May 2020

Relationships and Belonging in Elementary Schools with High Teacher Turnover

Sarah Fingado
Dominican University of California

Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

Sarah Fingado
Candidate

Jennifer Lucko, PhD
Program Chair

Jennifer Lucko, PhD
First Reader

Katherine Lewis, PhD
Second Reader

Relationships and Belonging in Elementary Schools with High Teacher Turnover

By

Sarah Fingado

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters in Education.

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

May 2020

Abstract

For many years, the "teacher shortage" has been a topic in educational news. This shortage is caused in part by high rates of teacher turnover, and most greatly impacts urban and rural schools serving low income students of color. This turnover leaves students with long term substitutes, uncredentialled teachers, or first year teachers and leads to lowered social and academic outcomes for impacted students.

Operating on a theory that a sense of belonging would improve teacher retention rates, and thus student outcomes, this research used a qualitative approach to examine relationships and a sense of belonging in traditionally high turnover elementary schools. Culturally Responsive Teaching emerged as a central focus of this project due to the heavy emphasis on relationships in this style of instruction. Teacher and student participants were interviewed to find out what barriers exist to creating meaningful relationships and community in these settings. The findings from this research indicate that a shift in school values to prioritize relationships, belonging and collaboration can significantly improve job satisfaction and teacher desire to remain connected to school communities. By implementing these key changes, schools and districts can improve teacher retention rates, and ultimately lower the effects of the opportunity gap.

Acknowledgments

This paper was completed in May 2020, a time when many schools (including my own) were forced to temporarily close, due to fears related to COVID19. This has been a trying and stressful time for many. I would like to thank the dedicated group of educators and support staff who have come together to support our students and our community in this new era of learning. I have never been reminded more of the power of a strong community: we are in this together today and every day. I am honored to be part of such a dedicated and loving team!

I would also like to thank my students. Your bright faces and curious minds remind me every day of the power of community. I am honored to be your teacher. You will do big things, you will do hard things, and you will make the changes we need in this world. I cannot wait until we can be together again! I owe all of you so many hugs, high fives, and smiles.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the family and friends that supported me though this process. I am beyond thankful for: the push to start, the editing help, the words of support, the forgiveness, and the love I received while returning to school both to earn my credential and complete my thesis. I would not be here without your support!

A special thanks to Jennifer Lucko and Katie Lewis for all of your support, direction, and feedback. This project would not have been possible without you.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

"Well when are they coming back?" This was a question a long-term teacher from a high turnover elementary school recalls answering on the first day of a new school year. A group of students had rushed back into their previous classroom at recess time, eager to see the familiar face of their former teacher. These students had moved on to a new grade, and a new class, but were looking for their former teacher to find comfort and familiarity on a day often filled with both excitement and nerves. The long-term teacher described remembering the frustration that the students experienced as they learned that their former teacher would not be returning this school year and explained, "They miss their teacher. It causes a disruption here. It doesn't disrupt them academically, but emotionally I think it does because that's another broken relationship that they have to experience." This sense of loss is something that many students in traditionally high turnover schools will experience throughout their academic careers. According to the California Teachers Association, up to 20% of new teachers leave the classroom in the first five years, with turnover in urban areas being closer to 50% (Issues & Action, n.d).

High rates of teacher turnover lead to teaching shortages, because there are not enough new teachers to replace the number of teachers rapidly exiting the field. The highest reported teacher shortages primarily occur in rural and high poverty urban schools (Darling-Hammond, Sutcher, Carver-Thomas, & Stanford University, 2018). As a result, the teaching shortage disproportionately affects schools serving low income/minority students; this creates an "opportunity gap" (Milner, 2013) because not all students have the same access to quality teachers. When students are left without permanent teachers, they are subjected to long-term

substitute teachers and larger class sizes. This issue becomes especially relevant when considering the proven academic and social benefits associated with strong teacher/student relationships (Rucinski, Brown, & Downer, 2018). In order to make schools equitable for all students, the teacher shortage must be addressed, especially in schools that serve primarily low-income students of color which have traditionally suffered from high rates of teacher turnover.

Statement of Purpose

Previous research has focused on the importance of relationships within schools. One such study found that while a sense of belonging is important for all students, it can be especially important for those from marginalized groups (Boston, & Warren, 2017). Another study indicates that strong relationships can act as a protective barrier against teacher burnout (Taxer, Becker-Kurz, & Frenzel, 2019). These studies demonstrate that both students and teachers benefit from strong relationships within the school community, indicating a need to improve relationships and belonging in high turnover schools. One strategy aimed at relationship building within schools is Culturally Responsive Teaching. This strategy focuses on encouraging schools to prioritize *learning partnerships* over traditional student/teacher relationships (Hammond, 2015). Many within the field of education see teacher retention rates as a hopeless problem with no end in sight however, based on the aforementioned studies, these types of "learning partnerships" have great potential to improve student outcomes and teacher retention rates.

While a large body of both quantitative and qualitative research has found that positive relationships are beneficial for both students and teachers, there is limited research available

about specific responses and strategies to address relationship building in schools with traditionally high turnover of teaching staff. This research project aimed to understand the barriers high turnover urban elementary schools face in fostering strong relationships and a sense of belonging among staff and students. By understanding the barriers, it will be possible to develop solutions that will keep teachers attached to high poverty urban school communities, thus lowering turnover rates and improving outcomes for students affected by the opportunity gap.

Overview of the Research Design

The researcher is a teacher at a small urban school with traditionally high turnover, making this topic is especially significant in her school community. The year the researcher started at her current school fifty percent of the teaching staff were new teachers. The teaching staff at this school is beginning to stabilize, however the impact of turnover is still felt by both students and staff.

Most of this research took place at the researcher's own school site, which serves less than 200 students. According to the School Accountability Report Card (a tool used by the California Department of Education to compare school sites) in the 2017-2018 school year, 84.5% of the student population was considered economically disadvantaged. The student population was made up of, 19.3% African American students, 5.3% Asian students, 10.1% Filipino students, 43.5% Hispanic or Latinx students, 4.8% Pacific Islander students, 2.9% White students, and 6.8% of students that identify as having two or more ethnicities. All student participants were the researcher's current or former students and were in 3rd through 5th grades (approximate ages: 8-11).

Many of the teachers interviewed were the researcher's current colleagues. However, in order to have a broader understanding of the teacher experience in high turnover elementary schools, the researcher also interviewed former classroom teachers. These teachers were invited to participate due to their insight regarding the decision to leave the classroom. Due to difficulty finding participants (especially former teachers), not all teachers interviewed were associated with the same school site. In all, seven teachers were interviewed (five teachers from the primary research site and two teachers from other urban schools where teachers self-reported that high turnover and retention was a significant issue at their school site).

Participants included: two veteran/long term teachers (more than ten years), three new teachers (teaching less than five years), and two former classroom teachers (i.e., anyone who has left classroom teaching, regardless of years served). Four of the teachers interviewed taught at more than one school site during their teaching career. Teacher participants were made up of five females and two male participants. Racial/Ethnic groups represented in teacher interviews were: one African American/Black teacher, three Hispanic/Latinx teachers, two Asian teachers and one White teacher.

In order to better understand the thoughts, perspectives, and experiences of students and teachers highlighted in this research, a qualitative approach to data collection was used. Data included notes and observations in the researchers own classroom and student interactions, as well as teacher interviews and student focus groups. By investigating the qualitative data, this study aimed to capture the experiences and emotions surrounding a sense of belonging and community in schools for both students and teachers. This research study had three questions it sought to answer (1) What are the barriers to building school community in

urban schools? (2) How can a sense of belonging be fostered in school communities that have been impacted by high rates of teacher turnover? (3) How can Culturally Responsive Teaching practices improve a sense of belonging in urban schools?

Significance of the Study

The results of this study are vital to understanding and responding to the teacher shortage. Unlike previous studies, this research focuses specifically on schools that have been impacted by high rates of teacher turnover. While the study found that there are significant barriers to building relationships at high turnover schools, there are also clear strategies that can reduce the impacts of those barriers, and improve a teachers' desire to stay at a specific school.

A key finding of this study was that a focus on relationships between students and teachers, as well as among staff, is essential to creating an environment that reduces many of the factors associated with dissatisfaction in teaching and improves teacher retention rates. Another key finding was that both teachers and students desire more Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies. However, new teachers can find these strategies difficult to fully implement for a variety of reasons; the most significant being insufficient time and knowledge to adapt the provided curriculum.

