they definitely deserve more than a college kid just walking in who thinks he's hot stuff". Larry added, "Yeah, I kind of looked up to the people that have been here for so long they have a lot to teach you, a lot of experience". Two unique responses did surface. The first came from Tina a 26 year old new teacher:

Well I guess new teachers, nobody really knows them, so they're more away from everyone else. The veteran teachers they all hang out more they're all grouped together and the newer teachers just kind of walk by, hi and bye, it takes a little while. I think the veteran teachers need to find out about the new teachers first before they wanna talk to them. Other teachers just coming in they weren't subbing there they were never in the building before and they're just a lot quieter and they keep to themselves and nobody really knows who they are so they're just they're isolated, they are.

Henry, a 49 year old special subject teacher, provided the second unique response:

Well, all new teachers are non-tenured, so you know you're low on the pecking order. I myself even if I totally disagree with things I kind of kept that to myself and I'm a person who I have in my mind I, I hope I will act

the same way after I get my tenure if I do and try to be as helpful as I've been, but some veteran teachers you can see are much more in a comfort zone and there's good and bad to that and there's some people that are just so comfortable and they've done it so many years it's a whole different mind set and I have found that teachers are notorious complainers.

Henry added, "The new teacher really is watching their step. The older teachers you know don't as much some totally still respect the job; some have lost total respect for the job in my opinion."

While listening to participants in the face-to face interviews, it was interesting to observe their facial expressions as they answered the question about the treatment of veteran as compared to new teachers. Some were visibly tense or irritated as they talked about their experiences with or perceptions of how veteran teachers and new teachers were treated in their schools.

Q8-Can you describe the type of interactions you have with other teachers and administrators during a typical day in your school.

One theme identified throughout the responses to this question was the casual conversations centering on the personal lives of teachers and administrators. The second theme centered on the discussions between teachers about school issues. According to the respondents, most of the interactions took place during preparation periods, lunch time and while passing in the hallway. Kathy talked about the start to her day and said:

I come in and do my thing; I try to avoid the gossip the coffee clutches in the faculty room. I think that has been a great deal of help because it avoids kind of being involved and just one sided or have people look poorly upon you just because you were present at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Mark stated:

In a typical day I would talk to administrators, but especially other teachers I would talk pretty consistently you'll see them through the hallways you'll see them during lunchtime during preps and you know you just talk about almost anything whatever comes to mind in general personal life student issues other teacher issues and anything that's going on around the school.

Larry described typical interactions during his lunch and prep periods and said, "At lunch time I eat in the teachers room and there's always at least four or five different teachers there, we just sit and chat. On my prep I usually talk to the person who has the other self contained class and we discuss some of the stuff we're doing in the class and if we can collaborate."

Andrea talked about her daily interactions and said:

Well, with teachers, interactions are basically if someone needs something if I'm missing something or if you have a worksheet or a ditto at lunchtime, we talk about different things. It's just basic interaction, we talk about personal life, school life, how we could help the kids or if they have a different point of view or if something doesn't work how can I make it work and the administration seems to be fine if I need anything.

Henry gave an interesting description of his interactions with administrators:

Most of the time its, its just on a professional level but I happen to work in all the schools with very good administrators where they are personable also. We can talk about things other than school they'll tell me about their hobbies they'll tell me about their families and I find that's very nice which again makes them very approachable. Even at the highest level, and you find there's a commonality with some of them or how they're looking at life and it helps me to say hey they're human they're not just here to bust my chops all day which you don't get much of here at all it's a very comfortable setting for teaching.

To summarize, two themes emerged from the responses to question eight. The two themes were: (a) the conversations about personal life and (b) the discussions about school issues.

Q9-Please talk to me about teacher support programs you have experienced (such as mentoring, professional development, or peer coaching) that have helped to reduce any feelings of isolation you might have.

Mentoring was the strongest theme that emerged in the responses to this interview question. When asked to provide specific examples about their interactions with mentors, many of the participants recounted a very positive mentoring experience. The responses concerning new teachers' experiences with teacher support programs followed no particular pattern and were varied. Typically, respondents talked about mentoring as a necessary and helpful teacher support program and found the assistance their mentors provided to be invaluable.

Tina stated:

I had mentoring and that was I think that's the best thing that you can do the best thing. My mentor was absolutely wonderful. She was just always there anytime I had a question or whether it was a good question a silly question whatever she was there she would show me how to do everything not just tell me what to do.

In response to the question, Kathy explained, "Mentoring was very good, I mean last year, I did have a very good mentor and ended up being a good friend, but even with that we did become friends let's say outside of work. It was helpful, yeah definitely."

Mark found the interaction with his mentor to be helpful in many situations and suggested:

In terms of mentoring I had a really good mentor and this person had been there for me at all times, what ever I needed if there were any issues with students I always got really great advice on how to handle certain issues, and I put this knowledge to use and it worked. In terms of administrators, administrators have been really supportive too they would give me advice

at times when I really needed it and that's why I guess they are there to make sure everything goes well in school and for teachers so I would say the mentoring and the support from administrators and mentors has been really, really high quality really good always there, always helpful, always willing, what else can you ask for?. It was to help me with my teaching style, and my teaching, but you could put it that way that it helped me to be less isolated because if I didn't have that then yes then I would definitely, definitely feel isolated.

The theme of mentoring was included in the responses of every participant. Each participant spent a large amount of time describing the benefits of mentoring and how it positively impacted their teaching careers. Mentoring was usually described as being provided by their school district, with the mentoring taking place in the summer and before, during and after school hours as needed. The dedication, attention and feedback the mentors provided increased the new teachers' confidence and left a lasting impression on all the participants. Larry enthusiastically recalled the great relationship he forged with his mentor from the very first day they met and explained,

I had a mentor, and from the first day I interviewed and came in the next day and I accepted the position I met with my mentor and she gave me her number in the office and I talked to her a couple of times over the summer. I met with her, came in and got some books to research. She was absolutely fantastic, she took me in from the first day and we are still great friends. She introduced me to people, so I wasn't just walking around without having met people already. It would have been a lot tougher coming in the first day. It was hard enough trying to deal with the kids and at least if you have people that you can talk to about it that was a huge difference absolutely.

