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## Veteran Social Justice Teacher Challenges and Retention

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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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I'Asha S. Warfield

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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

Veteran Social Justice Teacher Challenges and Retention

by

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MA, California State University, Hayward, 2006

BA, Occidental College, 1999

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

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## Abstract

Teacher attrition disproportionately affects schools that have high populations of students who are socio-economically disadvantaged and/or high populations of students of color. The retention of social justice teachers is specifically important at high-needs schools because these teachers help to address both educational and social inequality. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators describe why they stay in the classroom despite perceived emotional challenges and what supports they recommend to keep social justice teachers in the classroom. The concepts of purpose, identity, and power, culture, and context from Hargreaves's emotional practice of teaching model were used as a framework. In this basic qualitative study, interviews with eight self-identified social justice teachers were analyzed using two-cycle coding to discern three emergent themes. The themes addressed why self-identified social justice teachers stay in the classroom and suggestions they offer to increase retention. The results indicated that teachers desired and experienced opportunities to grow (subthemes were collaboration and mentorship), being treated like professionals (subthemes were autonomy and trust, structural support and power, and relevant professional development), and finding fulfillment (subthemes were investment, personal and spiritual fulfillment, and leaving a legacy). The findings of this study could help principals and district leaders understand how to retain experienced social justice teachers, and this could promote positive social change by increasing the number of teachers who support having a more equal and equitable education system.

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## Dedication

To social justice teachers who trailblaze, speak up, “act out,” cry, get exhausted, then rest just enough to get up the next day, grab their teacher bag, and continue the work. You are my tribe.

To my brother, Tyrell R. Wilson. Social justice matters. Your life mattered.

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I would like to thank my family who cheer me on. Mom, thank you for always having more confidence in my ability than I do. Will, thank you for making me laugh when I am overwhelmed. Uncle Fred, thank you for "calling things that did not exist as if they did." *Now*, you can truthfully brag that your niece has her Ph.D. Dyanna and Desirée, thank you for the many times you played quietly while Mommy had meetings with her teacher.

Finally, I would like to thank this process. Years ago, I excitedly welcomed you into my life not knowing what an inconsiderate house guest you would be. Although you stayed longer and took up more space than I anticipated, you have taught me the importance of perseverance. I will carry that lesson with me in all my future pursuits. For that, I thank you. Now, I happily say goodbye. Here, let me hold the door for you.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Teacher turnover disproportionately affects schools and districts with a large population of economically disadvantaged and/or a high population of students of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Donley et al., 2019). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) found that the teacher turnover rate was 50% higher at Title I schools than non-Title I schools. The turnover rate in schools with more than 55% students of color experience 70% more teacher turnover than schools with less than 10% students of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). It is important to note that researchers did not find student race to be a predictor of teacher turnover; instead, they point to challenging working conditions that often exist in schools with a population of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015). The cost of teacher turnover is financial, relational, and institutional, all of which can negatively impact students who already suffer from an unequal education system.

Schools and districts incur the financial burden that accompanies high teacher turnover. While a new, early career teacher may be less expensive as far as salary, there are the added costs of induction and training (Donley et al., 2019). These costs accumulate when the new teacher chooses to leave the following year, and the school or district has to go through the process and incur the costs of recruiting, hiring, and training the next year.

Teacher turnover also has a high relationship cost. Relationships are essential to building a unified school culture; trust must be established, and that takes time (Simon & Johnson, 2015). High turnover impedes trust and disrupts the relationship building

process (Simon & Johnson, 2015). These relationships are important to collaboration.

Trusting relationships are also vital in mentorships. Experienced teachers are often asked to mentor new teachers. While these relationships might benefit both parties, they are time consuming, often adding extra duties that keep experienced teachers from work in their own classrooms, and this additional work could lead to burnout (Dedeo et al., 2017). Furthermore, if new teachers leave the next year, the experienced teachers might feel that they had wasted their time and be less willing to engage in such relationships in the future (Donley et al., 2019).

High teacher turnover may also depress institutional development. As teachers leave and new teachers replace them, human capital is lost. Teaching assignments are often rearranged to account for the instructional makeup of a new faculty (Simon & Johnson, 2015). For example, a teacher who normally teaches third grade might be reassigned to teach fifth grade, or a teacher who regularly teaches 12th grade economics might be assigned 10th grade world history. Reassignments might result in a loss in human capital and teacher burnout due to having to learn a new curriculum (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Turnover also impacts school-wide professional development. Schools and districts with high teacher turnover have to conduct the same entry-level professional development each year instead of elevating and providing more complex and comprehensive professional development that could help the institution grow (Defeo et al., 2017).

Additionally, high turnover limits school leadership's capacity to implement institutional changes. Principals and other school leaders have to spend more time

recruiting, hiring, and training new staff instead of spending that time on overall school improvement (Donley et al., 2019). Teacher leaders might also shy away from leadership positions that focus on school-wide instructional practices and systems because those teachers tasked with implementing those practices and systems might be gone the following year (Donley et al., 2019). Having to replace teachers each year disrupts schools' educational programs, especially when the newer teacher has less experience and fewer qualifications than the teacher being replaced. It is more challenging to continue initiatives and build school-wide programs with a revolving staff (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). This lack of continuity could result in diminished institutional memory that would help a school continue to develop and improve (Donley et al., 2019).

In this chapter, I discuss background information, the problem and purpose of the study, the research questions, conceptual framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance.

### **Background**

Teacher turnover poses a great challenge given the teacher shortage in high-need schools. Due to a rise in birthrates and immigration, it is predicted that student enrollment in U.S. K-12 public schools will increase from 50 million in 2016 to 53 million by 2025 (Sutcher et al., 2019). However, high teacher attrition and the decrease in enrollment in teacher education programs pose a challenge to meeting the increase in K-12 student enrollment (García & Weiss, 2019b; Sutcher et al., 2019). The predicted increase in demand in terms of student enrollment and the decrease in supply of qualified teachers have brought attention to the teacher shortage in schools with a high population of

economically disadvantaged students and schools with a high population of students of color in rural areas (Donley et al., 2019). Only one third of attrition is due to retirement while two thirds of teachers leave the profession early (Sutcher et al., 2019). Some consequences of high attrition and turnover are decreased morale of teachers who stay and a weakening of school cohesion (García & Weiss, 2019b). At the same time that there is a high attrition rate in some areas, there is a decline in teacher education program enrollment. Between 2010 to 2018, enrollment in teacher education programs had decreased by a third (Partelow, 2019; Title II Reports, 2020). Subject-specific shortages pose even a greater challenge. Particularly, there is a national shortage in math and science teachers because people who have experience in math and science can typically make more money outside of teaching (Sutcher et al., 2019). Even with bonuses within these shortfall areas, the salary pales in comparison to what those individuals could make outside of education.

In order to meet the supply and demand gap, some districts fill their vacancies with underqualified teachers. Districts are only able to hire uncertified teachers if they cannot fill their vacancies with certified ones (Sutcher et al., 2019). Schools have hired teachers who have fewer credentials and less experience because it is becoming increasingly more difficult to fill vacancies (García & Weiss, 2019b). From a survey taken of 211 California school districts taken in 2016, Podolsky and Sutcher (2016) found that 75% of school districts reported the challenge of filling teaching vacancies. California doubled the number of teachers with emergency and temporary credentials between 2012–2013 and 2015–2016 (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Some of the

teachers filling vacancies do not hold a credential, enter the profession through alternative programs, do not have an education background in their subject area, or have taught for fewer than 5 years (García & Weiss, 2019a). A consequence of filling vacancies with underprepared teachers is that they have been found to be 2.5 times more likely to leave teaching after their first year than prepared teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Leaving after the first year of teaching further exacerbates the teacher shortage. As teachers leave the profession, the teachers who enter are often less experienced and not as credentialed as the ones who left and, in turn, are more likely to leave.

The problem of filling vacancies is worse for high-need schools. Inequity in school funding makes it difficult to attract and keep qualified teachers and high-poverty schools often pay lower salaries to work in more challenging environments (Sutcher et al., 2019). High-poverty districts were found to be twice as likely to fill their vacancies with underqualified or substitute teachers than low-poverty districts (García & Weiss, 2019b). Since teachers who hold credentials are more likely to stay in the profession longer, retaining teachers at high-poverty schools is sometimes more difficult because first year and noncredentialed teachers are more likely to leave the school or profession (García & Weiss, 2019a). Even highly credentialed teachers at high-poverty schools are more likely to leave the school than equally qualified teachers are likely to leave low-poverty schools (García & Weiss, 2019a). Much of the research on teacher attrition points to teachers' emotional response to work-related stress, burnout, and conflict (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016).



Teacher shortages, high turnover in high-need schools, and the scramble to fill vacancies regardless of qualifications further intensify educational inequality. There is not only a need to keep teachers in the classroom but also to keep teachers who are invested in addressing educational inequality, especially in high-need schools. Social justice educators create curriculum and develop strategies that teach students how to examine and evaluate their experiences and the social structures that shape those experiences to encourage students to become advocates for themselves and their communities (Navarro, 2018; Roegman et al., 2017; Rojas & Liou, 2018). Deemed “democratic activism,” Sleeter (2014) found social justice educators set high academic expectations using students’ intellectual and life experiences to prepare students to understand and challenge discrimination they may face and encourage them to work for a more equitable society (p. 3). Through this pedagogical approach, social justice educators aim to address the social structures that maintain inequality to alter the life trajectory of students (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Dover et al., 2018). Underlying the aim of teaching for social justice is the premise that teaching is not neutral because it is based on the dissemination of ideas and involves the distribution of power and access (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). Social justice educators examine their own teaching to find ways to address educational inequality that often hurt African American, Latino, and economically disadvantaged students (Belle, 2019). Retaining such teachers, especially in high-need schools, is one way to promote educational equality.

## **Problem Statement**

While teacher education courses and alternative certification programs, such as Teach For America (2022), prepare teachers to address social injustice and educational inequity (Reagan et al., 2016), high teacher attrition rates stunt progress toward educational equity for students (Heineke et al., 2014; Ronfeldt et al. 2013). Although high-need, urban schools in the United States are often filled with teachers who enter the profession for social justice reasons, the intent to return to a particular school or stay in the profession is often impeded by required adherence to Every Child Succeeds Act, federal mandates, an emphasis on standardized testing, and other district- and site-specific challenges (Dover et al., 2018; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Navarro, 2018). School districts that serve a large concentration of high-need students suffer from teacher shortages at a higher rate than their counterparts (Podolsky & Sutchter, 2016). High teacher turnover has a negative impact on student academic achievement as well as an adverse effect on teachers who remain at the school site (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Nonetheless, some social justice-oriented teachers choose to remain in the classroom despite challenges.

Much of the research about the need for teaching for social justice focuses on the instructional practices and outcomes of social justice educators (Dover, 2013; Gonzalez et al., 2017) but does not address why these teachers stay in the classroom. Most of the research on teacher retention focuses on why early career teachers leave high-need schools but does not adequately address why experienced teachers stay (Harfitt, 2015; Towers & Maguire, 2017; Trent, 2017; Whipp & Geronime, 2017). There is limited

research on why experienced social justice teachers remain in the classroom despite the perceived challenges of working in high-need, difficult-to-staff schools. Furthermore, there is limited research on what supports experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators suggest are needed to keep social justice teachers in the classroom. This study will help fill this gap by focusing on social justice-oriented teachers who remain in urban, public school classrooms beyond 5 years.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand how experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators perceive any emotional challenges they face, why they choose to stay in the classroom despite those challenges, and what suggestions they have to retain social justice educators. The participants in this study were interviewed to deepen the understanding of social justice educator retention.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: How do experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators describe why they stay in the classroom despite perceived emotional challenges?

RQ2: What supports do experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators suggest are needed to keep social justice teachers in the classroom?

### **Conceptual Framework**

I used Hargreaves's (1998b) model of the emotional practice of teaching as the conceptual framework for this study. In the model, Hargreaves described the emotional

labor of teaching and how teachers' emotions connect to purpose, identity, and power as well as how culture and context shape those emotions. Hargreaves's focus on teaching as emotion helped me to explore how emotions might influence teachers' reasons for remaining in the profession as well as contributed to the design of the interview questions and was well aligned with a basic qualitative study design.