Research Implications

In order to provide equitable access to education and lower the effects of the opportunity gap, educational systems must focus on retaining quality teachers. These systems are especially needed in schools that serve primarily low-income students and students of color, as they have traditionally had the highest rates of turnover and may benefit the most

from Culturally Responsive Teaching practices which new teachers struggle to fully implement. This research project suggests that teacher turnover is not a hopeless issue; it identified several key strategies focused on relationships and community building that will improve a teacher's desire to remain at a specific school site. These strategies include, shared accountability models, cohort models, collaborative learning models, support models, and a focus on Culturally Responsive teaching. In order to make positive changes in teacher retention, and thus improve student outcomes, schools and districts should focus on prioritizing relationships and community building by creating and maintaining these key structures.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

"If you were a sixth grader in Petersburg City Schools last year, at no point did you have

a licensed math teacher provide instruction. Not a single day." —Virginia State Superintendent

Steven Staples

The above quote was attributed to Steven Naples in a November 2017 article in the

Washington Post (Strauss). According to greatschools.org, 91% of the students in the

Petersburg School District identify as Black and 78% are low income. In addition to reporting

demographics, greatschools.org calculates academic progress by comparing annual test scores

to previous years, and then comparing those results to all schools in the state. By their

calculations, 100% of students in this district are making below average academic progress,

compared to the state average of 22%. According to research from the National Center for

Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, teachers with weaker credentials (less

experience and no secondary degree) teaching in schools that serve disadvantaged children

lead to a widening of the already large achievement gap associated with the socioeconomic

differences (Clotfelter et al., 2007). Therefore, in districts like Petersburg, where students do

not have access to qualified teachers, it is not surprising that test scores show below average

academic progress. As you will see in this literature review, low income and minority students

having limited access to quality teachers persists not just in Petersburg, but in many districts

throughout the nation.

The phrase *achievement gap* is often used to describe differences in achievement scores

between White and African American students (Anderson, Medrich, & Fowler, 2007). Due to

the difference in available resources, some refer to this issue instead as the *opportunity gap*

(Milner, 2013). The term *opportunity gap* is used to describe the inputs, rather than outputs, within the educational system (McClellan, McKnight, Isselhardt, Jeffries, & National Network of State Teachers, 2018). This means that the term *opportunity gap* shifts the focus to the limited resources provided to the affected students rather than their performance in these unequitable conditions. One resource low income/minority students have had the least access to is quality teachers. The teaching shortage disproportionately affects schools serving low income and minority students, with the greatest shortages being reported in rural and high poverty urban schools (Darling-Hammond, Sutcher, Carver-Thomas, & Stanford University, 2018). From the researchers own experience working in a high poverty urban district, it has been observed that when students are left without permanent teachers, they are often subjected to long-term substitute teachers and larger class sizes. This issue becomes especially relevant when considering the proven academic and social benefits associated with strong teacher/student relationships (Rucinski, Brown, & Downer, 2018). This literature review seeks to understand relationships and sense of belonging within urban school communities that have been traditionally subjected to high rates of turnover, with the hope of ultimately being able to recommend solutions to keep urban elementary school teachers attached to school communities, thus narrowing the *opportunity gap*.

In what follows, three main themes occurring in the academic literature will be discussed. First, the history of teacher turnover will be reviewed in order to provide an understanding of its' impacts on low income and minority students. Included in this history is a specific discussion on Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). Second, the importance of positive relationships for students and school staff will be explored. Particular attention will be paid to

teacher wellness and teacher student relationships. Finally, professional development and its' role in community building and teacher wellness will be examined.

History and Background

According to the Learning Policy Institute, in 2017, more than 100,000 U.S. classrooms were staffed by instructors who were uncertified for their assignment. Many of these classrooms were serving primarily low-income students and students of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). This problem also appears locally. In August 2019, Mayor London Breed, the mayor of San Francisco, attempted to address this issue with new stipends for schools in the city's Bayview, Mission, and Southeastern neighborhoods. In these schools, one-third of teachers are first- or second-year teachers, and educator turnover is at 27 percent, compared to a district-wide rate of 21 percent (Steuart, 2019).

Another challenge faced by many low-income urban schools is the culture of the student population not being reflected by the teacher population. Teaching is, and has been, a predominantly White field. According to the 2017 U.S. Department of Education Schools and Staffing Survey, up to 82% of teachers in the U.S. identified as White in 2017 (Hoffman, 2018). While this may not seem like a problem, White teachers are not always able to acknowledge (or understand) that the culture and background that they themselves represent is not representative of all of their students (Hoffman, 2018). Geneva Gay (2001) claims that "culture encompasses many things, some of which are more important for teachers to know than others because they have direct implications for teaching and learning" (p. 107). Gay's argument is that teachers must understand cultural norms around learning and interactions between children and adults to be able to teach students of backgrounds that differ from their own. She

believes that if teachers understood and respected these cultural norms, school would be more engaging and meaningful for groups of diverse learners.

Additionally, many White teachers have misconceptions and/or confusion about the diverse students in their classrooms that can cause struggles in effective communication within the school community (Bonner, Warren, & Jiang, 2018). For example, if a teacher fails to recognize cultural norms and misinterprets a behavior as defiance or resistance, the result will most likely lead to conflict (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007). Conflicts with students likely result in feelings of anger and ineffectiveness on the part of the teacher.

Teachers who doubt their ability to maintain an effective learning environment are more prone to burnout (Bümen, 2010). Student/teacher relationships, both positive and negative, can determine how much joy and anger the teacher experiences in the classroom, which has a correlation to teachers' emotional exhaustion (Taxer, Becker-Kurz, & Frenzel, 2019). Therefore, misunderstandings and miscommunication based on cultural norms may increase teachers' feelings of emotional exhaustion/burnout, leading to increased turnover in schools with high concentrations of minority students. If we take a moment to view the teaching shortage and the opportunity gap side by side in this way, we start to see how they are connected.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). One response to this mismatch of cultures in the educational setting has been Multicultural Education (i.e. education that aims to teach about various cultures). However, this strategy is not enough on its own because it often does not identify the context behind the events it aims to teach about (Harmon, 2012). According to Harmon, Multicultural Education often focuses on highlighting heroes rather than fully

examining the systems of oppression that many individuals face. That is, while many teachers

highlight and honor individuals or significant events from varying racial groups, oftentimes they

do not pay attention to the inequity that forced individuals to act, or created the context for

the event to occur. As a result, systems of inequality may not receive enough attention for

individuals or their actions to be fully understood. This type of omission does not lead to a full

understanding of the realities faced by the many people and cultures it aims to highlight

(Harmon, 2012).

Some believe that using culturally responsive pedagogy could be a better solution to the

mismatch of background and culture between educators and students (Hoffman, 2018). Gay

(2001) also makes the claim that *Culturally Responsive Teaching* is one of the most effective

strategies that can be used to meet the needs of diverse students. Harmon (2012) makes the

claim that the term culturally responsive teaching has meant several things since it was first

introduced. For the purpose of this paper, I will use Gay's (2001) definition of culturally

responsive teaching, which states that culturally responsive teaching is:

> Using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse
> students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. It is based on the assumption
> that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and
> frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher
> interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly. (p. 106).

One of the key components of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is creating and maintaining

meaningful relationships between students and teachers (Hoffman, 2018). The idea of powerful

relationships as a central strategy in CRT is one that the researcher will be referring to

throughout this literature review. Hammond (2015) offers a list of five culturally responsive

teaching moves. The first move is to "build authentic relationships." Hammond (2015) claims

that these relationships are the *on-ramp to engagement and learning*. The impact of building this type of authentic relationship will be discussed in the following section.

Student/Teacher Relationships Impact School Outcomes

The idea that relationships are central to student success is not unique to Hammond's (2015) work, or even the work of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). In a 2007 study, researchers found that children with high quality teacher/student relationships were more engaged, and that that engagement led to higher academic outcomes (O'Connor & McCartney). This makes sense, given that *student engagement* is a term used commonly in education to describe a student's interest in each task or particular subject matter. Students who are interested are more likely to participate and give their full attention than those who are not, thus leading to higher outcomes for engaged students.

Students also recognize the benefits of strong positive relationships with their teachers. According to a previous study, students felt that a strong relationship with a teacher was important to their sense of belonging at school (Bouchard & Berg, 2017). Positive student/teacher relationships are especially significant given that it has been proven that a sense of belonging can be a predictor of grades for African American high school students (Boston & Warren, 2017). The same study found that the best way to promote a sense of belonging in schools is to cultivate a culture of acceptance and promote positive teacher-student relationships (Boston & Warren, 2017).