In summary, the theme of mentoring that emerged from responses to this interview question was demonstrated to be an effective way of retaining new teachers and reducing their feelings of isolation.

Q10-What comes to mind when someone refers to you as a new teacher in your school?

The main theme that stood out from participant responses to this question was that being a new teacher is a positive thing; it's OK to be a new teacher. Participants seemed to have difficulty responding to this question. The responses concerning this question were thoughtful, heartfelt and at times tentative. Several participants got sidetracked and began comparing themselves to more experienced teachers instead of discussing their perceptions and feeling about being referred to as a new teacher. Mark stated, "It never bothered me if somebody says a new teacher I mean to me I am. I'm learning my way around the ropes you know I'm trying to make it in this teaching field in this business and when somebody says that I'm like ok I'm learning."

The response given by Andrea was a refreshing perspective on question 10. She responded to the question by saying,

I am a new teacher, I mean I've only been teaching for obviously less than three years so I am practically new compared to some other people, but at the same time I think after my second year I could basically do it with my eyes closed so I mean I am new at the profession, but at the same time I think I have some years under my belt that really have helped me, but I think later on as I you know mature that it's going to get easier, but yeah new is ok new is fresh".

Larry thought about his answer before he said,

A long way to go, not as experienced as older teachers, but I feel like new teachers coming out of college have some fresh ideas that they could share with their colleagues as well as the colleagues can show things that ok I've tried this, failed miserably, tried this, ok this worked great so I think yeah there is definitely give and take between new teachers and more experienced teachers.

Robert thought pensively before he answered the question and provided this response,

The first year terrible, I feel bad I feel sad the second year is a different story the second year I feel more comfortable more accepted and also some teachers spoke with me in my own language, my native language and I feel much better and the second year I think the first year is hard for all new teachers I think its because I don't know if the word to demonstrate to the students, to the staff to your peers and administrators that you are a good teacher.

In response to the question about her perceptions or reactions about being called a new teacher, Kathy said,

I recall a few comments here or there from teachers not even from parents actually because I was expecting parents to say like oh well you know you're new but I never really got that, I only got that from one parent that just said oh you know you look like one of the students but I, she wasn't demeaning once I started to speak, but from the teachers you do get, you haven't been here long enough you'll wait and you'll see how the system works so that's really kind of what comes to mind as like the one basically negativity other than that, So new is not necessarily bad, no it's been kind of exciting.

To summarize, the main theme in response to this questions was that being a new teacher is a positive thing; it's ok to be a new teacher.

Q11-Where do you see yourself professionally in the next one to three years?

The common theme that developed from this question was a strong desire to remain in the teaching profession. All participants indicated that they would like to continue teaching, and working in the field of education. Andrea explained, "Professionally, I still see myself in the classroom, I think once I get my personal life settled, I would like to go back to school, but I would still see myself in the classroom, as a teacher, absolutely."

No response was given as proudly as the one given by Larry, who said,

I think I am definitely hooked on teaching and if I'm not teaching here I'll definitely be teaching someplace else, absolutely, it's a lot of little victories and those little victories really make a difference for me. I definitely feel like I've done something at the end of the day. Yeah, if you're building a bridge or something you know ok well one day you laid some bricks so what, but with teaching every day I can leave the classroom and feel like ok I helped that student do this today or I did that well, it's very rewarding.

Some other interesting perceptions and answers were recorded regarding the question about where the new teachers would see themselves in the next one to three years. Tina a second year teacher responded, "Exactly where I am now, oh yes, absolutely, I don't see anything else in my future." Kathy talked about her future plans in the field of education and said,

In the next one to three years, I still see myself teaching in the classroom, hopefully preschool handicapped, I did, I really did want to try and expand the preschool handicapped class, even into like autistic, but that's not really my call, but if it would have been, I would have loved to do and I still want to try and get involved to do like the trial training and stuff like that and continue grad because eventually at some point I do want to do supervision of some sort in special ed.

One participant Robert discussed his strong feelings about being an educator and said, "Oh yes, definitely yes I want to be an educator. I want to stay in the field because its what I like, all my life I wanted to be a teacher that's what I'd for now, for 15 years, I want to continue my career because always I think when I'm growing up you are going to be a teacher and now I have an opportunity, and this opportunity will never disappear from my life."

Discrepant Cases

The researcher was aware of the possibility of encountering discrepant cases during the study and understood that discussing contrary information adds to the

credibility of the study. The data were carefully reviewed during the study to reduce the risk of inadvertently overlooking a discrepant case. The researcher did not encounter any discrepant cases or non-conforming data during the study. However, if a discrepant case was found, the researcher would have presented the information to the reader or audience even if it did not agree with the expected themes or patterns of the study. As described by Creswell (2003), “Because real life is composed of different perspectives that do not always coalesce, discussing contrary information adds to the credibility of an account for a reader” (p. 196).

Evidence of Quality

To increase the validity of the study, the researcher used several strategies as a means to check the accuracy of the findings. Creswell (2003) noted that validity is “seen as a strength” of qualitative research (p.195). Rich, thick description helped to connect the readers to the setting and gave them a sense of shared experiences. Self-reflection was used to prevent the researcher from bringing bias to the study. The researcher also utilized member checking as a method of quality control in the study. Member checking was used to verify the accuracy of the interview findings by taking a final report of interviews back to participants to determine whether they felt they were accurate. This was important because the participants may have felt obligated to give positive feedback to the researcher during the interviews.

Triangulation of the data from interviews and the review of interview transcripts were used to examine evidence from these sources and build coherent justification for themes developed in the study. The researcher did not find any discrepant cases during

the study. The discussion of negative or contrary information can add to the authenticity and credibility of the research.

Summary of Data Analysis

Data were collected in this study for the purpose of answering the research question of the study. The research question was: What is the relationship between a new teacher's experience with isolation and teacher attrition? The method of data collection in this qualitative study was in-depth interviews. The patterns and themes described as findings in the study were supported by the data. In response to the research question, the interview data showed that new elementary teachers perceived and experienced isolation in different ways and to varying degrees.

