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Grade 6–8 Teacher Perceptions Regarding Teacher Resiliency Factors in a Northeastern State's Public Middle Schools

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and that any and all revisions required by
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Abstract

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by

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MA, New Jersey City University, Jersey City, 2014

BS, Kean University, 1999

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Teacher attrition presents a significant challenge for Northeastern State Middle School Districts (NSMSD), threatening educational stability and student outcomes. This qualitative study examined Grade 6–8 teachers' perceptions of resilience as a factor influencing their decisions to remain in the teaching profession. Grounded in resilience theory, the study explored how teachers overcame professional challenges and identified supports that promoted retention, addressing a gap in existing research. Using a basic qualitative design, semistructured interviews were conducted with 14 purposefully selected middle school teachers from NSMSD. Reflexive thematic analysis using open coding revealed five key themes: individual resilience factors, relational supports and collegial connections, systemic and workplace conditions, leadership dynamics, and middle school–specific challenges. Findings indicated that resilience was not solely an individual trait but was shaped by school-wide and systemic supports, which directly influenced retention decisions. The resulting white paper project provides district leaders with practical recommendations, reflection tools, and planning strategies to strengthen teacher resilience and reduce turnover. Implications for positive social change include equipping leaders with actionable strategies to sustain teacher well-being, foster long-term retention, and ensure consistent, high-quality instruction for middle school students.

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Dedication

To my husband, Jeff, my biggest cheerleader, steadfast supporter, and partner in every sense. Your faith in me never wavered through late nights, early mornings, and long weekends. I love you more than words can say, and I am endlessly grateful for the way you show up for our family and for me. We did this together!

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

The problem addressed in this study was the increasing teacher attrition rates leading to retention concerns in Grades 6–8 middle schools in a state in the northeast. Teacher turnover has long been a concern in education, as it negatively impacts students, school communities, and the stability of educational environments (Learning Policy Institute, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The departure of experienced educators often leaves students taught by less experienced teachers or substitutes, disrupting instructional quality and student outcomes. This issue is pronounced in middle schools, where educators face unique challenges associated with teaching early adolescents, a developmental stage characterized by significant social, emotional, and academic needs (Farahmandpour & Voelkel, 2025).

Data indicate a significant rise in teacher attrition rates. The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) reported that nearly 44% of teachers cite burnout as the primary reason for leaving the profession. High turnover has been associated with operational challenges in schools, disruptions in instructional team effectiveness, and difficulties in fostering cohesive school cultures, all of which can negatively impact student achievement (Learning Policy Institute, 2022). These findings underscored the need to address teacher attrition in middle schools to preserve stability and foster positive learning environments.

Middle school teachers face stressors such as managing the developmental and socioemotional challenges of early adolescents, adapting to diverse learning needs, and

responding to heightened expectations for academic outcomes (Farahmandpour & Voelkel, 2025). The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated these challenges, contributing to increased teacher stress and burnout. These compounding factors highlighted the complexity of teacher retention in middle schools and the critical need for tailored strategies to support educators.

This qualitative study is conducted to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of resilience as a factor influencing their decision to remain in the teaching profession. Focusing on Grades 6–8, I explore teachers' experiences in navigating professional challenges and examine the supports that contributed to their retention. By investigating resilience strategies, I sought to provide actionable insights that could inform district-level policies and practices to enhance teacher satisfaction and reduce attrition. While centered on understanding teacher persistence, the goal was to offer practical guidance for local administrators and policymakers working to create stable, supportive educational environments that benefited both educators and students.

Rationale

The challenge of retaining middle school teachers in a northeastern state underscores a significant gap in practice at the local level that warranted further exploration and scholarly understanding. Teacher retention is critical for maintaining the stability of school environments and ensuring effective leadership in middle schools, as consistent staffing contributes to cohesive school cultures, instructional continuity, and student achievement (Ingersoll et al., 2019; Learning Policy Institute, 2022). Retaining highly qualified teachers is essential given the social, emotional, and academic

complexities of working with adolescents, who are undergoing critical developmental transitions (Farahmandpour & Voelkel, 2025). Although the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has diminished, its residual effects could continue to influence teacher stress and attrition, especially as educators adapt to ongoing shifts in instructional methods and student needs. These factors highlight the importance of understanding and addressing the challenges middle school teachers faced to promote retention and maintain educational stability. A specific focus on public middle schools in a northeastern state was necessary to address the localized challenges influencing teacher retention. Workplace conditions, administrative support, and teacher well-being are critical factors in fostering retention (García et al., 2022). Additionally, regional factors, including state-specific educational policies, socioeconomic disparities, and variations in support structures, create unique pressures for teachers in this region (Ingersoll et al., 2019). Understanding these influences is essential for developing targeted retention strategies that addressed the specific needs of Northeastern State Middle School Districts' (NSMSD) educators.

Teacher retention remains a critical issue in the evolving landscape of post-pandemic education. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to shifts in the teaching profession, intensifying responsibilities related to social-emotional learning, health and safety protocols, and technological integration (Kim & Asbury, 2022). These additional responsibilities have placed significant strain on teachers' time and emotional capacity, making it vital to identify resilience-building strategies that enable teachers to navigate these pressures effectively. Middle school teachers, already managing the complexities of

teaching early adolescents, face heightened challenges in meeting students' socioemotional needs while adapting to shifting instructional formats (Farahmandpour & Voelkel, 2025). Exploring how resilience intersects with retention efforts is necessary for supporting teachers in these roles.

This study is conducted to address the gap in practice by examining the specific challenges that NSMSD faced in retaining educators. While existing research illuminated the general causes of teacher attrition, there was a need for more focused inquiry into the experiences of middle school teachers in this region. By investigating how localized conditions and post-pandemic stressors impacted teacher retention, the study aims to provide actionable insights for educational leaders and policymakers. The rationale for this study is grounded in the need to understand and enhance teacher retention efforts within NSMSD. I aim to offer guidance for local administrators in developing strategies to support teacher resilience, foster retention, and promote educational stability. By addressing these needs, the study can contribute to high-quality education and effective instruction for middle school students in the region.

Definition of Terms

Attrition: Relates to how often teachers depart from their positions or the profession over time. It is influenced by various factors, including teacher pay, workplace conditions, support from the school, morale, and teacher voice. These elements collectively impact a teacher's decision to remain in or leave their role, with attrition often tied to challenges like low support, poor working environments, and lack of influence in decision-making (García et al., 2022).

Cognitive errors: Refer to flawed decision-making processes that significantly contribute to the attrition of teachers (Denton et al., 2021).

Resilience: An individual's capacity to adapt to and recover from challenging life circumstances, such as trauma, tragedy, stress, and other adversities (Hascher et al., 2021).

Teacher attrition: Refers to the departure or separation of individuals primarily engaged in classroom teaching from the educational system, with its prevalence and impact intricately linked to teacher shortages and their effects on organizational and instructional tasks within schools (Castro, 2023).

Teacher turnover rate: The percentage at which individuals primarily engaged in classroom teaching either depart from or separate from the school district. It also encompasses those who transition from classroom teaching to another position within the district between consecutive school years (Crouch & Nguyen, 2021).

Significance of the Study

This study explores perceptions regarding strategies embedded within resilience themes among Grade 6–8 teachers in public middle schools in a northeastern state, focusing on understanding the factors that influenced their decision to remain in their positions. Addressing this problem was significant because teacher retention has a direct impact on the stability, quality, and overall effectiveness of education within middle schools. High teacher turnover disrupts student learning, increases administrative burdens, and leads to substantial financial costs associated with recruiting and training new educators (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). By identifying strategies

that support teacher resilience and motivate educators to stay in their roles, this research provides actionable insights for school leaders, policymakers, and education stakeholders to address attrition and retention challenges.

The study is relevant to the local educational setting as it highlights the unique needs and challenges of middle school teachers in an NSMSD. Findings are intended to assist in the development of targeted interventions, such as professional development programs, mentorship opportunities, and wellness initiatives that were tailored to the experiences of educators in this region. These interventions are expected to help foster environments that support teacher resilience and job satisfaction, potentially reducing attrition rates.

Moreover, this study's findings have broader implications for advancing educational quality and promoting equity. A stable and effective teaching workforce is essential to providing students with consistent and high-quality educational experiences. Understanding teacher perceptions of resilience helps administrators create conditions that prioritize teacher well-being, reduce burnout, and foster collaboration and growth. This aligns with broader educational goals to improve school climates, enhance teacher retention, and ultimately ensure long-term success for educators and students. The positive social change that can result from this study includes improved school climates, enhanced teacher retention, and long-term benefits for both educators and students by identifying strategies that support teacher resilience and persistence in the profession.

Research Question

What are the perceptions of Grade 6–8 teachers regarding resiliency as a factor in

their decision to remain teaching?

Review of the Literature

The research on teacher attrition revealed a multifaceted issue with significant implications for middle school educational institutions. Various factors influence teacher retention, including working conditions, administrative support, teacher morale, and subject-specific challenges. Resilience plays a role in helping teachers navigate these challenges and remain in the profession. Leadership emerged as a pivotal factor in fostering teacher retention, as research has demonstrated that adaptive and context-specific strategies contribute to teachers' ability to persist in their roles (Kwok & Macfarlane, 2025; Squires et al., 2023). The teacher resilience model introduced by Squires et al. (2023) highlights the importance of mentorship and leadership support in balancing the challenges educators face. Similarly, Kwok and Macfarlane (2025) found that induction programs focused on skill development and administrative guidance significantly influenced early-career teacher retention. These findings reinforce the necessity of strong leadership practices that support teacher well-being and professional growth.

In addition to leadership and working conditions, teacher resilience was identified as a significant factor in retention, especially in middle school settings where educators faced increased social-emotional demands and developmental complexities among students. Research suggests that resilience was shaped by both personal and systemic factors, including emotional regulation, professional identity, and organizational support (Day & Gu, 2014). By synthesizing these themes, this review provides a foundation for

understanding the systemic and individual challenges associated with teacher attrition and explores how leadership practices can address these issues to create more supportive and sustainable educational environments. The following section examines resilience theory as a conceptual framework for understanding teacher retention and the role of leadership in creating resilience-building strategies.

Literature Search Strategy

A detailed search and analysis of peer-reviewed literature was conducted using academic databases, including ProQuest Education, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), and Google Scholar. The search focused on studies published between 2020 and 2025 to ensure alignment with current educational challenges. However, earlier studies were included when they provided essential foundational insights into teacher resilience and retention.

Search terms were selected to capture the various dimensions of the topic. The following keywords were used in different combinations: *teacher resilience, leadership and teacher retention, middle school teacher burnout, transformational leadership in education, teacher well-being strategies, school climate and retention, resilience-building leadership, mentoring,* and *middle school teacher retention.* Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine search results and ensure a comprehensive review of relevant literature.

To enhance the depth and scope of the review, additional studies were identified by examining the reference lists of key articles. Foundational studies on resilience theory and leadership practices were incorporated to provide theoretical grounding and

contextual understanding. This approach ensured a broad yet focused synthesis of research, allowing for an in-depth exploration of leadership's role in building resilience among teachers.

Review of the Broader Problem

The literature review examined key themes related to teacher resilience and retention, with a particular focus on the role of leadership in fostering a supportive and sustainable teaching environment. The literature review is organized into the following sections focused on the causes and trends of teacher attrition in middle schools: resilience theory: the conceptual framework; leadership's role in building resilience; leadership's role in attrition; subject-specific challenges in teacher attrition; specialized disciplines and attrition; cognitive barriers and professional resilience; mentorship and professional growth; context-specific challenges in teacher retention; fostering teacher resilience in challenging contexts; school climate and workplace culture, with subsections on restorative practices and teacher attrition and positive cultures and administrative support; external stressors and resilience, with subsections on safety concerns and post-pandemic stressors; and structural reforms for long-term retention, with subsections on evaluation systems and teacher satisfaction and broader systemic challenges in teacher attrition.

Resilience Theory: The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that grounded this study was resilience theory, which provided a lens for examining teacher retention and the professional challenges educators face. Resilience is defined as the ability to adapt, recover, and thrive amidst adversity, allowing educators to navigate the complexities of their roles while maintaining purpose

and commitment (Day & Gu, 2014). In the educational context, resilience encompasses both personal and systemic factors, including emotional regulation, professional identity, and organizational support. This framework remains particularly relevant in middle school settings, where educators encounter increased social-emotional demands and developmental complexities among students.

Day and Gu's (2014) model highlights the interplay between protective factors (e.g., self-efficacy, relational support) and risk factors (e.g., workload stress, low morale) in shaping teacher resilience. Leadership stability is a critical component, as consistent and supportive administrators create environments that foster resilience-building. Adaptive leadership practices, such as promoting professional trust, autonomy, and sustained support, play a key role in mitigating burnout and strengthening educators' professional identities. This aligns with research indicating that resilience is not solely an individual trait but also influenced by the broader school environment, particularly leadership practices that foster professional growth and emotional well-being (Mansfield et al., 2012).

Studies have illustrated how resilience theory extends beyond individual coping mechanisms to include institutional supports that enhance teachers' ability to persist in the profession. Wiggan et al. (2021) synthesized resilience theory with existing research on teacher attrition and leadership practices to analyze the interaction between systemic and personal factors in affecting teacher retention. Wiggan et al. emphasized the need for supportive evaluation systems to foster resilience and prevent burnout, while García et al. (2022) highlighted the role of positive workplace cultures in enhancing teacher

satisfaction and commitment. Specifically, resilience theory provided a framework for understanding how leadership strategies, such as fostering collegial relationships, reducing bureaucratic burdens, and ensuring access to professional development, could mitigate systemic challenges and strengthen teacher persistence (Gu, 2017).

By grounding this study in resilience theory, the research aims to explore how middle school teachers perceive and experience resilience within their professional contexts. This framework informed the study's qualitative approach, including the design of semistructured interviews to capture teachers' perceptions. The alignment between resilience-building strategies and leadership practices provided a foundation for examining leadership's role in addressing systemic challenges and fostering teacher retention. Through this theoretical perspective, the study is intended to generate actionable insights that middle school principals could use to create supportive environments that reduce attrition by promoting both individual resilience and systemic stability.

Leadership's Role in Building Resilience

Effective leadership is instrumental in fostering teacher resilience, mitigating attrition and burnout. R. Baker et al. (2022) argued the need for tailored leadership strategies that align with individual school contexts, cautioning against standardized approaches that fail to address the nuanced relationship between teacher well-being and retention. Adaptive leadership practices, such as promoting professional trust and autonomy, empower teachers to navigate workplace stress more effectively (Mansfield et al., 2012). These strategies contribute to reinforcing teachers' professional identities,

which serve as protective factors against burnout (Gu & Day, 2007).

Furthermore, beginning teachers often face unique challenges that require targeted support from school leadership. Mansfield et al. (2012) highlighted that resilience-building practices, such as mentoring programs and fostering professional networks, can significantly reduce stressors and create a supportive culture. Research by Lamboy (2023) supported this, emphasizing transformational leadership practices that inspire teachers and align their individual goals with the broader school vision, thereby fostering resilience and reducing attrition rates.

For middle school principals, these findings highlight the importance of adopting strategies that foster resilience and prioritize teacher wellness. Creating an environment in which teachers feel supported and appreciated requires intentional efforts, including regular check-ins, opportunities for meaningful professional development, and acknowledgment of individual and team achievements (Ferren, 2021). Encouraging collaboration and peer support within a school community also plays a significant role in buffering against the challenges of the profession (Mansfield et al., 2012).

Such practices not only enhance satisfaction and commitment but also address systemic issues contributing to turnover. When principals actively model resilience and foster open communication, they set the tone for a workplace that was both productive and empathetic (Gu & Day, 2007). By addressing the specific stressors and needs of middle school teachers, principals create a foundation for lasting stability, stronger relationships between teachers and students, and better outcomes for the entire school community (Ferren, 2021; Lamboy, 2023).

Leadership's Role in Attrition

The relationship between leadership and teacher attrition is well established, with research emphasizing the critical role of administrators in either mitigating or exacerbating teacher turnover. Castro (2023) highlighted that leadership approaches that failed to create supportive and collaborative environments contributed to teacher dissatisfaction and early departure from the profession. Similarly, Mansfield et al. (2012) found that a lack of administrative support diminished teacher self-efficacy, leading educators to feel overwhelmed and unable to persist in their roles. Research suggests that when principals fail to establish a culture of support, mentorship, and shared decision-making, teachers demonstrate a higher likelihood of exiting the profession due to stress, isolation, and burnout.

Leadership stability and trust also play a role in teacher attrition rates. DeMatthews et al. (2021) demonstrated that frequent principal turnover disrupted school climate, weakened professional trust, and increased teacher stress levels, ultimately leading to higher attrition. These findings align with McMahon et al. (2023), who argued that when leadership practices lack consistency, transparency, and a clear vision, teachers experience heightened job dissatisfaction and a greater chance of exiting the profession. Instability in leadership often result in unclear expectations, diminished morale, and increased workloads, all of which contribute to teacher departure (Lamboy, 2023; Mansfield et al., 2012). In contrast, research indicates that lower supervisory/administrative support is associated with lower well-being and higher motivation to leave the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018).

Additionally, the absence of transformational leadership has been linked to higher attrition rates. Lamboy (2023) emphasized that transformational leadership, which inspires and motivates educators by aligning personal goals with organizational vision, could act as a protective factor against attrition. In schools where leadership fails to cultivate teacher empowerment and professional autonomy, job dissatisfaction and disengagement increased, accelerating the likelihood of turnover (Day & Gu, 2014). Studies further indicated that principals who neglected resilience-building strategies inadvertently contributed to systemic challenges, such as burnout, low teacher engagement, and emotional exhaustion, which are central to understanding teacher attrition (García et al., 2022; Wiggan et al., 2021).

Together, these studies provide essential insights into how leadership deficiencies contribute to middle school teacher attrition. As attrition continues to challenge educational stability, understanding the connection between leadership failures, school climate instability, and teacher burnout is essential for developing policies and interventions aimed at reducing turnover. By addressing the leadership factors that drive attrition, school administrators create more sustainable environments that retain experienced educators and support the broader goal of educational continuity.

Subject-Specific Challenges in Teacher Attrition

Teacher attrition remains a critical issue across various educational disciplines, with specialized subject areas facing distinct challenges that contributed to higher turnover rates. Disciplines requiring specialized expertise, such as foreign languages, STEM, and special education, experienced particularly high attrition levels due to

certification barriers, resource shortages, and increased instructional demands (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). These shortages not only disrupt student learning outcomes but also undermine the long-term sustainability of these programs, particularly in underfunded districts where recruitment challenges persist (Podolsky et al., 2019).

In addition to external pressures, internal cognitive barriers and professional resilience factors influence educators' decisions to remain in the profession. Research suggested that teacher self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and perceptions of administrative support significantly impacted retention rates, particularly in high-demand fields (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). For instance, special education teachers frequently reported that excessive workload demands, bureaucratic challenges, and limited professional autonomy contributed to early-career burnout (Mason-Williams et al., 2019). Similarly, STEM educators often left for higher-paying industry positions, citing a lack of ongoing content-specific professional development as a key factor in their attrition (García & Weiss, 2019).

Understanding the interplay between external workforce conditions and internal professional resilience is essential for identifying strategies to address teacher attrition in specialized subject areas. Existing research highlighted the potential impact of subject-specific mentorship programs, administrative policies that reduced bureaucratic burdens, and increased funding for professional learning opportunities (Sutcher et al., 2018). This study examined how these factors influenced middle school teacher attrition and explored leadership practices that contributed to workforce stability. By investigating these challenges, the goal of this research is to provide insights that can inform future retention

strategies and policy recommendations.

Specialized Disciplines and Attrition

Teacher attrition presented significant challenges in specialized subject areas, where shortages of qualified educators disrupted student learning, hindered program sustainability, and strained institutional resources. Studies indicated that persistent shortages in world language, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and special education teachers were linked to specialized certification requirements, resource limitations, and increased instructional demands (Burke & Ceo-DiFrancesco, 2022; Sutcher et al., 2018). These shortages were particularly pronounced in middle schools, where developing foundational skills in these disciplines was essential for long-term academic success (Devers et al., 2024). When vacancies remained unfilled, schools often hired less experienced educators, reduced course offerings, or increased class sizes, resulting in challenges that affected both teachers and students (Podolsky et al., 2019).

Multiple factors contributed to teacher attrition in specialized fields, extending beyond salary concerns to include workplace conditions, administrative support, and professional development opportunities (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Teachers in high-demand disciplines reported limited instructional resources, demanding curricula, and increased accountability pressures as contributors to burnout and turnover (García & Weiss, 2019; Mason-Williams et al., 2019). For example, special education teachers frequently cited excessive workload demands and compliance requirements, while STEM educators expressed frustration over the lack of content-specific training and competition with private-sector employment (Devers et al., 2024; Farahmandpour & Voelkel, 2025).