### **Nature of the Study**

I employed a basic qualitative approach in this study. A qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study because it emphasizes context and subjectivity in order to understand how people interpret their experiences (see Merriam, 2019). Qualitative inquiry is about meaning making (Patton, 2015). Focusing on teachers' stories and reflections is central to gaining an understanding of their perceptions and experience. Seidman (2006) wrote, "At the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language" (p. 8). I conducted semi structured interviews with eight experienced teachers in high-need schools who identified themselves as social justice educators to examine why they stay in the classroom and what supports they suggested are needed to keep social justice teachers in the classroom.

### **Definitions**

*High-need schools:* Schools with a high percentage of students of color and students who live in poverty, perform below grade level, are in foster care, have disabilities, have been incarcerated, or who are English language learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

*Social justice educator*: An educator who uses curriculum and strategies that encourages students to examine their own experiences and analyze social structures in order to advocate for themselves and their communities (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Dover et al., 2018).

### **Assumptions**

I began this study with three main assumptions. First, I assumed that teachers who would agree to participate in this study and, therefore, self-identify as social justice educators, indeed did teach from a social justice perspective. Second, because this study centers on teachers' stories, another assumption was that teachers would be authentic and have good memories. The reliance on memory was especially salient given that teachers have moved to virtual schooling due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, I assumed that teachers would be able to describe the emotions they had both prior to and during this unique moment of the pandemic.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study included public, noncharter high school teachers in urban, high-need schools in one school district. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 5 to 25 years. Participants were currently teaching and, at the time of the interviews, aimed to remain in the classroom at their current schools. I did not include teachers who did not identify with the idea of being a social justice teacher.

### **Limitations**

A primary limitation of this study was that participants self-selected in that participants self-identified as social justice educators based on their understanding of the

term. Social justice is a term used throughout the district's online literature and found in the mission statements of district departments and schools. Another limitation was that the participants teach in one school district; therefore, their experiences may not be generalizable. I reached saturation without broadening the pool to include a similar local urban school district. Collecting data via Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic was another limitation. This is a rare moment in which teachers are experiencing teaching in new ways and being introduced to new challenges. This situation may have shaped their emotions toward teaching in unique ways.

### **Significance**

This study may help fill a gap in understanding why self-identified social justice teachers decide to stay in the classroom and what suggestions they have to support teacher retention. Such understanding could inform the hiring practices and retention efforts of schools, particular those schools in difficult to staff areas (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Sustaining the employment of experienced teachers with a focus on social justice could help initiate and sustain efforts to bring more equality and equity to schools. Since school districts that serve large populations of high-need students suffer from high teacher attrition (Podolsky & Sutchter, 2016), the need to figure out ways to retain teachers is a pressing social, political, and educational issue.

### **Summary**

Teacher turnover, particularly at high-need schools, further exacerbates educational inequalities. In this chapter, I described the pedagogical approach of social justice teachers and how retaining such teachers could address educational inequality.

However, much of the research on teacher retention does not focus on retaining social justice educators or does it focus on the reasons teachers remain on in the classroom. I interviewed social justice educators who remain in the classroom using Hargreaves's the emotional practice of teaching model as a framework through which to understand their reasons for staying. In Chapter 2, I will discuss Hargreaves's model as the conceptual framework and analyze current empirical studies on how identity, response to challenges, and support might influence a teacher's decision to leave or stay in the classroom.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore why social justice-oriented teachers remain in the classroom despite emotional challenges and what supports they suggested are needed to keep social justice teachers in the classroom. Such an exploration may provide insight into how to retain teachers who are committed to promoting educational equality and social change. There are at least three major threads in the research literature regarding the retention of social justice-oriented teachers: teacher identity and retention, responses to challenges and retention, and peer and principal support. Regarding teacher identity, when a teacher's personal values align with the school's values, it has been found that the teacher is more likely to remain at the school (Barnes, 2019; Moore & Clarke, 2016). However, misalignment between a teacher's values and that of the school's or dissonance between a teacher's perception of the work and the actual work could result in a kind of teacher identity conflict that might lead to the teacher leaving (Harfitt, 2015; Ryan et al., 2017; Towers & Maguire, 2017).

Other studies have examined role stress, increased standard testing, and how such challenges might impact a teacher's decision to stay in the classroom (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). Still other studies explored resilience as a response to challenges. Particularly, studies have examined internal and external sources of resilience and how resilience may influence retention (Day & Hong, 2016; Tricarico et al., 2015). A third thread of studies focused on how peer and principal support might impact retention. Some researchers found that teacher assumptions and perceptions of support influenced



their discussion about whether they intended to stay in the classroom (Mérida-López et al., 2020; Zavelevsky & Lishchinsky, 2020).

In this chapter, I present my literature search strategy, the conceptual framework of Hargreaves's (1998b) emotional practice of teaching model, and a literature review. The literature review section is composed of an analysis of empirical studies that focused on how identity, response to challenges, and support inform teachers' decisions to leave or stay in the profession.

### **Literature Search Strategies**

I searched the Sage Journals, Education Source, ERIC, and Science Direct databases for peer-reviewed, empirical studies published within the last 6 years. The following key words and phrases were used: *teacher retention*, *teacher attrition*, *social justice teacher retention*, *teacher identity*, *teacher resilience*, *teacher burnout*, *role stress*, *principal leadership and retention*, *teacher turnover*, *teacher shortage*, and *teacher retention in high need schools*. I also drilled down by reading useful studies that were referenced in the articles previously reviewed. Studies were also found based on suggestions by Mendeley, the reference organization software that used key words and phrases found in my reference library to make suggestions for other studies that relate to my collection.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Hargreaves's (1998a) work on the emotional practice of teaching guided my understanding of how emotions may inform teachers' motivations to stay in the profession. Emerging from sociology and social-psychology, Hargreaves developed the

model to examine teacher emotions in teachers' work and development. Hargreaves's (1998b) work is grounded in the notion that teachers are not "just well-oiled machines," but "emotional and passionate beings" (p. 835). In Hargreaves's model, teaching is an emotional practice, and teaching and learning requires emotional understanding. To begin, Hargreaves (1998a) described teaching as a form of emotional labor. Emotional labor refers to the teachers' use of emotion or performing with emotion when interacting with students, parents, and colleagues. This labor could be viewed as positive or negative. Hargreaves suggested that emotional labor could have a positive effect on teachers when teachers conjure their emotions in the classroom to show students their passion about a subject, thus heightening students' interest in the lesson. However, when teachers feel forced to fabricate emotions, this labor could have negative implication. For example, when teachers are asked to feign enthusiasm for reform measures that run counter to their ideas of good teaching, they may experience burnout, cynicism, or guilt.

Hargreaves (1998a) also described emotions in relation to teachers' sense of moral purpose. Emotions are tied to the extent to which teachers feel they can meet their purpose. When teachers feel that they are able to achieve their purpose, they are fulfilled and happy; however, when obstacles hinder them from achieving their purpose, teachers may experience anger, burnout, and demoralization. Examples of obstacles Hargreaves's described were teachers having to pursue goals they disagree with or being asked to pursue goals that they felt they were unable to attain.

In terms of how emotions affect the self, identity, and relationships, Hargreaves (1998a) examined emotions in response to physical and psychological security.

Particularly, Hargreaves highlighted the emotions associated with risks teachers are asked to take in terms of education reform. Teachers may feel fear and anxiety when these risks threaten their sense of professional security. Conversely, they may feel excited and encouraged when the risks they take result in mastering a difficult task. Hargreaves also described the role emotions play in terms of teachers' feelings of power and powerlessness, arguing, "Emotions are political as well as personal phenomena" (p. 326). When teachers are empowered, they feel content and satisfied. When their power is reduced or suppressed, they may feel anxiety, anger, or shame.

Lastly, Hargreaves's (1998a) described the importance of culture and context when examining teacher emotions. Emotions are culturally informed and contextually situated. Hargreaves wrote, "Emotions and their legitimate expression are culturally loaded, being accorded different value within different cultural, racial and ethnic groups" (p. 329). Therefore, when examining teacher emotions and how teachers express their emotions, it is important to acknowledge culture and context.

In this study, Hargreaves's work on the emotional practice of teaching informed the study design, interview questions, and probes. Of specific focus were Hargreaves's descriptions of the emotional labor of teaching; how teachers' emotions are connected to purpose, identity, and power; and how culture and context shape those emotions.

### **Review of Empirical Literature**

In this section, I discuss some of the current, peer-reviewed research about teacher retention. From the research, I have identified three ways to categorize why teachers choose to stay or leave the classroom. First, research that examined how teachers'

personal and professional identities may influence retention is discussed. Next, I present research that explored challenges that influence retention and the ways some teachers responded to those challenges is presented. Finally, research that examined the influence principal and peer support may have on teacher retention is reviewed.

### **Teacher Identity and Retention**

In exploring teacher motivations to remain or leave the classroom, several studies examined the role identity played in teacher retention and how alignment between teachers' values and the school's values influenced retention (Moore & Clarke, 2016; Olitsky, 2020). Barnes (2019) interviewed 16 teachers from Rwanda, India, Japan, and Ethiopia with 10–30 years of teaching experience and found that they came to their schools already having the same values as their schools. The teachers reported that school routines and curricular approaches as well as collegial relationships sustained their values.

Some researchers referred to the conflict between teachers' expectations and the actual demands of the work as an identity crisis that elicited disillusionment that led some teachers to leave the profession (Harfitt, 2015; Ryan et al., 2017; Towers & Maguire, 2017). Using narrative inquiry, Harfitt (2015) analyzed the stories of two first-year teachers in Hong Kong who left the profession after their first year. Harfitt found that both teachers left the profession because teaching was not what they imagined it would be. Although both teachers graduated from teacher education programs, they expressed feeling ill prepared for the daily stress and isolation they found in their job. Their ideas about teaching and their identities as teachers conflicted with the reality of the work.

The conflict between teacher expectations of the work and external demands has been focused on test scores in the findings of some studies. Teachers reported that the focus on test scores conflicted with how they believed students learned and how they viewed their roles as educators (Moore & Clarke, 2016; Towers & Maguire, 2017). After conducting 24 interviews with teachers who taught more than 5 years at disadvantaged schools in London, Towers and Maguire (2017) found that more experienced teachers felt the stress of high-stakes testing more than their novice counterparts because experienced teachers often filled leadership positions and held more responsibility for raising test scores. Towers and Maguire then conducted an in-depth interview with one teacher who, after 10 years, decided to leave the profession. They chose to create a vignette of this one teacher's experience because they thought her story helped to draw connections and better explain the data they already collected. The focus teacher reported feeling that being a teacher was such an intricate part of her personal identity that feelings of failure due to high-stakes testing limited her autonomy and caused her to feel stressed and overwhelmed in all areas of her life. Greater accountability to focus on test scores conflicted with what she believed good teaching to be. Thus, because her personal identity was deeply connected to her work and she felt that she was no longer doing good work, she decided to leave teaching in order preserve her personal identity.

Similar to Towers and Maguire (2017), Lindqvist and Nord (2016) focused on teachers who had taught for more than a few years in their study. They found that leavers, who were considered stars in their teacher education program and who stayed in teaching from 2–7 years, attributed their decision to leave to a conflict between their identity and

the teaching role. Teachers decided to leave instead of “restructuring their beliefs about themselves” in light of their teaching context (p. 96). One teacher found that teaching was not as “fun” as she needed it to be. Another teacher explained that she entered the profession because she saw how much her mother enjoyed teaching, she did not find the same happiness and desire to invest fully as her mother did. Again, the expectations of what these teachers thought the job would be conflicted with the reality of the work.

However, Buchanan (2015) found that some teachers were able to challenge school policies and structures that misaligned with what they believed to be good teaching. Interviewing nine teachers with 4–17 years of teaching experience, Buchanan found that some teachers in the study left the profession because an overemphasis on testing conflicted with their teaching identity, more experienced teachers had confidence in their core beliefs and teaching skills were able to challenge systems in ways that affirmed their identity and remained in the classroom.

### **Responses to Challenge and Retention**

Some researchers have addressed challenges teachers might face and how those challenges influence their retention. In this section, I discuss research that examined challenges such as role stress, a heightened standardized testing culture, and diminished self-efficacy. Studies that explored how teachers’ level of resilience might impact how they respond to challenges are also included.