The new teachers viewed themselves in a positive way and were enthusiastic and optimistic about their teaching careers. The data revealed that many new teachers had a positive preservice experience, and each recounted a strong desire to be a teacher from a young age. The new teachers found themselves in a complex and multifaceted new environment which at times left them feeling isolated and looking for acceptance. The data also showed that the new teachers found that mentoring was the most effective of all the teacher support programs available to them.

In response to the question of this study, the data showed that new teachers often perceived their experiences, both good and bad, as a right of passage into their new careers. The participants felt that more respect and recognition was given to veteran teachers as compared to new teachers. Respondents explained that it was important for new teachers to be flexible and make classroom management and organization a priority.

Two participants felt isolated from other teachers in specific school buildings in which they taught. All but two new teachers reported feeling some degree of isolation from their peers during the study. It is interesting to note that the data collected in the study showed that all the participants had a strong desire to remain in the teaching profession, even if they did not stay in the same school district.

In the next chapter, a summary and discussion of these findings as well as recommendations for further study in the area of new teacher isolation and its impact on teacher attrition will be presented.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Overview of Study

This qualitative study examined the perceptions of new teachers regarding isolation. This final chapter presents a brief overview of the research problem, how and why the study was done, and a review of the research question, methodology and findings. New teacher isolation impacts teacher attrition and retention rates. It is a problem in many school districts in the United States. As described in chapter 1 of this study, many promising new teachers who experienced isolation were not able to reach their full potential and have left the teaching profession prematurely. The problem of new teacher isolation should be of great interest to teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders in the field of education. All members of the learning community have a vested interest in helping new teachers experience success in their first assignments.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the actual lived experiences of new teachers in an urban school district regarding their perceptions of isolation and how they functioned during the first few years of their teaching careers. The researcher was interested in bringing about an increase in the awareness of veteran teachers, administrators, and school districts on the local, state, and national levels regarding the problem of new teacher isolation. A better understanding of what new teachers experienced in their teaching assignments provided insight into the type of skills and learning experiences teacher support and preparation programs developed to prepare novice teachers for their first teaching assignments.

The following key research question was addressed: What is the relationship between a new teacher's experience with isolation and teacher attrition? A phenomenological research design was selected for this study because it examined human experience. Data were collected through recorded, in-depth, face-to-face interviews conducted with eight new elementary school teachers in authentic school settings. Participants were selected from a pool of 14 new teachers who met the definition of having less than three years of teaching experience. Participants were included in the study based on their response to a letter of invitation that invited participation in the study. A meeting was held for the respondents to reply to the invitation letter and meet with the researcher to discuss the purpose and scope of the study. A total of nine new teachers were randomly chosen for the study. After two cancelled interview appointments, one of the respondents withdrew from the study resulting in a total of eight participants in this study.

Through the use of interviews using open-ended questions, the researcher explored the impact that isolation had on a new teacher's decision to remain in or leave the teaching profession. Learning about the issue of new teacher isolation helped to bring about positive social change in learning communities by improving teacher morale and instructional practice, which in turn helped to reduce teacher attrition rates.

Summary of Findings

Data were collected in this research study through in-depth, face-to-face interviews, and a series of 11 interview questions (see Appendix B). The interview questions were designed to answer the research question: What is the relationship

between a new teacher's experience with isolation and teacher attrition? From responses to the interview question regarding which teacher support programs helped to reduce feelings of isolation in new teachers, one major theme that emerged was mentoring. Participants most often described how mentors played a key role in making their adjustment as new teachers a much easier process. Their mentors enabled them to become accepted as part of their new school communities.

Responses to the interview question concerning preservice teacher experiences and how the new teachers entered the field of education produced two themes. They were a) a positive preservice experience and (b) a strong desire to become a teacher from a young age. Two major themes that emerged in response to the interview question regarding whether new teachers felt isolated in their school and from other teachers were (a) feeling isolated or alone, and (b) feeling isolated in the school building in which they taught.

From responses to the interview questions regarding experiences and perceptions as a new teacher, two themes emerged: (a) importance of having a mentor teacher, and (b) that the difficulty adjusting to being a new teacher was viewed as a rite of passage. In response to the interview question about where the new teachers see themselves professionally in the next 1-3 years, a strong desire to remain in the field of teaching was noted, but not necessarily in their current schools or districts. Responses to interview questions concerning perceptions about being referred to as a new teacher produced one major theme. The theme was that being a new teacher was a positive thing; it's OK to be a new teacher. The question concerning new teachers' perceptions of their treatment as

compared to veteran teachers revealed two clear themes. The themes were that more respect was given to veteran teachers and that veteran teachers were not held to the same high standard as new teachers.

Interpretation of Findings

Based on the results of the data collected, the researcher drew three conclusions from this study. They were:

1. New teachers seemed to interpret teacher support programs and in particular mentoring, as being instrumental in reducing their feelings of isolation in their initial assignments.
2. New teachers experienced isolation in different ways and to varying degrees depending on their teaching assignments and the school buildings in which they were assigned to teach.
3. New teachers had a strong desire to remain in the teaching profession, but would leave the current district or school in which they taught due to feelings of isolation.

The first conclusion of this study was that new teachers found teacher support programs and in particular mentoring, to be instrumental in reducing their feelings of isolation in their initial assignments. Results from the interview questions showed that participants often spoke about their experiences concerning mentoring and how it helped them to feel less isolated and more connected to the learning community. Data collected during the study showed that new teachers often cited the importance of having a mentor and how it made their transition into the teaching profession a more positive and

successful experience. The data collected did not show that the participants in the study linked mentoring as a factor that influenced their decision of whether to remain in or leave the teaching profession. Mark provided an example in support of this conclusion:

In terms of mentoring, I had a really good mentor and this person had been there for me at all times, what ever I needed if there were any issues with students. I always got really great advice on how to handle certain issues and I put this knowledge to use and it worked. In terms of administrators, administrators have been really supportive too. They would give me advice at times when I really needed it and that's why I guess they are there, to make sure everything, everything goes well in school and for teachers, so I would say the mentoring and the support from administrators and mentors has been really, really high quality, really good, always there, always helpful, always willing. What else can you ask for? It was to help me with my teaching style and my teaching but you could put it that way that it helped me to be less isolated because if I didn't have that then, yes then I would definitely, definitely feel isolated.