Addressing these challenges required targeted resilience-building strategies that enhanced teacher support, professional identity, and workplace stability. Studies examining collaborative learning communities, subject-specific professional development, and administrative leadership suggested that these factors contributed to higher teacher retention in specialized fields (Sutcher et al., 2018; Wiggan et al., 2021). Additionally, leadership practices that reduced bureaucratic burdens, promoted teacher autonomy, and provided mentorship opportunities helped mitigate the systemic issues driving attrition in specialized disciplines (Day & Gu, 2014). This study explored the intersection of attrition, leadership, and resilience in specialized middle school disciplines to generate insights that supported long-term workforce stability and program sustainability.

Cognitive Barriers and Professional Resilience

Internal cognitive barriers significantly impacted teacher retention in high-stress fields such as math and science. Denton et al. (2021) identified cognitive distortions such as self-doubt, catastrophizing, and unrealistic expectations as major contributors to professional dissatisfaction and burnout. Unlike studies that focused primarily on external factors like compensation or workload, this research shed light on the internal psychological processes that influenced attrition. Denton et al. (2021) argued that these cognitive distortions amplified feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction, ultimately increasing the likelihood that educators left the profession.

Addressing these cognitive barriers involved interventions designed to enhance resilience and mitigate psychological stressors. Denton et al. (2021) emphasized the

effectiveness of mindfulness training, cognitive-behavioral techniques, and professional coaching in helping educators manage internal challenges. McMahon et al. (2023) added that addressing mental health concerns and offering consistent emotional support were critical to reducing stress and burnout among teachers in schools with high rates of teacher-directed violence. These strategies were relevant for middle school teachers, who navigated a unique combination of behavioral, academic, and social-emotional demands due to their students' developmental stages.

Additionally, Mansfield et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of fostering professional resilience through structured mentorship programs and collaborative networks. Such programs provided teachers with opportunities to share strategies, build confidence, and develop problem-solving skills, which were essential for overcoming internal and external stressors. Resilience served as a protective factor, enabling teachers to address these challenges while maintaining their professional commitment.

By focusing on both cognitive and systemic obstacles, schools implemented comprehensive interventions that supported educators' emotional well-being and built a more resilient workforce. Denton et al.'s (2021) findings highlighted resilience as a pivotal factor in teacher retention, offering actionable insights for addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by educators in specialized and high-stress disciplines. Integrating support systems like those described by McMahon et al. (2023) and Mansfield et al. (2012) created a more supportive environment for educators, ultimately reducing attrition and fostering long-term professional satisfaction.

Mentorship and Professional Growth

Goldhaber and Theobald (2022) underscored the importance of comprehensive support systems, highlighting the significant role of teacher preparation and mentorship in reducing early-career attrition. Their research revealed that educators who received thorough preparation and sustained support during their formative years were much more likely to stay in the profession than those who did not. This underscored the need for supporting early-career teachers in developing the skills, confidence, and approaches essential for addressing the challenges specific to teaching.

The study aligned with existing research emphasizing the necessity of targeted leadership support in fostering teacher resilience. Middle school educators in their early career stages faced a steep learning curve, characterized by the need to navigate diverse classroom dynamics and address the social-emotional complexities of adolescent learners. Without structured induction programs, mentorship, and professional development, these challenges often resulted in burnout and eventual attrition (Goldhaber & Theobald, 2022; Pivovarova & Powers, 2022). However, leadership strategies that prioritized robust mentorship opportunities and tailored professional growth initiatives created a strong foundation for teacher resilience. These interventions not only helped educators adapt to workplace demands but also addressed both their professional and emotional needs, promoting long-term retention (Day & Gu, 2014; Mansfield et al., 2012).

Research by Pivovarova and Powers (2022) reinforced these findings, illustrating the importance of comprehensive teacher preparation and mentorship in reducing

attrition. Their study emphasized the unique challenges faced by early-career teachers, including managing classroom behavior, navigating professional isolation, and adapting to school culture. Similarly, Lamboy (2023) highlighted the need for addressing systemic barriers, such as resource disparities and limited access to professional development, which disproportionately affected novice educators in high-need schools. Structured induction programs and professional development initiatives were essential for equipping new educators with the skills necessary to succeed. Middle school principals played a critical role in facilitating collaboration and providing access to experienced mentors, laying a foundation for resilience and retention (McMahon et al., 2023).

These supports were important in middle school environments, where educators needed to address the developmental and social-emotional needs of young adolescents. By customizing interventions to meet the specific needs of new educators, including offering continuous mentorship, professional development opportunities, and structured collaboration, school leaders built resilience and enhanced the likelihood of sustained retention. For middle school principals, these strategies were vital, as they addressed the unique challenges associated with teaching early adolescents while ensuring that new teachers felt supported and prepared to navigate their roles.

Context-Specific Challenges in Teacher Retention

Localized factors such as high student mobility rates, limited access to specialized training, and elevated accountability pressures contributed to teacher turnover in Northeastern middle schools, reflecting broader systemic challenges. Research underscored how localized challenges exacerbated the broader issue of teacher attrition.

For example, studies identified high student mobility as a stressor that disrupted classroom stability and increased the workload on teachers to continually adapt instruction (R. Baker et al., 2022). Limited access to specialized training further compounded the issue, leaving educators underprepared to meet diverse student needs in specialized disciplines like STEM and special education (Burke & Ceo-DiFrancesco, 2022). Elevated accountability pressures, often tied to high-stakes testing and performance evaluations, were linked to increased job dissatisfaction and burnout (Denton et al., 2021; Gu & Day, 2007). Madigan and Kim (2021) emphasized how these challenges were often more pronounced in high-need schools, where limited resources and high stress exacerbated teacher attrition rates.

These context-specific challenges amplified the systemic barriers to teacher retention, highlighting the need for strategies that addressed both the external and internal factors affecting educators. For instance, high accountability pressures not only created external stress but also exacerbated internal cognitive barriers, such as self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy (Denton et al., 2021). The limited availability of professional development opportunities in resource-strapped schools underscored a broader failure to equip educators with the necessary tools for growth and resilience (Mansfield et al., 2012). Research by Ruble et al. (2024) further underscored the importance of targeted interventions in mitigating the psychological and systemic stressors that drove teacher attrition. These interconnected factors suggested that teacher turnover in Northeastern middle schools was not an isolated phenomenon but rather a localized manifestation of broader systemic issues. Addressing these challenges required a multifaceted approach

informed by the literature, emphasizing the importance of tailored strategies that fostered teacher resilience while alleviating localized stressors.

Fostering Teacher Resilience in Challenging Contexts

Literature suggested that fostering resilience was critical for mitigating the impact of localized barriers on teacher retention. Interventions such as mentorship programs, access to high-quality professional development, and streamlined administrative support were associated with significant improvements in teacher retention (Gu & Day, 2007; Mansfield et al., 2012). For instance, mentorship programs provided novice educators with the guidance and support needed to navigate complex school environments, while professional development initiatives equipped teachers with strategies to address diverse classroom challenges effectively (Denton et al., 2021). Burnout reduction programs demonstrated success in helping educators manage workplace stress by integrating mindfulness, coping strategies, and personal goal setting, further enhancing teacher well-being and retention (Hidajat et al., 2023).

These strategies were effective in addressing both systemic and cognitive challenges. Mentorship and professional development not only provided teachers with practical skills but also reinforced their professional identities, which acted as protective factors against burnout (Gu & Day, 2007). Streamlining administrative processes alleviated unnecessary burdens, allowing teachers to focus on instructional quality and student engagement. When implemented effectively, these interventions created a supportive environment that empowered educators to manage their roles even in high-pressure contexts. Moreover, the findings of Arthur and Bradley (2023) emphasized the

value of building strong relationships among teachers and between teachers and students, further reinforcing resilience in challenging school environments.

School Climate and Workplace Culture

Restorative Practices and Teacher Attrition

Restorative practices played a critical role in shaping school climate, a factor consistently linked to teacher attrition. Research indicated that collaborative environments, strong teacher-student relationships, and inclusive school cultures contributed to greater job satisfaction and reduced attrition rates (Denton et al., 2021; Grant et al., 2022; Lamboy, 2023). Schools that emphasized restorative approaches fostered a stronger sense of belonging and being valued professionally, making teachers less likely to consider leaving the profession (Mansfield et al., 2012).

Additionally, restorative practices helped mitigate workplace stressors by addressing unresolved conflicts and fostering open communication, both of which were identified contributors to teacher burnout and attrition (Burke & Ceo-DiFrancesco, 2022; Oldfield & Ainsworth, 2021). Teachers in schools where leadership prioritized restorative methods reported lower levels of emotional exhaustion and a stronger commitment to the profession, underscoring the potential of these strategies in retention efforts (Day & Gu, 2014; Lamboy, 2023). Research suggested that workplace culture influenced teachers' ability to manage professional stressors, making school-wide restorative approaches a key factor in addressing systemic challenges leading to attrition (Denton et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Oldfield and Ainsworth (2021) advocated for a social-ecological framework when examining teacher resilience, emphasizing that support systems at

multiple levels, individual, school, and policy, were necessary to reduce attrition in high-stress environments. Their findings indicated that teacher resilience was not solely a personal trait but was shaped by school climate, leadership support, and professional collaboration. Leadership practices that created inclusive and communicative workplaces contributed to greater teacher well-being and commitment (Burke & Ceo-DiFrancesco, 2022).

To address systemic barriers contributing to teacher attrition, school leaders implemented restorative strategies that prioritized teacher appreciation, reduced administrative burdens, and improved access to professional support. These efforts alleviated stressors that led to burnout and disengagement, contributing to a more consistent and sustainable workforce (Grant et al., 2022; Lamboy, 2023). Research suggested that schools implementing restorative approaches not only saw improvements in teacher well-being but also experienced enhanced organizational stability and lower attrition rates (Mansfield et al., 2012).

Positive Cultures and Administrative Support

Teacher morale and a supportive work environment were critical factors in reducing attrition. García et al. (2022) emphasized the role of positive workplace cultures in enhancing teacher satisfaction and directly addressing systemic issues that led to low morale. Their findings highlighted the responsibility of middle school principals in fostering environments that promoted teacher well-being and resilience. By implementing resilience-building strategies, principals addressed the challenges contributing to burnout and turnover, creating a workplace that supported long-term retention.

Positive cultures that emphasized collaboration, recognition, and support systems were vital in middle school settings, where educators faced the added complexities of working with early adolescents. Principals who prioritized these elements helped create a stable and supportive educational environment, ultimately reducing teacher turnover and enhancing overall school success.

External Stressors and Resilience

Safety Concerns

External safety concerns were identified as a critical contributor to teacher attrition. McMahon et al. (2023) demonstrated that teacher-directed violence, including both verbal and physical aggression, significantly increased stress levels and burnout among educators. Their study revealed that schools experiencing elevated incidents of violence required the implementation of policies and resources that prioritized teacher safety and well-being, as such unsafe conditions directly undermined teacher resilience and led to increased turnover. This evidence established that exposure to violence served as a primary external stressor influencing educators' decisions to leave the profession.

Redding (2022) further substantiated these findings by indicating that environments with inadequate safety protocols imposed additional stressors on teachers. In such settings, educators were not only exposed to aggressive behaviors but also encountered insufficient crisis support and inadequate security measures, which collectively eroded their capacity to maintain resilience. The study underscored that when safety protocols were perceived as lacking, teachers experienced heightened emotional and physical burdens, thereby contributing to higher attrition rates.

Denton et al. (2021) investigated the role of internal cognitive processes in teacher attrition, revealing that cognitive errors, such as self-doubt, catastrophizing, and unrealistic expectations, exacerbated the adverse effects of unsafe environments. Although their research focused on math and science educators in high-stress contexts, the findings suggested that exposure to unsafe conditions amplified these internal distortions, further diminishing teachers' ability to cope with external challenges. Thus, the interplay between external safety risks and internal cognitive errors critically undermined teacher resilience, accelerating attrition.

Post-Pandemic Stressors

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges in teacher retention for middle school educators. Price et al. (2022) highlighted the severe toll the pandemic had taken on teachers' physical and emotional well-being, emphasizing the need for increased focus on wellness initiatives and support systems. Rising stress and burnout during this period contributed to higher turnover rates, negatively impacting school stability, staffing, and student outcomes.

Leadership played a pivotal role in addressing these challenges. Redding (2022) underscored the importance of resilience-building strategies, such as targeted professional development, teacher motivation, and well-being initiatives, as key factors in reducing attrition. These strategies were relevant in the post-pandemic context, where middle school educators faced the compounded pressures of meeting the developmental, social-emotional, and academic needs of students.

By focusing on teacher wellness and creating supportive environments, middle

school principals helped mitigate the long-term effects of pandemic-related stress. These efforts supported the study's focus on understanding how leadership could foster resilience and promote retention in middle school settings. Collectively, the research highlighted the need for school administrators to prioritize teacher well-being as part of a comprehensive strategy to address attrition and ensure a sustainable, effective workforce.

Structural Reforms for Long-Term Retention

Evaluation Systems and Teacher Satisfaction

Structural changes in educational systems were vital to addressing teacher attrition effectively. Wiggan et al. (2021) argued that traditional evaluation models, often punitive or overly rigid, failed to address the complexities of teaching and instead contributed to dissatisfaction and turnover. Teachers subjected to such models reported feeling undervalued and unsupported, particularly when feedback lacked clarity, specificity, or a growth-oriented approach. These conditions weakened morale and undermined teachers' sense of professional efficacy, ultimately increasing the likelihood of attrition.

In contrast, more flexible, formative evaluation systems had been shown to support teacher development and enhance job satisfaction (Redding, 2022). Research indicated that when teachers were included in the evaluation process and received constructive feedback aligned with their instructional goals, their motivation and engagement improved (Gu & Day, 2007; Wiggan et al., 2021). These findings reinforced the idea that evaluation systems designed with a focus on professional growth, rather than compliance or accountability alone, helped retain high-quality educators and contributed

to positive school culture.

This study examined how teacher perceptions of evaluation systems impacted their sense of professional identity and workplace satisfaction. Participants described how leadership's approach to feedback, performance review, and support during evaluations shaped their overall job experience and influenced their decision to remain in the profession. These insights supported the need for school leaders to adopt reflective and collaborative evaluation practices that promoted teacher resilience and reduced attrition.

Broader Systemic Challenges in Teacher Attrition

Teacher attrition was shaped by structural and systemic challenges that extended beyond individual evaluation systems. Educators continued to experience increased professional pressures, exacerbated by factors such as pandemic-related disruptions, resource disparities, and limited access to ongoing professional learning opportunities (Lamboy, 2023; Price et al., 2022). These conditions were particularly pronounced in high-poverty and high-need schools, where teachers faced heightened workloads, inadequate instructional materials, and insufficient institutional support, all of which contributed to higher attrition rates (Ingersoll et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2022).

The organizational climate and policy environment in which teachers worked also contributed to attrition. Oldfield and Ainsworth (2021) noted that teacher resilience was not solely a personal characteristic but one shaped through broader school and systemic conditions, including leadership stability, institutional expectations, and the availability of professional support systems. Research suggested that persistent structural challenges, such as inequitable access to professional development, excessive bureaucratic demands,

and inadequate mentorship opportunities, may have accelerated turnover among middle school educators (Robinson et al., 2022). Additionally, Price et al. (2022) emphasized that policy decisions at the district and state levels influenced teacher working conditions, further demonstrating the multi-level nature of teacher attrition.

The compounded effects of workplace stress, systemic inequities, and institutional instability had implications for both individual educators and broader school communities. Schools experiencing chronic attrition often reported increased difficulty in maintaining instructional continuity, reduced collaboration among faculty, and declining student engagement (Lamboy, 2023; Oldfield & Ainsworth, 2021). These findings highlighted the necessity of examining teacher attrition through a multi-dimensional framework that considered both school-level and systemic contributors to workforce instability.

By synthesizing insights from multiple studies, this section demonstrated how institutional conditions and broader educational policies contributed to teacher attrition. Understanding the systemic barriers that affected teacher persistence in middle schools informed the direction of this study, ensuring a comprehensive examination of the factors influencing attrition in the research setting.

Summary

This review of the literature established the persistent issue of teacher attrition among middle school educators in the Northeastern United States. Studies indicated that middle school teacher attrition rates remained disproportionately high, contributing to disruptions in instructional continuity, increased hiring costs, and declines in student

achievement (Ingersoll et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2022). Research consistently identified multiple contributing factors, including challenging working conditions, inadequate administrative support, low teacher morale, and professional stressors (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2018). Additionally, teachers' ability to manage workplace challenges and sustain commitment to the profession was influenced by personal and systemic resilience factors (Day & Gu, 2014; Oldfield & Ainsworth, 2021).

The reviewed literature demonstrated that attrition in middle school settings was influenced by both institutional conditions and teacher perceptions of professional support. Educators who reported high levels of stress, isolation, and dissatisfaction with school leadership were much more likely to exit the profession, further exacerbating workforce instability (Denton et al., 2021; Lamboy, 2023). This evidence highlighted the importance of understanding teachers' experiences and perspectives on attrition-related challenges, particularly in middle school environments where student behavioral and academic needs increased workload demands (Farahmandpour & Voelkel, 2025).

This study addressed a local gap in practice by exploring the perceptions of Grade 6–8 teachers in the Northeastern United States regarding factors that influenced their decision to remain in or leave the profession. Unlike national studies that broadly examined teacher retention trends, this investigation focused on middle school teachers' experiences within their specific institutional and community contexts. The study was grounded in Resilience Theory (Day & Gu, 2014), which provided a framework for understanding how personal and environmental factors influenced teachers' ability to

persist in the profession despite workplace challenges. By employing semistructured interviews, this qualitative inquiry identified themes related to teacher resilience, workplace stressors, and school climate influences on attrition.

This problem-centered examination of middle school teacher attrition contributed to ongoing discussions about workforce stability and educator well-being in the Northeastern United States. Understanding teachers' perspectives on the conditions contributing to attrition provided practitioners and policymakers with insight into the factors shaping workforce instability in middle schools.

Implications

The reviewed literature highlighted critical areas for addressing teacher attrition in middle schools, in a Northeastern state. These insights informed potential project directions based on the anticipated findings of the proposed study, emphasizing leadership practices, supportive environments, subject-specific challenges, and teacher well-being.

Context-Specific Leadership Strategies

Tailored leadership strategies were vital in mitigating teacher attrition. Research underscored that middle school principals needed to adopt adaptable leadership approaches that considered the unique needs of their school contexts. Ferren (2021) cautioned against one-size-fits-all solutions, while Castro (2023) emphasized the importance of empowering principals with tools to navigate attrition-related challenges. DeMatthews, Carrola, Reyes, and Knight (2021) linked leadership stability to improved teacher retention, demonstrating that consistent and adaptable leadership fostered positive

school environments.

Based on these findings, the study revealed the necessity of professional development programs that enhanced principals' capacity to address the specific challenges of middle school leadership. Project deliverables included training modules on adaptive leadership practices and strategies for maintaining leadership stability to reduce turnover.

Supportive Work Environments and Positive School Cultures

Fostering a supportive work environment was another significant implication for reducing attrition. García et al. (2022) emphasized that positive workplace cultures enhanced morale, while Grant et al. (2022) advocated for restorative practices to build trust, inclusivity, and open communication. These approaches recognized the multifaceted nature of teacher retention and the need for holistic solutions.

Mullen et al. (2021) highlighted that resilient school cultures, shaped by collaborative leadership and professional respect, significantly impacted teacher retention, especially in high-stress environments. Similarly, Arthur and Bradley (2023) demonstrated that nurturing environments where teachers felt valued and supported could reduce burnout and improve job satisfaction. Their findings suggested that creating collegial relationships and fostering open communication were essential elements of effective school culture.

Research by Oldfield and Ainsworth (2021) supported a social-ecological approach, emphasizing the importance of addressing systemic barriers and promoting resilience through inclusive practices. Additionally, Diab and Green (2024) identified

support systems tailored to novice teachers as critical for fostering engagement and reducing turnover, which aligned with initiatives to cultivate supportive environments.

The study's findings guided the development of initiatives like teacher recognition programs, structured team-building activities, and the integration of restorative practices. These initiatives aligned with insights from Collie (2023), who emphasized the importance of relatedness and professional growth opportunities in mitigating teacher turnover intentions. Such initiatives formed part of a project deliverable focused on cultivating supportive and resilient school cultures.

Subject-Specific and Cognitive Challenges

Subject-specific challenges in foreign languages, STEM, and special education exacerbated attrition. Burke and Ceo-DiFrancesco (2022) emphasized critical shortages in these areas, while Denton et al. (2021) identified cognitive barriers, including self-doubt and unrealistic expectations, as contributors to teacher turnover. Similarly, Madigan and Kim (2021) highlighted the persistent shortages in high-need subjects like special education and STEM, emphasizing the negative impact of these shortages on student outcomes and teacher retention.

Research by Diab and Green (2024) further supported the necessity of tailored professional development to address subject-specific challenges for novice educators in high-demand fields. Their findings underlined the importance of providing tools and strategies to mitigate stress and promote self-efficacy among teachers in these disciplines. Additionally, Jackson and Parker (2023) proposed frameworks such as SMIRC (Support, Mentorship, Inclusion, Resilience, and Collaboration) to address burnout and cognitive

challenges among special education teachers.