#### ***Role Stress, Self-Efficacy, and Testing Culture***

Role stress and burnout has led some teachers to leave the classroom (Andrew et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). Role stress is similar to identity conflict in that it

occurs when a teacher's role expectation does not align with stakeholder expectations (Andrew et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016; Somech, 2016; Somech & Bolger, 2019). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017) surveyed 1,145 elementary, middle, and high school teachers that ranged from 1 year to 47 years of teaching to examine the relationship among potential stressors, as indicated by discipline problems, time pressure, low student motivation, and value dissonance as well as teacher burnout as exhibited by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Skaalvik and Skaalvik found that time pressure and work overload were most strongly related to emotional exhaustion. Teachers' emotional exhaustion, in turn, had a negative impact on their sense of personal accomplishment. Yu et al. (2015) examined the relationship between stress, burnout, and self-efficacy, concluding that when teachers were overwhelmed and exhausted due to work-related stress and felt that they were not capable of doing their jobs well, a sense of "powerlessness" and loss of passion for their work might have motivated them to leave the profession

Some researchers examined how the rise in testing culture increased role stress and decreased self-efficacy (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Ryan et al., 2017). Ryan et al. (2017) analyzed online survey data of 1,899 teachers in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Connecticut and found that testing accountability significantly predicted stress, attrition, and burnout. Gonzalez et al. (2017) surveyed 145 elementary, middle, and high school teachers and conducted three focus groups of seven to nine teachers. They found that the increase in stress due to test-related activities and the decrease in self-efficacy could lead to a lowering in teacher morale. While some teachers in their study were not opposed to

testing itself, they reported stress around test-related activities, such as added paperwork, rescheduling of the school day, extra remediation strategies aimed at improving test scores, and setting aside their own content. These requirements increased teacher stress and decreased self-efficacy.

Glazer (2018) also found increased stress due to testing culture decreased the morale of some experienced teachers and motivated them to leave the profession. Glazer studied teachers who viewed themselves as competent yet left the classroom in resistance to the imposed curriculum and growing testing culture that they said conflicted with what they viewed as effective instruction and weakened their job satisfaction. Researchers have found other test-based accountability measures increased stress, burnout, and attrition, such as including test results in teacher evaluations, tenure decisions, and performance-based pay (Glazer, 2018; Ryan et al. 2017).

Rumschlag (2017) explored if there was a distinction between how veteran and novice teachers reported their experience with dealing role stress, self-efficacy, and testing. Through surveying 162 teachers using Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey, 3rd edition, Rumschlag examined if there was a difference in burnout between early career teachers (i.e., those who had taught fewer than 5 years) and experienced teachers. Rumschlag found no significant difference between novice and veteran teachers in terms of burnout, personal accomplishment, or depersonalization: Both novice and veteran teachers reported being in the low range for feeling competent and personal accomplishment. Rumschlag attributed the low levels of personal accomplishment to repeated changes to how teachers were being evaluated and pressure to increase student



test scores. Personal accomplishment was one area that veteran teachers scored higher than novice teachers, and Rumschlag attributed this difference to the time veteran teachers have had to hone their craft.

### ***Resilience***

Resilience is another possible response to teaching in challenging situations. The level of teacher resilience has been reported as being linked to job satisfaction and retention (Andrew et al., 2016; Arnup & Bowles, 2016). Much of the research on teacher resilience referenced Gu and Day's (2007) study of teacher commitment and effectiveness. Defining resilience as "the interaction between the internal assets of the individual and the external environments," Gu and Day focused on three teachers that they considered resilient (p. 1314). From their examination, they distinguished between teachers who physically remain in the profession and those who remain and are still motivated and committed to the work.

The source of resiliency in teachers could be viewed in terms of teachers having internal or individual resources and external or contextual resources (Mansfield et al., 2016). Internal or individual resources included viewing teaching as a calling driven by moral purpose and teachers' personal and professional identities (Flores, 2020). In their review of 69 peer-reviewed journal articles and two book chapters, Mansfield et al. (2016) identified motivation, efficacy, having a sense of moral purpose, optimism, hope, and social and emotional competence as personal resources resilient teachers have. Tricarico et al. (2015) interviewed seven teachers who entered teaching through a pipeline program called Transition to Teaching which placed teacher in high need schools

for at least 3 years. The teachers who participated in this study taught in the district for more than 5 years. Tricarico et al. examined the difference between teachers' "staying power," which was their ability to remain in the classroom despite challenges, and their "impact power," which has to do with student learning outcomes. They found that persistence, work ethic, and sense of calling contributed to teachers' staying power while learning how to differentiate, involve families, and grow professionally increased their impact power.

Day and Hong (2016) also studied how teachers respond to teaching in challenging contexts. They interviewed eight teachers and two school leaders at a secondary school in a disadvantaged urban community. Participants reported that the main challenges they faced were negative student behaviors and high-stakes testing accountability measures. Day and Hong found that internal motivations and external support contributed to the teachers' capacity for resilience. Internally, for some teachers, a sense of calling built their resilience. Also, setting boundaries and accepting what was outside of their control contributed to teachers' resilience. Day and Hong concluded that teachers' level of resilience had to do with their identity, their professional purpose, the relationships they build, and how they manage support structures.

Drew and Sosnowski (2019) also found that individual attributes developed and sustained teacher resilience. Drew and Sosnowski conducted three focus groups of 33 elementary, middle, and high school teachers to examine teacher resilience. In their study, teachers reported that their ability to maintain their sense of purpose helped them to create a strong connection to the profession and the school community. Drew and

Sosnowski suggested that these "deep roots" helped them to be resilient. Resilient teachers choose "to reframe challenges into learning experiences, embrace constant change and uncertainty and draw on rejuvenating experiences as much as possible" (p. 498). The ability to reframe and embrace change were internal attributes that helped them to stay in the profession.

External resources also contributed to teacher resilience. Although Day and Hong (2016) found that some teachers were resilient because of their individual attributes, they concluded that having a sense of "calling" was not enough to sustain teachers. Teachers needed support to further develop and sustain resiliency and concluded it is the role of school leadership to promote and sustain teacher resilience in order to improve retention. Day and Hong also found school culture and relationships helped build and foster teacher resilience. Papatraianou et al. (2018) found that teacher resilience was developed through connections: connection to others and connection to cultural context. Papatraianou et al. interviewed 10 preservice and early career teachers in central Australia, which is rural and has a large indigenous population. The teaching context posed a challenge to some teachers, as they had to navigate conflicts between their developing professional identity and the beliefs of others. Teachers' awareness of their teaching context including its diversity and challenges contributed to their resilience. Teachers reported that support from other teachers and relationships with students supported their resilience.

Relationships with students and colleagues contributed to teacher resilience. Webb's (2018) case study of three teachers explored how relationships fostered resilience. Through their stories, teachers described how relationships, particularly with

their students, helped them develop resilience despite challenging teaching contexts and low pay. Trusting relationships between colleagues was also reported to impact teachers' sense of resiliency. Teachers referenced the need to work with people they trust, the ability to build collegial relationships, and school leadership's capacity to build teacher resilience (see also Drew & Sosnowski, 2019). Li et al. (2019) surveyed 455 elementary and secondary teachers to explore teacher resilience and the influence of organization and relational conditions impact on teacher resilience. Their questionnaire included three scales regarding teacher resilience, work conditions, and relational trust. The teacher resilience scale included 13 items that measured vocational motivation and commitment, self-efficacy, and job fulfillment and professional optimism. The work conditions scale addressed leadership support, teaching resources, and workload and variety. The relational trust scale included 30 questions related to trusting principals, colleagues, and students and parents. Li et al. found that developing trusting relationships with various stakeholders helped build collective resilience. Li et al. addressed resilience as not just about the individual teacher, but having organizational and collective resilience that creates an environment that cultivates and sustains teacher resilience.

### **Peer and Principal Support**

Professional support is another factor that influences teacher retention (Navarro, 2018; Olsen & Huang, 2019). Newberry and Allsop (2017) surveyed and interviewed six former teachers to examine reasons why they left the profession. They found that while all participants pointed to several factors (workload, low compensation, stress, misaligned beliefs, and feeling isolated) that influenced their decision to leave, the timing

and intensities of these factors ultimately led to their decision. Newberry and Allsop concluded that even though teacher leavers were not a homogenous group, personal and professional support may have impacted how teachers experienced the intensity of those factors that caused them to leave teaching.

Some research has highlighted how teachers' emotions could influence how they perceived support (see Fiorilli et al., 2017; Ju et al., 2015). Mérida-López et al. (2020) suggested that teachers who experience burnout might disengage and perceive that their workplace is not supportive and decide to leave. They surveyed 1,297 primary and secondary teachers using the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire II, which measures peer and supervisor support, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale, and the Occupational Withdrawal Intentions Scale. They found that teachers who perceived high levels of support were more engaged in the work, and that this increased engagement was associated with a decrease intention to quit. They also found associations between perceived support, engagement, and emotional intelligence. They suggested that teachers who reported higher levels of emotional intelligence also reported higher levels of support and engagement, and teachers with low work engagement and low emotional intelligence levels reported the highest levels of intentions to quit.

Mentor support has been cited as being particularly important to retaining teachers, with quality mentor relationships reported as being a possible mitigating factor that retained teachers at challenging school. Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) analyzed Teacher Incentive Fund survey data that included 1,479 teachers over 3 years at 37

schools. Geiger and Pivovarova examined five school characteristics: high/low poverty, high/low Hispanic enrollment, high/low Native American enrollment, high/low school quality grade, and high/low enrollment. They found little difference in retention rates that could be attributed to school characteristics. However, they did find that high quality mentoring to be one area that could explain retention. Geiger and Pivovarova also found that teachers in high poverty schools reported higher quality relationships with mentor teachers and greater levels of support, and higher teacher retention.

Appropriate support and inclusion, including from mentoring, may also have a positive effect on teachers' perception of their teaching experience despite the work environment challenges that novice teachers face. Zavelevsky and Lishchinsky (2020) found that work environment posed challenges to novice teachers. They interviewed 20 novice teachers (those within their first 3 years of teaching) from 20 different middle schools in Israel to examine ecological school culture. Their questions focused on four layers: individual, interpersonal, organizational, and community. Some teachers reported that relationships between teachers gave them a "sense of partnership, belonging, and support" (p. 9). The assignment of mentors had a positive effect on novice teachers. Some participants reported that without their mentor teachers navigating their first year would have been "virtually impossible" (p. 9).

Principal support was also found to play a role in teacher retention in Zavelevsky and Lishchinsky's (2020) study. Some participants reported that they had expected support from mentoring teachers and found it satisfactory but expected more support from administrators. Some principals in the study created opportunities for teachers to

share and vent as a way to help with the isolation and loneliness some teachers in the study reported experiencing. Teachers reported positive perceptions of support when the principal appeared available specifically to support novice teachers. Zavelevsky and Lishchinsky found that even when principals did not follow through with providing support, the mere invitation of support made novice teachers perceive that they were supported.

Teachers, however, may perceive principals are less supportive than principals perceive they are. Hughes et al. (2015) found that perceptions of support differed between principals and teachers in a survey of 17 principals and 80 teachers from 20 schools using their adaptation of the Administrative Support Survey. Hughes et al. found that emotional and environmental supports were rated as most important. They found that teachers perceived open and varied communication with principals as a form of support at hard staff schools. Teachers wanted to be shown they were an important part of the school's system through public praise from administrators and through being notified of school events. Hughes et al. also pointed to structural issues that make it difficult for principals to provide the support teachers reported needing. One suggestion was to decrease the teacher to administrator ratio. Another suggestion was to decrease the managerial duties principals have so they would have more time to support teachers.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In this chapter, I restated the problem and purpose of this study on social justice teacher retention. I also briefly described how I searched and collected relevant literature. I then presented the work of Hargreaves (1998a, 1998b) that formed my conceptual

framework. In the literature review, I summarized findings on reasons why teachers leave or remain in the classroom. I presented motivating factors in three categories: teacher identity, teacher response to challenges, and support.

The literature provided several factors that may lead to teachers leaving the classroom. The literature provided insight into how both personal and contextual resources influence teacher retention. Much of the current literature focuses on why teachers leave the classroom. This study aimed to understand why teachers stay. Also, this study will address why social justice teachers, in particular, decide to remain high needs schools. Although some of the current literature is qualitative, much of it remains quantitative. The qualitative approach I took for this study could deepen the understanding of what motivates social justice teachers to stay.



### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand why experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators stay in the classroom and what supports they suggested are needed to keep social justice teachers in the classroom. In this study, I took a basic qualitative approach with participant interviews to deepen the understanding of social justice educator retention. Data were collected from teachers working in a large, urban school district in the western United States.