Additionally, other researchers found that teachers who suffer from emotional exhaustion had less of an ability to maintain positive relationships and supportive learning environments (Herman, Hickmon-Rosa, & Reinke, 2018). Emotional exhaustion has been

defined as "a state of mind where stresses of external environment exceed the capacity of ones' nerves and starts to reflect in behavior through frustration, depression and dissatisfaction" (Shaheen & Mahmood, 2016 p. 38). Students taught by emotionally exhausted teachers felt less supported and this had a negative impact on students' motivation (Shen et al., 2015). Additionally, research indicates that there is a correlation between students' motivation and improvements in academic performance (Adamma, Ekwutosim, & Unamba, 2018). Thus, when teachers experience emotional exhaustion, it can harm student/teacher relationships and ultimately lead to lower academic results by decreasing student motivation.

While there is limited research around the impact of student/teacher relationships on teachers, one study determined that quality student/teacher relationships are not only beneficial for students, but may also help teachers reduce the effects of burnout (Taxer, Becker-Kurz, & Frenzel, 2019). This claim was made based on the findings that increased experiences of enjoyment and decreased experiences of anger were related to lower levels of emotional exhaustion for teachers (Taxer, Becker-Kurz, & Frenzel, 2019).

Therefore, when teachers had more positive relationships with students, they experienced more joy and satisfaction in their daily role, and they experienced less feelings of frustration, which is often associated with emotional exhaustion and burnout. The idea that positive experiences improve relationships is echoed by another study focused on resilience that claimed teachers are better able to cope with negative experiences if they have regular, positive interactions with their students and in their school communities (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011).

As stated earlier in this literature review, due to high rates of turnover many urban schools are staffed by novice teachers. One professor from an education preparation program, who was shocked by high rates of turnover in novice teachers, developed a support group specifically for novice teachers. The professor hoped this project would create an informal "safe" group for new teachers to come together and be supported in a way that formal induction programs could not offer (Sanderson, 2003). This theory is supported by Tait (2008), whose primary participant felt uncomfortable asking for guidance from her mentor and expressed disappointment that the mentor assigned to her was working half -time and left the school part way through the year. One of the themes Sanderson (2003) discovered in this group was feelings of isolation. Like Sanderson's work, Tait's (2008) study aimed to create a profile of resilient teachers to understand how resiliency contributed to success in the first years of teaching. The main participant in Tait's (2008) study was described as having high emotional intelligence and was skilled in the area of making connections with others and maintaining supportive relationships with them. For example, she remained in contact with her peers from her teacher preparation program, who she felt were going through similar struggles (Tait, 2008). This helped the teacher to maintain a connection and sense of belonging to the teaching community outside of her school. If the previously mentioned theory that positive experiences improve relationships is correct, then these relationships may have helped this teacher reduce the symptoms of burnout.

In high poverty schools, dissatisfaction with teaching is often linked to high rates of exhaustion (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012). According to the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), teachers in the U.S. work longer hours and have less time for

planning and professional development than their peers in many other countries (Darling-Hammond, 2014). These longer hours lead to more stress for teachers. Many of the teaching blogs that are currently popular on social media are plastered with new editorials relating to teacher stress and burnout. For example, a recent *Edutopia.org* article claims that 93 percent of elementary school teachers experience high levels of stress (Terada, 2018).

In one study, Herman, Hickmon-Rosa, and Reinke (2018) found that teachers with higher stress levels use less positive reinforcement even when school wide positive behavior systems are in place. This limited use of positive behavior measures leads to impaired student/teacher relationships and lower reported self-efficacy of teachers (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). This may perpetuate a negative cycle in classrooms where teachers had reduced self-efficacy as these teachers felt more stressed and were unable to implement positive behavior reinforcements, which would improve relationships, reduce stress, and increase self-efficacy.

Professional Development, Collaboration, and School Leadership

The literature suggests that professional development may be increasing, rather than lowering teacher stress. This may contribute to negative impacts on relationships within the school communities, which indicates a need for change in the professional development system to better focus on teacher needs.

Professional development focused on teacher wellbeing will improve teacher working conditions and stress levels. In one study, researchers found that teachers with more stress experienced a lower sense of job satisfaction (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). However, participants of a Professional Development training focused on: teacher stress, professionalism,

and teacher student relationships indicated that this type of training has great benefits to teachers and the school environment. After participating in the training, teachers noticed: positive changes in their own attitudes, improved relationships with students and colleagues, decreases in problematic student behaviors, and less stress in the classroom (Sneyers, Jacobs, & Struyf, 2016). This finding indicates that providing teachers with opportunities to learn strategies for stress management and relationship building can not only help them to improve at these specific skills, but also to increase their overall sense of wellbeing. These findings indicate a need for more stress-related professional development opportunities.

According to a study by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, most teachers spend 68 hours each year on professional learning activities (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation & Boston Consulting Group, 2014). These professional learning activities are often district mandated, and only 29 percent of teachers feel highly satisfied with the professional development being offered. One example of this dissatisfaction is that in high turnover schools, veteran teachers claim that Professional Development (PD) is unhelpful for them, due to constant repetition aimed at new teachers (Guin, 2004). This repetition of PD ultimately leads to frustration and impaired relationships between new and returning staff members (Guin, 2004).

Collaboration models for Professional Development are often beneficial for new teachers. The opportunity to participate in training by "coaching" other teachers or acting in a leadership role or collaborating is beneficial for novice teachers (Huisman, Singer, & Catapano, 2010). Interestingly, however school wide collaboration was viewed both positively and negatively by teachers, depending on the climate of collaboration in their school (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). This means that at some school sites, collaboration was viewed by

teachers as adding to teacher stress, while at others (especially sites with new teachers), it was

viewed as beneficial.

In 2014, less than 30 percent of teachers surveyed felt they could choose their own

professional development opportunities (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation & Boston

Consulting Group (BCG), 2014). This number is shockingly low, especially when considering that

teachers felt less stress when they felt they had input in decision making (Collie et al., 2012). In

short, professional development (PD) may be increasing teacher stress rather than lowering it,

which may lead to negative impacts on relationships within the school community. This may

indicate a need for change in the professional development system. One recommendation

offered through the literature is to provide training for novice teachers, where they talk about

their resilient responses to events, in order to support their colleagues and increase their own

sense of efficacy (Tait, 2008). Another recommendation is that teachers should be trained in

supporting positive student/teacher relationships (Rucinski, Brown, & Downer, 2018).

Conclusion

The literature clearly shows that both students and teachers benefit from strong

relationships within the school community. Students experienced both social and academic

benefits when they felt they had strong personal connections with teachers. Teachers with

strong relationships felt reduced stress and greater job satisfaction. However, there was little

research in how to create these types of relationships in schools that have traditionally

experienced high rates of turnover. While one study claimed that teachers should be trained in

supporting positive student/teacher relationships (Rucinski, Brown, & Downer, 2018), there

was no model of training suggested. In fact, the literature showed that there was dissatisfaction with the traditional professional development model.

The literature reviewed for this study has limited specific responses and strategies to address relationship building in high turnover schools. Teachers indicated that, while many teachers believed in the power of Culturally Responsive Teaching, they admitted they lacked the time and resources to fully implement it in their classroom (Bonner et al., 2018). Moreover, there is a lack of research around what is specifically needed to cultivate the types of relationships that lead to a sense of belonging in high poverty urban schools.

This research project is designed on the premise that relationship building (between students and teachers as well as among staff) in traditionally high turnover schools would promote a sense of belonging at the school, thereby creating higher retention rates among teachers, and narrowing the opportunity gap. The purpose of this research is to understand the barriers urban schools face in fostering strong relationships and a sense of belonging among staff and students in order to develop solutions that will keep teachers attached to high poverty urban school communities, thus lowering turnover rates and improving outcomes for students affected by the opportunity gap.

Chapter 3: Methods

This research project aims to understand the barriers that urban schools face in fostering a sense of community and belonging among staff and students. By exploring these barriers, the researcher hopes to find solutions which could be used to help create an environment in which teachers feel connected to the school community, thus lowering teacher turnover rates and improving relationships and outcomes for students affected by the opportunity gap.

Research Questions

This study focused on participants' responses to questions and discussions during student focus groups and teacher interviews. The survey and focus group questions were formed based on the following central questions: (1) What are the barriers to building school community in urban schools? (2) How can a sense of belonging be fostered in school communities? (3) How can Culturally Responsive Teaching practices improve a sense of belonging in urban schools? These central questions were used to focus the study around a sense of belonging and relationships that the participants have experienced in their urban school communities.

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

The researcher decided on a qualitative approach to research in order to better understand the thoughts and feelings of the participants. Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups assigned to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014). A qualitative approach to data collection provided increased opportunities to focus on questions aimed at student and teacher experience around belonging

in their own school communities. It also points to a constructivist worldview, as it relies heavily on the participants' views of the situation being studied (Creswell, 2014).