The study's findings highlighted the need for professional development programs that addressed these challenges, such as cognitive-behavioral training to combat self-doubt and stress. A project deliverable included targeted strategies and resources to support educators in high-stress disciplines, promoting resilience and retention. For instance, Collie (2023) emphasized that fostering relatedness and professional growth within these fields could significantly reduce turnover intentions. Such interventions helped bridge the gap between the increasing demands on educators and the support they required to thrive in their roles.

Prioritizing Teacher Well-Being and Resilience

Teacher well-being and resilience were foundational to retention efforts. Day and Gu (2014) advocated for interventions that prioritized professional growth and emotional support, while Lamboy (2023) identified systemic issues, such as low pay and limited resources, as barriers to retention. Similarly, Collie (2022) emphasized the role of job resources, such as supportive leadership and collegial relationships, in fostering teacher well-being and reducing turnover intentions.

Fox et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of resilience-focused interventions during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating that well-designed wellness programs could significantly improve teachers' capacity to manage stress. In alignment with these findings, Diab and Green (2024) underscored the necessity of integrating social and emotional support systems into schools to cultivate resilience among educators in high-stress environments.

The study's findings informed the creation of wellness programs, resilience workshops, and stress management training designed to address the specific needs of middle school educators. These initiatives formed a central component of a project deliverable aimed at enhancing teacher well-being and reducing attrition. Furthermore, Collie (2023) suggested that incorporating professional growth opportunities into wellness initiatives could amplify their impact by addressing both emotional and career-related challenges. This holistic approach served as a model for fostering resilience and satisfaction, ultimately reducing teacher attrition.

Potential Project Directions

The findings of this study addressed a gap in practice by examining teacher attrition within middle schools in the Northeastern United States. District and school leaders in this region continued to experience challenges in retaining middle school educators, which led to instructional disruptions, staffing shortages, and increased workload demands for remaining teachers (Local Education Report, Year). However, there was limited research on how middle school teachers in this region perceived the factors influencing their attrition, particularly regarding leadership support, school climate, and resilience. By investigating these localized issues, this study provided insights into how educators experienced workplace challenges and what role school leadership played in shaping these conditions.

The potential social change implications of this study were significant for district administrators and middle school principals seeking to understand and address teacher attrition at the local level. Attrition affected instructional consistency, teacher

collaboration, and student outcomes, making it a pressing issue for school leaders in the region (Local Education Report, Year). This study explored teacher perceptions of the factors that contributed to attrition in their specific schools, offering context-specific insights that informed leadership decisions and school policies. While this study did not propose direct interventions, its findings contributed to discussions about improving school climate, professional support systems, and leadership strategies within these middle schools.

By focusing on teacher attrition within specific middle schools in the Northeastern United States, this study contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership and organizational conditions influenced workforce stability in the local context. This study was guided by Resilience Theory (Day & Gu, 2014), which provided a framework for examining how middle school teachers navigated professional challenges and whether school conditions supported or hindered their ability to remain in the profession. Understanding these localized conditions allowed for a more targeted examination of how leadership practices and school environments contributed to attrition in these middle schools.

The goal of this research was to examine teacher attrition from the perspective of middle school educators within this specific region, providing insights that reflected the realities of their professional experiences. By investigating how school leadership and workplace conditions contributed to attrition at the local level, this study added to ongoing discussions about workforce stability in middle school education within the Northeastern United States.

Summary

The body of research on teacher attrition highlighted the multifaceted nature of the issue, emphasizing the need to understand the factors contributing to workforce instability. High teacher turnover disrupted instructional continuity, weakened school climate, and negatively affected student achievement (Ingersoll et al., 2019). Middle school educators in a Northeastern state faced additional challenges, as they worked with early adolescents who required specialized academic, developmental, and social-emotional support, which may have contributed to higher attrition rates in this setting (Sutcher et al., 2018).

Teacher attrition was influenced by multiple workplace conditions, including leadership, school culture, and access to professional support systems. Principal leadership, in particular, had a significant impact on how educators experienced their work and whether they chose to remain in teaching (Lamboy, 2023; Mansfield et al., 2012). Additionally, subject-specific shortages, particularly in foreign languages and STEM fields, created further challenges for schools struggling to retain qualified educators (Burke & Ceo-DiFrancesco, 2022). Understanding how middle school educators perceived these issues was essential to identifying localized conditions contributing to teacher attrition.

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of middle school teachers in a Northeastern state regarding the factors contributing to their resilience and decisions to remain in or leave the profession. This study examined how workplace conditions, leadership practices, and professional experiences influenced

teacher attrition within this specific context. Given the growing concerns regarding teacher shortages in middle schools, this research provided a deeper understanding of workforce instability at the local level.

By investigating localized factors contributing to attrition, this study identified patterns in middle school educators' experiences that contributed to workforce instability. Findings informed discussions on school leadership, workplace conditions, and institutional challenges that impacted teacher persistence. The following sections of the report outlined the study's methodology, data collection, and analysis approaches, as well as implications for educational practice.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

The selected research methodology for this study was a basic qualitative design, which was appropriate for exploring the perceptions of Grade 6–8 teachers in NSMSD regarding resilience as a factor in their decision to remain in the profession. Basic qualitative research centers on exploring individuals' experiences and the ways they construct meaning within specific contexts, making it well-suited for examining how teachers perceived resilience in relation to their professional decisions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2016). By focusing on teachers' perceptions, this study sought to gain insight into teachers' lived realities and the complex, context-specific factors contributing to attrition, which qualitative research allowed for through in-depth, narrative-driven data collection.

A quantitative methodology, which emphasizes numerical data and statistical analysis, was not suited to the purpose of this study, which emphasized the subjective and multidimensional nature of teacher attrition. Unlike quantitative research, which relies on numerical data, qualitative research offers a way to understand complex, human experiences in depth. It provides rich, descriptive accounts that allow for deeper exploration of teachers' experiences, beliefs, and perceptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Ravitch and Carl (2016) emphasized, qualitative methods were particularly useful when studying meaning-making and context. Yin (2016) further supported this by noting that qualitative inquiry enabled researchers to capture the multifaceted nature of real-world phenomena. This study focused on understanding how teachers experienced and

interpreted resilience in the face of workplace challenges, which required a research approach capable of capturing nuanced personal and professional perspectives.

While a quantitative methodology could have provided statistical insights into teacher retention trends, it would not have offered the depth of understanding needed to explore how individual and contextual influences affect teachers' retention choices (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). Similarly, a mixed-methods design, which includes both quantitative and qualitative research methods, was not selected because its inclusion of statistical analysis could have detracted from the depth of qualitative inquiry needed for this study. Mixed-methods research also demands extensive time and resources, which would have shifted the focus away from the qualitative narratives central to this research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016).

Qualitative research is suited for uncovering the nuanced and multifaceted nature of teacher retention decisions. It provides a platform for participants to share their perspectives in their own words, offering rich, detailed insights that would be difficult to capture through quantitative methods (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This approach was central to addressing the study's research question: What were the perceptions of Grade 6–8 teachers regarding resiliency as a factor in their decision to remain teaching? This approach ensured that the research remained focused on the subjective and context-specific experiences of educators while contributing actionable insights into how resilience could be fostered to support teacher retention.

By focusing on rich, descriptive accounts of teachers' perceptions, this approach

directly addressed the research problem in a comprehensive manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yin, 2016). A basic qualitative design allowed for the collection of detailed, context-specific data that provided important insights into the challenges and supports contributing to teacher attrition. This methodology ensured that the study captured the depth and complexity of teachers' experiences while maintaining the flexibility needed to explore emergent themes.

Consideration of Alternative Research Methodologies

Other research designs were evaluated but were determined to be less effective in addressing the study's objectives. A phenomenological design, which focuses on shared experiences of a specific phenomenon, was considered (Vagle, 2018). However, this approach was not selected because it is used to identify a singular, collective experience rather than explore the multiple individualized factors influencing teacher attrition. While phenomenology is useful for studying deeply personal and uniform experiences, it does not allow for the exploration of multiple intersecting factors, such as leadership, school climate, and subject-specific challenges, that contribute to teachers' retention decisions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Similarly, a case study approach, which is used to examine a bounded system such as a single school or district, was not appropriate because this study analyzed perceptions across multiple schools rather than within a single institution (Yin, 2016). A grounded theory approach, which develops new theoretical models based on data patterns (Charmaz, 2014), was also considered but ultimately rejected. The study's focus was not on producing new theories but on examining how existing resilience frameworks applied

to teacher attrition in a specific context.

Additionally, an ethnographic approach, which involves prolonged observation and immersion within a cultural setting, was deemed unsuitable, as this study did not require long-term researcher participation in the daily professional lives of middle school educators (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given these considerations, the basic qualitative design was determined to be the most effective methodology, as it allowed for a broad exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences related to resilience and retention.

This design enabled the collection of rich, descriptive data, offering valuable insight into how personal, professional, and organizational factors interacted to shape teachers' decisions to remain in or leave their positions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2016). By adopting this approach, the study ensured a thorough and nuanced investigation of teacher attrition while remaining aligned with its research objectives. In addition, this design provided the flexibility needed to capture diverse participant perspectives, which strengthened the dependability and credibility of the findings.

Participants

Population, Setting, and Sampling Procedures

The population for this study consisted of Grade 6–8 teachers who were employed in NSMSD. These educators were directly relevant to the study's focus on teacher retention in middle schools, offering a deeper understadning into the factors influencing resilience and attrition. The study setting included middle schools within NSMSD, where systemic and situational challenges often impact teacher retention. A purposeful sampling

method was employed to select participants who could offer detailed and meaningful perspectives on these issues (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Purposeful sampling allowed for the inclusion of individuals who had direct experience and knowledge relevant to the research question, enhancing the depth and richness of the data.

Participant Selection Process

The selection process began by identifying Grade 6–8 teachers in NSMSD who met the inclusion criteria. Participants were required to have at least 3 years of teaching experience in Grades 6–8 to ensure they could provide meaningful insights into the factors impacting retention. A balanced sample of approximately 14 participants was targeted, with an even distribution across grade levels: four to five teachers from Grade 6, four to five teachers from Grade 7, and four to five teachers from Grade 8. This balanced sampling approach ensured that the study captured a wide range of perspectives across different stages of middle school education, contributing to in-depth understanding of the phenomenon as experienced by participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Procedure for Gaining Access

Access to participants was facilitated through publicly available teacher directories or school websites in participating districts. After obtaining Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, an initial recruitment email was sent to potential participants. This email outlined the study's purpose, procedures, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants who expressed interest were sent a consent form with detailed information about the study. When the initial recruitment effort did not yield sufficient participation, a backup plan was implemented, which included

expanding recruitment efforts to teacher networks or other Northeastern districts.

Establishing a Working Relationship

Establishing trust and a positive working relationship with participants was critical for qualitative research. During the recruitment and interview process, I maintained a professional yet approachable demeanor by fostering open communication, demonstrating active listening, and ensuring confidentiality throughout the study. Building rapport began with the initial recruitment email, which clearly outlined the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and ethical considerations to promote transparency and trust (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

To further establish a sense of trust and comfort, I engaged participants in informal conversations before beginning interviews, providing them with an opportunity to ask questions and clarify any concerns about the research process (Seidman, 2019). Throughout the interviews, I used neutral, non-judgmental language and acknowledged participants' perspectives to create a space where they felt valued and respected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, I emphasized that participants could withdraw at any time, reinforcing their autonomy in the research process. By incorporating these strategies, I aimed to build an environment of mutual respect and openness, ensuring that participants felt comfortable sharing their authentic experiences. This relational approach was essential for obtaining rich, meaningful data that accurately reflected the realities of teacher resilience and attrition in NSMSD.

Measures for the Protection of Participants

The protection of participants' rights and welfare was a central priority of this

study. Measures were informed by the *Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), which emphasizes respect for persons, beneficence, and justice as guiding principles. These principles guided the study's approach to informed consent, confidentiality, and minimizing potential risks to participants. Participants were treated as autonomous decision-makers and provided with clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits before giving their voluntary consent. No data were collected before consent was obtained.

Confidentiality

Participants' confidentiality was safeguarded throughout the study to protect their identities and maintain ethical research standards. Identifiable information was anonymized, and each participant was assigned a coded pseudonym based on their grade level and a participant number. For example, teachers in Grade 6 were assigned codes such as T6.1, T6.2, T6.3, etc.; teachers in Grade 7 were assigned T7.1, T7.2, and so forth; and teachers in Grade 8 were designated as T8.1, T8.2, etc. This system ensured that no personally identifiable information was linked to individual responses in reports or publications.

All research data, including interview transcripts and consent forms, were securely stored on password-protected devices with restricted access limited to the researcher. Audio recordings and transcriptions were encrypted to prevent unauthorized access. The interview recording and transcript will be securely stored and destroyed five years after the completion of the study. Any physical notes or materials were securely

shredded at that time to maintain confidentiality. The implementation of strict confidentiality measures helped protect participants' identities and upheld ethical research practices throughout the data collection and reporting process.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection began. The consent form, included with the recruitment email, detailed the purpose, procedures, possible risks, and benefits of the study. Participants were advised that they could withdraw at any time without consequences and had the opportunity to ask questions before signing the consent form. Transparency during the consent process ensured that participants were fully aware of their rights and the nature of their involvement (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Protection From Harm

To minimize any potential harm, the study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the *Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), which underscores the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The study avoided sensitive or distressing topics, focusing solely on participants' professional experiences and insights related to teacher retention. The semistructured interview questions were carefully designed to elicit thoughtful and meaningful responses while minimizing the risk of undue stress or discomfort. Participants had the option to skip any question they found uncomfortable or withdraw from the interview entirely at any time without consequence. Ensuring the psychological and emotional safety of participants was paramount and

aligned with best practices in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection

Description and Justification of Data for Collection

The data collected for this study consisted of semistructured interviews with Grade 6–8 teachers across several NSMSD schools. This approach was appropriate for a basic qualitative tradition, as it facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions and experiences. Semistructured interviews allowed for flexibility in probing deeper into emerging themes while ensuring alignment with the research questions. This data provided insights into the role of resilience in teacher retention and helped address the overarching research problem.

Data Collection Instruments and Sources

The data collection instrument was a researcher-developed interview protocol (Appendix B). This protocol included eight core sections consisting of 42 open-ended questions and follow-up prompts designed to elicit detailed responses related to teacher retention and resilience. Questions focused on the supports and challenges participants encountered as well as their perceptions of the role of resilience in their decision to remain teaching. The interviews were audio- and video-recorded, with participant consent, to ensure accuracy and enable transcription for analysis.

Sufficiency of Data Collection Instruments

The interview protocol was designed to ensure sufficiency in answering the research questions. Open-ended questions allowed participants to provide detailed narratives, enabling the identification of key themes and patterns. Additionally, the

flexibility of the semistructured format ensured that follow-up questions could be applied to further explore and clarify participants' responses, enhancing the richness and reliability of the data collected.

Processes for Generating, Gathering, and Recording Data

Interviews were arranged at mutually convenient times and conducted either via Zoom or in person. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed, and securely stored on password-protected devices. Data were labeled using unique identifiers to ensure confidentiality.

Systems for Keeping Track of Data

Google Sheets was used to organize and manage the data throughout the analysis. Separate tabs were created for each transcript and interview, allowing for systematic tracking and review. A detailed research log (see Appendix D) documented interview dates, participant codes, and key observations. Reflections were recorded throughout the data collection and analysis processes to elicit emerging patterns and understandings. Transcripts and audio/video recordings were securely stored and clearly labeled for accurate retrieval and reference.

Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants

Access to participants was facilitated through publicly available teacher directories and school websites within NSMSD. Following Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, an initial recruitment email was sent to eligible Grade 6–8 teachers. This email included a brief description of the study, an explanation of the voluntary nature of participation, and a request to schedule interviews.

Teachers who expressed interest were given an informed consent form to review and sign before participating in the study.

If initial recruitment efforts did not yield sufficient participation, a backup recruitment plan was implemented. This plan included:

1. Expanding recruitment to additional middle schools within NSMSD by requesting principal permission to distribute study invitations through internal staff email lists, faculty meetings, or teacher newsletters.
2. Extending outreach to surrounding districts with similar demographic and institutional characteristics, ensuring alignment with the study's focus on middle school teachers in the Northeastern United States.
3. Engaging School Administrators and Teacher Liaisons – Principals, assistant principals, and department chairs may have been contacted to help distribute recruitment information to potential participants.
4. Utilizing peer referrals by encouraging initial participants to share the study information with colleagues who may have been interested in contributing their perspectives.

This multi-step recruitment strategy would have ensured that a sufficient number of participants could be secured while maintaining the voluntary nature of participation and adhering to ethical research guidelines. By incorporating alternative recruitment avenues, the study would have been able to gather diverse and meaningful insights from middle school teachers regarding resilience and attrition. This backup recruitment plan was not needed.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I did not have any current professional relationships with participants, or the districts involved in the study. My professional background as a middle school administrator informed my understanding of teacher retention but may have introduced potential biases. To address this, I maintained a detailed research log of schedules, transcripts, and coding notes that documented my decisions and reflections throughout the process. This practice allowed me to critically monitor my assumptions, ensure transparency, and minimize potential bias in data interpretation.

Data Analysis

The data collected in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process to analyze semistructured interview data from middle school teachers. The goal was to identify themes that addressed the research question: *What are the perceptions of Grade 6–8 teachers regarding resiliency as a factor in their decision to remain teaching?* The process was primarily inductive, with latent coding used to explore underlying meanings in participants' narratives. This method provided a structured yet flexible process for exploring, coding, and reporting patterns found in qualitative data, allowing for an interpretation of participants' perceptions of resilience and retention.

Although the analysis was primarily inductive, elements of deductive reasoning were also applied, as resilience theory provided a conceptual foundation for interpreting teacher retention factors. Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) explained that all qualitative analysis is shaped by the researcher's perspective and the context in which the study

takes place. In this study, efforts were made to enable themes to naturally arise from the data, while also recognizing that interpretation was guided by the theoretical framework. This balanced approach supported a systematic and reflective coding process that captured the depth and complexity of teachers' experiences, maintaining analytical rigor while remaining open to unexpected insights.

Transcription and Review

After each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed using Fathom Notetaker, an AI-powered tool that provided an accurate and efficient baseline transcript. Each transcript was then manually reviewed and edited for completeness and precision to ensure deep familiarity with the data. This hands-on review process fostered a stronger connection with participants' narratives and allowed early insights to emerge during transcription. After the first interview, a check-in with the dissertation committee was conducted to review the transcription and analysis approach, ensuring methodological alignment and rigor. As part of this collaborative process, all video links, finalized transcripts, and documentation of the initial coding and theming process were submitted to support transparency and consistency in the analytic approach.

Thematic Coding and Analysis Process

While the initial coding process was inductive and data-driven following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, later phases of analysis were informed by a reflexive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022), in which themes were actively constructed through interpretive analysis, professional judgment, and conceptual engagement with the resilience framework.

Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data

The first phase involved reviewing interview transcripts multiple times to develop a deep understanding of the data. This step allowed for initial reflections, observations, and the identification of potential areas of interest. Reading and re-reading the data ensured that emerging patterns and participant perspectives were thoroughly considered.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

In this phase, the data were manually coded using a two-cycle approach. First-cycle coding focused on identifying key phrases, surface-level meanings, and recurring ideas directly from participants' own words. This initial round allowed for a broad, grounded look at patterns in the data. In the second cycle, the codes were further interpreted and grouped into similar responses, which helped organize the data into clearer categories.

Over 1,000 initial codes were generated during this process, reflecting the complexity and richness of the data. To support organization and consistency, coding was managed using Google Sheets, which allowed for efficient sorting, comparison, and refinement across cases. These initial codes were later condensed into a smaller set of secondary codes or categories, which shaped the subsequent theme development process.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

In this phase, initial codes were repeatedly reviewed and grouped into broader secondary categories to reduce redundancy and highlight emerging patterns across the dataset. Codes with similar meanings were clustered to move from a wide range of open codes to more conceptually focused categories.

This process resulted in 34 distinct combined themes. These were then evaluated for relevance, frequency, and alignment with the research question. After further consolidation and refinement, five major themes were identified, representing key areas of teacher experience related to resilience and retention in middle school settings.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

In this phase, the 34 combined themes developed earlier were re-evaluated against the full dataset to promote clarity, coherence, and alignment with the research questions. This process involved multiple rounds of reviewing and refining themes to assess how well they reflected consistent patterns across diverse participant experiences.

The initial coding process had generated hundreds of detailed codes, which were first condensed into approximately 300 discrete thematic ideas. These were then merged and organized into 34 combined themes. During Phase 4, those 34 themes were carefully re-examined for overlap, redundancy, and representativeness.

Themes with similar content were merged, less central ideas were folded into broader categories, and weakly supported themes were removed. Continued review led to the consolidation of those 34 themes into five final themes that were conceptually distinct, strongly supported across interviews, and directly aligned with the study's focus on teacher resilience and retention.