In this chapter, I present the research design and rationale and address my role as a researcher. The methodology, including participant selection, instrumentation, and recruitment, is provided. I also describe the data collection and analysis process before concluding with a discussion of issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators describe why they stay in the classroom despite perceived emotional challenges?

RQ2: What supports do experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators suggest are needed to keep social justice teachers in the classroom?

In this study, I employed a basic qualitative approach. A qualitative approach was most appropriate because it recognizes context in order to understand how people interpret their experiences (see Merriam, 2019). Qualitative inquiry is about meaning

making (Patton, 2015). Focusing on teachers' stories and reflections was central to gaining an understanding of their perceptions and experience. Seidman (2006) wrote, "At the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language" (p. 8) Interviews with participants allowed me to hear their construction of meaning through their words. I conducted semistructured interviews, guided by the conceptual framework of Hargreaves's (1998a) emotional practice of teaching model, to examine teachers' stories about their work, why they stay, and how they make meaning of that decision.

Although sharing stories about what keeps teachers in the classroom may have elicited emotions that may have aligned with a phenomenological approach, the purpose of this study was not to delve deep into the lived experience of the teachers. The aim of this inquiry was not an exploration of the "essence" of teacher experiences (see Patton, 2015) but rather to gain insight into how those experiences influence their decisions to stay and to garner suggestions about how to encourage others to remain in the profession. Such an approach is pragmatic because the intent is to seek "practical and useful insights to inform action" (see Patton, 2015, p. 152). The action in this case was retaining teachers. Furthermore, to analyze the complexity of lived experiences requires the time to access participants several times and resources that were beyond the scope of this study and perhaps the availability of possible participants.

A case study approach was another option I considered for this study. Case studies emphasize the importance of setting and context in relation to the phenomenon being studied. Patton (2015) emphasized that case studies are "holistic and context

sensitive” (p. 534). Because of the importance of context, the researcher usually uses at least three data collection methods to describe a bounded setting. For example, the researcher might use interview data, observation notes, and documents to provide a holistic view of the case. I had considered using a case study approach to address my research problem because classroom observations and student work could support teacher interviews, thus allowing me to delve deeper into why teachers remained in the classroom. However, the research questions for this study centered on teacher perceptions and suggestions. As such, I focused this study on their stories and not witnessing their instructional approaches or outcomes. My research questions were also not site specific and might have crossed among different settings. Additionally, I might not have been able to find a case study setting where enough teachers met my qualification criteria. Therefore, a case study would have been a poor fit given my questions and participant criteria.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Although I no longer work in the school district where the study was conducted, I did work there for 18 years. With that experience, I had to be particularly aware of how my biases, assumptions, and possible relationships with teachers could influence my data collection and analysis. As a teacher, I have my own thoughts about retention and why I think teachers choose to leave. I suspended as much as possible the notion that I know everything and instead sat with the mindset of exploration. Seidman (2006) wrote, “At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth” (p. 9). I viewed it as my role as a qualitative researcher to hear teachers’

narratives and their experiences, allow the data to tell the story, and welcome surprises to surface.

I also had to navigate my insider-outsider position. Some participants may have viewed me as an insider with whom they could be open and honest. Because the district has high teacher turnover, loyalty and longevity are applauded and carry high status. Since I did work in the district for 18 years, some participants may have approached me as one of their own and felt comfortable sharing with me. On the other hand, I no longer work in the district and that may have caused participants to approach me as an outsider. Nonetheless, their volunteering to meet with me demonstrated their willingness to engage in this project. I acknowledged my need to monitor my assumptions and stayed aware of how participants may have viewed my presence. A reflective journal was kept as a way to monitor my assumptions and chronicle my research decisions. Through this journal, I attempted to make my thinking as visible and transparent as possible (see Ortlipp, 2008).

### **Methodology**

In this section, I describe participant selection and recruitment, instrumentation, and the data collection and analysis processes.

#### **Participant Selection**

I planned to interview eight to 10 self-described social justice teachers who had taught in a high-need, urban, public school district for 5 or more years as a starting point to gauge saturation. Saturation was reached at eight interviews. Once I noticed data redundancy, I assumed that saturation has been met (see Braun & Clarke, 2019; Saunders et al., 2018). Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who fit the inclusion

criteria. Patton (2015) described purposeful sampling as a method to select “information-rich cases” in order to gain understanding of the phenomenon being investigated (p. 264).

I selected participants based on the following criteria:

- currently teaching,
- had taught for more than 5 years in a high-needs, urban, public school, and
- taught from a social justice perspective.

### **Instrumentation**

I conducted semistructured participant interviews for this study. Alignment of the aspects of my research proposal served as a check as I drafted my interview guide. The research questions guided the development of my interview questions and the conceptual framework, based on Hargreaves’s (1998b) emotional practice of teaching model and the literature review helped me develop probes. My interview guide flowed from questions about their teaching, including how they view themselves as social justice educators, to questions about the challenges they perceive and why they chose to stay before concluding with questions to solicit their suggestions for teacher retention (see Appendix). Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) five elements of responsive interviews—detail, depth, vividness, nuance, and richness—also aided in the construction of the interview guide. Much of the work in constructing interview questions was anticipating answers and examining how the way a question is asked affects the quality of answers. I drafted the questions in a way that aimed to address the research questions while also welcoming surprises that emerged.

In order to refine my interview guide and interviewing skills, I conducted two practice interviews with former colleagues who were not participants in this study. These practice interviews and feedback from the practice interviewees helped me clarify and rewrite questions as well as identify sections that required better probing questions. Additionally, the practice interviews allowed me to get more comfortable with the process, especially when it came to using Zoom's video conferencing software and transcript production. I also shared my interview questions with fellow students and received additional feedback.

### **Procedures for Recruitment and Participation**

After receiving Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Approval #07-01-21-0435199), I recruited participants in two ways: Through school programs that focused on social justice with which I was familiar and through my broader teaching network. Teacher names were publicly available on school websites. The district uses a simple "first name.last name" email address system; therefore, with names, I was able to email those teachers myself and introduce my study. I directly emailed teachers an introductory letter that described my study and participation criteria and asked if they were interested in participating. Emails included a brief description of my study including my criteria, my contact information, and the offer of a \$25 gift card of choice for participants' time. I believed offering teachers a monetary "thank you" is especially important given that participants who tend to be teachers are not well compensated for the extra time they devote to the profession.

First, I emailed teachers who are involved in programs that specifically address social justice issues. One area of recruitment was through the website of high school pathways that have a social justice focus. Pathways are small academies within comprehensive high schools that specialize in dedicated areas. These academies were an appropriate starting point for recruitment given that one of the criteria for my study was that participants are social justice-oriented teachers and teachers who choose to teach in these pathways have an awareness of social justice and fit my criteria. The Manhood Development course is another program that addresses social justice issues. I emailed teachers who teach the Manhood Development course at the high schools in the district. Manhood Development is a course offered at 10 district high schools that focuses on African American male achievement through cultural awareness and positive identity development. The course is geared toward African American male students and is taught by African American men. Similar to the teachers in the select academies, the teachers of Manhood Development tend to be those who consider themselves social justice educators.

Second, I utilized my other teacher networks, such as my association with Teach for America, the teachers' union for the study district, organizations that work with teachers on community engagement projects, and other teachers with whom I have worked in the past and fit my criteria. I asked those in my network to forward my recruitment email and information to teacher they believed fit my criteria. Then, those teachers who were interested contacted me directly to set up interviews.

## **Data Collection**

Once participants responded to my email and agreed to participate in the study, I scheduled interviews with them. Interviews were offered via phone and video conferencing, and all participants chose to be interviewed using Zoom. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. At the beginning of the interview, I asked if the participant had any questions about the consent form or the study, reminded them that I was recording the interview, and asked them what type of gift card they wanted and where I should send it. Interviews were recorded using Zoom's integrated software.

Video was recorded and a transcript was created using Zoom's closed caption feature. Given that my conceptual framework focuses on teacher narratives and teachers telling their own stories, it was appropriate and necessary that my transcription method allowed for the capture of the teachers' voices and sharing of stories in their own words. Originally, I was going to transcribe the interviews myself to get closer to the data; however, I found Zoom's transcription software to be fast and useful. I did read through the transcripts once they were downloaded to make corrections. Once the recordings were transcribed, I offered each participant a copy of the transcript and asked for any changes or corrections. One participant requested a transcript but did not respond with any comments. After transcripts were downloaded and checked, videos were deleted.

## **Data Analysis Strategy**

I used two-cycle coding as described in Saldaña (2016) to analyze interview transcripts. In vivo coding was used during the first cycle. In vivo coding was the most appropriate process for this study because it places emphasis on the actual words and



language of participants. A focus on participant words to create codes aligned with my overall approach to this study—to describe why these teachers stay in the profession, using their own words. Following my initial coding, I did a second round of coding and categorized codes to narrow the number I produced during the first cycle. From these categories, themes emerged.

During this process, analytical memos were drafted. To focus these memos, I used some of Saldaña's (2016) prompts that I found useful to describe (a) my code choices, emergent patterns, categories, and themes; (b) problems or challenges that arose as I coded and further analyzed the data; (c) ways that my bias crept into my analysis; and (d) plans for next steps or directions for the study (p. 53).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

To demonstrate trustworthiness in this study, I addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In the following brief discussion of these elements, the rigor in research design and execution is described.

I addressed credibility in four primary ways. First, I scrutinized the alignment of the study, making sure that the construction of my interview guide aligned with my research questions and the conceptual framework. Second, I conducted practice interviews and received feedback from both practice participants and a small cohort of fellow research students. Third, at the end of each interview, I offered to send participants transcripts of the interview as a form of transcript checking. This allowed participants to add clarifications and corrections. Only one participant desired the transcript. The other seven did not want a copy of the transcript but, instead, requested a short brief of my

findings once the study was complete. Fourth, I kept a journal that tracked the development of my research process.

Since subjectivity and context are essential to qualitative research, providing the reader with insight to participants' experiences and feelings is important. Using thick descriptions, I addressed transferability. Using participants' own words through long, descriptive quotes was a way that I attempted to provide context and emotions without undermining confidentiality. Although setting and contexts might be unique to this specific study, with the use of my descriptions, another researcher could use the same participant criteria and similar school contexts to conduct a similar study.

To address dependability, I kept a research journal and index cards that tracked decisions I made regarding the data collection and analysis process, particularly my coding process. Additionally, raw data was shared with my committee members who provided a sort of external audit through their own rough coding. The conversations we had about the interview data confirmed my coding decisions.

In an attempt to make sure that findings were based on participants' stories and not my own assumptions and biases, I used my journal to record my thoughts. This process was especially useful considering I share a similar professional background and pedagogical approach as study participants. At times, the journal served as a way for me to respond to questions and surprises that surfaced during interviews. My reflective process created necessary pauses between interviews, enabling me to better hear connections among interviews without my own thoughts interfering or coloring the data.

### **Ethical Procedures**

After receiving Walden University IRB approval, I began recruiting participants for my study. Pseudonyms were used for participants and school sites in an effort to ensure confidentiality. Before conducting interviews, I gave participants ample opportunity to understand the nature of the study and agree to take part in it through the letter of informed consent. To ensure confidentiality, data will be stored on a password-protected computer and a designated flash drive that will be stored in a locked drawer.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I outlined the methodology for this basic qualitative study. I described how I recruited and interviewed experienced social justice-oriented public school teachers. The data analysis process was also explained. Finally, I discussed how I addressed trustworthiness and ethics throughout the research process.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators perceive challenges they might face, why they choose to remain in the classroom despite those challenges, and what suggestions they have for retaining social justice educators. In this chapter, I restate the research questions, describe the study setting and participant demographics, discuss data collection and analysis processes, and address trustworthiness. I then report the results of the study.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: How do experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators describe why they stay in the classroom despite perceived emotional challenges?

RQ2: What supports do experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators suggest are needed to keep social justice teachers in the classroom?

### **Setting and Participant Demographics**

I interviewed eight participants via Zoom in a location of their choosing. Interviews were conducted in the last 2 weeks of summer break before the start of a new school year while participants were preparing to teach in-person after a long period of teaching online (after one and a quarter school years of the teachers in the target population teaching exclusively online due to the COVID-19 pandemic). All participants had at least 5 years teaching in the district with one teacher having taught over 20 years in the district (see Table 1). I used pseudonyms that represent social activists from

various civil rights and feminist movements. The male and female names reflect their gender identity. There were four women and four men participants. All other demographic factors are not disclosed to protect their confidentiality.