The concept of belonging/community in schools was central to many of the questions asked in both interviews and focus groups. The researcher was interested in understanding whether or not students and staff felt that they belong to their school community, and what factors led to those feelings. Qualitative measures were needed in this case to allow for a wide variety of responses and to capture the individual experiences of the participants. Another main focus of the interview questions was Culturally Responsive Teaching. Teachers were asked how familiar they were with Culturally Responsive Teaching practices and if they noticed any impact by using these strategies in their classrooms. Additionally, teachers also responded to open ended questions about high turnover and how it does or does not impact their school communities.

The primary research site where student focus groups took place is located in a small urban school that serves primarily low-income students of color. The students at this school have been traditionally subjected to high rates of teacher turnover, which may have led to lower social and academic outcomes. Therefore, this study represents a transformative worldview because this view places importance on the study of lives and experiences of diverse groups that have traditionally been marginalized (Creswell, 2014, p. 10). A transformative worldview contains an action agenda. It aims to change the lives of the participants by improving conditions in the institutions in which individuals work (or, in this case, attend school). Moreover, a transformative view brings light to social issues such as empowerment, inequality, oppression, domination, and alienation (Creswell, 2014). At the conclusion of this

study, the researcher provides recommendations based on major findings for implementing key

strategies in schools that experience high teacher turnover as well as recommendations for

further studies aimed at understanding the views of parents and afterschool staff and how

theses members of the school team see themselves as belonging to the school community.

These improvements may have the potential to change the lives of urban students and teachers

by creating more desirable working conditions for teachers and more equitable access to

quality teachers and education for students.

Research Design

Participants in this study included teachers and former teachers from three school sites[1]

and students in 3rd through 5th grades (approximate ages: 8-11) at one school site. The school

used for the student focus groups is part of a large urban district and serves primarily low

income/minority students. According to the School Accountability Report Card (a tool used by

the California Department of Education to compare school sites) in the 2017-2018 school year,

84.5% of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged and the student

population at this site is made up of 19.3% African American students, 5.3% Asian students,

10.1% Filipino students, 43.5% Hispanic or Latinx students, 4.8% Pacific Islander students, 2.9%

White students, and 6.8% of students that identify as having two or more ethnicities. In

addition, this site's average scores on standardized testing are significantly lower than the

district average (School Accountability Report Card, n.d). According to the 2017-2018 School

---

[1] Four teachers interviewed taught at more than one site during their career and discussed former school

sites during interviews.

Accountability Report Card, 20% of students at this school scored proficient in English Language Arts, while the district average was 48% proficiency. In that same year, 8% of the students at this school scored proficient in Math, while the district average was 50% proficiency (School Accountability Repot Card, n.d). These deviations from the district average may stem from opportunity gaps impacting this school. School Accountability Report Card documents are publicly available; however, due to privacy protections the actual name of the research site cannot be released.

Participants/Sampling Procedures

Teachers interviewed for this study included five teachers from the primary research site, as well as two teachers from two additional schools in urban districts. Due to the small nature of the primary research site specific details about teacher participants have been omitted in order to protect privacy. Some general information is provided to give a better understanding of participant background. Participants include two veteran/long term teachers (taught more than ten years), three new teachers (taught less than five years), and two former classroom teachers (i.e., anyone who has left classroom teaching regardless of years served). Four of the teachers interviewed taught at more than one school site during their teaching career. Participants included two male and five female teachers. Racial groups represented by participants include one African American/Black teacher, three Hispanic/Latinx teachers, two Asian teachers, and one White teacher.

The researcher has a dual relationship with these participants, as they were all former colleagues or personal friends. The researcher approached participants individually, both in person and over the phone, to briefly describe the project and ask if they would be interested

in participating in interviews. Those that were interested signed consent forms (See Apendix E for Teacher Informed Consent Form) and participated in thirty-minute interviews.

To recruit students, the researcher reached out individually to both current and former students in grades 3rd through 5th and explained that they were conducting a study about relationship building and community in schools. The researcher asked students if they were interested in participating in the study and explained the focus group procedure. If students were interested both the student and guardians signed consent forms (See Appendix C for Parent/Guardian Consent Form and Appendix D for Student Consent Form). Student focus groups occurred on campus in the researcher's classroom. The groups occurred in a small group of three to five students per session. Each session lasted for approximately 30 minutes and took place either during lunch or after school, dependent on student availability. Due to the small nature of the school site, specific details about student participants have been omitted in order to protect privacy. In total, seven students participated in two separate focus groups. Some general information is provided to give a better understanding of participant background. Student participants represent grades 3rd through 5th. One male and six female students participated in focus groups. Racial backgrounds represented by student focus groups include: four African American/Black students, one Hispanic/Latinx student, one Asian student, and one Mixed Race student.

Methods of Data Collection

Students began each session by reviewing circle norms used widely at the school site to ensure that all students felt comfortable participating in the conversations. As students came from various grade levels, the researcher started by asking students to participate in a warm up

circle question to help them to feel more comfortable working as a group. Students were then asked a series of open-ended questions (See Focus Group Interview Guide in Appendix A) and given the opportunity to participate in group discussions. Some examples of questions asked were: *What makes you feel like you belong in this school?* and, *Who are the people that help you belong in this school?* These questions were used to encourage students to describe the people and actions that help them feel connected to the school community. Their answers were used to answer the research question- *How can a sense of belonging be fostered in school communities?* Students also gave insights into the question- *What are the barriers to building school community in urban schools?* The researcher avoided questions related to turnover in order to protect students' emotional well-being and therefore was not expecting to gain insight into what students perceived as barriers to building relationships. Student participants also provided responses that lead to a deeper understanding of the question- *How can Culturally Responsive Teaching practices improve a sense of belonging in urban schools;* student responses included descriptions of what they like about teachers, and how teachers help them feel comfortable. Once initial ideas were established, clarifying questions were posed, including: *What do you think your teacher should do to help a new student feel welcome in the classroom? How do you and your friends make sure everyone at the school feels welcome here?* These questions helped to clarify thinking and encourage students to share specific details and examples. These sessions were recorded on the researcher's computer or phone for later review. In addition, observations were recorded during the focus group by the researcher.

Teacher participants were interviewed at a location of their choosing. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and questions were open ended (See Appendix B for Interview

Guide). The researcher recorded interviews on their phone or computer to review at the completion of each interview. Additionally, the researcher took written notes during these conversations. Teachers were initially asked to briefly describe their current or former school site. This helped the researcher establish baseline data about each participant's school. Teachers were then asked to describe turnover at their current or former school sites and comment on how turnover impacts teachers and students. Next, teachers were asked questions, like: *How would you describe relationships among staff at your school?* or *What advice would you give to a friend who was interested in working at your school?* These questions were chosen to help understand teacher perception of relationships at their school site and answer these research questions: *What are the barriers to building school community in urban schools?* and *How can a sense of belonging be fostered in school communities?* Teachers were also asked questions such as: *What supports exist for teachers that are new to your school?* These questions were used to understand resources available to teachers and answer the research question *What are the barriers to building school community in urban schools?.* Additionally, questions like: *Do you/did you use Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) strategies in your classroom?* were asked to gain insight into teacher understanding and use of Culturally Responsive Teaching and answer the research question *How can Culturally Responsive Teaching practices improve a sense of belonging in urban schools?*

Data Analysis

This study relied on qualitative data in the form of student focus groups, as well as teacher interviews. All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis

and coding. In addition, the researcher included observations and/or field notes from their own classroom.

After each student focus group and teacher interview, the researcher wrote analytic memos to capture data about group interactions and key findings. For student focus groups, these memos include notes on body language, skipped questions, general interactions, and surprising statements during the half hour focus group. According to Maxwell (2013), regularly writing memos is an essential practice that will help researchers to capture and record their thinking around qualitative data and lead to further insights. For teacher interviews, these memos included notes on body language, laughter or sighing, and surprising statements.

Results of all student focus groups and teacher interviews were recorded and transcribed for review and coding. Maxwell (2013) refers to coding as the main strategy used to categorize data in qualitative studies. Transcripts of interviews and focus groups were all open coded by hand using both expected and unexpected codes. Peer coding was used on a sampling of transcripts to promote precise and reliable coding. The researcher began by segmenting portions of the transcript based on key ideas or concepts. Each segment was then labeled with expected codes based on the literature review. The expected codes for student focus groups were community, friends, morning/ community circles, support, and recess. Unexpected codes included: *warm demander*, loss, limited trust, and limited desire to form relationships. Expected codes for teacher interviews were: lack of support, stress, fear, positive student relationships, positive staff relationships, negative student encounters, negative staff encounters and teacher wellness. Unexpected codes included: sense of loss, limited trust, *warm demander*, loving, and shared accountability.