In this example, the participant provided a detailed explanation of mentoring and how it was helpful for new teachers. Also in this example, we saw evidence that a dedicated, high quality mentor can make a substantial impact on a new teacher's career. In another example the benefits of mentoring were highlighted in a response given by Tina, who said, "I had mentoring and that was I think that's the best thing that you can do, the best thing. My mentor was absolutely wonderful. She was just always there anytime I had a question or whether it was a good question a silly question whatever, she was there she would show me how to do everything not just tell me what to do." In the response provided by this participant, the positive impact that mentoring had on her experience as a new teacher was clear.

The review of the literature presented in chapter 2 of this study provided evidence of the importance of mentoring for new teachers. The current trend toward induction and

mentoring activities has greatly reduced the occurrence of new teacher isolation and improved the success and retention rate of new teachers in their learning communities. Wong and Wong (2003) stated, “Effective induction programs not only retain highly qualified new teachers; they also ensure that these teachers are teaching effectively from the very first day of school” (p. 1). The findings were related to the research and literature by the idea that implementing a sustained induction and mentoring program reduced isolation and contributed to the success of new teachers. This was an important concept. Eisenman and Thornton (1999) suggested the following:

New teachers need support. They need ongoing professional development. They need a sense of belonging, of common cause, and the knowledge that over time they will make a difference not only in the lives of individual children they teach, but in their profession. (p. 79)

Implementation of teacher support programs helped to minimize the feelings of isolation that were common among new teachers. Educational leaders must provide support and guidance to new teachers, and not just briefly welcome them to their new school. Hope (1999) suggested that a positive experience for new teachers, “Involves systematic contact with the intent of assisting new teachers’ professional growth and development and engaging in collegial conversation about the work of teaching” (p. 50).

The findings were related to the theoretical framework in this study through the social development theory (Vygotsky, 1978). It emphasized the connections between people and the cultural environment in which they act and interact in shared experiences. Vygotsky believed that the life long process of development and learning was dependent on social interaction and that social learning leads to cognitive development. Vygotsky explained it as, “ the distance between the actual development level as determined by

independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). This theoretical framework was relevant to the problem of new teacher isolation because it explained that human experiences influence how we react to and handle ourselves in difficult and stressful situations. New teachers can use the valuable experiences gained from participating in mentoring activities to positively impact their learning communities.

The second conclusion drawn in this study was that new teacher’s experience isolation in different ways and to varying degrees depending on their teaching assignments and the school buildings in which they were assigned to teach. New teachers faced many challenges and obstacles as they entered the teaching profession. They entered the complex world of the classroom and school building to which they were assigned. Each school had its own unique culture and personality made up of rules, regulations and traditions that the new teacher had to learn and adapt to. As a result, new teachers had to be flexible and willing to adjust to their new environments and learning communities. Several participants viewed this adjustment period as being a rite of passage that new teachers endured as a kind of initiation into the teaching field. Kathy, a new special education teacher, provided this response:

This building now that I’m in, I’m the only special ed teacher here that in and of itself is a little isolating and there is a little bit of I guess the greatest attitude towards the districts special ed program as it is. So that was leashed out at least a few times right in the beginning they would say you know, not to be offensive, but we know that you are part of the child study team, when in reality I’m not, but and then there was a lot of resistance because the class was new this one, so it was a completely new atmosphere to this building and to the district.

Henry said:

One thing I work in different schools so that's a little unique, I travel, and again, now one school, school number ... I'm in every day this year I'm teaching the same amount of classes there but I don't feel as isolated there because the staff now knows me better, so it's a combination of things, one I'm seeing them for a second year but now I'm there every day I teach there first period they know my teaching style now and there's more, I'll call it warmth, but in a professional way, cooperation.

Robert said, "In the first year definitely I felt isolated, definitely, but in the second year when you know everybody, when everybody's talking to you when everybody they start to help you to talk to you about different things more than the first year."

The findings showed how participants experienced isolation and how they perceived their role as a new teacher. Renard (1999) explained,

In this age of abbreviated teacher-training programs, alternative certification, and emergency teacher placements, a growing number of teachers have the potential of arriving in classrooms feeling inadequately prepared. Instead of arming themselves with the additional resources that they will need to be successful and sane during those first years, too many stand isolated, wondering bitterly where their welcoming committee could be. (p. 3)

These situations were typical for many new teachers and made the transition into their initial teaching assignments a stressful and isolating experience. Wong and Wong (2005) explained, "American education typically views teachers as independent operators, encouraged to be creative, and expected to do a good job behind closed doors. Collaboration is rare. Loneliness and lack of support further exacerbate the problems of beginning teachers" (p. 5).

The third conclusion of this study was that new teachers had a strong desire to remain in the teaching profession, but would leave the current district or school in which they taught due to feelings of isolation. An earlier conclusion focused on the point that new teachers faced many challenges and obstacles as they entered the teaching profession. They began their careers in a complex world of new rules and regulations. It was also widely accepted that a new teacher had to prove him or herself to the teachers, students and administrators and be accepted into the culture of the school or district in which they taught. These working conditions were overwhelming and caused feelings of isolation and frustration. Taken together, these two statements were supported by Wong (2002) who wrote, “The best way to support, develop, and cultivate an attitude of lifelong learning in beginning teachers is through a new teacher induction program focused on teacher training, support, and retention” (p. 52). Regarding how new teacher isolation impacted teacher attrition rates, it was noted that the first few years of a teacher’s career can be a crucial time in their growth and development. Moir and Gless (2001) explained, “These initial years are also important in that early experiences serve to set the professional norms, attitudes, and standards that will guide practice over the course of a career” (p. 109).

Participants in this study expressed that they had a strong desire to remain in the teaching profession. However, teachers also indicated that although they did not want to leave the field of education, they might leave the current school or district they were working in due to feelings of isolation. The perception that emerged from their responses was that if their current teaching job did not work out, they would move on to another

school or district to continue working in the field. It is important to note that all the participants in the study had a mentor to help them adjust to their new position. The mentor was assigned to assist with instructional and non-instructional components of the job such as classroom management and content preparation for teaching and learning.