**Table 1**

*Participants and Years Teaching*

Participants (Pseudonyms)	Number of Years in the District
Ms. Davis	5–10
Mr. DuBois	5–10
Mr. Garvey	11–15
Ms. Huerta	21–25
Mr. Newton	5–10
Mr. Shabazz	5–10
Ms. Steinem	11–15
Ms. Walters	21–25

**Data Collection**

Once Walden University IRB approval was received, I sent recruitment emails that included an introduction to the study, participant criteria, and an informed consent letter. Emails were sent to teachers' publicly accessible district email accounts. First, I emailed teachers who were listed on the district website as being a part of school programs and academies that focus on social justice. Next, I emailed teachers that I knew through their professional email addresses and asked them to forward my recruitment email to those they thought would be interested in my study. Three teachers who were forwarded my recruitment letter emailed me directly expressing their interest. I followed the recruitment plan as outlined in Chapter 3 except I did not find it necessary to contact teacher leaders to reach saturation.

Upon receiving eight "I consent" responses, I gave participants the opportunity to select days and times for the interviews and then sent them a Zoom invite. Interviews

ranged in length from 45 to 90 minutes. Interviews were recorded using Zoom's integrated video recording technology and were initially transcribed using Zoom's closed caption transcription option. I reviewed the transcriptions after each video using the video recording to enhance my understanding and corrected any mistakes in the transcript. Using the transcript and the notes I took during each interview, I noticed recurring words and ideas and reached saturation after the eighth interview. After reviewing the video recordings, I deleted the video and worked with the corrected transcripts.

### **Data Analysis**

Central to the nature of this study and its basic qualitative design were participants' stories and the context and subjectivity with which they understood and spoke about their experiences (see Merriam, 2019; Seidman 2006). With that in mind, listening to and sometimes correcting each transcribed interview, often line by line, was the first step in the data analysis process. During this process, I was able to hear participants' words again and became better acquainted with the data. In an attempt to accurately use their words, I initially included their speech patterns and markers, such as "you know" and "like." However, these speech patterns were omitted in any quotes used in the presentation of findings to increase clarity. After reviewing each transcript, I took notes in a journal describing possible patterns and categories (see Saldaña, 2016). I also noted ways to improve subsequent interviews and used my notes to unpack my biases and how my perspective might influence the interviews and analysis.

With the transcriptions, I began a two-cycle coding process (see Saldaña, 2016). In the first cycle, I highlighted words and ideas that came up in multiple interviews (e.g.,

words such as “autonomy,” “support,” “legacy,” and “love”), Once these words were highlighted, categories were created using them. The five initial categories were sense of purpose, positive emotional responses, opportunities for growth and development, autonomy, and structural support. With these categories highlighted and written on index cards, I conducted a second coding cycle and read through the transcripts again, highlighting sentences that corresponded with each category. From this reading, subcategories emerged that I wrote under each category. Next, I copied and pasted the highlighted quotes under each category and subcategory. This allowed me to see connections that I had not seen before, move quotes, and combine categories. From that process, themes and subthemes emerged (see Table 2). While some participants might have emphasized the importance of one theme or subtheme over another, there were no data points that contradicted my analysis. There were no discrepant cases.

**Table 2***Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
• Opportunities to grow	Mentorship, collaboration
• Being treated like professionals	Autonomy and trust, structure support and power, relevant professional development
• Finding fulfillment	Investment, personal and spiritual fulfillment, leaving a legacy
• Opportunities to grow	Mentorship, collaboration
• Being treated like professionals	Autonomy and trust, structural support and power, relevant Professional development

**Trustworthiness**

In this section, I discuss how I addressed trustworthiness in this qualitative study in subsections describing my approach to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Credibility**

I addressed credibility in four primary ways. First, I scrutinized the alignment of the study making sure that the construction of my interview guide aligned with my



research questions and the conceptual framework. Second, I conducted practice interviews and received feedback from both practice participants and a small cohort of fellow research students. Third, at the end of each interview, I offered to send participants transcripts of the interview as a form of transcript checking. This allowed participants to add clarifications and corrections. Only one participant desired the transcript. The other seven did not want a copy of the transcript but, instead, requested a short brief of my findings once the study was complete. Fourth, I kept a journal that tracked the development of my research process.

### **Transferability**

Since subjectivity and context are essential to qualitative research, providing the reader with insight to participants' experiences and feelings is important. Transferability was addressed through the use of thick descriptions. Using participants' own words through long, descriptive quotes was a way to provide context and emotions without undermining their confidentiality. Although setting and contexts might be unique to this specific study, with the use of my descriptions, another researcher could use the same participant criteria and similar school contexts to conduct a similar study.

### **Dependability**

To address dependability, I kept a research journal and index cards that tracked decisions I made regarding the data collection and analysis process, particularly my coding process. Additionally, raw data were shared with my committee members who provided a sort of external audit through their own rough coding. The conversations we had about the interview data confirmed my coding decisions.

## **Confirmability**

In an attempt to make sure that findings were based on participants' stories and not my own assumptions and biases, I used my journal to record my thoughts. This process was especially useful considering I share a similar professional background and pedagogical approach as study participants. At times, the journal served as a way for me to respond to questions and surprises that surfaced during interviews. My reflective process created necessary pauses between interviews, enabling me to better hear connections among interviews without my own thoughts interfering or coloring the data.

## **Results**

Three themes emerged from the data: opportunities to grow, being treated like professionals, and finding fulfillment. Each theme has subthemes, as listed in Table 2. These themes and subthemes surfaced in response to both research questions. At times, participant responses blended from one interview question into the next, seamlessly moving from why they stay in the classroom despite challenges (RQ1) to what more could be done to keep teachers like themselves in the classroom (RQ2). At other times, teachers commented using similar language and ideas but experienced the phenomena in different ways. Responses weaved between RQ1 and RQ2 as participants explained why they stay in the classroom and offered suggestions on how to keep others like them in the class.

### **Opportunities to Grow**

One theme that emerged was how teachers' desire to grow in the profession informed their decision to stay and how more attention paid to teacher growth and

development could help retain teachers. Collaboration and mentorship were subthemes. Seven of the eight participants discussed how mentorship and collaboration influenced their decision to stay in the classroom. For instance, when asked, “What do you think either school leadership or district level leadership could do or should do to help [teachers] stay in the classroom or to support them in their decision to stay?” Ms. Walters described her positive experience of collaborating and conversing with veteran teachers at a recent workshop:

When you’re a teacher who's been teaching a long time, it’s a little embarrassing to say, “I still don't really know how to do this, you know. I'm still having trouble with this.” We talked at the end of our [workshop] protocol about how great it was that you can be vulnerable in that space. To be in your 21st year and still feel like you need support, you know, so that was positive.

The veteran teacher’s desire to grow was also expressed in Ms. Steinem’s comments as she recalled the reciprocal nature of collaboration:

I’ve now worked with three--not student teachers--like three of our actual history teachers at [my school] and coached them or coplanned with them and been like a sounding board. At the end, I feel like I’ve done that to selfishly help myself build out and make my curriculum better.

Some teachers also described how collaborating with other teachers influenced their decision to stay in the classroom. They described how collaboration helped them develop their practice, which motivated them to stay. The impact that collaboration had

particularly on social justice educators could be heard as Ms. Steinem described a meeting with a fellow teacher:

He started giving me some actual like legit feedback. Just like “Hey, you know, your stuff’s really great and I love like the topics that you’ve chosen, but then do you also realize that you’re really kind of teaching from a deficit kind of model? Always like all the bad things that have happened over time. You might mention the resistance in a debate [but] you’re not really lifting that up as being something more real in history.” I was like “Dang, you’re right.” Okay, so then I kind of created this like shift--a new shift in thinking.

Ms. Steinem went on to explain how collaboration helped her deepen her practice and made her enjoy the work even more because she was able to teach a fuller history that could give her students a “complete sense of self and ancestry and pride.”

Some participants pointed to how school culture influences collaboration. Ms. Davis, who recently transferred from another school in the district, spoke about how encouraged she was by the prospect that she would be collaborating with like-minded teachers. Speaking about her new site, she said,

There’s a lot more collaboration. I came there because I knew teachers here that are social justice or equity [oriented] or whatever you want to call it. It’s in everything that they do. Like for a chemistry teacher, or a world music teacher or biology or—like everybody’s doing it. Everybody’s at least down--I should not say everybody-but a lot of people at least [are] down to have those conversations.

Mr. DuBois also discussed the importance of having colleagues who share a common goal. He stated,

Because, like I mentioned before, I haven't felt a lot of support from the top down. So just feeling like there are other people who have a similar perspective or similar critiques or want to do similar work or even if it's slightly different, like we're all trying to do right by our kids. That's huge.

The opportunity to grow through mentorship and collaboration was also addressed as teachers offered suggestions for how to keep social justice educators in the classroom. Teachers discussed the need for such support. Mr. DuBois described the lack of support he felt during his first year of teaching:

Just treading water almost makes you unnoticeable. I was expecting more support from the graduate program or from administrators or the people who are hired to support new teachers. And once people, like on your second or third day, feel like, "Oh, well, no one's like dying and up in his classroom. Okay, he doesn't need support."

Ms. Davis discussed how lack of mentorship and collaboration could be a reason some teachers leave. Describing the possible thought process of a new teacher, she said, "It's a big experiential gap. You go into teaching. You're starting something new and you're gonna have your a-- kicked for a couple years. And if you don't have somebody there that's going to make sure that you stay standing while you're being kicked---. You know who's going to come out on the other side saying "Hey I have a teaching credential and I'm leaving because actually this was way

too hard, but I got it. I like passed all the tests and I checked all the boxes, and I can probably--or actually--relate to my students very well. But I got the credential and now I'm leaving.”

When asked what can be done to retain social justice educators, Mr. DuBois pointed to coaching. He said,

Better coaching would be great. I feel like a lot of the coaching resources at [my school] end up getting concentrated on a few--like the most severe cases. Then people who are kind of hanging in there in a steady state or maybe even thriving definitely don't get support.

Highlighting how some teachers might feel isolated, Ms. Steinem also suggested more mentorship:

But if there was more support for ongoing mentorship like school-site based ones. I know a lot of it happens organically. And that's great, but I wish it was more consistent. Someone to say “you're not alone.” I believe we really treat teachers so often like that they are alone in the classroom.

### **Being Treated Like Professionals**

Being treated like professionals was the second most prominent theme that emerged from the interview data. When asked “What do you think will help motivate teachers like yourself to stay? What does leadership need to keep teachers like you?” Ms. Huerta said, “I think a sense of feeling respected as professionals for one, definitely.” There were three subthemes related to being treated like a professional. Participants pointed to how being trusted and having autonomy make them feel like professionals.

Participants also addressed the role structural support and power play in how they feel treated. Additionally, participants discussed relevant professional development and training on managing their mental health as ways they feel they are being respected as professionals.

### *Autonomy and Trust*

Having autonomy over what and how they teach was important particularly for these social justice teachers. When asked if he ever experienced pushback from school leadership about his teaching, Mr. Shabazz said:

I'm in an environment where basically I get to do whatever I want. Now I don't know if that's me, or the school or whatever, but even when the principal has had maybe a question about what I'm doing, nobody has ever stopped me from doing what I want to do. They keep offering me things that even enhance what I want to do.

Mr. Shabazz expressed that having such freedom helps him enjoy and grow in the work. Similarly, Ms. Walters said, "I feel like I have had a ton of autonomy, maybe too much sometimes, but I thrive in it."

Some of the participants pointed to the role of the principal in offering autonomy. For example, Mr. Shabazz referred to his principal and being "user-friendly." Describing a time when her teaching deviated from the district social studies curriculum, Ms. Huerta recalled:

I took my students outside--this I learned a valuable lesson--I took my students outside to do an indigenous ceremony with them and burn sage. And we circled

up out in front of [our school] and we circled around the flagpole, and at the end of the day there was a message from my principal who told me that a parent had called the school and said that a teacher was outside doing witchcraft with their students. I thought, “Oh, here we go.” But [my principal] pushed back said, “No, that's not what she's doing. It is traditional. It's cultural. It's part of social studies.”

Ms. Huerta attributed her having autonomy to her being “super blessed to be in the right place at the right time with the right people.”

While some teachers pointed to administrators who supported their autonomy, other teachers referenced the absence of, or high turnover of school administrators that resulted in a kind of autonomy. Ms. Steinem described the connection between principal turnover and her sense of autonomy:

We had revolving administrators. So, there was no one who ever asked me for my lesson plans, no one really ever asking to prove what I was teaching. So, I just designed a lot of all my own curriculum, which was hard but really rewarding.