Concept mapping, a visual tool that represents qualitative and can be used to uncover relationships between data points data (Maxwell, 2013), was used to further explore all codes. After initial coding, all codes were sorted into categories and studied for associations and patterns and placed on a concept map. The process of concept mapping allowed the researcher to look at the data as a whole set and group codes together to better understand themes in the student focus group and teacher interview data. At this point, all data was analyzed again using focused coding, a second round of coding to refine and expand theories (Creswell, 2014), and any additional relevant codes were sorted into themes. At this phase, the researcher was looking at consistency in student responses across questions, as well as anything that stood out as unusual, based on student's overall response patterns, or examples that contradicted the findings.

The researcher made all efforts to prioritize protection of participant confidentiality. In order to preserve participant confidentiality, teachers are referred to only by their experience category. These categories are as follows: Veteran/long term teacher (anyone with 10 or more years of classroom teaching experience, not necessarily at one school site), new/novice teacher (anyone with less than 5 years of classroom teaching experience), and/or teachers who have left the classroom/former teacher (may or may not still be working within the field of education). When referring to teacher participants experiences there will be no references to gender, race, or grade level taught Students may be referred to by their grade level where appropriate, but will not be referred to by gender or race.

Validity

The researcher has worked in an urban school district for the past ten years and has seen how teacher turnover impacts schools. At the primary research site where the researcher currently teaches, there was recently a year where the school saw a fifty percent turnover of teaching staff in one school year. The researcher's intensive long-term involvement in this issue has allowed for a deeper understanding of the issues faced by urban schools who experience turnover. This previous experience helped the researcher to avoid jumping to conclusions and to avoid premature theories (Maxwell, 2013). On the other hand, because the researcher is so close to this issue, it was difficult to avoid bias. The researcher was aware of this potential bias and prioritized keeping an open stance during data collection and analysis, in order to truly hear all thoughts and feelings involved in this issue. The researcher understands that it was in the best interest of her colleagues, and more importantly the students she serves, to work to reduce bias to ensure validity of results and findings.

In this study, qualitative data was collected through student focus groups and teacher interviews. In order to achieve what Maxwell (2013) would describe as "rich data," all focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed. To ensure transcripts were reliable, they were checked against recordings to confirm that no errors were made during the transcription process. This process allowed the researcher to review all parts of the interview rather than just referring to notes taken during the interview process.

The researcher is a teacher at the school site where all student focus groups took place. The student participants were either current or former students of the researcher's third grade class. The rapport and familiarity between the researcher and students served to increase the

validity of the research findings, because students were already comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings with the researcher, leading to more honest discussion in focus groups.

Alternatively, the researcher was in a position of power over the student participants, which could have resulted in biased data. It is also possible that the close relationship that the researcher has with the students could have led to misinterpretation of student experiences and beliefs, meaning that the true intention was not communicated into the data. The researcher was aware of these potential biases and attempted to assure students they were able to share whatever they felt was appropriate without fear of consequences. The data was analyzed as objectively as possible.

The primary research site is a small urban school with a history of high teacher turnover, meaning that student participants have most likely experienced having a teacher leave at the end of the school year or starting the school year with a teacher who is new to the school. In order to protect student participants, the researcher chose to avoid asking questions focused on teacher turnover in order to avoid bringing up memories that may have been emotionally upsetting for student participants. Instead, the researcher chose to focus student discussions on positive traits or actions that teachers take to help students feel connected to school. While this approach may have led to potential bias, skewing discussions towards positive topics and feelings, the researcher felt that student comfort should be the priority.

Familiarity may have impacted the results of this study. All teachers and former teachers interviewed for the study were colleagues, former colleagues, or friends of the researcher. This may increase the validity of results. As Creswell (2014) points out, the development of trust, a prolonged time working with participants in the research setting, and strong participant

relationships all promote accurate findings. On the other hand, it is possible that this familiarity may have led to some bias, as the participants may have framed their answers in a way that they believed the researcher wanted. It is also possible the researcher misinterpreted the participants' experience or ideals shared in the interview process because of previous knowledge of each participant's teaching experience and background.

The researcher was aware of this potential bias. Maxwell's (2013) theory of reactivity claims that what a participant says during an interview will always be influenced by the researcher. The researcher was aware of this theory and made efforts to avoid leading questions. One strategy the researcher used to avoid misrepresentation of data is respondent validation. This process involves frequent clarification to ensure that the researcher is not misinterpreting what interview participants are intending to communicate (Maxwell, 2013).

The researcher used multiple strategies to promote validity of the study results. In order to mitigate the effects of bias the researcher also used triangulation of data- using multiple interviews to gain a variety of teacher perspectives to increase the validity of the research. One strategy the researcher used to achieve triangulation was to interview teachers at a variety of stages in their career. This included interviewing veteran teachers, new teachers, and teachers who have left the classroom. In addition, triangulation, collection of data from more that one source (Maxwell, 2014), was achieved by collecting data from both students and teachers and through personal observation and field notes of the researcher's experiences.

Chapter 4: Findings

This thesis project aimed to investigate the factors which contribute to challenges in building relationships in schools with traditionally high teacher turnover. By examining and understanding the challenges to relationship building, education experts can propose strategies for schools to use that would promote a sense of belonging for all students and staff. By focusing on relationship building (between students and teachers as well as among staff) in traditionally high turnover settings, leaders can promote a sense of belonging within the school that leads to higher retention rates of teachers.

The findings discussed below are organized into three major themes that emerged from the data. The first examines how relationships and a sense of belonging increase teachers' desire to stay in schools. The second theme explores several prominent barriers specific to developing strong relationships within high turnover schools. The third theme traces the intentional process of creating structures in order to improve relationships and sense of belonging. Several strategies were uncovered that could potentially disrupt the identified barriers and improve relationships in schools with high rates of teacher turnover.

The Impact of Positive Relationships at School

The power of positive relationships was evident throughout this research project. Teachers who were still working in classrooms overwhelmingly described positive relationships as important, while teachers who left the classroom described having limited relationships with both students and staff at their school sites, or in some cases negative relationships.

At the primary research site, the power of positive relationships is felt immediately. You cannot spend more than five minutes in the building without receiving friendly greetings from

both students and staff, oftentimes combined with a hug. Visitors to this site often reflect on

how positive the school environment feels, or describe the school as having a *close-knit*

community. At this school, the teaching population is beginning to stabilize after many years of

high turnover; this stabilization is an indication that a positive community and sense of

belonging has an impact on teachers desire to remain attached to their school communities.

In interviews, all seven teachers expressed the power of positive relationships, or the

impact of negative relationships. In one interview session, a new teacher laughed while sharing

that the advice they[2] would give to a teacher coming to their school would be to "have lunch

with the teachers." This teacher went on to describe the various relationships they have with

teachers and mentors that supported them during their first year of teaching. The teacher

ended this part of our conversation with the declaration, "I would not have survived [my first]

school year without them!" Alternatively, a teacher who left teaching altogether described a

situation that was very different: "Our communication was all related to work. That is mostly

because we were all so tired." This former educator went on to describe a culture of complaint

and negativity at the school site where they previously taught. This teacher said that, because

of this culture it felt like everyone was "counting the minutes until [they] could go home." The

teacher described a lack of relationships as well as a lack of desire to form relationships

between staff members at this school site.

The difference in these scenarios paints the picture of two strikingly different school

communities, despite the fact that both schools share similarities in student population

---

[2] All teachers interviewed will be described using gender neutral pronouns to protect confidentiality.

(teachers described schools with high rates of students on free and reduced lunch, as well as large numbers of immigrant students) and high teacher turnover (as reported by the teachers). At the first school site, positive social interactions are the norm and the teacher interviewed expressed wanting to stay at their current school, while at the second school most interactions were strictly formal and professional. The second educator ultimately decided to leave teaching.

In schools without a strong sense of community, it is easy to feel Isolated. One new teacher shared, "It can be really easy to feel alone as a teacher. If one does fall into that situation it can be really hard to keep teaching. I feel really lucky to be in a situation where I have never felt alone." Another teacher described the positive impact that strong relationships and informal conversations can have on a classroom: "[My colleagues] care about me as a person… It's not just I got to train this [person] to do reading workshop or whatever; it's more than that." The teacher went on to share about a recent casual conversation they had with someone while walking through the hallway. The conversation was about empathy; the teacher reported that this conversation changed how they view the need to model empathy in their own classroom for the better.

What this teacher described confirms a sense of community. They feel like other members of the school community care about them as a person, not just as an educator. This sense of belonging creates a setting where conversations come naturally and simple everyday interactions lead to improved teaching practice. This school worked to actively cultivate community and a sense of belonging and the results are evident in the way teachers describe

the school, and how many teachers have decided to remain teaching at this site after years of high turnover.