Tina stated,

The first month was very, very crazy, but I had a mentor that stuck with me the entire time. She was there from day one all the way to the end, she was awesome, so anything I need she was there. Having a mentor was a very big help. Yeah also, the other teachers in that grade level were great, they helped me out, I did everything with them, they showed me how to do everything step, by step.

Larry explained it in this way:

I think I am definitely hooked on teaching and if I'm not teaching here I'll definitely be teaching someplace else. Absolutely I, you know it's a lot of little victories and those little victories really make a difference for me. I definitely feel like I've done something at the end of the day. Yeah, if you're building a bridge or something you know ok well one day you laid some bricks so what, but with teaching every day I can leave the classroom and feel like ok I helped that student do this today or I did that well, it's very rewarding.

Andrea explained, "Professionally I still see myself in the classroom, I think I, you know once I get my personal life settled I would like to go back to school, but I would still see myself in the classroom, as a teacher, absolutely."

Many of the study participants indicated in their responses to question 1 that they had a strong desire to become teachers from a young age. The participants also indicated in their responses to question 11 that they had a strong desire to remain in the teaching field even if they did not remain in their current school or district. We could infer from this that even when the participants felt challenged in their new positions and perhaps

isolated from other teachers, their strong belief in the importance of education and a need to help children learn helped them overcome any misgivings they had about their future in the teaching profession.

Building relationships through collaboration and a community of teachers is an important aspect in the work of preparing and training new teachers when they enter the field of education. Wong and Wong (2005) explained, “New teacher induction programs build a community of teachers, bringing together beginning teachers, experienced teachers, and school leaders in a collaborative setting where they can observe each other teach and engage in a culture of cooperation and continuous learning” (p. 5).

Support for this idea is found in the theoretical framework of this study. A theory related to new teacher isolation that was used to substantiate the findings in this study was the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Bandura emphasized the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Bandura explained, “Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action” (p. 22). As applied to this study the theory demonstrates that new teachers benefited from observing and modeling the behaviors of veteran teachers, school leaders and mentors while they participated in induction and mentoring activities.

There were several practical applications related to the findings in this study. The practical applications centered on finding strategies that enabled school districts to be more successful at retaining new teachers and reducing attrition rates. School systems

need to begin implementing induction and mentoring programs that improve new teacher retention rates in the near future. According to Ingersoll and Smith (2003), “The data on new teacher attrition suggest that efforts to recruit more teachers-which have been the focus of much policy- will not, by themselves, solve the staffing problems plaguing schools. The solution must also include teacher retention” (p. 33). Another practical application of the findings was the creation of high quality teacher support programs that included mentoring, peer collaboration and developing a community of teachers.

Including information and classes on new teacher isolation as part of the course of study in teacher preparation programs at colleges would also be an important practical application of this study. There needs to be a tighter connection between theory and practice to create a system that works in harmony to provide new teacher training and ongoing support to produce new teachers that can succeed in the teaching profession and help students achieve. The transition from being a student of educational theory to actually teaching in a classroom is a difficult and sometimes lonely journey. Hope (1999) explained, “This is the beginning of their sojourn in the isolation chamber known as the classroom” (p. 55). In the past, college students in teacher preparation programs have not been well prepared for the realities of teacher isolation encountered in their first assignments. Renard (1999) explained, “I was told that new teachers – both those new to the profession and those new to a district or school – face a world of challenges, and disadvantages” (p. 2). It is unfortunate that we see time and again that those new teachers’ have not received the necessary support from administrators and colleagues alike.

Implications for Social Change

The implications for social change were clearly established in the significance portion of chapter 1 and the outcomes presented in chapter 4. The researcher believes that positive social change can be achieved by reducing or preventing the occurrence of isolation and attrition when new teachers begin their careers.

This study may be of importance to practitioners in the field of education, new teachers, school administrators, community stakeholders, and college students participating in teacher preparation programs. New teachers may find the study to be helpful in preventing or reducing feelings of isolation in their initial teaching assignments. The study may be helpful to college students preparing to be teachers by increasing their knowledge about the usefulness of teacher support programs.

The study may inspire school administrators and those who prepare preservice teachers to look more carefully at the problem of new teacher isolation and how it correlates to teacher retention and success. Traditional college teacher preparation programs could be improved by incorporating lessons about new teacher isolation into the curriculum.

There are several benefits for new teachers in this study. The importance of social change was emphasized through sustained teacher support activities in a school district. New teachers can improve practice through collaboration with and observation of other teachers. School administrators may develop an increased awareness regarding new teacher attrition rates and the need to implement induction and mentoring activities.

Recommendations for Action

The problem of new teacher isolation and its relationship to teacher attrition rates is underscored by the information and findings concluded from this study. The first recommendation is that school systems need to begin implementing quality induction and mentoring programs that will improve new teacher retention rates in the near future. The next recommendation is that school districts and administrators should focus on the prevention of new teacher isolation by being cognizant of the problem and putting teacher support programs in place that reduce the chances of it occurring. In addition, all school districts should consider staffing each of their schools with a new teacher representative (a master teacher or grade level team leader) to facilitate the smooth adjustment and transition of the new teachers into the learning community. Another recommendation for action could be that new teachers are required to participate in support and induction programs for at least two years after being hired. This would ensure a successful and more positive experience for both the new teacher and the district.

Stakeholders in the field of education need to be aware of the results of this study. School administrators, local boards of education, preservice teachers, student teachers, and veteran teachers would gain great insight into this problem. Members of local, state, and national teacher unions, and parent and teacher associations would also benefit greatly by reading the results of this study. The results of this study could be disseminated through academic or peer reviewed journals, as well as, by presenting the study at a national or international education conference.

Recommendations for Further Study

This qualitative phenomenological study was limited to one urban school district in the northeastern United States. Further study on this topic including additional data gathering and analysis across several other school districts within the state, or across the country using the 11 interview questions would be helpful in supporting the conclusions of this study more fully.