Mr. DuBois also discussed his autonomy being a consequence of having an absent principal. When asked if he received any pushback because he teaches about social justice and current events instead of the science curriculum, he said:

I think it might also be a consequence of like my classroom is not a source of a lot of crisis and there's a lot of crisis at [my school]. So, it's kind of like “well, nothing terrible is happening in [DuBois'] classroom so whatever. He can do whatever he's doing.”



Some teachers discussed how removing their autonomy could lead to them leave their particular site, but not the profession. Ms. Walter described what could drive her out of her classroom. She said:

If I had somebody micromanaging me. Or, if they banned critical race theory, which they are doing. I mean like in my hometown, where I just spent most of the pandemic, there are school board members running on that platform--like “no critical race theory.” If I were in a school like that [pause]. If all of a sudden there was more control on what we have to teach, what we're not allowed to teach, that would do it.

Ms. Steinem also provided an example of when she feels that teachers are not trusted or micromanaged. She said:

Having the administration that doesn't see you as capable or treat like children. It's petty but the whole process of how we have to get approved to buy things. I'm just like “you guys trust us with the minds of children every single day and you can't trust me to spend \$100 on something?” It just makes me feel like I'm being treated like in an incompetent adult, and it really frustrates me.

### ***Structural Support and Power***

The influence of structural support and power was a second subtheme under the theme being treated like a professional. Participants pointed to how school-site administration and district-level structures help shape their perception of their work, inform their desire to remain in the classroom, and influence the retention of social justice educators.

Participants' descriptions of the influence of principal support varied. Some referenced the amount of power principals are given to shape a school while others who came from schools with high principal turn-over highlighted the positive and negative aspects of having high principal turnover. In terms of principal power, Ms. Steinem discussed how she perceived her principal's influence. When asked has anything surprised her about teaching in the district, Ms. Steinem said, "Sadly, how important administration is... how much an administrator can derail a school even when you have really solid teachers. I really hate how much power is invested in a single principal, how much swing, influence they can have." Ms. Davis described how the power structure, particularly administrative power, at times have misaligned with her social justice approach to teaching. She critiqued the administration's decision making. She said,

What decisions they're actually like, quote unquote, allowed to make, or ones they feel they're allowed to make or not make. They tend to reinforce the systems and structures that exist, and then at the same time it's like this ridiculous paradox. We reinforce, actively reinforcing, inequities and bigotry in every level of our school system in our schools, and at the same time, we have a [social justice promoting] YouTube video that we like to show.

However, Ms. Davis also described how a principal could have a positive influence on her staying in the classroom. When discussing how her social justice approach to teaching has motivated her to stay in the classroom, Ms. Davis described the positive impression she had of her new school principal. At her previous school, she expressed feeling like she was the only teacher challenging systems and raising questions

about inequities. Regarding her new school, she said, “I was so excited to not be the only person to raise my hand [about issues of inequities]. The principal of the school started out a PD with an intense, intense call to action. And so that was heartening.” From this first meeting with the principal, Ms. Davis discussed feeling supported in her social justice approach to teaching.

Ms. Steinem also discussed the influence a principal could have on her decision to stay at her school site as she speculated how a principal’s approach could cause her to leave her school. She said:

I guess if I had had a really crappy principal that may have made me not want to stay. Where I'm at now, if we got a bad principal, I'd be like, “Oh, hell no. You're not going to ruin our school. You're not going to veer off our course.” I would probably fight back. If I lost that battle, then maybe I would consider going to another school. But I can't imagine ever leaving teaching.

In terms of principal power, some teachers described how the relationships they have with their principals make them feel valued as professionals. Mr. Garvey spoke of his former principal who made a point to get to know the staff well. Mr. Garvey discussed how when the staff faced challenges at school and the principal had to resolve conflicts in her non-traditional way, the staff responded positively to her. He said, “You loved her, and you came back, and you let her talk crazy to you because you knew she really loved you.” He felt valued and because she had established a relationship with him, he did not feel that she was misusing her power. On the other hand, some participants recalled ways that principals had not built relationships with them. Therefore, when those

principals had to fulfill their leadership roles, some teachers viewed it as an affront and not being treated professionally. Discussing a different principal he had, Mr. Garvey criticized principal roles of authority that were not built on relationships. He described having not seen the principal much of the year and not having a relationship with him until it was time for his formal evaluation. Mr. Garvey recalled:

We're coming to give you an evaluation. We're going to critique you. It's like "Wait a minute. I haven't seen you all year and the only time you're going to come see me is to critique me where you have to find something wrong with what I'm doing, or else your job is irrelevant."

While some teachers pointed to how principal leadership might influence their retention, others pointed to larger structures within the district. When asked if she has ever considered leaving, Ms. Huerta pointed to systems and structures that posed challenges:

In these last few years have kind of just been like, "I don't think I can do this anymore." I don't think I can keep butting my head up against you know the mandates and the requirements and the, you know, extended time where we're not being compensated and, you know, parent teacher conferences and professional development that has most of the time doesn't even slide in me and, yeah, these last few years probably feeling a little bit more so.

Even with these challenges, Ms. Huerta concluded, "But overall, in terms of like feeling that teaching was no longer where I wanted to be. No, I can't, I can't recall a time when I have ever."

### ***Relevant Professional Development***

Access to relevant professional development was a third subtheme. Participants addressed how professional development contributed to their feeling like they are treated like professionals. Having relevant professional development that addressed their needs as social justice educators and their own personal growth was one of the factors that informed their reasons for staying the classroom. They also offered suggestions for the type of professional development that would encourage teachers like themselves to remain in the classroom. Ms. Huerta expressed the connection between professional development and being treated as professionals. When talking about a recent workshop she attended she said:

We felt that our time was really being honored. And that we were being given the tools to really be successful. I think more teachers would stick it out beyond the pay issue. We know realistically, teachers, as a whole, are never going to really see a huge jump in pay. But if everything else was being respected, and we were really being supported, then I think a lot of teachers would probably stay a lot longer than they do.

Ms. Walters also discussed a connection between professional development and being treated like professionals. She highlighted how taking part in professional development workshops with a specific district instructional leader makes her feel respected. She said:

I'm in his professional development today. And it's like, you know, every single time you have a professional development with him you're going to be treated like

a professional. You're going to learn. You're going to come out of it with great ideas on how to continue social justice work.

Some participants expressed frustration with professional development that they have received from the district. Ms. Huerta, having been a teacher in the district for over 20 years, said:

I've sat through so many PDs that are just like an utter waste of time. I'd say 75% of my PDs each year has zero to do with what I teach, or how I teach and what's going to meet my needs. It's more about meeting other people's needs. They need us in that room so they can fill out their forms and say "I did this here," you know, like, to their boss. It's not helping us. So just that lack of respect for our time.

She said that much of her frustration is the lack of relevance to her work as a veteran teacher. She also discussed feeling like tools are thrown at teachers to use without the time and guidance to use them in a way that informs their practice. Ms. Davis expressed a similar frustration as she spoke about beginning of the year professional development.

She said:

You know on day one at PD next week, I know we're gonna look at the data about who's sent out of classrooms, or who speaks, and who is silent in classrooms. But what are we going to do with the data? That wears on you.

When describing relevant professional development, many of these social justice educators pointed to the work that is being done or needs to be done around race and

equity. Mr. Shabazz expressed his excitement about continue professional development on race. He said:

I mean we started antiracism PDs, and let me say some of those sessions were quite heated and very adversarial. But I think that's the kind of work that forges diamond. Black folks were called to task, White folks were called to task, everybody had to examine their ideas and their views. This is the kind of work I'm really looking forward to this year.

Mr. Newton also discussed the importance and relevance of professional development about race. He said:

We did a whole PD series on countering, dismantling White supremacy--as much as you can do it in a, in a public school setting. Continuing to support and fight for those in the face of more opposition to come. If educators and administrators, and leadership, or whatever, can continue to support this work, that'd be powerful.

Ms. Davis explained the kind of professional development that she finds relevant to her work. She said:

But when there are training and professional developments, and there's a lens of equity--not just the word equity, which people love to use or access-- but like you really use the lens of equity of like okay and we're going to use the lens of equity in such authentic way that it might actually, you know, undercut or call into question some of the other stuff that we're doing. That's fine. But you need to have those opportunities for all teachers, all educators to get practice and get comfort in being part of those conversations, getting more familiar. Being in those

spaces so that then they can hold those spaces because those spaces already exist in their classrooms, it's just a matter of them, acknowledging that.

Teachers also mentioned professional development that focuses on mental health as being relevant and important to their work. Some teachers mentioned the need for professional development on trauma-informed practices. For example, Mr. Garvey said, “Suffice it to say to have that same kind of intentionality around trauma informed training for teachers before they even step in front of a kid, an oath if you will, and understanding that this is somebody's child.” However, teachers also discussed the need for training that focuses on teacher mental health especially given the challenges of their school contexts. Mr. DuBois expressed the need this way:

I feel like we have a lot of resources at [our school] for our students’ mental health. I haven't felt as much for teacher mental health. I feel like a lot of my growth has been in terms of like “whoa--The reason you overwork yourself is connected to your own history of trauma etc, etc.” All those things have been a part of my own healing and discovery, not anything prompted by school. But I feel our school and a lot of schools are heavily impacted by trauma for students and teachers alike.

When asked what kind of support teacher teachers like her would need to stay in the work, Ms. Davis quickly replied:

Therapy. Like actual therapy. There's definitely some secondhand trauma in addition to our own firsthand trauma. It all compounds. And I think you got to offload it, or you have to deal with it somehow. And if you don't have a really,



really supportive network or support system, you have to have the skills to know how to process this stuff. And just process like being tired, being exhausted, and not knowing whether you did the right thing or whatever. I think that would probably be really helpful.

To further explain her point, Ms. Davis discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic which forced her to teach exclusively online gave her time to think about her secondhand trauma. She said:

And the pandemic has really made me think a lot about my own trauma you know. As I mentioned, my student that I was very close with was killed like less than a year ago as well. And that was the second time [a student was killed]. I was just like, “Damn, this is going to keep happening and it is happening in our city”.

Near the end of the interview, when I asked Mr. Garvey if he had anything else he wanted to add, he also pointed to the need to address teachers’ mental health. He said, “I would say this, Black teachers go through the same thing that Black students go through, the same thing Black parents go. But we suffer quietly.”

### **Finding Fulfillment**

The third and final theme that emerged from the data pertained to how being in the classroom gave participants a sense of personal and spiritual fulfillment. Fulfillment came from three distinct subthemes: the investments they make at their school sites, feeling connected to the work personally and spiritually, and their desire to leave a legacy.

### *Investment*

Some participants described ways that their investments in the development of their school influences their decision to stay. When discussing being social justice educators and how teaching from that perspective informs their instruction and their retention, many of the participants focused on the changes and improvements they could make within their schools rather than larger systemic changes. Emphasizing this point, Mr. Shabazz said, “I don’t know how anything can fundamentally change, though. You notice, I don't talk about the system or the district. I talk about [my school].” His investment in his school was further explained when he said, “I couldn't or wouldn't teach at any other place but [my school], and I've been offered other situations. I have no desire nor see myself fitting into any place other [school].” For him, his commitment was to this local community. When asked why he has decided to stay at his school, he described ways that he is invested in the future of the school. He said, “I've kind of become part of what we're doing there--an integral part of what we're doing there. And now we're talking about some things that we actually want to accomplish.” He went on to explain the details of a new academy he wanted to create at his school. Mr. Shabazz’ description of the possibility of creating an academy showed how he is looking toward the future of the school and his role in that future.

Like Mr. Shabazz, Ms. Steinem also discussed how her investment in creating an academy at her school contributed to her desire to remain in the classroom. She said, “It just makes me feel more committed and entrenched, in a good way, in my school.”

Similarly, when asked, “What do you think has been motivating or what influences you to stay?” Mr. DuBois pointed to investment in his school. He said:

I'm motivated by the fact our school is still not functional, in the sense. that I want it to be. If I am optimistic and conceive of a school as a place where learning is supposed to happen. We don't have learning happening, most of the time for most people in our school. So, like that's plenty of work to do. I feel like I have a lot of space and opportunity to explore and build programming that really resonates with me, and that I've found resonates with students that didn't exist the school before... So, like, feeling like there's a lot of work left to do and projects that are incomplete.