Discrepant cases and divergent perspectives were purposefully considered throughout this phase. Rather than being excluded, variations in participant narratives were used to challenge and test the boundaries of each theme. This contributed to a more inclusive and credible thematic structure, ensuring the final themes reflected both

common experiences and important outliers.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

In this phase, each theme was carefully refined to ensure it reflected a distinct, coherent, and meaningful dimension of the participants' experiences. The five final themes were clearly defined based on their conceptual boundaries and relevance to the research questions. To enhance credibility and demonstrate alignment with the data, representative participant excerpts were selected to illustrate each theme. These excerpts are not exhaustive but help ground each theme in the authentic voices of participants. The goal was to refine themes to enhance clarity and relevance. The final themes are presented below.

Theme 1: Individual Resilience Factors. Defined as the personal traits, coping strategies, and reflective practices that teachers draw on to manage stress, overcome adversity, and maintain a sense of purpose in their work. This theme was well-articulated by participant T6.3 who shared, "It was maybe the most resilient I've ever been... People are depending on me… I have to show up." Such reflections highlight how teachers often draw upon internal reserves of strength and responsibility to persist in challenging circumstances.

Theme 2: Relational Supports and Collegial Connections. Defined as the emotional and professional support teachers receive through peer collaboration, shared struggles, and interpersonal bonds that foster belonging and sustain morale. Participant T7.2 reflected this sentiment, explaining, "Surrounding myself by people who understand... just to hear someone say, I get it... is easier than dealing with somebody...

dismissive in that regard." This underscores the critical role of collegial empathy and validation in sustaining teachers through stressful experiences.

Theme 3: Systemic and Workplace Conditions. Defined as the broader school and district structures, policies, and expectations that shape teachers' capacity to remain resilient, including both supportive systems and structural barriers. This was illustrated by Participant T8.2, who expressed frustration, "I shouldn't be having to fight with the same people that are supposed to be helping..." The comment reflects how systemic inefficiencies or conflicts can undermine resilience by creating unnecessary stress and barriers to professional effectiveness.

Theme 4: Leadership Dynamics. Defined as the role school and district leaders play in either supporting or undermining teacher resilience through visibility, trust, communication, and responsiveness. Participant T7.2 underscored this idea by stating, "Knowing you're supported, respected, valued… leaders need to provide that to support teacher resiliency." This finding emphasizes how leadership practices directly influence teachers' sense of value and their ability to maintain resilience in demanding environments.

Theme 5: Middle School-Specific Challenges. Defined as the unique developmental, behavioral, and instructional demands of working with early adolescents, which test resilience but also offer powerful opportunities for impact. Participant T8.2 captured this experience, noting, "Someone walks in your room... with a physical thing, a mental thing, an emotional thing... Meeting kids on multiple levels... tests your resilience...." Such experiences illustrate the intensity and unpredictability of middle

school teaching, while also showing the resilience required to address students' diverse and intersecting needs.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

In the final phase, the analysis was synthesized into a written report that integrated the themes with existing literature and highlighted connections between the findings and broader research on teacher resilience and retention. This stage emphasized presenting the results in a clear and systematic manner that reflected the voices of participants while also supporting practical recommendations for school leadership practices that foster resilience. By following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework while also incorporating interpretive flexibility discussed in their later work (Braun & Clarke, 2022), an inductive analytical approach was employed to identify, analyze, and interpret recurring patterns across the qualitative data, offering insights into middle school teachers' experiences with resilience and retention. The five final themes identified in this study: Individual Resilience Factors, Relational Supports and Colleagial Connections, Systemic and Workplace Conditions, Leadership Dynamics, and Middle School-Specific Challenges, serve as the framework for the results section and will be used to answer the research question.

Ensuring Accuracy and Credibility

To support the credibility of the findings, member checking was offered by asking participants to review their full interview transcripts. However, no participants opted to review or provide feedback. Despite this, the opportunity for review demonstrated transparency and ethical research practice. All data were analyzed with careful attention

to consistency, trustworthiness, and alignment with participants' intended meanings throughout the coding and theme development process.

Addressing Discrepant Cases

Discrepant and outlier responses were identified during theme review and were not excluded. Instead, they were used to refine and test the boundaries of emerging themes. While most participant responses aligned within shared patterns, a small number reflected divergent perspectives, such as persisting without peer support or considering leaving despite strong systemic conditions. These cases did not lead to new themes but were folded into broader categories where appropriate. A more detailed discussion of these discrepant cases and their interpretive value is provided in a later section of the study.

Data Analysis Results

The data for this study were collected through semistructured interviews with Grade 6–8 teachers employed in multiple middle schools within Northeastern State Middle School Districts (NSMSD). The study utilized a basic qualitative research design, which focused on capturing teachers' perceptions related to resilience and attrition. Semistructured interviews were selected as the data collection method because they provided flexibility to explore emergent themes in depth while maintaining alignment with the overarching research question on teacher resilience as a factor in retention.

An interview protocol (Appendix B) was developed, consisting of 8 core sections and 42 open-ended questions and follow-up prompts. While not every participant was asked all 42 questions, the protocol served as a flexible guide to explore key areas related

to workplace challenges, leadership practices, and the personal and systemic factors influencing teacher resilience. Questions were designed to elicit detailed narratives, enabling participants to share their perspectives on the supports and barriers affecting their professional persistence.

Participant recruitment began after obtaining Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, using a purposeful sampling method to identify teachers with at least three years of experience in Grades 6–8. Eligible teachers were contacted through publicly available directories and school websites. A recruitment email provided an overview of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and instructions for scheduling interviews. Interested teachers were given a detailed informed consent form to review and sign prior to participation. Interviews were then scheduled at times convenient for participants. The participant demographic overview is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics Overview

Participant	Grade	Subject	Years of Experience	Demographic
T6.1	6	Bilingual Math	8	Urban
T7.1	7/8	Math	12	Urban
T6.2	6	Math	6	Urban
T8.1	8	ELA	20	Suburban
T8.2	8	Math	25	Urban
T8.3	8	ELA/SPED	13	Urban
T7.2	7	Math	19	Urban
T6.3	6	SS	19	Urban
T6.4	6	Art	18	Suburban
T8.4	8	Math	20	Suburban
T6.5	6	SPED	21	Suburban
T8.5	8	Science	15	Suburban
T7.3	7	ELA	14	Suburban
T6–8.1	6–8	PE	27	Suburban

Note. Participant identifiers correspond to the coding used in transcripts and analysis.

Interviews were conducted either via Zoom or in person, depending on each participant's preference, and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Prior to each interview, rapport was established through informal conversation, and participant consent was confirmed. This approach fostered an environment of trust and openness, which was critical for obtaining authentic, meaningful data.

With permission, all interviews were video and/or audio-recorded to capture accurate participant responses. Audio files were transcribed using Fathom Notetaker, an application that generated detailed transcripts and allowed for thorough engagement with the data. Transcripts were carefully reviewed for accuracy and completeness. Each participant was assigned a code based on their grade level (e.g., T6.1, T7.2) to ensure confidentiality throughout the analysis and reporting process.

All data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and consent forms, were securely stored on password-protected devices with access restricted to the researcher. Transcripts and recordings were labeled with unique identifiers and organized for efficient retrieval and systematic analysis. This secure and consistent data management process supported the overall integrity of the study.

Supporting documentation was maintained throughout the research process, including a detailed research log in Google Sheets that recorded interview dates, participant codes, and key observations. Reflective notes, interview transcripts, links, and analytic tracking were also documented in the same spreadsheet (Appendix D) to capture ongoing insights and decision-making. This level of documentation supported

transparency, organization, and methodological rigor across all stages of data collection and analysis.

The Findings

The problem addressed in this study was the increasing attrition rates among middle school teachers in NSMSD, driven by complex personal, interpersonal, and systemic challenges that undermined resilience and professional commitment. The research question guiding the study was: *What are the perceptions of Grade 6–8 teachers regarding resiliency as a factor in their decision to remain teaching?* Through thematic analysis of semistructured interviews, five final themes were identified. These themes, composed of related themes, collectively answered the research question and directly addressed the problem of teacher attrition in the middle school context:

Theme 1: Individual Resilience Factors

Themes in this cluster, including internal factors such as mindset, growth mindset/self-fulfillment/advocacy, and teacher well-being, revealed how teachers' personal beliefs and strategies functioned as protective factors aligned with resilience theory. Participants described reframing challenges, drawing on personal strength, and embracing growth as essential to staying in the profession. For example, participant T6.1 emphasized, "Resilience is just about having that inner strength and support to remain committed, despite the job… teaching can be emotionally, mentally, physically draining," highlighting the importance of perseverance and external support. Another teacher explained the universality of consistent effort, stating, "Other teachers might define it differently. Some lean on routines, others on their support systems. But the core idea is

the same: keep showing up" (T8.1), which underscored mindset and consistency as shared protective factors across different personal coping styles.

A third participant used a vivid analogy to depict how resilience evolves over time through experience and reflection:

Participant T6.1 stated, "Students hate math… I tell them you don't learn to ride a bike right away. You fall, but eventually you ride without training wheels. Teaching takes experience: you won't get it right the first few times. With experience, it gets easier; you know what to do." This analogy not only normalizes mistakes and setbacks but also reinforces the importance of persistence and reflection in professional growth.

These insights align directly with the conceptual framework grounded in resilience theory, which emphasizes both individual adaptability and the ability to persist despite adversity (Gu, 2017). Teachers' narratives demonstrate how personal commitment and strategies to maintain mental and emotional equilibrium help counter the stressors of the profession, directly addressing the study's research question on how resilience factors influence decisions to stay in teaching. Moreover, these findings support the literature highlighting that resilience is not a fixed construct, but an evolving process cultivated through reflective practice, emotional regulation, and intentional self-care strategies (Beltman et al., 2011). Collectively, participants' accounts illustrate that building individual resilience is essential for managing the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral demands of middle school teaching; demands that might otherwise contribute to attrition.

Synthesis of Patterns & Discrepant Cases

Across participants, a consistent pattern emerged: personal commitment, emotional regulation, and reframing challenges were described as essential strategies enabling teachers to persist despite daily stressors. While most teachers emphasized perseverance as a cornerstone of resilience, a few described moments when personal resilience was not enough, highlighting the need for external supports. Participant T6.5 reflected, "Last year was a year I almost quit… had two tough cases… behaviorists, lawyers observing… resiliency was put to the test…" illustrating how even the most dedicated teachers may reach a breaking point when external stressors are intense and sustained. These differing perspectives reinforce resilience theory's view that resilience is an evolving process shaped by both individual traits and contextual factors. Together, these patterns underscore that resilience is not solely about personal grit, but also about the alignment between teachers' internal strategies and their broader environment, directly addressing the research question.

Theme 2: Relational Supports and Collegial Connections

Relational supports and collegial connections emerged as essential sources of protection that helped sustain teachers' resilience, directly addressing the research question on how educators perceive resilience as influencing their decision to remain in the profession. Teacher T6.3 described how "knowing I wasn't the only one going through it" made it easier to cope, highlighting the power of shared experience to alleviate feelings of isolation and self-blame. This sense of collective struggle was reinforced by opportunities to "vent and complain and commiserate" and "bounce ideas

off each other" (T6.3) so that difficulties were viewed as systemic or situational rather than personal failings. The same participant reflected on the importance of hearing that it was "helpful to hear that it's not perfect for everybody," which normalized setbacks and reinforced belonging within a professional community (T6.3). Teacher T6.2 emphasized the value of finding "a group of people or one person that you're able to just kind of go to if you need any kind of assistance," while another teacher described a trusted coworker, "my ride or die, my left hand," (T7.3) as essential for managing stress and maintaining emotional balance day-to-day.

Additionally, T8.3 captured how relational dynamics with leadership are equally critical for sustaining resilience, stating, "Good admin makes me want to go above and beyond; bad admin makes me want to do the bare minimum." This underscores that relational supports extend beyond peer connections to include the quality of relationships with administrators, which can motivate teachers or contribute to disengagement. These insights are consistent with resilience theory, which highlights that teachers' ability to adapt and persevere depends not just on personal qualities but also on the presence of supportive relationships and school systems (Masten, 2001). By employing a basic qualitative methodology with semistructured interviews, this study was able to surface these nuanced relational dimensions of resilience that quantitative designs might overlook. Moreover, the relational themes directly answer the research question by demonstrating that teachers' decisions to persist are closely tied to their ability to access meaningful collegial and leadership support. This reinforces literature indicating that interpersonal resources, whether through trusted peers or supportive administrators, play

a vital role in sustaining commitment and buffering teachers against burnout (Gu & Day, 2007; Tait, 2008).

Synthesis of Patterns & Discrepant Cases

Participants consistently described supportive peer relationships and collegial networks as powerful buffers against stress, illustrating a shared pattern of turning to colleagues during times of challenge. A notable relationship emerged where teachers who felt they belonged within their school community were more likely to describe intentions to stay. Conversely, a minority who experienced professional isolation expressed greater frustration and thoughts of leaving, highlighting discrepant cases that emphasize the protective power of positive relationships. These findings align with the research question by demonstrating how interpersonal connections directly influence teachers' perceptions of resilience and decisions about staying in the profession.

Theme 3: Systemic and Workplace Conditions

Discussions about policies, professional development, gaps (e.g., in resources or training), and school culture/environment captured how organizational and systemic factors shaped teachers' experiences of resilience. Participants described how restrictive policies, insufficient professional learning opportunities, and negative school climates undermined their ability to remain in the profession, while positive systemic supports reinforced their resilience.

For instance, participant T7.2 questioned the disconnect between student needs and available interventions, asking, "Meaningful program, for the kids, right? So if we have such large gaps in learning, why do we not use a program like that that's designed to

fill in gaps for kids?" This reflection highlights how systemic decisions about curriculum and resources can either erode or strengthen teachers' sense of efficacy and commitment.

Another teacher emphasized the importance of professional trust and flexibility: "Trusting that we know what's best for the kids in our classroom and, you know, giving us some flexibility with regard to that, I think is important to resiliency" (T7.2). This statement illustrates how respecting teachers' expertise serves as an important source of support, reinforcing their ability to adapt and stay motivated despite challenges.

However, contradictions between institutional messaging and workplace realities added to stress and feelings of isolation. As one participant observed, "We tell teachers to focus on their social and emotional well-being, but we don't create a space for them to do it" (T8.2). This mismatch between expectations and practical support underscores how systemic conditions can undermine resilience when policies are not matched by meaningful action.

These insights demonstrate that systemic and organizational factors are critical to understanding teachers' perceptions of resilience, directly addressing the research question by revealing how school and district environments can either foster or hinder teachers' capacity to persist. Consistent with resilience theory, when schools create environments that offer important sources of support, such as aligning resources to needs, respecting teacher expertise, and providing authentic opportunities for well-being, teachers are more likely to sustain their commitment and remain in the profession.

Synthesis of Patterns & Discrepant Cases

Patterns across the data revealed that when school policies, resources, and

professional autonomy aligned with teachers' real classroom challenges, resilience was bolstered. When systemic gaps or misalignments were present, feelings of helplessness and burnout increased. Some participants described exceptional cases where systemic supports improved dramatically (e.g., new leadership implementing effective programs), offering discrepant but hopeful examples of how systemic shifts can reverse negative trends. Collectively, these findings demonstrate the central role of organizational context in shaping resilience, highlighting patterns and relationships essential to understanding teacher retention in alignment with the research question.

Theme 4: Leadership Dynamics

This cluster featured themes on both positive and negative school leadership experiences, reflecting participants' perceptions of how administrative actions directly influenced their well-being, professional engagement, and decisions to remain in teaching. Participants consistently portrayed school leadership as a pivotal factor that could either strengthen or undermine their resilience. Supportive, communicative, and responsive leaders were credited with fostering a climate of trust, psychological safety, and professional fulfillment, all of which sustained teachers' motivation even during periods of heightened stress. T8.3 explained, "Admin who acknowledge the emotional toll of teaching validate our experience," emphasizing how emotionally attuned leadership reinforces teachers' sense of being seen, heard, and valued which were key aspects identified by resilience theorists (Gu & Day, 2007) as essential for buffering occupational stress in education.

Other participants highlighted the powerful motivational role of effective

leadership: as T8.3 articulated, “Good admin makes me want to go above and beyond; bad admin makes me want to do the bare minimum,” clearly illustrating the strong link between leadership behaviors and teachers’ willingness to invest extra effort. These insights support research indicating that leaders who model care and competence inspire greater commitment, while those who fail to do so diminish teachers’ sense of efficacy and investment in their roles (Leithwood et al., 2008).

However, the absence of authentic support or consistent leadership emerged as a major risk factor undermining resilience. T8.3’s comment, “Empty slogans about wellness don’t mean anything without action,” points to how performative or insincere efforts, lacking tangible follow-through, can deepen distrust and disengagement. This aligns with previous research showing that symbolic gestures without meaningful backing can erode morale (Wallerstein, 2021). Similarly, T7.3 noted, “My principal and vice principal are very good… but there’s a disconnect… between the higher ups,” highlighting systemic issues when district-level leadership is perceived as out of touch with the realities of classroom practice. This disconnect can create frustration and a sense of isolation, limiting teachers’ capacity to sustain resilience.

Furthermore, T8.3 observed, “I’ve seen good teachers leave because they feel invisible,” underscoring how a lack of recognition and affirmation from leadership can contribute to feelings of professional helplessness that can culminate in attrition. Such findings reinforce the importance of consistent, individualized, and relationally focused leadership practices for supporting resilience, in line with resilience theory’s assertion that trusting, respectful relationships are critical protective resources in high-stress

professions.

The insights from this cluster directly address the study's research question by illustrating how teachers' perceptions of leadership profoundly shape their willingness to stay in the profession. By leveraging a basic qualitative methodology grounded in semistructured interviews, this study elicited rich, context-specific narratives, revealing both micro-level (individual leadership behaviors) and macro-level (district or systemic) factors influencing resilience. This deeper insight moves the research forward by highlighting how leadership can function as either a safeguard or a source of risk in the broader middle school teaching environment.

Synthesis of Patterns & Discrepant Cases

A strong pattern emerged in participants' narratives showing leadership behaviors consistently influenced resilience, with supportive, engaged leaders described as enhancing morale and motivation, while absent or inconsistent leadership undermined commitment. Interestingly, some discrepant cases showed teachers persisting despite poor leadership, relying heavily on personal coping or collegial support which further emphasized the interplay of multiple resilience factors. These relationships emphasize the significance of leadership as a potential protective and risk factor, directly aligning with the research question and extending understanding of how leadership impacts middle school teacher retention.

Theme 5: Middle School-Specific Challenges

Themes such as middle school age challenges/behaviors and student disrespect revealed the unique and often intense stressors inherent in teaching early adolescents,

factors central to both the research question and the rationale for focusing on middle school teacher retention. Participants described how adolescent unpredictability, shifting generational norms, and widening academic disparities compounded the day-to-day demands of the classroom, requiring heightened resilience.

For example, participant T6.3 recounted an early-career experience: “One of my first, very first days teaching...she put a pen in a pencil sharpener and stabbed me through my shirt...my boss told me to get it cleaned, gave me 10 minutes, and then I had to teach the rest of the day.” This incident underscores the dual challenge of managing extreme student behaviors and contending with administrative responses that may fail to support teacher recovery, directly impacting resilience and highlighting systemic risk factors.

Participant T8.1 described the pressures introduced by generational and developmental changes: “The resilience part is just being able to deal with the generational shift of how students learn…” This observation reflects resilience theory’s emphasis on adaptability in the face of evolving contexts, demonstrating how teachers’ persistence depends on their capacity to respond to cultural and generational transformations in student populations.

Academic disparities were also identified as a compounding stressor, as illustrated by teacher T7.3’s reflection: “A lot of my kids can’t read on grade level and I’m teaching seventh grade and some of these kids are reading, like, on maybe first, second grade level. A lot of them can’t write.” Such significant learning gaps intensify instructional demands, increase emotional labor, and contribute to the chronic stress associated with middle school teaching.

Participants also noted how changes in student behavior and societal norms shape resilience demands. One teacher, T6.4, remarked: “The population has changed, or the norms of this age group have changed… both in what’s coming in from home and what’s expected at school,” underscoring how shifts in student and community dynamics compound the demands of teaching. Also, several participants highlighted seventh grade as an especially challenging period, requiring elevated levels of patience and resilience. As one teacher explained, “They’re coming right back. They’re comfortable. They know what they can get away with. They’re even further into the teenager part, but still not in the good decision-making part ... So I definitely think seventh grade in our situation is where you need to be the most resilient” (T8.2). This detailed account captures how developmental nuances can create distinct challenges, reinforcing why resilience strategies must be both individualized and context specific.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the middle school environment presents unique, layered challenges intersecting with personal and systemic factors, requiring teachers to cultivate robust, adaptive resilience strategies. This supports the study’s research question by illustrating how perceptions of resilience are shaped not only by individual dispositions but also by the distinct developmental and social dynamics inherent to teaching at the middle school level.