Educational background, age, gender, demographics, teaching style, degrees earned and preservice teacher preparation programs were not considered on an in-depth level for this study. It may be useful to study whether age combined with gender makes a difference in how a person views new teacher isolation and its impact on teacher attrition. It would be useful to understand what effect, if any, a new teacher's age or gender has on their perceptions or experiences with isolation in their teaching assignments.

While the new teachers in the study named professional development and mentoring and as two of the support programs that helped to reduce feelings of isolation, they did not go much beyond listing the formats in which professional development and mentoring was provided. A more in-depth investigation into the purpose, content, and context of professional development and mentoring programs that are provided to new teachers would provide more insight about how new teachers, as educators understand the effects of these teacher support programs. Another interesting topic to study would be to look at what effective and successful new teachers view as the important skills, knowledge and learning experiences that are needed to prepare for their new careers. This

information could be used to design or redesign university teacher preparation programs to make them more relevant and useful to new teachers.

Finally, preservice teacher preparation programs are another area that has relevance in influencing how a new teacher perceives and experiences isolation in his or her teaching assignment. It may be helpful to conduct further study on preservice teacher preparation programs. During this study the impact of isolation on a new teacher's decision to remain in or leave the teaching profession has been addressed. The research showed us that the phenomenon of new teacher isolation as it impacts teacher attrition has become an ever increasing problem in the United States and is an important issue in the field of education on local, state, and national levels.

The high rate of teacher attrition is causing concern in the teaching profession. In fact, the annual turnover rate for teachers is close to four percent higher than the average of all other professions (Carroll & Fulton, 2004). The problem of teacher turnover is an important issue on local, state, and national levels because it is costly for school systems and can negatively affect teacher retention efforts. The average cost to recruit, hire, prepare and lose a teacher is \$50,000.00 (Carroll & Fulton, 2004). According to the results of a 2004-2005 study conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) ,“Among public school teachers younger than age 30 ,about 15 % moved to another school, while 9% left teaching” (p.3). Further study on this topic will only serve to better understand how to balance the needs of new teacher's with the needs of school districts, so they can both benefit.

Researcher's Reflection

The researcher had a variety of meaningful experiences during the research process. The researcher found the interview process to be a rewarding and challenging journey that led to interesting findings and conclusions about the study. A phenomenological design was chosen for this study because it examined human experiences regarding a phenomenon. According to Creswell (1998), "A phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon" (p.51). Based on this definition, the qualitative tradition of a phenomenological study met the needs of the researcher of recording the experiences of new teachers concerning teacher isolation and its impact on teacher attrition.

The researcher found that it was not easy to transcribe interviews verbatim and that it took a lot of practice and patience to acquire this skill. It also took time to become comfortable and confident while conducting interviews. The researcher was careful not to introduce any of his personal biases regarding new teacher isolation during the study. The researcher thought about the possible bias he brought to the study, concerning his personal experience with an induction program during his first year of teaching. The researcher was cautious during the study and made it clear to all participants that they should not feel obligated to give positive feedback during the interviews regarding their experiences working in the school district. The researcher also reassured the participants that all information in the study was confidential and that

participation or non-participation in the study would not affect their chances of being rehired or receiving tenure.

The researcher did not directly supervise any of the new teachers who participated in the study. The researcher was aware of his preconceived ideas about the stereo types of teachers in certain content areas and about teachers who acquired their certification through the alternate route as opposed to the traditional route of teacher preparation programs. The researcher did not let his personal opinions or feelings interfere with his ethical responsibility during the study. The researcher was also aware of the different culture and environments of different school buildings within the district and how this might have impacted the study.

As a result of the study, the researcher changed his point of view on several important issues. First, the researcher realized that there was not a big difference in the perceptions among new teachers regarding isolation and the need to be accepted as part of the learning community. In addition, gender, subjects taught and certification types did not impact the perception of being isolated as a new teacher. The researcher was a little surprised and found it interesting that several participants explained how they experienced isolation in some school buildings within the district but not in others. The researcher did not anticipate the strong feeling of pride that the participants had about being new teachers and the overwhelming desire by most of the participants to become teachers from a young age.

Conclusion

The insights and themes that emerged and were presented in this study were self-described perceptions and interpretations provided by the participants in the study. The new teachers in this study perceived themselves to be an integral part of the teaching and learning process in their schools. In addition, they viewed their mentor teachers and participation in teacher support programs to be invaluable in their growth and development as new teachers. The day-to-day issues and challenges that new teachers faced needed to be addressed by all stakeholders in the field of education. The results of data collected in this study pointed to three reoccurring themes identified by new teachers in an urban elementary school district regarding their perceptions and experiences with isolation. They were (a) a strong desire to remain in the teaching profession, and (b) the importance of mentoring and (c) a positive self-image as a new teacher.

The important role of teacher support programs in helping new teachers cannot be underestimated or minimized. These programs can be implemented in school districts and can be designed to support and promote the success of new teachers. Supporting and developing these programs to prepare the new teachers we need for our schools will require a mix of research, theory, practitioners dedication, professional development, mentoring, reflection and authentic learning experiences. The impact of isolation on a new teacher's decision to remain in or leave the teaching profession is clear when we looked at the responses of study participants. Although the new teachers in this study experienced various degrees of isolation, they all indicated a strong desire to remain in the teaching profession, but not necessarily in their current schools or district.

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APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study about New Teacher Isolation and its Relationship to Teacher Attrition. You were chosen for the study because you are a new teacher with three or less years of experience in the field of education. Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be part of the study.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named David Sleppin, who is a doctoral student at Walden University. David Sleppin is also a supervisor of instruction for the _____ School District.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand and explore the relationship between a new teacher's experience with isolation and teacher attrition.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in an informal introduction meeting to learn about the study, lasting approximately 45 minutes.
- Meet with the researcher to review and sign the study consent form, lasting approximately 30 minutes.
- Participate in a tape recorded interview, lasting 60-90 minutes.
- Meet with the researcher to review the interview transcript from your interview for accuracy, lasting approximately 45 minutes.
- Attend a dissemination of study results meeting, lasting approximately 45 minutes.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is voluntary. This means that everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you want to be in the study. No one at the _____ School District will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. If you feel stressed during the study you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

There is the minimal risk of psychological stress during this study. If you feel stressed during the study, you may stop at any time. There are no benefits to you from participating in this study. The researcher will benefit by gathering data to conduct his study.