When addressing her motivations for staying in the classroom, Ms. Davis discussed a conversation she had with a professor about how to change schools. Ms. Davis recalled:

I asked him, “How does that power shift happen?” He said you've got to stay there for a long enough time that 1) you have clout and 2) that you're building coalitions of like-minded people, whether those are parents that are attached to the school or families that are attached to school or stay connected to students. You just have to build the block that is so loud and powerful and beautiful that it overwhelms the old White male department head who's been sitting on his throne for the last 10 years doing nothing and doesn't know any of the kids' names.

Ms. Davis went on to explain how her commitment to her school was also connected to an investment in the community. She said, “I'm much more interested in how can we utilize, or reimagine the constraints that we're under to make learning

experiences for students, or build community in a way that's going to support and sustain our students and their families.” In this way her desire to improve the education system was tied to her investment in her school and community and to her needing to remain in the classroom.

### ***Personal Fulfillment***

Having a sense of personal fulfillment was a second subtheme. Teachers described how their love for the work and relationships they build with students have fulfilled them. Ms. Steinem expressed how she feels about teaching. She said, “I really genuinely like love being a classroom teacher.” She went on to discuss her role and how helping to build an academy has contributed to her love of the work. She said, “If I hadn't gone to teach in the program, I probably would have still stayed teaching. I just feel way more satisfied and challenged and like invigorated by it.”

Words like “love,” “enjoy,” “joy,” and “fun” were often used when describing how they feel about teaching. Having been in the district for over 20 years, Ms. Huerta said, “Time flies when you're having fun and I really truly love my job.” Mr. Shabazz discussed how much fun he is having teaching and that he would consider quitting when it just isn't fun anymore. Ms. Steinem began the interview explaining how excited she was that the starting the year in person instead of online. She said:

I'm really excited. I know it's going to be kind of wild. I'm excited to be there. It will be fun to get to meet these personalities that I met over Zoom. The last year was just like really unsatisfying, you know, emotional and unsatisfying, and so I'm really looking forward to having interactions again.

Mr. Newton also described the personal fulfillment he receives from teaching. He said, “I just know I'm happy and at peace. I truly enjoy and love what I do. It's also personal. So, I guess from a selfish point of view, doing this work helps me feel good.”

Building relationships with students and the community was another way that teachers expressed being personally fulfilled. Ms. Huerta described how influential relationships have been in her decision to continue teaching for over 20 years. She recalled:

I mean number one I just I love building relationship with students... I've been to weddings. I attended my first online Zoom pandemic wedding last summer. Been to baptisms, baby showers. I'm a godmother to one of my former students. I just building that relationship and not only with the students but getting to know the whole family. I've also been to funerals. I have buried a number of students and while I don't love that part, I love the community that comes out of bringing people together, even in sadness, even in loss. It's still community.

In terms of building relationships, Mr. Garvey discussed keeping connected with his students years later and how that motivates him to stay in the profession. He said:

What I love is seeing is the difference that I make. When one of my kids calls me at 25 years old and is like, “Yo, Mr. [Garvey], all that stuff that you were talking about. Man, I was thinking about it the other day and I realized it.” Man!

Part of building relationships for Ms. Steinem was getting to know her students. When asked what could keep teachers who teach through a social justice lens in

the classroom and what would keep her motivated in years to come, she focused on relationships with students and having a classroom that centers on students. She said:

Responding to what they're thinking about and what they're hoping for the future. Not just culturally responsive, but just like student responsive. Making students feel seen and heard in a classroom space is part of what keeps me motivated, too.

### *Spiritual Fulfillment*

A third subtheme was spiritual fulfillment. Some participants described their motivation to teach, particularly from a social justice perspective, as more than a job. Words like “compelled,” “purpose,” and “a force” were used to describe their reasons for remaining in the classroom. Their descriptions pointed to a sense a spiritual fulfillment. When asked what being social justice teacher mean and how it shows up in her classroom, Ms. Huerta replied, “I see my work as very sacred. I feel, to me, it's like ceremony.” Continuing to describe her social justice approach to teaching and if that approach has influenced her decision to stay in the classroom, Ms. Huerta replied:

“[It] definitely has impacted my decision to still remain in the classroom and to remain connected education. It’s just a force inside me that pushes me to get up every day and get up every year and just start again.”

When asked if teaching from a social justice perspective has motivated him to stay in the classroom, Mr. Newton responded in a similar way. He said:

It’s just something that seems to be in me and, you know, I don't know why. I can’t explain it. I think there's something that just pulls us in. It's in our DNA. It’s

in us at a molecular level. Because if it's not, you won't do it for long. The people that stay in this work, there is something that just compels them.

Ms. Davis described what compels her to stay in the work. She said,

It becomes like almost like a thankless task. You're just doing the thing and not because of the outcome. You're doing it because it's the principled thing to do. So, I guess not for the consequences, but for the act itself.

When asked, "What is making you stay?," Mr. Garvey pointed to larger socioeconomic issues that are connected to his culture which he described as being central to his reason for teaching. He said, in almost a whisper:

My people are being faced with an unprecedented time of history. The Black churches that I grew up going to with my uncle and neighborhoods are gone. And I don't know where my people are going or have gone. There's gentrification and people are disappearing. Moving on. So, I feel like I have an obligation, it's kind of something that I made up my mind.

Similarly, Mr. DuBois described his feeling obligated to stay in the work because of something larger than himself. When asked, "Have you ever thought about leaving the classroom?," he said that he had never wanted to teach anywhere else. Thinking about what he could do given his background, he added, "Even like escaping, building my own spaceship, doing my own thing and living off-grid, that doesn't feel in alignment." He went on to explain that it doesn't feel right to him to abandon his students and the community.

## *Legacy*

Reflecting a final subtheme, three participants explicitly used the word “legacy” in the interviews and other participants alluded to ideas that connect to the concept of leaving a legacy. When participants discussed what they plan to leave behind as influencing why they stay in the work, there was a richness that moved beyond having an investment at their school. The participants described wanting to make a lasting impact. Mr. Shabazz discussed how reflecting on his life and impact led him to consider the role teaching could have on his legacy. He said:

I'm at a point in my age where I've done a lot of things successfully, and I said, “Well, but what is my legacy going to be?” It's not just about making money or doing this or starting businesses. Maybe my legacy could involve [teaching]. I'm a student of Malcolm [X]: “Each one, teach one.” So, what better way to teach one than to actually be in the classroom teaching.

Later in the interview, when describing his investment in building a new program at his school, Mr. Shabazz returned to the idea of legacy when he said, “I'm in the throes of something that could be part of my legacy.”

Mr. DuBois used the idea of legacy to explain his motivation to stay in the classroom. He referred to other teachers and staff members at his school who have been a part of the community for a long time. He described himself at the beginning of a career that could add to the legacy he saw at his school. He said:

It's nice to feel small and contributing to a long legacy of work at the same time.

It doesn't make me feel like the challenges that I feel daily or even yearly are like



too enormous because I'm like, "Oh, it's year 5 like that's literally 10% of [another teacher's] career." It doesn't matter that I'm not good at this yet, because there's plenty of time left, and plenty of work to do.

The desire to become a strong teacher and be a part of the legacy at his school has influenced him to stay.

Ms. Huerta discussed her desire to encourage students to become teachers as part of her legacy. She said:

I hope to inspire more students to want to go into education. I feel like maybe that's the legacy I'm trying to leave behind. Knowing that even if I just inspired two or three kids to become educators... So it's like that circle. Never closes. It just continues. That cycle continues and that for me is very important because I see our society pulling us further and further away from our essence as humans and that worries me.

Mr. Garvey also pointed to inspiring students as being a part of his legacy. When asked what is making him stay in the classroom despite the challenges, he said, "I think that I'm still looking for my replacement... I'm looking for my replacement like any master should look for an apprentice to take their place." He later went on to describe the cycle that Ms. Huerta also described:

Even if you don't get to see [your work] come to fruition. You see a little spark when you've been inspired a young person in the moment. And you know and think back to the people in your childhood who dropped a little jewel that caused that ripple through your brain that made you want to explore something like it. The fact that I get the opportunity to be that person is awesome.

## Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the eight social justice teachers interviewed, the setting, and context for this study. I described the data collection and analyses processes, and how I addressed trustworthiness. I relayed themes that emerged from the data. I then summarized the results as they addressed social justice teacher retention.

The results indicated the importance of having opportunities to grow, being teachers like professional, and having a sense of fulfillment in terms of both how experienced social justice educators describe why they stay in the classroom and suggestions they have for keeping social justice educators in the classroom. In terms of opportunities to grow, participants described the importance of collaboration and the reciprocal nature of mentoring. Participants also discussed how being treated like professionals influence how they view their work, their intent to stay, and how it could influence others to remain in the classroom. Autonomy, power dynamics, relevant professional development, and attending to teachers' mental health were ways participants expressed being treated like professionals. Lastly, the data suggested that having a sense of fulfillment influenced participants' retention. Participants described their site-specific investments as well as their investment in the local communities. Participants also described ways that teaching has been personally and spiritually fulfilling. Included in the idea of being fulfilled was participants' intention to leave a legacy—to have a lasting impact on their schools and communities. Collectively, these themes provide a better understanding of why these teachers remain in the classroom.

Next, in Chapter 5, I will provide an interpretation of these findings as they confirm, disconfirm, or extend Hargreaves's (1998a) emotional practice of teaching model and the current literature on teacher retention. Chapter 5 will also include a discussion of the limitations of the findings, possible social change implications, and suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand social justice teacher retention in response to the following two research questions:

RQ1: How do experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators describe why they stay in the classroom despite perceived emotional challenges?

RQ2: What supports do experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators suggest are needed to keep social justice teachers in the classroom?

I interviewed eight self-identified, social justice teachers who had taught in high-needs schools for 5 or more years for this basic qualitative study. The following three main themes and accompanying subthemes emerged from the data, all addressing both research questions:

- Opportunities to grow (subthemes: collaboration and mentorship),
- Being treated like professionals (subthemes: autonomy and trust, structural support and power, and relevant professional development), and
- Finding fulfillment (subthemes: investment, personal and spiritual fulfillment, and leaving a legacy).

In this chapter, I analyze and interpret the findings in light of Hargreaves's (1998a) emotional practice of teaching model. Next, the ways that the findings confirm, disconfirm, or extend knowledge garnered from current, peer-reviewed studies are

discussed. Then, I describe the limitations of the study and offer recommendations for further research. Lastly, the potential impact for positive social change is presented.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

#### **Interpretation of Findings in Light of Hargreaves's Emotional Practice of Teaching Model**

All three themes (i.e., having the opportunity to grow, being treated like professionals, and finding fulfillment) confirmed Hargreaves's (1998a) emotional labor of teaching model. In the model, Hargreaves described the emotional labor of teaching; how teachers' emotions connect to purpose, identity, and power; and how culture and context shape those emotions. The results of this study confirmed Hargreaves's overarching description of teachers as emotional and passionate beings. Participants' responses to questions that asked them to point to specific teaching strategies were often laced with emotion and passion, evidenced across all three themes. Even though these were veteran teachers who had years of instructional experiences and practices to recall, they focused most on the emotions and passions that informed their instructional decisions. For instance, discussions about how teaching from a social justice lens was expressed in their classrooms, teachers often gave a quick description of a project or assignment they assigned and then went on at length to discuss the why behind the assignment. Their "whys" were often their desire to centralize specifically marginalized student voices and expose students to a fuller history in which the struggle and resistance of their culture and community was represented. Another way I heard participants' emotions and passions was when they spoke about the relationships they have with

students. Some participants spoke about students who had been killed in the community and the emotional toll such events have had on them as teachers and community members. Other participants spoke with joy about being a part of students' lives beyond the years they had them in their classes.

Supporting Hargreaves's (1998b) general idea of teachers being emotional beings, the third theme, finding fulfillment, confirmed Hargreaves's specific idea of having a moral purpose. Hargreaves suggested that teachers who felt that they were able to fulfill their sense of moral purpose were more content with their work. Participants who described building specialized pathways or projects that centered on issues of equity and student voice, expressed being happy with their work and a desire to continue teaching. This sense of moral purpose was expressed even more so as teachers discussed being "compelled to teach" and teaching as a "force" within them. Participants expressed how being invested particularly at their school sites and the surrounding community influenced their decision to remain in the classroom. While some participants discussed larger systemic issues regarding equity and education, most centered on what they could add or change about their schools. Their responses echoed the "think globally, act locally" approach to teaching. It is important to note, however, that while all participants intended to continue teaching long term, two teachers admitted that they were unsure of how long they would last as teachers. These two participants expressed their discontent with larger systemic problems that hampered their ability to feel fulfilled in their current positions. They conceded that if at some point they felt that they were not able to see the positive impact they had through teaching, they would leave. In a way, the alignment

between their moral purpose and their expected impact influenced their intention to remain in teaching.