Significant Barriers to Creating and Maintaining Relationships in High Turnover Schools

The findings of this study indicate three common barriers to building and maintaining quality relationships in high turnover schools. The first barrier is high rates of turnover, leading to feelings of instability in the community. Second, repeated experiences of loss ultimately impact trust and a desire to form relationships. The third barrier is teachers' feelings of being overwhelmed and undervalued. The data does not indicate that this finding (i.e., overwhelmed and undervalued) was specific to high turnover schools; however, it was mentioned with such high frequency that it is necessary to consider this barrier for a fuller understanding of teacher experiences in a high turnover school.

Shifting communities at high turnover schools. In some cases, schools with high teacher turnover were also impacted by high student turnover. Moreover, given that all teachers interviewed taught for at least one year within the San Francisco Bay Area, the rapidly changing demographics associated with this location should also be considered. According to the Urban Displacement Project, "wages of low-income residents have not kept pace with the sky-rocketing housing prices resulting in massive demographic shifts in the mega-region, from San Francisco to Sacramento" (Zuk & Chapple, 2015). Teachers serving low income communities have noticed these effects in their classrooms. During teacher interviews, one teacher commented that many families that have been coming to the same school for several generations, in recent years, have begun to commute in. Another teacher from this school site

commented, "I have kids who don't show up on Fridays because they're worn out from the commute each day." When discussing students leaving, one teacher commented "it definitely creates an unstable type of community for a lot of students because it's just kind of up in the air if they're going to be able to make it out here for another year or not."

Many schools that experience high turnover suffer from negative stigmas attached to the population of students and the neighborhoods in which they are located. Additionally, due to effects of the opportunity gap, many schools in low income neighborhoods report lower test scores than schools in more affluent communities. As a result, as neighborhoods gentrify, new residents do not always want their children to attend the neighborhood schools. One long time teacher described this scenario and how it can also impact teacher turnover:

> If [parents] don't get [their desired] school for kindergarten, they'll switch over to that other school in first grade. So that's not good for our teachers here. That's why we have a lot of turnover because we have to consolidate. So that could be a problem too for our kids, and even for our staff because you know you form a relationship with that teacher and then they're gone then you've got to start all over again... You don't get a chance to have that relationship where you can work together and you know, cry on each other's shoulder... so that can be very frustrating too.

As student populations shrink, schools lose funding. This defunding can lead to mid-year consolidations, layoffs, and limited funds to rehire teachers for the following school year, as well as decreases in available positions. While this process varies from how leaders in education typically describe turnover, because teachers are not making the decision to leave the school, the impact it has on the community is the same, and sometimes felt even stronger due to the abrupt ending of relationships.

The lack of funding due to student turnover can also impact feelings of job security. One teacher interviewed described having to change grade levels, due to consolidation as well as a fear of being laid off. While this teacher hopes to remain at their current school site, they have

resigned themselves to the possibility that, at some point, they may be asked to leave due to inadequate funds. This instability makes it harder for school communities to function. There is always a sense that someone from the community may not return, which impedes relationship building as described in the following section.

The psychological effects of repeated loss. Building relationships requires time and trust. In a constantly changing community, adequate time to build trust is not always a reality as new faces come and go on a regular basis, leading to a negative impact on desire to build new relationships. Students and teachers at high turnover schools experience a repeated loss of community members. This loss can impede one's desire to form new relationships, due to a lack of trust.

The students interviewed for this study were not directly questioned about teacher or student turnover, due to the strong feelings often associated with these types of experiences; however, the hurt they experience is obvious through their actions. One teacher shared an experience in which students told them that they were a favorite teacher because they had stayed and everyone else left; this speaks to a sense of loss and feelings of being neglected. In this above case, all the teacher could do was reassure the students that they would continue to be there for them.

The repeated turnover has also created an environment in which students are accustomed to their teachers leaving at the end of the year. One example of this comes from a teacher who described an experience of telling students that they had an announcement. The students immediately became upset. Through conversation and questioning, it became evident that the students thought the announcement was that the teacher would be leaving at the end

of the year. These students are so accustomed to being left by their teachers that a simple announcement can lead them to jump to conclusions. This behavior indicated that students in high turnover schools are constantly bracing themselves for someone else to disappear from their school community.

During the interviews, teachers expressed concerns for the repeated loss experienced by their students. One long time teacher said, "it sometimes hurts to see someone build a relationship and then find out that, you know, they're not going to come back anymore." In the researchers own classroom, a student recently transferred to a new school. The researcher was able to observe the sense of loss felt by my remaining students. Students who remained in the class continued to write this student's name on cards, and regularly expressed missing their friend. This sense of loss makes students hesitant to form new relationships.

In the following quotes, students describe what it would be like to have a new student join the community and their limited desire to reach out to newcomers. One student said that their friends "will be really not understanding at first. As you get to know my friends they will treat you as one of them, but at first they might not like you." A different student added, "we wouldn't really talk to the new kid. Because we would want to see their attitude and how they react to things at our school- we would wait to see their attitude." A final student in the focus group agreed, sharing "we might ignore [them] at first. But if they talk to us, we'd probably say hi or something. Probably we'd get along after a while."

All three students expressed concern over new students joining the community. None of them expressed a desire to get to know new students or welcome them to the community. The researcher found this surprising. All of these students in the above conversation can be

described as kind caring individuals who are connected to a social group. All of the students in

the focus group expressed that it would take time for them to welcome a new student into the

community or their social group. This finding speaks to the fear and inconsistency students

have experienced in the school community. Students want to be sure that peers stick around

before they are willing to invest emotional energy into forming new friendships.

Teachers in traditionally high turnover schools had similar reactions to students. When

asked about how teacher turnover impacted their daily role one long-term teacher explained:

> It's better now, just because in the last two years people haven't left, but I can imagine
> that if every year I was working with a different teacher I wouldn't be able to
> collaborate as well. It would take so much more effort… It's going to take so much of our
> time just to understand each other and to trust each other. It does take trust.

Both children and adults in high turnover schools feel the impact of shifting communities. These

communities have not had adequate time to develop trust, and a sense of reliability. This

impacts the culture at high turnover schools and makes relationship building and collaboration

more difficult.

Overwhelmed, exhausted, and undervalued. While the researcher suspects that this

barrier is not unique to high turnover schools, feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and

undervalued was frequently mentioned during teacher interviews and, as such, it requires

discussion. Teachers from all categories (new, long term, and former) shared feelings of being

overwhelmed. One of the most striking examples is from this teacher who has left education:

> It's just such a hard job. You are never good enough. You are never good enough for the
> kids. You are never good enough for the families. You are never good enough for the
> principal or admin. team. There is always something that you *can* be doing, and you're
> not satisfying some people.

This teacher went on to describe constant feelings of exhaustion. When asked what would have

helped them during this time, the first request that came to mind was a simple one: "It would

have been nice to have admin come into your class. To see how you are, or how your class is going." This teacher needed support and needed someone to notice and care about how they and their students were feeling. However, administrative priorities kept school leaders out of the classroom, which impeded relationships and led to feelings of not being supported and an increased sense of isolation for this teacher.

Teachers who have remained in the classroom and teachers who have left described frustration with curriculum goals and formal professional development not meeting their most urgent needs. One teacher described a classroom where there was not always time to address social emotional needs. While this teacher knew their students needed the additional social emotional support, they felt that if they did not focus on prescribed/predetermined learning goals, their students would not meet necessary benchmarks. However, these learning goals did not always seem as relevant or as valuable as the desire to develop interpersonal skills. During the interview, this teacher laughed while asking, "when in my life have I ever thought thank God I know what a rhombus is!?" This teacher felt pressure to meet curriculum goals, even though their students needed more emotional support. The limited focus on social emotional needs did not allow for relationships to fully develop in that classroom and added to teachers' feelings of stress and lack of job satisfaction.

Another teacher expressed knowing that the current curriculum was not meeting their students' needs, but as a new teacher they did not have the time, resources, or experience necessary to adjust each lesson or time block every day. These teachers expressed a desire and a need to adapt all of their lessons to be more culturally relevant, but shared that thinking critically about each lesson they taught in a day was exhausting. Sometimes, they just had to go

with the plan even if it was not what was best for their students. These teachers describe feeling powerless to change the situation and feeling as if they do not have the time available to meet classroom needs and desires. Because so many teachers at traditionally high turnover schools are new to the field, many are still learning the content and curriculum they are expected to teach. Learning new skills and curriculum while knowing there is not enough time to make necessary adaptations to support students leads to teachers' compounding feelings of frustration and being undervalued.