Compensation:

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality:

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in any reports of the study.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher's name is David Sleppin. The researcher's faculty advisor is Dr. Thomas Stapleford. You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via 908-907-3026 or dslepp@gmail.com or the advisor at 1-800-925-3368 or thomas.stapleford@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Director of the Research Center at Walden University. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension 1210.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have received answers to any questions I have at this time. I am 18 years of age or older, and I consent to participate in the study.

Printed Name of

Participant

Participant's Written or

Electronic* Signature

Researcher's Written or

Electronic* Signature

Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Legally, an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please tell me about how you entered the field of education, and about your preservice teacher training.
2. Please tell me what the term isolation means to you.
3. Can you talk to me about your first month as a new teacher and what you experienced?
4. How do you perceive your treatment as a new teacher?
5. Please talk to me about whether or not you feel isolated in your school and from other teachers?
6. What would you say are the three or four most important things a new teacher should expect when entering the field of education?
7. What's different about the treatment of new teachers as compared to veteran teachers in your school?
8. Can you describe the type of interactions you have with other teachers and administrators during a typical day in your school?
9. Please talk to me about teacher support programs that you have experienced (such as mentoring, professional development or peer coaching) that have helped to reduce any feelings of isolation you might have.
10. What comes to mind for you when someone refers to you as a new teacher in your school?
11. Where do you see yourself professionally in the next 1-3 years?

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT DATA SHEET

Participant Information

1. Participant's Name _____
2. Age (optional) _____
3. Current Teaching Position _____
4. How many years have you been teaching? _____
5. What is your highest degree earned? _____
6. What teaching certification(s) do you hold? _____

School Information

7. Type of School (Elementary, Middle) _____
8. Number of Staff Members _____
9. Student Enrollment _____
10. Number of classes taught at each grade level:
Pre-K____ 1____ 3____ 5____ 7____
K____ 2____ 4____ 6____ 8____

Researcher's Checklist

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| _____ Informed Consent Form Signed | Date _____ |
| _____ Interview Completed | Date _____ |
| _____ Member-Checking Completed | Date _____ |
| _____ Study Codes Assigned | Date _____ |
| _____ Attended Study Results Meeting | Date _____ |

APPENDIX D: SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

List of Codes Developed for Interview Transcript:

Concepts-Isolation, Attrition

Themes-Perceptions of isolation, experiences with isolation, meaning of isolation, feeling isolated from peers, teacher attrition, mentoring

isol.prc (perception isolation)
isol.mean (isolation meaning)
isol.exp (experience isolation)
isol.peer (isolation peers)
teach.attr (teacher attrition)
ment.exp (mentoring experience)

Concepts are shown in bold face type and themes are in brackets and bold face type.

Interview Transcription

This interview took place on August 6, 2008.

Participant L6

I: Thanks for participating in this interview about the topic of New Teacher **Isolation** and its Impact on Teacher **Attrition**. The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes.

I: Are you ready to begin?

L6: Yes.

I: Why don't you begin by talking a little bit about how you entered the field of education, and about your pre-service teacher training?

L6: Ok, I went to, the college I went to? I went to _____ University. I knew from a young age that I wanted to be a teacher so even in high school I was gearing up for that and I did my four year program at _____ University, graduated with a degree in special ed and I passed the praxis K-8 so I can teach in middle school special ed.

I: Is there anything about your pre-service teacher experience, let's say student teaching or practicum that stands out in your mind as something productive or special?

L6: My student teaching was very good, my teacher, I worked with ___ she let me take over from the first day, which was great, I dove right in the whole time, so I knew early on that this is what I wanted to do. So it wasn't like you wait till the last week and you're like ahhh, I'm not good at this, I should find something else, but it was fantastic and I was hooked ever since then.

I: Ok, thank you. Please tell me what the term **isolation** means to you. **[isol.mean]**

L6: Being alone, **[isol.mean]** having no support um no friends, **[isol.mean]** no support staff, a person, being alone. **[isol.mean]**

I: Can you talk to me about your first month as a new teacher and what you experienced?

L6: I remember when I came in the first day I was extremely nervous even though my mentor, I met with her, over the summer and she gave me some books and some materials to look over. **[ment.exp]** I was extremely nervous but um one of my friends that I made the first day helped me out my first day, and got me under way pretty much so that definitely helped. And I think by the second week I was in the groove, but that first week it was, I was feeling the kids out, they were feeling me out, it was pretty nerve wracking, but that only lasted like the first couple of days and then it was either swim or get out. I remember the first month I had a pretty close group of friends but a lot of other teachers didn't even make it a point to really talk to me or know my name or anything. **[isol.exp]** So I remember I had 3,4,5 people that I would talk to, ask questions and other people I would see in the hallway and say hello and they would just brush by. **[isol.prc]** **[isol.exp]**

I: Would you like to take a five minute break?

L6: No thanks, I'm OK.

I: Okay, How do you perceive your treatment as a new teacher?

L6: I think my mentor was fantastic, **[ment.exp]** she helped me just even getting started with the attendance and stuff like that I had no idea what to do. She was fantastic and she introduced me to a lot of her friends **[ment.exp]** and they were really good and that made it so much more smooth cause I walked in that first day and I was so nervous, I thought I'm going home, maybe I'll come back in a week or two. So I was really overwhelmed but they really helped me out and got my feet underneath me and helped me.

I: Please talk to me about whether or not you feel **isolated** in your school or from other teachers?

L6: Yeah, there are some teachers I can honestly say I haven't spoken five words to, **[isol.peer]** um I don't know if I didn't make the effort early on or they didn't make the effort, but I can honestly say I know nothing about them. **[isol.peer]** But I think for the

most part the majority of the staff here is very friendly, they stop in the hallways and say hello, you know catch up.

I: What would you say are the three or four most important things a new teacher should expect when entering the field of education?