Synthesis of Patterns & Discrepant Cases

Participants repeatedly described patterns of heightened emotional labor and unpredictability unique to early adolescence, particularly in seventh grade, requiring exceptional resilience. However, a few discrepant cases described middle school teaching

as energizing and rewarding when coupled with supportive contexts, suggesting that challenges alone do not determine resilience, but that contextual supports mediate these experiences. These patterns show how students' developmental changes interact with both individual and school-level factors, offering deeper understanding of the challenges specific to middle school teaching and directly addressing the research question.

Synthesis of Findings

Together, the five final themes demonstrate that middle school teachers' perceptions of resilience are multifaceted, shaped by the dynamic interplay of personal coping strategies, relational supports, systemic and organizational conditions, leadership dynamics, and the unique developmental complexities inherent in teaching early adolescents. These findings directly answer the research question by illustrating how both individual and contextual factors converge to influence teachers' decisions to remain in the profession.

Participants' accounts revealed that resilience is not just an internal characteristic, but a process forged through interactions with supportive colleagues and administrators, professional autonomy, and resources aligned with real classroom needs. Conversely, when these supports were absent or when systemic misalignments, inconsistent leadership, or heightened adolescent challenges dominated, teachers described escalating stress and waning motivation, often culminating in thoughts of leaving the profession

For example, Beltman (2020) highlighted that resilience grows when teachers can draw on personal coping strategies and when schools foster trusting relationships, professional autonomy, and realistic expectations. These findings show that having

supportive systems in place is not just a nice extra, it is essential for helping teachers stay committed when facing the tough challenges of teaching middle school. By aligning school policies, leadership practices, and resources with what teachers actually need, schools can better support teachers' resilience and reduce the risk of burnout or attrition.

The findings from this study extend these insights to the specific context of middle school teaching, highlighting how adolescent behavioral shifts, evolving societal norms, and leadership responsiveness uniquely shape resilience experiences for educators at this level. By employing a basic qualitative methodology with semistructured interviews, the study captured rich, context-specific narratives that offer a detailed account of how resilience unfolds in day-to-day school life, insights that quantitative studies alone might overlook.

Ultimately, these findings provide a research-based perspective of the factors that strengthen or weaken resilience among middle school teachers, highlighting specific, context-dependent drivers of workforce instability and identifying opportunities for schools and districts to improve teacher retention through comprehensive, relationship-focused, and contextually responsive support systems.

Synthesis of Patterns

Analysis of the five final themes revealed clear patterns aligning with the research question on how teachers perceive resilience as a factor in their decisions to remain in middle school teaching. First, across nearly all interviews, participants described individual resilience as an ongoing process involving personal coping strategies and adaptive mindsets, consistent with resilience theory's conceptualization of resilience as

dynamic rather than static (Beltman, 2020). Patterns also emerged in relational supports: teachers overwhelmingly emphasized that having colleagues or administrators who offered genuine support and opportunities for shared problem-solving was critical to their ability to persevere (Kabia, 2022). This pattern supports previous research demonstrating that positive professional relationships are key protective factors against burnout (Gu & Day, 2007; Mansfield, 2019).

Systemic and workplace conditions also showed consistent patterns, with participants pointing to gaps in resources, misaligned policies, or contradictory messaging about well-being as contributors to demoralization. Teachers who experienced authentic respect for their professional judgment described a greater sense of agency and resilience. These consistent patterns directly answer the research question by demonstrating that resilience is fostered through an interaction of personal, relational, and systemic factors, a finding supported by scholarship that emphasizes the importance of aligned organizational supports (Beltman & Poulton, 2022).

Leadership dynamics formed another strong pattern: participants who felt recognized and supported by their leaders reported higher levels of motivation, while those who experienced inconsistent or performative leadership described declining morale. Similarly, the middle school-specific challenges theme consistently highlighted developmental unpredictability and generational shifts as intensifying stressors, requiring context-sensitive resilience strategies.

Discrepant Cases

While these patterns were consistent across most participants, a few discrepant

cases emerged. For instance, one participant described persisting in teaching despite lacking collegial or leadership support, attributing their resilience solely to personal determination: “I don’t want to rely on anybody else for the job that I’m trying to accomplish in my classroom” (T7.1). This contrasts with the dominant pattern of relational supports as central to resilience, highlighting that for some, individual disposition can override contextual challenges.

Another discrepant case involved a participant who reported positive systemic supports but still considered leaving due to external personal factors unrelated to the school environment, such as family obligations. This outlier underscores that while workplace factors are critical, individual circumstances beyond professional settings can also influence retention decisions, aligning with resilience theory’s recognition of ecological and contextual layers impacting adaptation (Ungar, 2012).

By accounting for both prevailing patterns and these discrepant cases, the findings offer a nuanced, comprehensive understanding of how Grade 6–8 teachers perceive resilience in relation to their decisions to remain in the profession. This comprehensive analysis reflects a rigorous approach and ensures that all significant data, whether supporting or differing from the main patterns, have been thoughtfully incorporated to fully address the research question.

Evidence of Quality

To ensure the accuracy and credibility of the data, all interviews were transcribed verbatim using Fathom Notetaker and reviewed multiple times for completeness and precision. Member checking was offered by inviting participants to review their

transcripts or summaries; however, no one chose to participate. Throughout the study, I maintained detailed reflective notes and research logs (Appendix D), which documented the transcripts, coding decisions, theming process, representative quotes, mapped final themes, and notes on reflexivity and interpretation. These practices supported transparency and consistency in the analysis. To strengthen the validity of the findings, I examined patterns that emerged across participants with different backgrounds, grade levels, and school contexts. This comparative approach helped to confirm that the themes represented consistent and recurring experiences rather than isolated viewpoints. Sample transcript excerpts (Appendix E) further illustrate the richness of the data and demonstrate the rigor of the analytic process.

Summary of Outcomes

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive, empirically grounded understanding of how Grade 6–8 teachers in NSMSD perceive resilience as a factor influencing their decisions to remain in the profession. These findings directly address the research question, *What are the perceptions of Grade 6–8 teachers regarding resiliency as a factor in their decision to remain teaching?* by revealing five final themes: individual resilience factors, relational supports, systemic and workplace conditions, leadership dynamics, and middle school-specific challenges.

The outcomes demonstrate that teachers' resilience is shaped by a dynamic interplay of personal strategies, supportive relationships, aligned systemic conditions, and responsive leadership, all of which can either ease or intensify the distinct challenges of teaching early adolescents. This directly responds to the problem of rising middle school

teacher attrition in NSMSD, which was linked to complex personal, relational, and systemic factors that weakened teachers' commitment to the profession.

These findings align with and extend the larger body of resilience literature, including Beltman (2020), who argued that resilience emerged through interactions between individual coping resources and contextual supports, and Mansfield (2019), who emphasizes that teacher resilience was a relational and context-dependent process. By highlighting how middle school-specific factors such as developmental unpredictability and generational shifts intensify resilience demands, the study builds on resilience theory (Masten, 2001) by placing resilience within the unique social and academic demands of middle school education.

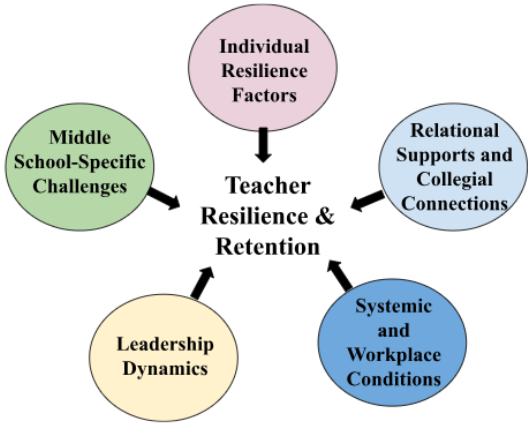
Furthermore, the findings show how resilience is not just an individual trait but a process requiring aligned support at multiple levels, from collegial networks to school and district leadership. These insights strengthen the conceptual framework by showing that resilience is not just about what teachers do on their own, but also about the support they receive from colleagues, leaders, and school systems. This reflects Gu and Day's (2007) finding that teachers' resilience depends on the quality of their social and organizational environments. By highlighting how personal strategies work together with supportive relationships and school conditions, the findings show that resilience is a flexible, context-based process shaped by both individual and external factors, especially in the complex middle school setting.

Collectively, these outcomes suggest that to improve teacher retention, schools and districts must adopt holistic, relationship-centered, and contextually responsive

strategies that support teachers' personal, relational, and systemic resilience. This summary provides a logical and systematic integration of findings with the research question, problem statement, relevant literature, and conceptual framework, offering actionable insights to address middle school teacher attrition. To further illustrate these connections, Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the final themes in relation to teacher resilience and retention.

Figure 1

Final Themes Influencing Middle School Teacher Resilience



Note. The figure highlights the five clusters identified as key influences on middle school teachers' resilience and their decisions to remain in the profession.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

The project is a white paper designed to address the persistent challenge of middle school teacher attrition in NSMSD. This deliverable presents an executive summary of key findings from the doctoral study, which explored Grade 6–8 teacher perceptions regarding resilience and the factors influencing their decision to remain in the profession. Drawing from rich qualitative data, the white paper translates these findings into targeted, research-informed recommendations aimed at district and school-level decision-makers.

Organized around the five final themes identified: (a) individual resilience factors, (b) relational supports and collegial connections, (c) systemic and workplace conditions, (d) leadership dynamics, and (e) middle school–specific challenges, the white paper offers practical strategies that school leaders can adopt to improve teacher well-being and retention. The document synthesizes resilience theory, stakeholder voice, and evidence-based practices into a concise format that is both accessible and actionable. The white paper is intended for use by superintendents, principals, school board members, and other educational stakeholders. It is written in clear, practitioner-friendly language and includes both an executive summary and a section of prioritized, strategic recommendations. Specific tools such as reflection questions, implementation prompts, and sample school-level actions are included to facilitate use in leadership team meetings or board-level planning sessions.

The project's future use extends beyond this study, with potential for district-wide presentations, integration into school improvement planning, or inclusion in professional

development initiatives focused on resilience-informed leadership. As such, this white paper is not only a deliverable for this doctoral study, but a living resource that can evolve and inform sustained efforts to create supportive, resilient school environments. This project meets the expectations of a formative evaluation report by addressing local needs, grounding recommendations in evidence, and prioritizing practical application. The white paper is included in Appendix A of the final study and spans approximately 25 pages, and depended on the depth of recommendation sections and any accompanying visual aids or tools.

Rationale

The challenge of retaining middle school teachers in a northeastern state underscores a significant gap in local practice, one that this study directly addressed by examining teachers' experiences and perceptions of resilience. Teacher retention is essential to sustaining stable school environments and effective instructional leadership, as consistent staffing fosters cohesive school cultures, instructional continuity, and improved student outcomes (Ingersoll et al., 2019; Learning Policy Institute, 2022). This issue is particularly pressing in middle schools, where educators face distinct demands related to the social, emotional, and academic needs of early adolescents, a developmental stage marked by heightened behavioral and instructional challenges (Farahmandpour & Voelkel, 2025). Given these realities, the project was developed to provide targeted, actionable strategies to guide local educational leaders in strengthening teacher resilience and improving retention.

This project takes the form of a white paper designed to inform district-level

decision-makers about the conditions influencing middle school teacher resilience and retention in NSMSD. The rationale for this genre choice is grounded in the findings from Section 2, which demonstrated that teacher retention is not merely a function of personal resilience but is also shaped by a complex, interconnected set of individual, relational, systemic, and developmental factors. A white paper is an ideal medium for synthesizing these nuanced findings into a concise, actionable, and audience-specific deliverable intended for superintendents, board members, and other educational leaders.

The project directly addresses the local problem of increasing teacher attrition among Grades 6–8 educators in NSMSD. As revealed in the study, attrition is often driven by a breakdown in systemic supports, unsupportive leadership, misaligned workplace policies, and the intensifying demands of middle school teaching. While participants described effective personal strategies for managing stress, such as reframing, mindfulness, and professional reflection, these approaches alone were insufficient in the absence of strong organizational and relational supports. This reinforces the need for schools and districts to adopt a more holistic, multi-level approach to building teacher resilience. The white paper will serve as a tool for translating these research insights into targeted recommendations that can guide district- and school-level policy and leadership practice.

A white paper format was selected because it aligns with the purpose and nature of the study's findings. Rather than evaluating an existing program, the study illuminated the need for improved systemic responses to teacher stress and burnout, particularly in middle schools. As Vo and Christie (2015) suggested, practitioner-focused reports should

be accessible, thematically organized, and designed with real-world application in mind. This project follows that guidance by presenting its findings in a format that is both research-informed and leadership-friendly. It offers not only an executive summary of the thematic results from Section 2, but also clearly framed, evidence-based recommendations that align with the five final themes: individual resilience factors, relational supports and collegial connections, systemic and workplace conditions, leadership dynamics, and middle school-specific challenges.

Furthermore, the use of a white paper reflects the participatory and stakeholder-centered spirit of this study. Teachers' voices were central to the research design, and the white paper continues that trajectory by elevating those voices into a format that speaks to leadership. By connecting the day-to-day experiences of middle school educators with organizational strategies, the project aims to close the communication gap between frontline practitioners and policy-level actors.

Finally, the white paper holds promise for future use and dissemination beyond NSMSD. The themes and recommendations derived from the study reflect widespread challenges seen nationally in middle school education, including high emotional labor, developmental complexity, and insufficient systemic support. As such, this white paper could serve as a model for other districts seeking to strengthen teacher resilience and reduce attrition. It may be shared with district leadership, presented at board meetings, or used as a foundation for professional development planning.

This project genre was selected to strategically bridge research and practice in a format that is accessible and actionable for school and district leaders. By amplifying

teacher voice and integrating context-specific recommendations, the white paper aligns with the practical needs of educational stakeholders. Grounded in both the qualitative data from Section 2 and the current literature on teacher resilience and retention, this project serves as a purposeful and impactful extension of the study's findings.

Review of the Literature

Teacher attrition continues to be a critical issue in U.S. public education, especially at the middle school level where developmental, curricular, and behavioral challenges intersect (Ingersoll & Strong, 2019). The problem is not merely one of staffing, but of institutional stability, student success, and professional morale (Robinson et al., 2022). In particular, NSMSD have experienced increased difficulty retaining educators due to compounding stressors, such as post-pandemic burnout, workload intensification, and inconsistent administrative support. This literature review addresses the local and national gap in practice by exploring how research supports a targeted, resilience-based response to teacher attrition. This review synthesizes relevant literature in five areas: individual resilience factors, relational supports and collegial connections, systemic and workplace conditions, leadership dynamics, and middle school-specific challenges. Each theme is grounded in resilience theory, particularly the work of Mansfield et al. (2012) and Day and Gu (2014), to inform the rationale and structure of the proposed white paper as a vehicle for practical, evidence-based recommendations.

Framing the Problem Through Resilience Theory

Resilience theory offers a conceptual lens for understanding how teachers persist in the face of occupational adversity. Resilience is not a fixed construct, but an evolving,

context-dependent process influenced by personal, relational, and organizational supports (Mansfield et al., 2012). According to Day and Gu (2014), resilient teachers demonstrate qualities such as moral purpose, professional agency, and strong commitment, often relying on both internal coping strategies and external networks. Resilience theory informed the development of the study's thematic categories as well as the structure of the proposed white paper.

Individual Resilience Factors

Individual characteristics such as self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and adaptability are consistently identified as foundational to teacher resilience. Day and Gu (2014) emphasized that educators with a strong sense of moral purpose and emotional well-being are more likely to remain committed to their profession, even under significant systemic stress. Similarly, Mansfield et al. (2012) and Beltman (2020) described resilience as an evolving process shaped by internal strengths and external experiences, rather than a fixed personality trait or construct. These internal capacities allow educators to navigate the demands of the profession with greater optimism, autonomy, and professional identity.

Research also highlighted the importance of proactive coping strategies and wellness routines in sustaining educator well-being. Practices such as mindfulness, journaling, and cognitive reframing have been shown to reduce emotional exhaustion and buffer the effects of occupational stress (Harris & Bostain, 2021; Lee et al., 2021). Ravitch and Carl (2016) stressed the need for early-career educators to cultivate reflective practices that reinforce self-awareness and intentionality, two key elements of personal

resilience. Cicco (2024) emphasized that embedding self-care into training programs is vital for long-term resilience and burnout prevention. Likewise, Kwok and Macfarlane (2025) found that comprehensive induction programs that include individualized mentorship and emotional support directly strengthen retention by fostering psychological resilience.

Collie (2022, 2023) further linked subjective vitality, a sense of energy and motivation, to reduced turnover intentions, especially when teachers experience strong relationships with students and colleagues. Lipscomb et al. (2021) demonstrated that resilience-based professional development enhanced protective factors in both teachers and students. Tamah and Wirjawan (2021) explored how teachers respond resiliently to professional change, showing the importance of mindset and agency. Shakimova et al. (2024) confirmed that targeted professional development can support teachers in resisting stress-related burnout.

However, scholars caution that focusing solely on individual traits risks ignoring the systemic and environmental factors that shape resilience. Hascher et al. (2021) argued that unless schools and districts implement structures to support well-being, even highly resilient teachers may find it challenging to sustain their professional commitment. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that individual growth must be contextualized within supportive learning environments to be sustainable. Murphy et al. (2020) and Hilligoss et al. (2025) echoed these concerns, advocating for integrated self-care practices within school systems. Diab and Green (2024) also underscored the critical role of school-level support systems in shaping the success and survival of novice teachers,

especially in diverse educational settings.

Despite strong evidence supporting individual strategies, many school systems, particularly at the middle school level, have yet to embed these practices into their professional development or schoolwide culture. Teachers may be encouraged to practice self-care and reflection, yet without organizational reinforcement, those efforts can feel isolated or unsustainable (Hascher et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2020). This white paper aims to address that gap by providing practical, research-informed recommendations for integrating resilience-building supports into the daily practices, policies, and professional learning structures that shape school life.

Relational Supports and Collegial Connections

Peer support and collegial collaboration played a critical role in fostering teacher resilience and mitigating burnout. Studies emphasized that teachers derive emotional support and a reinforced sense of professional identity through collegial relationships, especially in high-pressure or under-resourced school environments. According to Kwok and Macfarlane (2025), strong peer connections and relational mentoring within urban schools are critical to reducing isolation and improving early-career teacher retention. Zhang and Wu-Jing (2024) further demonstrated that participation in professional learning communities (PLCs) positively influences teacher resilience, particularly when those communities foster shared purpose, reflective practice, and mutual trust. Similarly, Zorde and Lapidot-Lefler (2025) found that sustained collaboration within PLCs helps develop inclusive teaching practices and supports teacher well-being over time. These collaborative environments not only offer pedagogical benefits but also serve as

protective buffers against stress and feelings of professional isolation.

Research affirms that a teacher's social and professional sense of belonging is a key determinant of job satisfaction and retention. Christens and Inzeo (2015) and Grant et al. (2022) highlight the importance of restorative practices, shared norms, and intentional team building in cultivating school climates where staff feel safe, connected, and valued. According to Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, relatedness, feeling recognized, included, and respected, is a core psychological need that supports intrinsic motivation and emotional resilience. Collie (2023) further emphasized that peer affirmation and access to informal networks can reduce teachers' intent to leave by enhancing daily morale and professional confidence. Zorde and Lapidot-Lefler (2025) describe how sustained PLCs can build inclusive practices and long-term educator well-being. Similarly, Zhang and Wu-Jing (2024) found that teacher identity mediates the relationship between PLC involvement and resilience, demonstrating the deep interconnection between collegial networks and professional identity.

Additional evidence from Stewart and Jansky (2022) suggests that early-career teachers who participate in structured mentorship programs report stronger relational bonds and greater professional clarity, factors that significantly contribute to retention in high-need schools. Diab and Green (2024) also found that novice teachers thrive when embedded in supportive school communities that encourage collaboration and shared responsibility. These studies underscore the importance of nurturing relational ecosystems, not only during induction but throughout a teacher's career trajectory.

Conversely, research has shown that when teachers experience a lack of peer

collaboration, exclusion from decision-making, or a sense of professional isolation, their risk of attrition increases significantly (Mullen et al., 2021). While many schools offer initial induction programs, ongoing relational support is often inconsistently structured or absent altogether. Lochmiller et al. (2024) noted that evaluation systems often focus solely on individual performance, ignoring the collaborative contexts in which teaching occurs, thereby missing opportunities to reinforce community-building efforts.

Despite the clear evidence supporting the role of collegial connection in educator retention, few districts have implemented sustained formal systems to nurture this support over time. This project seeks to address that gap by offering school leaders practical strategies to embed mentorship, peer collaboration, and relational accountability into the culture of their middle schools.

Systemic and Workplace Conditions

Teachers' daily working conditions, including but not limited to class sizes, excessive workload, policy mandates, and rigid schedules, play a significant role in shaping their decisions to remain in or leave the profession. According to a national survey by the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), nearly half of teachers cited burnout and unsustainable workloads as leading factors in their decision to exit the classroom. Similarly, García and Weiss (2019) found that dissatisfaction with the teaching profession is more frequently linked to poor working conditions than to salary concerns, challenging the notion that compensation alone can solve retention issues.