One teacher who left the classroom expressed exasperation at their students' limited access to resources outside of school. They shared that while it felt like much progress was made on a daily basis, that with some individuals, it felt like starting over every day. This teacher then went on to describe that some of the students did not have adequate access to food and oftentimes skipped meals. This teacher knew their students needed more, but was not always able to provide for them. They shared, "I was tired of not being met halfway. I felt like I could only do so much." This teacher felt that there were inadequate systems in place to support all students' needs. This teacher was left to feel responsibility towards meeting all student needs both within and out of the classroom. The sense of sole responsibility lead to feelings of being overwhelmed and of lacking the necessary support that would make students more successful.

The Impact of Community Building Structures

The findings of this study demonstrated that it is necessary to actively cultivate community within traditionally high turnover schools, with several structures emerging as effective. These structures include: shared accountability models, cohort models, collaborative

learning models, support models, and a shifting of the teacher role to include and Culturally Responsive Teaching practices. These structures and their role in teacher job satisfaction and student outcomes are described in the following sections.

Shared accountability. The creation of shared accountability models lowers feelings of isolation and reduces feelings of being overwhelmed/exhausted. One significant finding was that creating a culture of shared accountability helped limit feelings of isolation and a sense of being overwhelmed. At the primary research site there is a mantra that "every student is your student." This mantra applies to every staff member who works at this school. Teachers and staff members are frequently seen interacting with students who are not in their class or on their caseload.

One example of this is a particular student at the primary research site who comes to visit the researcher almost every day for a hug. This student has never been in the researcher's class, but because the researcher has been a consistent figure in the school for several years, and because there have been regular friendly interactions between the two, this student feels comfortable coming to the researcher both for social interactions and for support. On some occasions, this support looks like chatting at recess about an earlier conflict with a peer; other times, it means the student comes to the researchers' class for a break when the students own classroom is not meeting their needs This story is not unique to this student, as there are many students with whom the researcher has similar relationships. Moreover, this situation is not unique to researcher, as nearly every adult on campus at the primary research site could describe a similar scenario.

One teacher at the primary research site described these relationships as beneficial because they can feel "friendly and removed," yet students know that they will still be held to high standards by all the adults they interact with, leading to a sense of shared responsibility within the school. The researcher has made observations in her own classroom that highlight the importance of a shared sense of accountability. From these notes, the researcher has observed that that when problems arise with a student, or if she was feeling overwhelmed by a situation, that supports were regularly available. That support was given freely with no judgments, and no one involved in any of the situations (student of staff member) was made to feel like a burden for requesting assistance. Some examples of the types of situations the researcher took notes on include: behavior disruptions, student mental health needs, and curriculum assistance.

Cohort models increase a sense of community and build trust. Having shared experiences can help school teams develop community and build trust. A cohort model, where new teachers enter a school at the same time, is one strategy that could be used to build community. One new teacher describes their experience starting teaching at a school with many other new teachers.

> When I started there were a lot of first- or second-year teachers, and I think there's something to that. We were all doing the same kind of work. We were all going to the same process of learning. Learning the community, learning the school, and learning how to teach you know. I think that that kind of brought a lot of the teachers together and in some way like sharing that experience. Going through the struggles and having that same perspective…I'm not sure how that kind of relates to staying longer to be honest, but I definitely feel a stronger sense of community among the teachers than what I've seen in other schools, and other people have said that to.

The shared experiences of the staff created understanding and familiarity. Because teachers depended on each other to learn the new skills they needed for success, they built community

and trust quickly. While this teacher notes they are not sure if that will lead to higher retention rates, they do share that many people involved with the school feel and observe a strong sense of community.

Collaborative learning and support models. Teaching is commonly known to have high risks for professional isolation. One way to overcome this isolation is by developing collaborative learning models that provide opportunities to give and receive feedback and support from peers. One teacher who left the classroom reflected, "I learned a lot from [my grade level partner]. I wish we would have started collaborating earlier in the school year." This indicates that many new teachers enjoy the support of working and collaborating with colleagues.

An additional finding from this study showed that teachers who remained in education often spoke of not wanting to let their colleagues down. They felt that when they planned with someone, they were more likely to follow through. There was a built-in sense of accountability that came with co-construction of a new lesson or routine, leading to the feeling that colleagues supported each other and were pushing each other to take risks in the classroom. Teachers who experienced models for collaborative learning had an overwhelmingly positive experience. One teacher explained:

> I need people, I only believe people I think can do what I do. Do you know what I mean? I can't remember who told me this but, I always picture teaching as a dance floor. Have you heard this one? There are people who are on the floor, and other people who are on the balcony watching the dancers. Watching what the dancers do, talking about what they should do and how they should do it, when they're not down there dancing and they can't even dance either. And I think... I want to read or hear from or see people who have been dancing with me. Who are you know, like doing it, as opposed to somebody who's been up on the balcony just like watching and learning and, dissecting while not really doing. When it comes to CRT [Culturally Responsive Teaching], I think it would be hugely more for me more believable if I can if I see you do it, you know come

> to my classroom and do it, try it, and then if it works then okay, cool. Even if it doesn't work that's cool to it. But at least I know that you're willing to try it.

This teacher describes an ability to trust those who work alongside them. The teacher shared that this type of learning is better than reading a book or hearing a presentation from an expert. When professional learning happens in the context of an individual school site, the teacher can best see how the new learning can be applied and if the new strategy or model will meet the needs of their own students. Collaborative learning and an option to try out new material or strategies with the support of peers or experts leads to greater trust in the community and greater willingness to participate in the implementation of school wide systems.

Another finding was that there is a need for support structures within high turnover schools. The vast majority of current teachers interviewed described having access to some type of support or mentorship, at least in their early years in the classroom. Teachers who left education overall felt less supported or did not have access to a mentor. The type of support that teachers reported receiving varied. Some teachers received support with student behaviors, others with interactions with parents, while some described having support while planning. What was clear in all these responses was that teachers who received support did not feel as isolated as teachers who did not receive support, and that the support helped to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed.

The data shows support models that consider teachers' emotional needs reduce rates of teacher turnover. When asked about having a mentor, one former teacher described feeling like there had been limited support. They shared "we had an assigned mentor, but the only thing I ever asked this person for was how to submit time off. Not anything else. They weren't

really available, and it felt like a burden." In other parts of the interview, this teacher described

feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. One long term teacher described a very different

experience. They had support in their early years of teaching and continued to feel supported

throughout their career. This teacher shared,

> You need to have [supports] in place. I feel sad for teachers who go to a school and they
> don't have [supports] in place. Because they can't survive… They really can't survive…
> and if they don't have administrative support, they will not survive and the turnover will
> be much more frequent.

This quote speaks to the importance for structures of support. The long-term teacher

recognized that they had been able to keep teaching long term, based on the support they

receive, and cited lack of support as a reason for high teacher turnover. The idea that teachers

benefit from receiving support was made clear by the research.

While all the teachers who had support described how it positively impacted their

teaching, the emotional and psychological benefit of having a mentor was more important. This

type of support led to reduced feelings of isolation and feelings of being listened to or valued.

One new teacher reflected on working with a coach by saying:

> [They were] there for everything not just [their focus area]. They helped me get through
> the first day, through the first… honestly… like two weeks. And would then check in on
> me every day for like the first month and it was, psychologically, so helpful getting
> through. I was so new that was really helpful.

Another new teacher described how having a coach has impacted them by saying:

> In addition to all [the professional support] is just like, having a chance to vent or talk.
> We always talk about stuff first and see what's on top. That conversation there is huge
> for me because it allows me to kind of like, get stuff off that I haven't had a chance to
> speak about. We have many conversations not even to do with curriculum. That's just as
> valuable. I've cried, literally cried, to them you know about like how stuff is gone and
> stuff.

The first teacher quoted speaks directly to emotional support helping them to "get through''

the school year. The second teacher quoted went on to say that they would not want to find

another school. Both of these scenarios highlight the importance of relationships within support models. Both teachers hint at the idea that emotional support has helped them continue to teach. When mentors have informal conversations and prioritize a teacher's emotional needs, teachers feel both personally valued and emotionally supported by that mentor, which leads to improved relationships and greater trust.

Culturally Responsive Teaching practices. In Culturally Responsive Teaching, there is a call for *learning partnerships*, (Hammond, 2015) shifting the focus for teachers from being an instructor to being a supporter of the learning process. Teachers and student participants interviewed for this project had different ideas about how to best build strong relationships; however, both teachers and students describe aspects of a *warm demander* persona. Hammond (2015) describes a *warm demander* by stating:

> In this role, the teacher offers both *care* and *push* as needed. The main focus here is cultivating the skill to push students into their zone of proximal development while helping them manage their emotional response so they don't set off their amygdala. (p.95)

Hammond (2015) goes on to explain that a *warm demander* earns the rights to demand both engagement and effort (p. 98).