L6: Well, the first day expect to be completely lost [isol.prc] um there's no way around that I mean I took the books home over the summer, I was reviewing them, I thought I was ready and I walked in there and I was like wow ok so the first thing is expect to be lost. Second thing is try to find someone that will help you [isol.peer] [isol.prc] because, those first couple of days you need to have at least one or two people that will sit down and explain, ok in the morning you have to do this, in the afternoon you have to do this, at lunch time you have to walk your kids down. And the third is even though you're not confident just pretend to be confident, pretend that you belong in front of those kids, cause if not they can definitely pick up on it, it will be a rough year for you from the first day.

I: Ok, that's good advice.

I: What's different about the treatment of new teachers as compared to veteran teachers in your school?

L6: I think they definitely get more respect and I'm sure they deserve some of that for being in this business for so long yeah plus they know everyone already. But in this school pretty much everyone was pretty friendly and they still are.

I: Do you think this treatment was deserved?

L6: Yeah I thought it was deserved, I mean if someone if someone's been there for 20 years they definitely deserve more than a college kid just walking in who thinks he's hot stuff. I kind of thought of it in a different way, I was kind of saying that one day I'll be that guy who has been there for that long. Yeah, I kind of looked up to the people who have been here for so long they have a lot to teach you, a lot of experience.

I: That's good, that's a very positive attitude to have.

I: Can you describe the types of interactions you have with other teachers and administrators during a typical day in your school? [isol.prc]

L6: I walk in at 7:30 in the morning, I immediately see the security guard ,say hello have a little talk about the Yankees, go sign in and talk to my principal and ask her about how her dog is doing. At lunch time I eat in the teachers room and there's always at least four or five different teachers there we just sit and chat. On my prep I usually talk to the person who has the other self contained class and we discuss some of the stuff we're

doing in the class and if we can collaborate. At the end of the day, always say goodbye to everyone in class.

I: Please talk to me about teacher support programs that you have experienced (such as mentoring, **[ment.exp]** professional development or peer coaching) that have helped to reduce any feelings of **isolation** you might have.

L6: I had a mentor, and from the first day I interviewed and came in the next day and I accepted the position I uh met with my mentor **[ment.exp]** and she gave me her number in the office and I talked to her a couple of times over the summer. **[ment.exp]** I met with her came in and got some books to research. She was absolutely fantastic she, she took me in from the first day and you know we are still great friends. **[ment.exp]** She introduced me to people, so I wasn't just walking around without having met people already it would have been a lot tougher coming in the first day. **[isol.prc]** It was hard enough trying to deal with the kids and at least if you have people that you can talk to about it that was a huge difference, absolutely.

I: Have you gone on any professional development workshops over the last couple of years that you feel have been helpful?

L6: I went to one on motivating students. I thought that was one of the best workshops, it gave you tools on how to motivate different kinds of students some students are just um stubborn and if you say red they'll say blue and ways to deal with them and other kids are just they try to do their best but along the way it kind of gets a little messed up and how to deal with students like that I've used it the rest of the year and I showed a great, great success.

I: So you have found professional development to be effective?

L6: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

I: Ok, good, let's see. What comes to mind for you when someone refers to you as a new teacher in your school? **[isol.prc]**

L6: A long way to go, not as experienced as um older teachers but I feel like new teachers coming out of college have some fresh ideas that they could ya know share with their colleagues as well as the colleagues can show things that ok I've tried this, failed miserably, tried this, ok this worked great so I think yeah there is definitely give and take between new teachers and more experienced teachers.

I: Would it phase you if you were walking down the hall and veteran teacher called you a new teacher? **[isol.prc]** **[isol.exp]**

L6: It would have phased me as a first year teacher, [**isol.prc**] [**isol.peer**] like I'm new and no big deal but now it's call me whatever you want, you know, I'm here to do my job.

I: Where do you see yourself professionally in the next 1-3 years? **Attrition** [**teach.attr**]

L6: I think I am definitely hooked on teaching and if I'm not teaching here I'll definitely be teaching someplace else. [**teach.attr**] Absolutely, ... I, you know it's a lot of little victories and those little victories really make a difference for me I definitely feel like I've done something at the end of the day. Yeah, if you're building a bridge or something you know ok well one day you laid some bricks so what, but with teaching every day I can leave the classroom and feel like ok I helped that student do this today or I did that well, its very rewarding.

I: Ok, thank you very much for participating in the interview and sharing your experiences about teacher **isolation** and **attrition**. [**teach.attr**] I appreciate your time. Thank you.

L6: You're welcome.

CURRICULUM VITAE

David S. Sleppin
dslepp@gmail.com

EDUCATION

Ed.D., Administrator Leadership, Walden University, 2009
M. A., Educational Leadership, Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2004
M. A. T., Fairleigh Dickinson University, 1990
B. A., University of Delaware, 1986

CERTIFICATIONS

Administrative Certifications:

School Administrator: NJ School Administrator Certificate of Eligibility
Principal Certification: NJ Principal Certificate of Eligibility
Supervisor Certification: NJ Standard Supervisor Certificate

Teaching Certification:

ESL K-12: NJ Standard Certificate

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Administrative:

9/2004-Present: Supervisor of Instruction, _____ Public Schools

Responsibilities Include:

- **Supervisor of ESL, Bilingual, World Language and Title I (Basic Skills) Departments**
- **Experience supervising and evaluating teaching faculty and paraprofessional staff**
- **Experience aligning district courses of study to the NJCCCS**
- **District Testing Coordinator- Experience with State Assessments (NJ ASK 3-8)**
- **Coordinator of Federal Programs/Grants (NCLB) - *Successfully secured 4.5 million dollars in entitlement grant awards since FY 2003***
- **Coordinator- District Extended-Day Learning Programs/Gifted & Talented Programs**
- **District Staff Development Coordinator- Responsible for providing in-service/out of district and web-based professional development activities and Highly Qualified Teacher Compliance**
- **Responsible for maintaining the District Web-based Student Information System**

- **Responsible for the NJ SMART Data Uploads and SID Management**

Teaching: 1988-2004 Teacher of ESL, Grades K-8, _____ Public Schools

OTHER EXPERIENCE

1986-1997 United States Army and Army Reserves

- **Army ROTC College Scholarship Recipient**
- **Served as a Platoon Leader, Company Commander and Battalion Staff Officer**
- **Attained rank of Captain**