Research from Bartanen et al. (2019) and Adnot et al. (2017) further underscores that school and district conditions heavily influence teacher satisfaction and

effectiveness. In a 2021 study, Farahmandpour and Voelkel examined how policy environments and organizational instability, such as frequent leadership turnover and unclear mandates, create conditions that make teacher attrition more likely. These systemic challenges undermine teacher agency and disrupt consistency in instructional practice and school culture.

From a systems perspective, Oldfield and Ainsworth (2021) applied a social-ecological framework to teacher attrition, emphasizing that resilience cannot be fully developed without addressing the broader institutional and structural forces that create stress. These include inadequate planning time, constantly shifting expectations, and a lack of autonomy over instructional practices. Their research highlighted the need for systemic approaches that move beyond individual-level interventions and toward organizational change. Diab and Green (2024) reinforced this view, arguing that school leaders must differentiate supports based on teacher needs and roles, particularly for early-career educators and those working in high-demand areas like special education, STEM, and bilingual education.

Abrio and Labay (2025) reinforced this by linking teacher satisfaction directly to the quality of professional development and institutional responsiveness to staff needs. Woodcock et al. (2023) emphasized that ongoing stress-reduction training and structured emotional support systems are essential in cultivating schoolwide resilience. Additional studies by Kwok and Macfarlane (2025) and Fielder et al. (2024) found that induction models and leadership scaffolding must be embedded within the systemic culture of schools to retain staff and promote professional growth.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of workplace conditions, few districts have implemented localized, formative evaluations to examine the specific environmental stressors affecting middle school educators. Most existing efforts focus on broad policy reforms rather than targeted improvements that reflect teachers' experiences in their particular school settings. As a result, educators continue to navigate chronic stressors without sustainable institutional support. This white paper addresses that gap by offering a structured framework that school leaders can use to collect and act on qualitative insights from staff. By centering teacher voice in the evaluation of working conditions, this project provides school and district leaders with actionable strategies to reduce burnout, strengthen morale, and improve teacher retention in context-specific ways.

Leadership Dynamics

School leadership remains one of the most influential and well-documented factors in teacher retention. Research consistently demonstrates that administrators play a pivotal role in shaping the professional experiences of teachers, particularly in high-stress and under-resourced environments. For example, Boyd et al. (2011) found that supportive principals significantly influenced teachers' decisions to remain in their schools. Similarly, Ingersoll et al. (2019) identified administrative support as a leading predictor of teacher attrition, particularly in schools serving historically marginalized populations. In these settings, the presence or absence of relational trust, timely feedback, and recognition can either reinforce resilience or exacerbate burnout and dissatisfaction.

The quality of leadership is closely tied to working conditions that support or

erode teacher well-being. DeMatthews, Knight, and Shin (2021) emphasized the importance of principals in creating organizational climates that buffer teachers from excessive workloads and emotional fatigue. Leaders who proactively shield staff from stressors, protect instructional time, and promote positive relationships can foster conditions where resilience is sustained. Castro (2023) similarly emphasized that leaders must be equipped with practical tools to address the emotional and professional toll teaching takes, especially in chronically underfunded or high-need contexts. These findings align with Arthur and Bradley's (2023) research, which revealed that in challenging schools, a nurturing leadership approach that prioritizes staff well-being and collegial relationships was essential in retaining experienced teachers.

Leadership styles that center care, collaboration, and ethical responsibility have also been shown to enhance teacher morale and retention. Day and Gu (2014) found that teachers were more likely to remain committed to the profession when they worked under leaders who demonstrated genuine concern for their well-being and personal growth. In particular, leadership that balances accountability with empathy contributes to a more psychologically safe environment. This has become even more critical in the post-pandemic era, where uncertainty and emotional exhaustion have heightened the need for adaptive and emotionally intelligent leadership (Ferren, 2021). Mullen et al. (2021) emphasized that leaders who model resilience themselves help build resilient school cultures, reinforcing staff members' capacity to adapt and persevere in the face of adversity.

Teacher voice is also a critical dimension of leadership. Lochmiller et al. (2024)

emphasized that when teachers are actively engaged in school improvement efforts and decision-making processes, they report higher organizational trust and are more likely to stay. Dai (2023) highlighted the role of distributed and caring leadership models in supporting early career teachers, particularly by enhancing their sense of agency and connection to their professional identity. These participatory approaches help teachers feel valued and respected, which are foundational to resilience-building (Gearhart et al., 2024).

Moreover, structural inequities, such as racism, marginalization, and professional bias, can only be addressed when school leaders intentionally create inclusive, affirming environments. Avraham and Mishkin (2025) found that teachers of Ethiopian descent experienced higher rates of turnover due to systemic exclusion and lack of meaningful principal support. In contrast, leaders who actively supported integration and addressed bias were more likely to retain diverse educators. These findings supported the need for leadership practices that are not only relational but also equity driven.

Despite widespread agreement on the importance of effective leadership, many principals, particularly those in the NSMSD, may lack formal training in resilience-informed leadership practices. Too often, professional development for school administrators focuses on compliance, operations, and evaluation protocols rather than on cultivating relational trust, emotional presence, or inclusive collaboration. This gap is particularly significant in middle school contexts, where teacher stress is often compounded by the unique developmental and behavioral challenges of early adolescence (Drew et al., 2025; Mu et al., 2022).

In response, this project offers a formative evaluation framework rooted in resilience theory and informed by current literature on teacher well-being, leadership practice, and school culture. Drawing on the combined insights of Castro (2023), Mullen et al. (2021), and Day and Gu (2014), the framework emphasizes the value of emotionally intelligent, relationally attuned leadership. By highlighting concrete, research-aligned strategies, such as fostering teacher agency, promoting transparent communication, supporting autonomy, and creating structures for collegial support, district leaders and school principals can better address the root causes of teacher burnout and attrition.

The literature confirms that leadership is more than a managerial function; it is a relational, emotional, and cultural force that can sustain or destabilize the teaching workforce. When principals build resilient school cultures through inclusive, caring, and participatory leadership practices, they create the conditions necessary for teacher growth, job satisfaction, and long-term retention.

Middle School–Specific Challenges

Middle school educators operate in a uniquely demanding context that differs significantly from elementary and high school environments. Teaching early adolescents requires balancing academic rigor with developmental responsiveness, as students in Grades 6–8 undergo rapid cognitive, emotional, and social changes. As Burke and Ceo-DiFrancesco (2022) noted, middle school teachers must navigate departmentalized schedules while providing differentiated instruction, managing behavior, and attending to social-emotional learning needs, all within short class periods and rotating student

groups. These layered responsibilities require specialized instructional and relational strategies that are not always addressed in general teacher preparation or retention initiatives.

Research confirmed that behavioral disruptions and generational shifts in student behavior were central challenges in the middle grades. For example, Garwood (2022) emphasized that middle school teachers consistently identified classroom behavior management as one of the most stressful elements of their roles, particularly post-pandemic, when students' social-emotional regulation became more volatile. Similarly, Kollerová et al. (2023) identified disruptive student behavior as a key predictor of teacher exhaustion, especially in secondary school environments where adolescent behaviors intersect with low leadership support.

Certain subject areas within the middle grades are especially vulnerable to high turnover. Teachers in special education, STEM, and world languages frequently report elevated levels of stress, emotional labor, and burnout, driven by the diverse and multifaceted needs of students, unclear expectations, and persistent staffing shortages (Madigan & Kim, 2021). These challenges are further exacerbated by limited planning time, heavy caseloads, and insufficient peer collaboration, which leave educators feeling isolated or overwhelmed. In response, Jackson and Parker (2023) proposed the SMIRC framework: Support, Mentorship, Inclusion, Resilience, and Collaboration, as a model to improve retention and reduce burnout in high-need fields.

Developmental and contextual factors also compound the challenges of teaching in the middle grades. As Sam and Gupton (2024) note, educators working with

vulnerable student populations often function as first responders to emotional and behavioral crises, despite systemic misalignment and insufficient institutional support. These teachers often face a mismatch between institutional expectations and real-time student needs, especially in communities impacted by trauma, poverty, or social unrest. The middle school environment is also uniquely impacted by widening academic disparities, which require teachers to differentiate instruction for students reading and writing at vastly different grade levels (Kollerová et al., 2023). This reality was echoed by Garwood (2022), who described the growing demand for professional development focused on behavior management and trauma-informed practices as essential for preserving educator well-being and instructional effectiveness.

Despite the documented challenges of teaching in the middle grades, most retention strategies are designed with a one-size-fits-all approach that overlooks the specific pressures and instructional configurations of this age group. As a result, teachers working in these unique settings may not receive the tailored support they need to thrive. Many district initiatives lack differentiation by grade span or subject area, resulting in generic solutions that fail to address the root causes of middle school attrition.

Garwood (2022) emphasized that burnout prevention efforts must account for the specific classroom management struggles faced by middle school educators and proposed models like BASE, Behavioral, Academic, and Social Engagement, as a framework to strengthen teachers' capacity to manage disruptive behaviors, promote student engagement, and create supportive classroom climates that reduce burnout risk. Similarly, Sam and Gupton (2024) found that teachers, particularly in marginalized

communities, often serve as emotional first responders without adequate institutional support, creating a misalignment between expectations and available resources. Kollerová et al. (2023) reinforced this point through quantitative findings that linked teacher exhaustion to disruptive student behaviors, especially in schools serving adolescent populations. Together, these studies suggest that retention in middle school grades teaching is most sustainable when supports are context-specific, relationally grounded, and developmentally responsive.

This white paper seeks to close that gap by recommending targeted, developmentally appropriate supports for middle school teachers and principals. These include strategies that account for adolescent developmental stages, subject-area demands, and the logistical complexity of departmentalized teaching. By aligning retention practices with the realities of middle school education, school leaders can better support their staff, reduce turnover, and improve outcomes for students in this critical transitional phase.

Justification for a White Paper as the Project Genre

A white paper is an effective and appropriate project genre for translating the findings of this qualitative study into practical, leadership-focused solutions. Unlike lengthier academic reports, white papers offer a concise, solution-oriented format tailored to the needs of decision-makers, such as superintendents, school board members, and building-level administrators. The goal is to both inform and persuade, translating research into strategies for immediate leadership action.

Preskill and Gopal (2020) emphasized that evaluation-based white papers can

serve as powerful catalysts for organizational improvement when they are grounded in relevant data, clearly articulated themes, and contextual understanding. Particularly for complex and persistent issues such as middle school teacher attrition, the white paper format allows for the distillation of multifaceted qualitative findings into clear, actionable strategies that align with local priorities.

Research by Vo and Christie (2015) supports this approach, recommending that evaluation reports intended for school leaders and educators be written in accessible language, organized around key themes, and designed with practical implementation in mind. Furthermore, Christens and Inzeo (2015) argued that participatory evaluation formats that elevate stakeholder voices, such as those of teachers and school staff, not only enhance the credibility of the findings but also increase the likelihood of buy-in from leadership. This is particularly important in school districts where trust and shared responsibility are critical for initiating and sustaining change.

The white paper will synthesize teachers' lived perceptions, professional insights, and resilience strategies into a structured report aligned with the five thematic findings of the study. It will present practical recommendations rooted in resilience theory and designed to address the specific challenges faced by educators in NSMSD. In doing so, the white paper will function as both a policy guidance tool and a call to action, bridging the gap between rich qualitative research and the leadership decisions needed to foster a more supportive and sustainable teaching environment.

Conclusion

The literature clearly supports a resilience-based, context-sensitive approach to

teacher retention, especially in middle schools. The five identified themes: (1) Individual Resilience Factors, (2) Relational Supports and Collegial Connections, (3) Systemic and Workplace Conditions, (4) Leadership Dynamics, and (5) Middle School-Specific Challenges, reflect known contributors to attrition that are often under-addressed in practice. Grounded in resilience theory, this literature review supports the development of a white paper as a purposeful, timely deliverable to improve teacher support systems and reduce turnover in NSMSD.

Project Description

This project centers on the development of a white paper titled Fostering Teacher Resilience and Retention in Grades 6–8: Recommendations for Northeastern State Middle Schools. The white paper synthesizes the qualitative findings of this study into a structured, accessible, and practitioner-focused document designed to inform district and school leadership practices. Its primary objective is to provide superintendents, principals, school board members, and central office administrators with actionable strategies for improving teacher well-being and reducing attrition among Grades 6–8 educators.

The white paper is organized around the five thematic categories that emerged from the study's data analysis:

1. Individual Resilience Factors
2. Relational Supports and Collegial Connections
3. Systemic and Workplace Conditions
4. Leadership Dynamics

5. Middle School–Specific Challenges

Each theme includes a brief narrative overview, interview quotes from participants, relevant literature, and a set of targeted, evidence-based recommendations. When appropriate, the white paper includes tools like example strategies, reflection questions, and practical prompts to make it easier to use and to help spark meaningful conversations among educators and leaders. A closing section outlines broader policy considerations, suggestions for leadership training, and next steps for district-wide dissemination or adoption.

This product is designed for flexible use across stakeholder groups. District leaders may share it during administrative team meetings, Board of Education discussions, or strategic planning sessions. Principals and instructional leaders can use the white paper to guide building-level improvement efforts or professional development planning. Additionally, the report's format and tools lend themselves to collaborative reflection among teacher teams or leadership PLCs.

The final product is included in Appendix A of this study. It may be adapted for broader dissemination beyond NSMSD as interest arises. The document is written in a tone that balances professional authority with accessibility, ensuring that both scholarly rigor and practical application are maintained. Ultimately, the white paper serves as both a formative evaluation tool and a strategic resource to support long-term efforts to improve middle school teacher resilience and retention.

Project Evaluation Plan

This project is best evaluated through a formative evaluation approach, consistent

with the intent of the white paper as an improvement-oriented, practice-based deliverable. Rather than assessing the impact of a program already in place, this evaluation focuses on the relevance, clarity, utilization, and usability of the white paper by the intended audiences stated above, and below.

The evaluation plan includes the following components:

1. Stakeholder Feedback Surveys and Interviews - To assess the clarity, relevance, and applicability of the white paper, a feedback survey will be administered to key stakeholder groups, district administrators, principals, teacher leaders, and board of education members, following its initial presentation or dissemination. Items will be designed to capture perceptions of:

- Content relevance to local needs
- Clarity of recommendations
- Feasibility of implementation
- Overall usefulness and intention to apply insights

Optional follow-up interviews or focus group sessions may be conducted with 3–5 individuals from varied roles to gather qualitative feedback on how the white paper informs their decision-making and planning.

2. Pilot Implementation Tracking

Select schools or districts that express interest in using the white paper may be invited to participate in a short-term pilot. In these settings, school leaders may implement one or more of the recommended strategies (e.g., a teacher wellness initiative, a structured peer mentorship program) and provide feedback on barriers, successes, and

observed changes in staff morale or collaboration.

3. Artifacts and Professional Use Monitoring

Evidence of use, such as inclusion in professional development agendas, reference during leadership meetings, or adaptation into local strategic plans, will be informally collected. Participants will be encouraged to share artifacts, implementation notes, or meeting reflections to demonstrate how the white paper has supported school or district-level work.

4. Reflective Memo from the Researcher

As the researcher and author, I will maintain a reflective memo log documenting observations during dissemination, stakeholder reactions, and suggestions for future iterations. This practice supports transparency and adds to the trustworthiness of the evaluation process.

While the primary goal is not summative, the formative data gathered will help assess the white paper's impact as a practical resource and offer insights for possible revision or broader dissemination. If successfully received, the white paper may be adapted for use across other grade spans or used to inform leadership development programs within NSMSD and beyond.

Project Implications

The implications of this project extend across local, institutional, and potentially national levels. At the local level, this white paper responds directly to concerns raised by educators in NSMSD and provides leaders with a data-informed path forward. If implemented, the recommendations have the potential to:

- Improve school climate and teacher morale
- Reduce burnout and attrition among Grades 6–8 teachers
- Strengthen the leadership capacity to support teacher well-being
- Promote student continuity and achievement by increasing teacher retention

At the school level, the white paper may serve as a model for embedding resilience-informed strategies into district-wide improvement plans, leadership evaluation tools, and professional development programming. Schools of education and leadership certification programs may also consider integrating findings into administrator preparation curricula, given the documented importance of resilience-informed leadership.

At the broader field level, this project adds to the expanding body of research highlighting the importance of systemic, relationship-driven approaches to supporting teachers. Its implications support a shift in leadership practice from individual-centered views of resilience to a more ecological, organization-wide understanding. Additionally, the study amplifies teacher voice in educational policy conversations, addressing the common disconnect between policy intent and practitioner experience.

As the teacher shortage persists across the nation, particularly in hard-to-staff middle schools, this project offers a practical and transferable tool that can be adapted to different district contexts. The white paper has potential value not only for immediate use in NSMSD but as part of a larger conversation on building sustainable educational work environments. The success of this project may inform future research, inspire cross-

district collaboration, or spark the development of resilience-informed policy initiatives at the state level.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

A primary strength of the white paper is that it is built around the authentic voices of middle school teachers, which makes its recommendations both practical and grounded in real experience. For example, participants described that when principals checked in and asked how they were doing, it was more than small talk; it shifted how they felt about coming to work. This reflects what research calls for: tools and processes that help educators take insights from research and put them into action in their daily work. For instance, research-practice partnerships (RPPs) are designed to support teachers by giving them practical strategies and knowledge that help them apply research in their daily classroom practice (Schlicht-Schmälzle et al., 2024). Organizing the content into five clear themes: individual resilience factors, relational supports and collegial connections, systemic and workplace conditions, leadership dynamics, and middle school-specific challenges, ensures the recommendations address the many layers that shape teacher resilience.

The format of the white paper is another strength. It is concise, visually organized, and aimed at leaders who need quick, actionable strategies they can use immediately. One participant emphasized that leaders need to remember they are working with adults, not children, underscoring the value of practical, professionally focused tools that respect teachers' expertise and experience (T8.1). This mirrors research showing that structured, scenario-based tools such as problem-based cases, help bridge the gap between theory and what actually happens in schools (Tveitnes et al., 2025). The inclusion of examples,

reflection prompts, and planning tools in the white paper helps leaders move from understanding the problem to taking concrete action.

There are also some limitations. While the recommendations are grounded in both current literature and the study's findings, they have not yet been tested in the local context. Success will depend on leadership commitment, adequate resources, and consistent follow-up, all of which can differ between districts. Because the white paper was created for NSMSD, some ideas may need adjusting for other settings. Finally, as one participant pointed out, "When we enforce them, nothing happens… it's taking up a lot of teacher time, but then there's no admin follow through" (T6.3). This reflects a familiar finding in the literature: even the most well-designed tools have little effect without active, ongoing use by those in leadership roles (Farrell et al., 2021).

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

While the white paper offers a targeted, practical solution, there are other ways to address the problem of middle school teacher attrition. One option would be to design a focused 2–3-day leadership workshop dedicated to resilience-building strategies. This workshop could bring together school and district leaders to explore research-based practices, analyze real case studies, and develop customized action plans for their own contexts. The intensive format would allow leaders to engage deeply with the material, collaborate with peers, and leave with clear, ready-to-implement steps for supporting teacher resilience.

A second option would be to pilot a district-level "resilience advisory team" made up of teachers, administrators, and support staff. This team could meet regularly to

identify pressing challenges, recommend policy or procedural changes, and monitor progress toward improving working conditions. By embedding teacher voice into decision-making in a structured way, the advisory team could help ensure that resilience-focused initiatives remain relevant, sustainable, and aligned with actual classroom needs.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

Developing this project was as much a learning process as it was an opportunity to create something for others. As a scholar, I learned the importance of grounding every recommendation in both evidence and feasibility, ensuring the end product was academically sound yet easy to understand. This meant carefully selecting literature, analyzing participant voices, and translating complex themes into clear, practical steps.

As a practitioner, the process reinforced that leadership decisions go far beyond policy and procedures. The way leaders listen, communicate, and respond to staff directly influences resilience. As a project developer, I learned to design a deliverable that could actually be picked up and used, a tool that is not just informative but actionable. This experience strengthened my ability to merge research with leadership practice in a way that can drive meaningful change.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

This project matters because it reframes resilience as a shared responsibility, not simply an individual trait that teachers must develop on their own. In a profession where burnout is often accepted as an unavoidable reality, the white paper offers an alternative vision, one in which leadership actions, school culture, and systemic supports play a central role in determining whether teachers remain in the profession and are successful

in their work.

The significance of this work extends beyond retention statistics and resilience factors. It is about preserving the quality of education by ensuring that students are taught by skilled, motivated educators who feel valued and supported. Every teacher who stays because they feel heard, respected, and equipped is a direct benefit to the students, families, and communities they serve. This project positions resilience not as a luxury or an optional soft skill, but as a necessary condition for sustaining a strong teaching workforce.