### **Interpretation of Findings Considering Empirical Research**

It is important that an interpretation of findings in light of current research begin with emphasizing the unique, self-selected sample used for this study, which makes it difficult to compare the results with other studies. The participants for this study were veteran teachers who taught from a social justice perspective. These participants intentionally chose to teach in this high-needs school district. They entered the district aware of the challenges and with the intent to have a positive impact on the students there. Two of the participants work in programs specifically geared toward raising the achievement of African American male students. Teaching was a second career for two participants who entered the field to work in this district. Three of the participants previously worked in school support programs and decided to enter the classroom to have a greater impact. Five of the participants directly expressed coming from activist backgrounds that compelled them to teach.

Much of the current research on teacher retention focused on the challenges teachers face and explored how those challenges could explain low teacher retention (Glazer, 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Towers & Maguire, 2017). However, the teachers in this study, perhaps because their intentions and backgrounds, did not focus on the kinds of challenges raised in the current research. Nonetheless, there were instances when the findings of this study confirmed and could extend the current literature. In this section, I address those moments of alignment.

### ***Opportunity to Grow***

One theme that surfaced in this study was teachers staying in the profession despite perceived challenges because they had the opportunity to grow. Teachers expressed how mentoring relationships and collaboration influenced their decision to stay in the classroom. These relationships were important to their growth, and feeling like they were developing motivated the participants to stay in their teaching roles. The literature I reviewed for this study did not place the same emphasis on teacher growth. The current research explored the impact peer and principal support could have on teacher retention in terms of how support could build teacher resilience (Day & Hong, 2016; Drew & Sosnowski, 2019; Papatraianou et al., 2018; Webb, 2018). However, being resilient was not brought up as an influential factor by the participants. This was surprising given the research on the importance of being a resilient teacher, especially in challenging school environments. The participants and their school settings were rather unique, and I recruited these participants specifically because they wanted to talk about being social justice teachers, which has not been the focus of previous studies about teacher retention. Participants in the current study did not attribute their longevity to their ability to adjust and push through obstacles; instead, they expressed being pulled forward because of their sense of purpose or calling.

### ***Being Treated Like Professionals***

Another key finding was the importance of being treated as professionals. One area that participants discussed was the autonomy they felt in their classrooms. Some researchers found that lack of autonomy and self-efficacy could lead to teachers leaving



the profession (Yu et al., 2015). A few studies attributed the rise in standardized test culture and accompanying mandated curriculum to an increased sense of powerlessness, decreased moral, and weakened job satisfaction among teachers (Glazer, 2018; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Ryan et al. 2017). None of the participants discussed test culture and mandated curriculum as challenging their autonomy. It is important to note, however, that only three of the eight participants were directly responsible for state tests. Therefore, participants might not have felt the same impact as teachers whose names were attached to student test scores. Instead, participants expressed being pleased with the amount of autonomy they experienced and how that autonomy was a motivating factor in their decision to stay in teaching. Having autonomy was especially important to these social justice teachers who often use current events, social issues, and student experiences as their curricular content.

### ***Finding Fulfillment***

Perhaps the most prevalent finding was the influence fulfillment had on participants' decision to stay in the classroom. Participants' investments in their school site contributed to their feeling personally and spiritually fulfilled. The idea of fulfillment could be seen in the research in terms of the importance of internal resilience. Having a sense of moral purpose, optimism, and hope were important factors of internal resilience (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019; Flores, 2020). These aspects of internal resilience confirmed my findings as participants discussed internal elements that motivated them to continue teacher. However, participants in the current study pointed more directly to a spiritual understanding of those internal elements as they described their motivation as "a life

force” or “something that is biblical.” In this way, there is room to extend the current research.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to the possibility of generalizing the findings of this study to other settings. The first is that participants self-identified as social justice teachers. The term “social justice” is a familiar phrase in the district and often used in the district’s literature. Nonetheless, I did not collect a prescreening survey or checklist to identify participants as social justice teachers. However, there were questions I asked at the beginning of each interview that served as a kind of screening process. Particularly, three interview questions helped describe their social justice orientation:

- You consider a social justice educator or a teacher who teaches through a social justice lens. What does that mean to you?
- How does that perspective show up in your classroom?
- Please give me an example of how that perspective influences your teaching.

Another limitation was the time and context of the interviews. First, interviews took place a couple of weeks before the beginning of a new school year. Responses may have differed if interviews were conducted at a different time of the school year. Second, the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be ignored. Participants had spent the previous year and a half teaching online and were preparing to teach in person. Some participants expressed their excitement to see their students again. This reunion-type feeling might have colored their responses. Even with online teaching being fresh in their minds, teachers still reached for stories from before the pandemic to explain why they

remain in the classroom. So, although the pandemic might have been influential, it did not overshadow or consume teacher narratives.

### **Recommendations**

After conducting this study, other questions were raised that could point to the necessity for further research. Further exploration of factors related to teacher retention that were not addressed in this study could provide a broader understanding of why teachers remain in the classroom and what can be done to encourage higher retention rates, especially in high-need schools. I recommend the following:

- A further exploration of principal retention and its influence on teacher retention in high-need schools.
- A replication study, postpandemic, to explore how social justice teachers describe how the pandemic may have influenced their decision to remain in the classroom. Although the pandemic revealed educational inequities, some teachers expressed dissatisfaction with returning to school when they feel nothing has been done to address those inequalities.
- A study of second-career teachers who have taught 5 or more years and how they perceive teaching from a social justice perspective.
- A case study of veteran, self-identified social justice teachers using multiple interviews, participant journals, and class observation to explore how their teaching perspective, practice, and reflection may influence their decision to stay in the classroom.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Teacher retention continues to be a problem in the United States. This problem has been exacerbated in recent years because teachers have had to adapt to a variety of teaching situations through the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the retention of social justice teachers in particular is important as the country grapples with issues of history, equity, and justice. I posit that teachers who directly address such issues through what and how they teach are needed now more than ever. The findings of this study could be used to support the retention of social justice teachers. Efforts that address teachers' desire to grow, be treated as professionals, and experience fulfillment could help retain teachers.

### **Opportunities to Grow**

Teachers' desire to grow was one finding of this study. One way to address teachers' desire to grow is by paying greater attention to veteran teacher development. Often professional development is geared toward novice teachers. Since veteran teachers are often viewed as experts and mentors who offer support, their own growth may often be neglected. Participants described the motivating aspects of being in collaboration in which the exchange of ideas built reciprocal relationships that benefitted both the novice and veteran teacher. Some teachers also discussed being in trainings with other veteran teachers in which they did not have to feel like the experts but could express challenges they still had despite being seasoned educators. Providing more opportunities for veteran teachers to collaborate and more trainings that target veteran teachers could be helpful. One way to approach such tailored professional development opportunities is to provide

teachers with a diverse selection of trainings that move beyond early teaching challenges and allow teachers to choose areas in which they wish to grow.

### **Being Treated Like Professionals**

As reported in the findings, relevant professional development that addresses social issues as well as teachers' mental health was important to this sample of teachers. In terms of professional development that addresses social issues, participants reported having trainings that discussed issues of equity and access but desired more concrete practices that could help build more equitable learning experiences for students. As one participant noted, watching a YouTube video and looking at data that show the problem is not acting to solve the problem. Instead, professional development that moves from the theoretical to instructional practices would be helpful.

Additionally, a more active approach to teachers' mental health is needed. Many of the participants pointed to the mental health challenges they faced, particularly given their teaching environment. Teachers discussed losing multiple students a year due to community violence and other social issues. They suggested that more needs to be done beyond acknowledging the trauma and offering contact information for support or an isolated workshop on self-care. Instead, workshops and training series similar to the ones aimed at addressing student trauma could center on teacher mental health and well-being.

### **Finding Fulfillment**

Feeling that their work has an impact was central to these social justice teachers. While participants considered themselves social justice teachers who have a larger socio-political approach to teaching, they situated their impact within their local community.

There is an emphasis in district literature and structure on addressing issues of equity, access, and justice as well as the far-reaching impact teachers could have. However, the findings in the current study suggest that focusing on how teachers could have a local impact might be helpful. Teachers in this study were strongly invested in their school sites. They expressed having joy and love for their students and local community. District and school leaders could cultivate that sense of fulfillment by highlighting the seemingly small impact teachers are having within their classrooms. Additionally, increasing teacher leadership roles that offer teachers opportunities to be involved in the instructional and structural development while keeping teachers in the classroom could increase teacher investment, fulfillment, and retention.

### **Conclusion**

This study addressed how experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators describe why they stay in the classroom despite perceived emotional challenges and what suggestions they have for retaining teachers. The findings that emerged (i.e., the themes of opportunities to grow, being treated like professionals, and finding fulfillment) are important because these teachers choose to teach in often uncertain socio-political landscapes with the attempt to teach from a perspective that aims to center on student experiences, social issues, and activism.

As anticipated, participants discussed wanting to grow and be treated as professionals. Teachers having a desire to grow was expected because teachers often point to being “life-long learners.” Providing veteran teachers with such learning opportunities could help keep them teaching. Participants’ desire to be treated as

professionals was also predictable especially given the prevalent social commentary in which teachers are often described as either highly qualified superheroes or those who need to prove their skills and be micromanaged. As discussed earlier, there are practical and concrete ways to address teachers' desire to grow and be treated as professionals.

Yet, teaching remains a complex issue to discuss. There is skill, craft, and professionalism, but there is also more. As I set out to understand the reasons why veteran social justice teachers remained in the classroom, I had not anticipated the emotional and spiritual factors that influenced their decisions to stay. While I expected teachers to have passion for the work and be purpose driven, I was surprised by how much their sense of fulfillment fueled their commitment. I had not considered concepts like leaving a legacy or being compelled to teach as part of their motivation. Indeed, as Hargreaves (1998b) wrote, teachers are not "just well-oiled machines," but "emotional and passionate beings" (p. 835). With this understanding, perhaps social justice teachers can be retained and lead classrooms that are not only committed to students' academic advancement but are invested in addressing the inequities that students and their communities face.

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## Appendix: Interview Guide

### Veteran Social Justice Teacher Challenges and Retention

RQ1: How do experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators describe why they stay in the classroom despite perceived emotional challenges?

RQ 2: What supports do experienced teachers who identify themselves as social justice educators suggest are needed to keep social justice teachers in the classroom?

### Teaching Experience (Warm-Up)

1. How many years have you worked in education?

How long have you worked in the district?

In what capacity?

2. What are some of the reasons you decided to teach here?

--Probe: Could you tell me more about...? (*Listen for Hargreaves's sense of moral purpose and identity*)

3. Has anything surprised you about teaching here?

--Probe: Can you tell me more about that?

4. You consider yourself a social justice educator or a teacher who teaches through a social justice lens. What does that mean to you? (*Listen for Hargreaves's sense of moral purpose*)

5. How does that perspective show up in your classroom?

--Probe: Please give me an example of how that perspective influences your teaching.

6. (RQ1) Has that perspective influenced your decision to stay in the work?

### Teacher Retention/Attrition and Challenges

7. (RQ1) There is concern that almost half of teachers in the US leave or consider leaving within the first 5 years of teaching. Could you tell me more about your reasons for staying?

--Probe: Were there specific experiences you have had that have motivated you to stay?

--Probe: Could you tell me about them? (*Listen for Hargreaves's sense of moral purpose, identity, and feelings of being powerful or powerless*)

8. (RQ1) When you think about why you have stayed, what role has support (internal or external), if any, played in your decision?

9. (RQ1) Has there been a time when you considered leaving the classroom/district? If so, what were the challenges related to your work that made you think about leaving? If not, why? (*Listen for Hargreaves's ideas about feeling powerful and powerless*)

--Probe: Has your commitment to social justice issues ever caused you to want to leave?

If yes, Could you tell me about it? (*Listen for Hargreaves's sense of moral purpose, identity, culture and context*)

### **Suggestions**

10. (RQ2) What will help you continue in the work?

--Probe: What kind of supports do you need to keep you?

11. (RQ2) What do you think the district or school leadership can do to keep educators like you?

12. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?