Through developing this work, I learned that leadership is as much about shaping the conditions for success as it is about setting clear expectations. Resilience flourishes in environments where teachers feel trusted, have a say in making decisions, and receive consistent, genuine recognition. Small actions such as purposeful check-ins, creating safe spaces for dialogue, or following through on staff feedback can have an outsized impact on morale and commitment. These practices may seem minor in isolation, but over time, they can shift the climate of a school.

By capturing both the research and the perspectives of educators, the white paper gives leaders a concrete, actionable starting point. It translates abstract concepts into steps that can be implemented immediately, allowing leaders to take intentional action rather than simply acknowledging the problem. If used effectively, the work has the potential to spark meaningful change, helping schools become places where teachers not only choose to stay, but are able to bring their best selves to the classroom each day.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The most immediate potential for positive social change lies at the organizational level. Schools that apply these recommendations could create healthier, more supportive work environments, leading to stronger teacher morale and lower turnover rates. This stability has a ripple effect, where students can benefit from consistent, high-quality instruction, families can experience stronger connections with their schools, and communities can gain from having schools staffed by engaged, long-term educators. At the individual level, teachers could experience increased professional support, greater pride in their work, and improved overall well-being, which in turn may enhance instructional effectiveness and job satisfaction.

From a research methods perspective, this project reinforces the value of using thematic analysis to produce deliverables that are not only research-based but also immediately usable in professional contexts. Theoretically, it affirms the position of resilience theory, where environmental and systemic supports are as critical to teacher well-being as individual coping skills. From a practical research standpoint, this work points to the need for studies that examine whether resilience-focused leadership practices lead to measurable improvements in teacher retention over time.

Future research could follow schools over several years to see if putting the white paper's recommendations into practice leads to fewer teachers leaving and to better overall well-being among staff. Studies could also compare results across different grade levels, elementary, middle, and high school, or in schools with different locations and student populations, to find out which resilience strategies work best in specific

situations. Additionally, targeted research on subgroups, such as early-career educators, special education teachers, or teachers working in high-poverty or high-turnover schools, could identify unique needs and lead to more tailored interventions.

There is also an opportunity for experimental studies to test the effectiveness of specific strategies, such as leadership check-in protocols, structured teacher voice initiatives, or workload redesign efforts. Mixed-methods research could combine quantitative measures, such as turnover rates and engagement surveys, with qualitative insights like this, including teacher interviews and even focus groups, to provide a more holistic picture of how resilience is built and sustained. Finally, collaborative research involving administrators, policymakers, and teacher preparation programs could explore how resilience-building practices can be embedded earlier in educators' careers, potentially reducing attrition from the very start.

Conclusion

This project study underscores that sustaining a skilled and committed teaching workforce is not a matter of chance or individual willpower, but the result of deliberate leadership choices, supportive school cultures, and well-designed systems. The white paper transforms research findings and teacher perspectives into a practical guide for action, equipping leaders with strategies they can implement immediately to strengthen resilience and reduce attrition.

If adopted and applied consistently, the recommendations in this work have the potential to improve teacher morale, enhance professional well-being, and create learning environments where educators and students can be successful. The message is simple but

significant: Resilience is not built in isolation; it is cultivated through trust, collaboration, and intentional leadership. By embracing this shared responsibility, schools can move beyond simply retaining teachers to fostering workplaces where educators are empowered to stay, grow, and excel.

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Appendix A: The Project

Executive Summary

Key Findings from the Study Using Teacher Voice and Thematic Insights

This section presents the core themes that emerged from the study's qualitative analysis of Grade 6–8 teacher perceptions of resilience and retention. Each theme reflects recurring patterns in teacher experiences and perspectives and is supported by selected, representative quotations that highlight the depth and nuance of the findings. These themes provide a clear picture of the factors that either support or undermine resilience in middle school teachers. Collectively, they form the foundation for the practical recommendations outlined in the next section.

Theme 1: Individual Resilience Factors

Teachers described resilience as a deeply personal, evolving process shaped by their mindset, values, and capacity for emotional self-regulation. For many participants, resilience was not an innate trait but a capacity they developed gradually through deliberate practices and thoughtful self-reflection. Educators spoke about the importance of developing routines that allowed them to manage stress before it became overwhelming. This included practices such as daily journaling, mindfulness, morning rituals, evening decompression routines, and maintaining physical health.

Several participants described the act of setting professional boundaries, such as limiting after-hours communication or reframing work-life balance, not as selfish, but as essential to preserving their ability to remain present and effective in the classroom. Others emphasized the value of having a clear moral compass or sense of purpose that

anchored them during difficult moments. They found meaning in their relationships with students, their belief in public education, or their role as change agents within their communities, “just kind of encountering the daily challenges and being able to bounce back from moment to moment, from period to period” (T6.3).

Yet, while these personal strategies were described as critical, participants were careful to note their limitations. Teachers expressed concern that school systems too often overemphasize personal resilience while ignoring the structural conditions that cause burnout. Two of the teachers shared, “We get told we have to handle behaviors ourselves, don’t send them out...Sometimes you need admin to back you up when you try new strategies and they don’t” (T6.4). “When teachers try to set boundaries, admin sees it as complaining … There’s no professional development on how to handle burnout.” (T8.3).

These sentiments were repeated by several participants who feared that the narrative of individual resilience could become a justification for systemic inaction. The findings indicate that while internal coping mechanisms such as reflection, gratitude practices, and mindset shifts can support educators in the short term, these strategies must be paired with relational and organizational supports in order to be sustainable.

These findings align with resilience theory, which frames resilience as an evolving, context-dependent process shaped by both internal coping strategies and external supports (Day & Gu, 2014; Mansfield et al., 2012; Beltman, 2020). Collectively, the data suggest that fostering individual resilience is an important component of retention, but it cannot be the sole focus. Schools and districts must create environments that validate and reinforce these personal efforts through aligned policies, supportive

leadership, and a school culture that prioritizes educator well-being.

Theme 2: Relational Supports and Collegial Connections

The power of professional relationships emerged as one of the most protective and sustaining factors in teachers' resilience. Participants repeatedly described how both informal and formal collegial connections served as emotional anchors throughout the school year. Whether through daily check-ins, hallway conversations, or collaborative planning, peer relationships provided a sense of belonging, understanding, and solidarity that helped buffer the emotional toll of teaching.

"Having someone say, 'Yep, I've been there too,' makes you feel less alone and more like you can handle it." (T7.4) T8.1 stated, "When I see their struggles, I've been there, too. So, it brings me a sense of satisfaction to help newer teachers."

"And there were, uh, two staff members that were on my floor that … I became close with right off right from the start, and I think finding that small group that I was able to go to anytime I had a question or anytime I just wanted to vent was super helpful" (T6.5).

Teachers emphasized that small moments of connection, laughing together, venting frustrations, or receiving a simple word of encouragement often served as powerful reset points that enabled them to return to their classrooms with renewed focus and energy. Many credited their ability to persevere through difficult days to the presence of a trusted colleague, often described as a "work best friend" or "ride or die," who offered both practical advice and emotional affirmation. These relationships were not just helpful, they were often essential to enduring the pressures of the job. "Sometimes just

that one person saying, ‘You’re not crazy, you’re just tired’ is enough to get you through the week.” (T8.3)

In schools where collegial support was actively nurtured through shared planning time, grade-level teams, or staff wellness efforts, teachers felt more resilient and more connected to their professional identity. In contrast, those in buildings marked by isolated departments, limited collaboration, or interpersonal tension described increased feelings of disconnect, alienation, and discouragement. “Surround yourself with people who support you... Feeling like you’re not on an island by yourself is huge” (T7.2).

These findings affirm that resilience is not developed in isolation, it is shaped and strengthened through connection. Teachers need more than strategies and stamina; they need people. Collegial relationships create the social-emotional scaffolding that makes it possible to cope with daily challenges, problem-solve effectively, and feel valued at work.

The data clearly suggest that supportive professional relationships within schools, whether supported through mentoring, team planning, or informal peer bonds, play a pivotal role in teacher retention. School leaders who prioritize these connections by structuring time for collaboration, recognizing peer leadership, and creating safe spaces for dialogue help cultivate environments where resilience can thrive. Research also highlighted that collegial relationships, mentoring, and professional learning communities are powerful protective factors against burnout and attrition (Kwok & Macfarlane, 2025; Zhang & Wu-Jing, 2024; Christens & Inzeo, 2015).

Theme 3: Systemic and Workplace Conditions

Teachers described the conditions of their daily work environment as one of the most powerful influences on their ability to sustain resilience. While passion for teaching remained strong across participants, the practical realities of the job, particularly when unsupported or poorly structured, often pushed educators to their limits. Working conditions, including schedule design, class sizes, prep time, building-wide expectations, and the availability of behavioral and instructional supports, were consistently cited as either reinforcing or undermining teachers' emotional and professional well-being. Teacher T7.3 recalling an administrator stating, "That was wrong, let's understand what we did and, you know, learn from it.' It's all like, 'What did I do? What can I do?' Like, it's too much on me" (T7.3). "Former co-workers have left because they felt unsupported, and they've gone to a district where they felt more supported" (T6.2).

Many participants described a growing mismatch between the volume of responsibilities placed on teachers and the time, resources, or structures provided to meet those responsibilities. For example, several teachers noted that prep periods were frequently used for coverage, leaving them little time to plan, collaborate, or decompress. Others shared that rigid or fragmented schedules made it difficult to build momentum in instruction or respond flexibly to student needs.

The burden of simultaneously managing academic expectations and student behavior, particularly in the absence of consistent discipline protocols, was a repeated source of stress. Teachers shared that even when they implemented classroom management strategies with fidelity, they often felt unsupported when behavior escalated

or when systemic responses lacked follow-through. These concerns are consistent with national findings showing that poor working conditions, including excessive workloads and limited autonomy, are stronger drivers of attrition than compensation alone (García & Weiss, 2019; NCES, 2023; (Farahmandpour & Voelkel, 2025).

T8.2 stated, “I’ve seen people leave because they just had enough of trying to juggle behaviors because it is wearing and tiring to maintain a level of calmness when someone’s pushing your buttons all day for however many years that you’re there.” This strain was amplified for teachers in larger class settings or in schools with a high number of students requiring emotional or academic interventions. Several participants pointed out that while school leaders acknowledged the importance of self-care and resilience, they rarely addressed the structural issues, such as overfilled rosters, unrealistic pacing guides, or frequent coverage gaps, that directly impacted teachers’ mental and physical bandwidth. “They tell us to take care of ourselves, but how? During my duty? During my lunch while covering a class?” (T7.1)

The concept of “invisible weight” emerged as a powerful metaphor in several interviews. Teachers described the cumulative toll of managing daily logistics, unmet needs, and unacknowledged labor as something that wore away at their sense of purpose and their ability to stay positive. These were not isolated incidents, but ongoing patterns that when left unaddressed, contributed to feelings of frustration, helplessness, and in some cases, resignation.

> “Like if you don’t bother me about the little things and I can focus on the big things. I’m okay. But if I’m trying to do all of this and I’m being talked to about

> being one minute late or not being on page 36 when I'm trying to get to 47 and I have a classroom full of kids running around and, you know, I have all these things that I'm trying to juggle and someone's like, well, what about this? What about this? Hey, what about this? You didn't do this. That's the, for me, the moment where I'm like, there has to be a better way. Like I'm doing this and you're making me focus on something smaller" (T8.2).

The findings underscore that resilience is not only about mindset or coping; it is about having conditions that allow resilience to take root. When teachers are consistently stretched thin by structural inefficiencies or systemic disregard for their time and expertise, even the most committed educators face burnout. Schools that fail to address these systemic barriers may inadvertently contribute to high turnover, low morale, and reduced instructional effectiveness.

To strengthen teacher resilience in meaningful and lasting ways, school and district leaders must look beyond slogans and into the structures of the school day, the equity of workload distribution, and the support systems available to staff. Resilience must be built into the design of the work, not added as an afterthought.

Theme 4: Leadership Dynamics

Leadership emerged as one of the most decisive influences on teacher resilience and retention. Participants consistently emphasized that the attitudes, behaviors, and presence of school administrators shaped their daily experiences and long-term decisions about whether to remain in the profession. Teachers described the school leader as either a protective buffer or a source of additional stress, one who could inspire confidence and

growth or contribute to frustration and fatigue. “I’ve stayed at schools because of supportive administrator.” (T8.2). This is consistent with research identifying supportive principals and administrative trust as among the most influential factors in teacher retention (Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll et al., 2019; DeMatthews, Knight, & Shin, 2021).

Supportive leadership was defined not only by strong management skills, but also by the ability to foster meaningful, personal connections with staff and show genuine care for their well-being. Participants noted that principals who were visible, approachable, and genuinely invested in staff well-being created a climate in which teachers felt seen, respected, and motivated to stay, even during difficult school years. Teachers appreciated leaders who checked in informally, asked how they were doing, acknowledged the emotional labor of the job, and followed through on concerns. “Being relatable... just kind of making it so that it’s okay, I’m not in trouble... just showing that you, kind of understand that this is a hard job” (T6.3).

Relational leadership practices, such as building trust, promoting teacher voice, and leading with empathy, were repeatedly cited as protective factors. Teachers shared that when administrators created space for professional input and allowed for some autonomy in instruction, they felt empowered rather than micromanaged. This autonomy fostered professional agency, which in turn reinforced resilience. “She didn’t need to hover. She trusted me to do my job, and that trust made me want to give my best every day.” (T6.4)

In contrast, participants who worked under disengaged or transactional leadership reported feeling depleted and disconnected from their schools. These teachers described

leaders who focused solely on compliance, avoided hard conversations, or failed to advocate for staff when facing district pressures. In such environments, even experienced educators shared that they began questioning whether the effort was worth it. “You can only be ignored or dismissed so many times before you start planning your exit.” (T7.3)

Several participants highlighted the role of school leaders in shielding teachers from unnecessary or excessive district mandates. Principals who protected planning time, advocated for additional support staff, or pushed back against unrealistic expectations were viewed as champions for resilience. “Once teachers feel like they’re not being respected or valued...they could go do something else, make a whole lot more money.” (T8.1)

The findings also suggest that leadership impacts not just individual morale, but the entire culture of a school. Teachers described how strong leadership set the tone for peer collaboration, discipline policies, student culture, and overall workload balance. In many cases, teachers linked their decision to stay or to leave, directly to their experience with leadership over time.

This theme reinforces the idea that leadership is not solely administrative, it is emotional, cultural, and deeply relational. Effective school leaders understand that supporting teachers means more than evaluating lessons or managing logistics. It means cultivating an environment where trust, care, professional growth, and shared purpose are prioritized.

For schools to retain resilient educators, especially in high-demand middle school settings, leadership training must go beyond operational management and include

competencies such as active listening, trauma-informed practices, distributed leadership, and authentic staff engagement. These relational and reflective skills are essential for creating a school culture where teachers feel supported, trusted, and professionally valued. Resilient teachers are most likely to thrive under leaders who demonstrate resilience, support, and responsiveness.

Theme 5: Middle School–Specific Challenges

Participants affirmed that teaching in the middle grades comes with distinct and complex challenges that differentiate it from both elementary and high school teaching. The middle school years, typically encompassing Grades 6–8, represent a pivotal developmental stage during which students undergo significant cognitive, emotional, social, and physical changes. Teachers shared that successfully engaging early adolescents requires not only content expertise, but also humor, adaptability, emotional presence, and a strong relational toolkit. “I don’t just teach content, … I feel like I’m a therapist, I’m a teacher, I’m all these different things.” (T6.4)

Many educators described this age group as uniquely rewarding but equally draining. Students at this age are working through identity development, peer pressure, emotional and physical changes, and inconsistent self-regulation. These dynamics often translate into classroom behaviors that are unpredictable, emotionally charged, or testing of adult boundaries. Participants explained that in order to be effective, middle school teachers must be able to pivot quickly, de-escalate conflict with empathy, and differentiate instruction across wide academic and emotional ranges.

T8.4 stated, “Behavior has changed since COVID. Kids are more anxious, more

impulsive. It's not like it used to be." Teachers noted that the aftermath of the pandemic has exacerbated existing behavioral and emotional challenges in middle school classrooms. Students now present with higher rates of anxiety, diminished coping skills, and increased difficulty with social interactions, making day-to-day teaching more emotionally intense. Many educators expressed concern that these behavioral shifts have not been matched by adequate professional development or institutional support. They described feeling underprepared to meet the rising emotional needs of students while still being held to high academic standards.

Additionally, several participants pointed to logistical and structural challenges unique to the middle school model. Departmentalized teaching, shorter class periods, and limited time for cross-content collaboration were cited as stressors that complicate relationship-building and instructional continuity. Teachers often see over 100 students per day, making it difficult to track individual progress or provide the kind of feedback and support that younger students typically receive in elementary settings. "It's hard to give kids what they need when you see them for 42 minutes and have five classes back-to-back." (T7.2)

Participants also expressed frustration that district- or state-level policies often overlook the nuanced realities of the middle school environment. Expectations around curriculum pacing, assessment timelines, or disciplinary referrals were seen as more reflective of high school or elementary models, rather than tailored to the specific needs of Grades 6–8. As a result, many educators felt that their professional judgment was undermined and their capacity to implement developmentally appropriate practices

constrained. Prior studies confirm that disruptive behavior, developmental complexity, and subject-area demands uniquely strain middle school educators, increasing their risk of burnout (Kollerová et al., 2023; Madigan & Kim, 2021). “We’re expected to follow the same rules as everyone else, but our kids aren’t like everyone else. Middle school is just different.” (T8.1)

This theme underscores the critical need for context-specific supports that acknowledge the unique landscape of middle-level education. From student behavior to instructional pacing, middle school teachers face a complex web of responsibilities that require targeted retention strategies, differentiated professional development, and leadership practices that are responsive to the complex demands of the role. If districts aim to retain resilient and effective educators in the middle grades, they must recognize that resilience in this setting requires more than personal grit, it demands a system that is developmentally attuned, structurally supportive, and responsive to the voices of those who navigate these complexities every day.

Strategic Recommendations: Building Resilience and Retention in Middle School Educators

The following recommendations are grounded in the perceptions of middle school teachers in NSMSD and supported by current research on teacher resilience and retention. Organized by theme, each recommendation is designed to be practical, developmentally appropriate, and adaptable for school and district leaders. Leaders are encouraged to use this section during strategic planning, leadership team meetings, or board-level discussions focused on workforce stability and school climate improvement.

Support Individual Resilience Through Wellness and Growth

Findings-Based Insight

Teachers described individual strategies, such as mindfulness, boundary setting, and reflective routines, as important for coping with stress, but insufficient when unsupported by the organization. This finding echoes research on resilience as both personal and systemic (Mansfield et al., 2012; Collie, 2022).

Recommendations

- Integrate resilience and wellness strategies into schoolwide PD (e.g., mindfulness workshops, journaling exercises, stress-reduction tools).
- Offer protected time for personal planning, decompression, or reflection (e.g., once-per-quarter wellness periods).
- Encourage resilience-based goal setting during staff meetings or evaluations (e.g., reflection on habits that sustain motivation and purpose).
- Partner with mental health professionals to offer optional check-ins, confidential staff support groups, or wellness coaching.

Implementation Prompt

When do staff have time and space to care for their own well-being without sacrificing their professional responsibilities?

Cultivate Relational Trust and Collegial Connection

Findings-Based Insight

Teachers emphasized the role of trusted colleagues, mentorship, and peer validation in sustaining their commitment to the profession. This emphasis reflects

evidence that mentoring, peer collaboration, and PLCs strengthen teacher identity and retention (Kwok & Macfarlane, 2025; Zhang & Wu-Jing, 2024).

Recommendations

- Formalize a peer mentorship or "buddy system" across grade levels and content areas, with structured time for connection.
- Build in regular collaborative planning or co-reflection blocks to reduce isolation.
- Create informal connection points (e.g., "Coffee Connection" sessions, shared staff lounge time, or team shout-out boards).
- Recognize and elevate relational leadership within the staff, such as team leads who build strong culture.

Implementation Prompt

How are staff currently supported, formally or informally, in connecting, problem-solving, and encouraging one another?

Improve Systemic and Workplace Conditions to Reduce Burnout

Findings-Based Insight

Teachers cited heavy workloads, inconsistent expectations, and insufficient planning time as chronic stressors contributing to emotional exhaustion and attrition. Workplace analyses demonstrate that workload, time, and policy coherence strongly affect burnout and turnover (García & Weiss, 2019; NCES, 2023; Farahmandpour & Voelkel, 2025).

Recommendations

- Conduct a "Schedule Audit" to evaluate workload balance, duty coverage, prep

time, and transitions between classes.

- Align student behavior systems schoolwide, ensuring consistency, restorative practices, and administrative backup.
- Streamline communication and reduce redundant meetings or paperwork wherever possible.
- Actively seek teacher input on planning calendars, pacing guides, and initiative timelines.

Implementation Prompt

Which parts of the school day add the most pressure to staff, and how can leaders make those areas more manageable?

Lead With Empathy, Presence, and Purpose

Findings-Based Insight

Teachers associated their resilience with the behavior and presence of school leaders, especially those who were visible, empathetic, and protective of staff needs. Relational and supportive leadership correlates with stronger organizational trust and reduced attrition (Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll et al., 2019; Mullen et al., 2021).

Recommendations

- Create weekly "Leadership Visibility Routines" (e.g., morning walkthroughs, check-ins during lunch periods).
- Use two-way feedback tools that allow staff to share needs anonymously and receive transparent follow-up.
- Embed "empathy rounds" into administrative practice, brief, informal

conversations with teachers about what's working and what's overwhelming.

- Advocate for staff at the district level when mandates or initiatives threaten to overwhelm capacity.

Implementation Prompt

Is the staff confident that school leaders understand their daily challenges and will listen to and address their concerns?

Align Retention Strategies with the Unique Realities of Middle School

Findings-Based Insight

Participants explained that teaching in middle school requires the ability to adapt emotionally, a strong grasp of content, and an understanding of adolescent development, all while working in a fast-paced and constantly changing environment. Retention strategies tailored to adolescent needs and subject-specific pressures are more effective than one-size-fits-all approaches (Kollerová et al., 2023).

Recommendations

- Provide professional development that is tailored to each grade span and department, including topics specific to middle school such as adolescent behavior, trauma-informed practices, and executive functioning.
- Reduce class sizes or student load where possible, especially for high-demand courses or self-contained environments.
- Allow flexibility in discipline responses that account for adolescent growth and social-emotional responsiveness.
- Invite middle school teachers to help design supports, routines, and policies that

reflect their day-to-day experiences.

Implementation Prompt

Are district initiatives and retention strategies adapted to the unique context of middle school, or are they one-size-fits-all?

Moving From Insight to Action

The insights gathered in this study offer more than a snapshot of teacher perspectives; they serve as a powerful call for schools and districts to reexamine the systems, relationships, and leadership practices that shape the day-to-day lives of middle school educators. While the concept of teacher resilience is often framed as a personal or psychological trait, this research makes clear that resilience is built through the environment. Leaders, therefore, play a critical role in shaping the professional climate in which educators can either sustain their commitment or reach a breaking point.

This white paper translates qualitative findings into specific, research-informed strategies that educational leaders can begin using immediately. The thematic recommendations presented are not theoretical ideals, but grounded responses to real needs voiced by teachers. They are designed to help district and building leaders reflect on current practices, address systemic gaps, and initiate targeted efforts that promote wellness, connection, and instructional sustainability.

Effective implementation will look different across settings. Some schools may begin by piloting a peer mentorship model or redesigning team planning time, while others may focus on strengthening administrative visibility or restructuring professional development to reflect middle school realities. Regardless of where a school or district

begins, what matters is the commitment to listening, adapting, and taking action that aligns with the unique culture and challenges of Grades 6–8 education. These recommendations synthesize the qualitative findings of this study with current scholarship on resilience and teacher retention, providing leaders with context-specific, research-informed actions (Day & Gu, 2014; Ingersoll et al., 2019; (Farahmandpour & Voelkel, 2025).

Educational leaders are encouraged to use this white paper:

- As a foundation for school improvement planning and climate goals
- During retreats or leadership team discussions about teacher retention and well-being
- As a professional development tool for building administrators or aspiring leaders
- To guide district-level conversations on policy, staffing, and organizational design
- In board presentations or stakeholder updates on teacher support efforts

Building resilient schools is not a quick fix, it is an ongoing process that requires intentional leadership, collaborative effort, and structural responsiveness. Teachers in this study asked to be supported, respected, and given the time, space, and resources to do their work well. “I just want to feel like someone’s paying attention to what it actually feels like to teach right now.” (T7.3)

As this study showed, resilience grows strongest when it is nurtured by both personal capacity and collective care. Schools and districts that invest in relational

leadership, responsive structures, and developmentally appropriate strategies are more likely to retain the passionate, skilled educators their students need most. This document is offered as a starting point.

Closing Statement

This white paper offers a timely and actionable response to the growing challenge of middle school teacher attrition, particularly within NSMSD. Grounded in the lived perspectives of educators and supported by resilience theory, the findings and recommendations reflect both the urgency of the issue and the opportunity for change. By elevating teacher voice and translating qualitative insights into practical, research-informed strategies, this product is designed to guide school and district leaders in creating environments where teachers feel supported, empowered, and valued. The themes explored, ranging from personal wellness to systemic reform, underscore the need for leadership that is intentional, relational, and contextually aware. As educational demands continue to evolve, so must the ways we support those at the heart of the system. The insights and tools provided in this document are intended to prompt reflection, and inspire long-term, meaningful action that prioritizes the well-being, retention, and professional growth of middle-school educators.

Leadership Reflection and Action Planning Tool

To support practical implementation, school and district leaders are encouraged to use the following tool to identify priorities, gather feedback, and align next steps with their school's unique needs. This tool may be completed individually, with a leadership team, or used as a professional development discussion guide.

Theme	What We're Doing Well	What Needs Attention	Possible Next Step	Who Will Lead This?	Timeline
Individual Resilience					
Relational Connections					
Systemic Conditions					
Leadership Dynamics					
Middle School Realities					

Note. To support practical implementation, school and district leaders are encouraged to use the following tool.

Professional Reflection Questions for Leadership Teams

These open-ended questions are designed to help leaders dig deeper into their school or district context and take ownership of how to support resilience and retention among middle school teachers:

Individual Resilience

- How do we support teachers' emotional and physical well-being?
- Do we build space and time for wellness, reflection, and reset?

Relational Supports

- How do we foster trust and connection among staff?
- Is mentorship formalized, or left to chance?

- What structures are in place to reduce staff isolation?

Systemic Conditions

- Where in our schedule or routines do inefficiencies add stress for the staff?
- Are behavior systems consistent and responsive to teacher needs?
- How do we actively gather staff input on workload and daily pressures?

Leadership Practices

- Does the staff feel seen, heard, and supported by leadership?
- How often do we seek feedback, and do we follow up?
- Are we modeling the relational, reflective leadership we expect?

Middle School–Specific Needs

- How are our policies and PD aligned with middle school needs?
- Are classroom structures and expectations developmentally appropriate?

Visual Summary: Resilience and Retention Framework

Theme	Focus Area	Goal	Example Action
Individual Resilience	Wellness & Reflection	Help teachers sustain personal well-being and purpose	Embed mindfulness or journaling into PD
Relational Supports	Peer Connection	Strengthen trust and collaboration	Create peer mentor "buddy system"
Systemic Conditions	Schedule & Workload	Reduce chronic stress and burnout	Conduct building-wide schedule audit
Leadership	Relational	Build trust and	Initiate weekly

Dynamics	Leadership	emotional safety	empathy rounds
Middle School Challenges	Developmental Fit	Align Policies with adolescent needs	Design PD focused on middle school behavior

Note. These tools can be used independently or together to support full implementation of this white paper's recommendations. They are also appropriate for inclusion in leadership team agendas, board presentations, or district-led improvement planning efforts.

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Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Study Title: Exploring Grade 6–8 Teacher Perceptions Regarding Teacher Resiliency Factors in Northeastern United States Public Middle Schools

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of Grade 6–8 teachers regarding resiliency as a factor in their decision to remain teaching. Your responses will provide valuable insights into this topic and will remain confidential. Please feel free to share as much detail as you are comfortable with. You may skip any question or stop the interview at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Here are some sample questions:

- Tell me a little about yourself, your family, and your background.
- What inspired you to become a teacher?
- How would you define resilience in your role as a middle school teacher?
- What does resilience mean to you in the context of staying in the teaching profession?
- Can you describe a time when you faced a significant challenge as a teacher? What helped you get through it?
- How do you maintain your ability to manage stress or bounce back from difficult situations?
- What personal or professional factors contribute most to your resilience as a teacher?

- What types of support from your school or district help you build or sustain resilience?
- Have you found any professional development helpful?
- How could your school better prioritize teacher well-being?
- Are there moments or experiences that reinforce your commitment to remain in teaching?
- Can you share a moment that reminded you why you teach?
- Are there specific leadership qualities you find especially supportive?
- How does your school's culture or environment impact your decision to stay in the profession?
- Are there parts of the culture you would change to better support teachers?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences with resilience or your decision to stay in teaching?

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Exploring Grade 6–8 Teacher Perceptions Regarding Teacher Resiliency Factors in a Northeastern State's Public Middle Schools

Section 1: Background and Teaching Journey

Tell me a little about yourself, your family, your background.

Have you always lived in New Jersey? Where else?

How many years have you been teaching? Did you have another career before teaching?

What inspired you to become a teacher?

Is your income your household's primary source of income?

Section 2: Understanding Resilience

How would you define resilience in your role as a middle school teacher?

Do you think resilience looks different for teachers at other grade levels? Why?

Are there particular aspects of middle school teaching that require more resilience?

What does resilience mean to you in the context of staying in the teaching profession?

Do you think other teachers would define or experience resilience differently from you?

Section 3: Resilience in Action

Can you describe a time when you faced a significant challenge as a teacher?

What helped you get through it?

Looking back, would you have handled that situation differently?

Did that experience change how you approach challenges now? If so, how?

How do you maintain your ability to manage stress or bounce back from difficult situations in your role?

Are there particular habits or routines that help you stay resilient?

Have you ever felt that your resilience was tested to the point of considering leaving the profession?

Section 4: Factors Influencing Resilience

What personal or professional factors do you think contribute to your resilience as a teacher?

Do you feel your resilience is more influenced by internal factors (e.g., mindset) or external ones (e.g., support systems)?

Are there specific challenges in teaching Grades 6–8 that test your resilience? How do you respond to these?

Section 5: School and Leadership Support

What types of support from your school or district help you build or sustain resilience?

Are there specific programs or initiatives that have been particularly helpful?

Do you feel there are gaps in the support currently provided?

Are there any resources or initiatives that you think would better support teachers' resilience?

What kinds of professional development, if any, have you found useful in building resilience?

How do you think your school could prioritize teacher well-being more effectively?

Section 6: Decision to Stay in the Profession

How does your sense of resilience influence your decision to continue teaching?

Do you feel resilience alone is enough to keep teachers in the profession long-term?

Are there moments or experiences that reinforce your commitment to remain in the profession?

Can you share a specific moment that reminded you why you teach?

In what ways does your school's leadership contribute to your resilience as a teacher?

Are there specific leadership qualities that you find particularly supportive?

How does the school culture or environment impact your ability to remain in the profession?

Are there elements of the school culture you would like to see change to better support teachers?

Section 7: Strategies, Advice, and Policy Recommendations

What strategies or practices do you use to build or strengthen your resilience?

What advice would you give to new teachers about developing resilience in the profession?

Is there a particular mindset or practice you wish you'd known about when you started?

What do you think schools or policymakers could do to better support teacher resilience and retention?

Are there specific policies you believe would make a difference?

Do you think teacher resilience is adequately addressed at the policy level?

Section 8: Closing Reflections

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with resilience or your decision to stay in teaching?

Are there topics we haven't discussed that you think are important to understanding teacher resilience?

Appendix D: Reflective Notes Examples

#	Transcription	Initial Code	Emerging Theme	Themes - Condensed	Representative Quote	Mapped Thematic Cluster	Notes on Reflexivity / Interpretation
T7.1	"I think it takes a special breed to be a middle school teacher or a kindergarten teacher."	Teaching Reflection	Teaching Characteristics	Special Teaching Traits	"I think it takes a special breed to be a middle school teacher or a kindergarten teacher."	5 - Middle School-Specific Challenges → Middle School Age Challenges/Behaviors	Highlights the unique demands and personality fit required for middle school teaching, supporting your study's focus on middle school-specific resilience factors.
T6.5	"Sheer volume of kids… being in special ed, the kids are more aware of who has an IEP… some kids flock to you, some don't want you near them…"	Student load and stigma awareness	Demands of middle school inclusion	Challenges of inclusion workload	"Some kids flock to you, some don't…"	5 - Middle School-Specific Challenges → Middle School Age Challenges/Behaviors	Highlights unique social-emotional dynamics in special ed.
T8.2	"They're coming right back. They're comfortable. They know what they can get away with. They're even further into the teenager part, but still not in the good decision-making part. And then eighth grade, they're going to high school, so they have something to work for. So that's when they kind of grow up a little bit and get a little bit more serious. So I definitely think seventh grade in our situation is where you need to be the most resilient."	Identifying seventh grade as the most emotionally taxing	Grade-specific emotional challenges	Most Challenging Grade	"They're coming right back. They're comfortable. They know what they can get away with. They're even further into the teenager part, but still not in the good decision-making part … So I definitely think seventh grade in our situation is where you need to be the most resilient"	5 - Middle School-Specific Challenges → Middle School Age Challenges/Behaviors	Identifies seventh grade as a uniquely taxing period requiring heightened teacher resilience.
T7.3	"I think like with the older kids, especially, you're dealing not only with their academic struggles, but a lot of my kids have emotional struggles and, you know, they're going through a lot of things at home."	Emotional load	Emotional Demands of Middle School Teaching	Supporting students with emotional needs	"I think like with the older kids… you're dealing with their academic and emotional struggles."	5 - Middle School-Specific Challenges → Middle School Age Challenges/Behaviors	Illustrates the unique socio-emotional challenges of teaching middle schoolers.
T6.4	"Students come in and they don't like school whatsoever… whereas in elementary school they had excitement."	Middle school engagement drop	Age-based motivational shift	Motivation challenges in middle school	"Students come in and they don't like school whatsoever… whereas in elementary school they had	5 - Middle School-Specific Challenges → Middle School Age Challenges/Behaviors	Indicates loss of enthusiasm in middle years; researcher should avoid overgeneralizing negativity to all students.

#	Transcription	Initial Code	Emerging Theme	Themes - Condensed	Representative Quote	Mapped Thematic Cluster	Notes on Reflexivity / Interpretation
T6.2	"So, you know, as long as I went and documented, oh, well, so-and-so had a rough day today, they didn't finish this, if you can have him do it at home."	Documenting student behavior and missing work	Documentation Practices	Professional Recordkeeping	"I went and documented… so-and-so had a rough day…"	3 - Systemic and Workplace Conditions	Documentation ensures accountability, aligning with systemic strategies for maintaining resilience and clear communication with families/admin.
T6.2	"I think maybe being a little bit more understanding and maybe modifying the work, perhaps it was a little bit too much work for him, and maybe giving it to him in chunks, or maybe just saying to mom, you know, he missed these three assignments this week, if he could turn in two of them, I'll exempt him from the third."	Providing modified work options and scaffolding	Scaffolded Support	Differentiated Support	"Modifying the work… giving it in chunks…"	3 - Systemic and Workplace Conditions	Emphasizes protective systemic strategy of flexible instruction to support student success, aligning with resilience-promoting practices.
T6.2	"No, there aren't specific programs that help teachers with resilience."	Lack of resilience programs	Missing systemic supports	Systemic Gaps	"No, there aren't specific programs that help teachers with resilience."	3 - Systemic and Workplace Conditions	Emphasizes risk factor of absence of district-level supports for resilience—directly aligns with need for systemic investment.
T6.2	"Teachers are expected to figure things out on their own, no clear guidance."	Lack of guidance	Teachers left unsupported	Systemic Shortcomings	"Teachers are expected to figure things out on their own…"	3 - Systemic and Workplace Conditions	Emphasizes systemic failure: absence of clear support structures undermines resilience.
T6.4	"Don't you think I've checked in with that student a million times already?… made modifications… supported them?"	Feeling undervalued	Lack of trust in teacher judgment	Validation Gaps	"Don't you think I've checked in with that student a million times already?… made modifications… supported them?"	3 - Systemic and Workplace Conditions	Frustration from feeling disempowered by repetitive demands undermines teacher morale.
T6.4	"With [redacted] … we're not disciplining behaviors… we're getting on the kids' level… let's self-regulate."	Alternative discipline model	Emotional labor	Discipline Frustration	"We're not disciplining… we're getting on the kids' level… self-regulate."	3 - Systemic and Workplace Conditions	Highlights perceived mismatch between policy focus on self-regulation and classroom realities—seen as risk factor.

#	Transcription	Initial Code	Emerging Theme	Themes - Condensed	Representative Quote	Mapped Thematic Cluster	Notes on Reflexivity / Interpretation
T6.3	"I think it's important that people aren't thinking like, I need to do this completely by myself."	Importance of shared responsibility	Supportive work culture	Shared Responsibility	"People… shouldn't think they need to do it by themselves."	2 - Relational Supports and Collegial Connections	Underscores protective factor of collective support … normalizing interdependence strengthens resilience.
T6.3	"Realized I wasn't asking for enough help last year."	Realization of need for support	Reflective growth	Support Seeking Growth	"Realized I wasn't asking for enough help."	2 - Relational Supports and Collegial Connections	Underscores reflective practice and proactive help-seeking as protective strategies fostering resilience.
T8.3	"I think that's the most benefit I got when I worked in [redacted] I went in and watched some teachers, like some high teachers. They were phenomenal. And I got so many classroom management ideas, lesson plans. It's just sharing. You know?"	Positive peer modeling; modeling best practices	Learning from observing skilled peers	Peer Support & Collaboration	"I went in and watched some teachers… I got so many ideas… it's just sharing."	2 - Relational Supports and Collegial Connections --> Colleague Support	Emphasizes peer observation as a protective relational resource.
T7.2	"Surround yourself with people who support you… Feeling like you're not on an island by yourself is huge."	Connection and support systems	Mentorship and Collegial Belonging	Support networks build resilience	"Surround yourself with people who support you… Feeling like you're not on an island by yourself is huge."	2 - Relational Supports and Collegial Connections --> Colleague Support	Highlights peer relationships as critical protective factors; aligns with resilience theory.
T8.3	"I'm not going to gatekeep my stuff. I don't usually do that anyway, but at least some credit. One did, though. One tells everybody, oh, that's Ms. LaCasse, that's Ms. LaCasse, that's Ms. LaCasse."	Generosity vs. recognition; communal growth	Recognition builds community trust	Peer Support & Collaboration	"One tells everybody… oh, that's Ms. LaCasse."	2 - Relational Supports and Collegial Connections --> Colleague Support	Shows protective power of peer recognition in sustaining motivation.
T7.3	"I think if I didn't have my one coworker that I work with, we share a room together. She is my ride or die, my left hand… I think if it wasn't for her, like helping me through that… we all kind of just like helped each other get through it."	Collegial support	Peer relationships as resilience anchors	Colleagues anchor resilience	"I think if I didn't have my one coworker… she is my ride or die… we all helped each other get through it."	2 - Relational Supports and Collegial Connections --> Colleague Support	Strong relationships buffer against stress; demonstrates protective role of peer support.

Appendix E: Sample Transcript Excerpts

T6.1 “From an administrative standpoint, being visible, that comes with a leadership quality, being visible, and, you know, you’ll see things that you wouldn’t normally if you were in and out of the classrooms more often.”

T6.1 “No, I just, I feel like at the end of the day, resilience is just about having that inner strength and support to remain committed, despite the job, whether it gets, because teaching can be emotionally, mentally, physically draining...”

T6.1 “and you really have to have that purpose, that passion, the self-awareness to just be able to know that not every day is going to be the same.”

T7.1 “And I think resiliency is staying anyway, and putting up with that anyway...”

T7.1 “Even when you try to do something like Sunshine, they take it away, and I think that’s still resiliency.”

T7.1 “I think it depends on the support that’s being given.”

T7.1 “Our 7th grade class right now are awful. We are barely getting out of here with our lives this year.”

T7.1 “We’re leaning on admin hard.”

T7.1 “Just hold on, because the sixth graders that are coming up are angels.”

T7.1 “Those sixth grade teachers showed resiliency, they had the support, they were able to get through it.”

T7.1 “I think certain grade levels, depending on their support level, help keep the resiliency.”

T7.1 “Does resiliency require more, more so in one area than another?”

T7.1 “Sometimes the focus goes on the kids who need it the most...”

T6.2 “I think being just, like, for teachers to feel like they’re supported more, I think, would help with the resilience.”

T6.2 “I know in my district, a lot of times, teachers don’t feel supported.”

T6.2 “Now, for myself, I personally don’t really mind the, you know, the lack of support from an administration because I also feel that, well, I come to work, I do my job.”

T6.2 “Really, yeah. I handle a lot of things in the classroom myself, and the trade-off to that is, even though my administrator might not, you know, might not always be there for me in a supportive role, they also don’t bother me.”“

T8.1 “I would have loved it if my administrators came into the room a lot more and said, ‘I really love what you did there. That was great.’ Or, ‘How about you do it this way?’”

T8.1 “Your supervisor can do that too, but they’re not in the building every day. But your admins are. They could very easily pop in once or twice a week, which, even though it’s scary and uncomfortable for the teacher, in the end, it’s very helpful.”

T8.1 “Again, like I mentioned earlier, just treating us like adults, with the same adult respect that we’re treating you.”

T8.1 “I feel like I know every year that I’ve made an impact, and I’ve made a decision to myself early on that if I ever felt like this was a waste of my time, that I would just stop.