All teachers interviewed for this project indicated that they felt Culturally Relevant Teaching was important and many teachers that were still in the classroom expressed a desire to deepen their understanding of this pedagogical stance. Many teachers shared stories of getting to know their students as individuals, asking about and interacting with family members, and holding students to high expectations.

Another finding included the idea that students also desired teachers that acted as *warm demanders*. Students seemed to value the relationship they had with teachers. One

student said "you have to know the teachers," indicating that they value the relationships they formed with teachers.

In different focus groups students expressed the desire to have teachers who are both kind and strict. They described not liking teachers who are "pushy;" however, they also wanted teachers who enforced rules. One student said, "I wish teachers here would make students be more respectful. Because it's just too much for me. There is an argument every single day in our classroom." However, the same student later commented that teachers should be more kind: "One of my teachers is strict with the kids… I wish they would be a little less strict; everyone is annoyed when they get checked by [them]." Another student described similar feelings by sharing, "I want teachers that I'm with to be… a little… not aggressive… but a little more strict." She went on to describe that sometimes students do not care what the teachers are saying. In both these cases, what the students seem to want is for all students to respect and listen to their teacher, without the teacher having to overuse correction. What these students describe wanting is typical of the *warm demander* persona.

The results of one focus group described a desire for rigorous academics. This group described strong relationships with teachers who "helped" them. This speaks to student desire for a balance of care and push as described by Hammond (2015). When asked about what students like about teachers, student responses in this focus group tended to focus on academics. Another student shared that they felt the teachers from the primary research site supported them; this student said, "They give you hints, but not the real answer; they tell you a strategy." Another student replied, "when you don't get something and the teacher shows you how to do it, you like that teacher more." A final student added to the conversation by saying,

"and that helps you feel more comfortable." This speaks to students' desire to take part as active members of their own learning and engage in productive struggle.

When describing important elements of relationship building, all teachers and students described some aspect of the *warm demander* persona. When results from various interviews and student focus groups are combined, most elements of a *warm demander* have been described. This indicates that both students and teachers have a strong desire to shift the balance in classrooms so that teachers and students are working together in *learning partnerships.* In this type of partnership, a teacher's role is supporting students in being active participants of their own learning (Hammond, 2015). Some elements of this change in classroom dynamics were indicated; however, more work needs to be done to make the shift completely.

Conclusion

Previous literature revealed the importance of relationships for both students and staff; however, there was no research available on the negative impacts created by high rates of teacher turnover. This research project aimed to fill that gap by studying barriers to relationship building in traditionally high turnover elementary schools, in order to develop solutions and responses to the challenges these schools face in retaining quality teachers.

The findings from this research demonstrate that there is a strong correlation between schools that create a sense of community and the retention of teachers in those schools. Teachers who stated that they felt strong connections to other staff members at their school site indicated that they did not want to leave their current school.

The first central question this project sought to understand was: *What are the barriers to building school community in urban schools?* The research uncovered several significant barriers. These barriers included, unstable student populations and a limited desire among teachers and students to form relationships due to a repeated sense of loss. Additionally, teachers suffered from feelings of being overwhelmed and exhausted, which affected their ability to develop relationships and a sense of community at school.

The second research question this project sought to answer was *How can a sense of belonging be fostered in school communities that have been impacted by high rates of teacher turnover?* The findings of this research found that developing systems for shared accountability and collaboration greatly improve a sense of belonging. Teachers in collaborative settings expressed gratitude for the supports and opportunities they received in their current school sites. Additionally, teachers who felt supported by having a shared sense of accountability due to high amounts of collaboration, or mentorship felt less overwhelmed which lead to stronger feelings of self-efficacy and more capacity to support their colleagues and students.

The final research question this project sought to answer was *How can Culturally Responsive Teaching practices improve a sense of belonging in urban schools?* This research determined that both students and teachers' value Culturally Responsive Teaching practices. Students felt most comfortable when they formed positive relationships with their teachers. Additionally, students valued teachers who acted as *warm demanders*. This finding indicates a need for more collaborative professional development centered around Culturally Responsive Teaching.

This finding speaks to a need to improve retention of teachers in diverse schools. Diverse students stand to benefit the most from full implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching practices. However, because teacher turnover disproportionately impacts students of color, and new teachers do not feel fully equipped to implement these strategies on an ongoing basis, these students often have the least access. By improving retention rates, teachers would remain attached to school communities long enough to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to fully implement Culturally Responsive Teaching practices. This would lead to improved student outcomes and lower the effects of the opportunity gap.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Operating on a theory that a sense of belonging would promote teacher retention, this research study aimed to understand barriers faced in building community in traditionally high turnover schools. By determining barriers, the researcher was able to identify specific strategies that can be used by traditionally high turnover elementary schools to improve teacher retention rates and reduce the negative impact caused by frequent teacher turnover, thus lowering the *opportunity gap*.

This study showed consistencies with several major themes covered in the literature review. One significant consistency between this research project and the literature review is the power of positive relationships for both students and teachers. The findings from this research demonstrate that there is a strong correlation between schools that have specific strategies aimed at creating or improving a sense of community and the retention of teachers in those schools. This finding is consistent with the literature review, especially in regards to a previous study focused on a teacher's daily experiences of joy and anger, which concluded that strong relationships can act as a protective barrier against teacher burnout (Taxer, Becker-Kurz, & Frenzel, 2019). While the former study focused primarily on teacher/student relationships, this research project adds the previous research by finding that positive relationships amongst staff members are equally important in reducing feelings of exhaustion.

Another similarity between this research project and the literature review was found in regards for the need for collaborative school environments. This research project found that, in schools with limited structures to support collaboration, teachers felt overwhelmed by both the demands of teaching and their inability to meet the non-academic needs of their students on

their own. Conversely, teachers in schools with models for collaboration felt that they had a system of shared accountability and that they were not solely responsible for meeting all the needs of every student. These teachers felt they could look to others for support with specific students or needs and that that support would be received. This built in support system led to reduced stress and greater desire to remain at a specific school site. This finding is consistent with a narrative review of the 2013 *Teaching and Learning International Survey*, which highlights the need for teacher retention. The narrative claimed that the achievement gap will not close until support is provided to students outside of the classroom, and teaching policies change to create a more supportive and collaborative environment for teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2015). Both the literature and the findings of this research project speak to a need to reshape school policy to focus on collaboration as a way to improve teacher working conditions and student outcomes.

The potential value of Culturally Responsive Teaching is highlighted in both the literature review and the results of this research project. The findings of this research project indicate that students desire a strong relationship with their teachers. This is a central component of Culturally Responsive Teaching. Students expressed that having relationships with teachers helped them to feel comfortable, as well as motivated them to engage in the classroom community. Teachers in this study felt a strong desire and need to implement Culturally Relevant Teaching strategies; however, many new teachers felt underprepared to fully implement and maintain these strategies on a daily basis.

Implications for the Literature

The literature review revealed the importance of relationships for both students and staff; however, there was limited research available on the negative impacts on relationship building created by high rates of teacher turnover. This research project aimed to fill that gap by specifically studying barriers to relationship building at traditionally high turnover elementary schools.

This research project uncovered significant barriers specific to high turnover schools in regards to building and maintaining a sense of community. These barriers included unstable communities and a limited desire among teachers and students to form relationships, due to a repeated sense of loss. The finding that student turnover in low income communities further impacted the sense of loss at high turnover schools was unexpected. The significance of this finding is that high rates of student turnover paired with high rates of teacher turnover, makes it difficult for schools to create inclusive communities and welcome new members into the community. Students and teachers in high turnover school are subjected to repeated loss. This leads to instability and uncertainty within the community. Students have a limited desire to make and maintain friendships, due to the uncertainty of how long their peers will remain in the community. This leads to isolation and reduced sense of belonging. For teachers, this repeated sense of loss means that there is always an awareness that they will need to start over. When new students enter or leave the community teachers must review routines and reestablish classroom norms. This makes it difficult to move beyond surface layer relationships and form deep trusting relationships. Additionally, teachers have limited trust of their new colleagues, which leads to reduced collaboration. While these barriers are significant, key

strategies emerged that could reduce their effects; these structures include: shared accountability models to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed or isolated, cohort models to build a sense of community and trust, collaborative learning models to promote professional growth and reduce feelings of isolation while limiting feelings of being overwhelmed, and an adjustment of the teacher role to focus Culturally Responsive Teaching practices. This finding indicates that the problem of teacher turnover is one that can be solved if schools shift their values to prioritize community and belonging.

An additional finding of significance is that retaining quality teachers in traditionally high turnover schools is necessary for Culturally Responsive Teaching to be fully implemented and to bridge the opportunity gap. New teachers indicate that, while they wanted to use Culturally Responsive practices, they found it difficult to fully implement. New teachers indicated that they did not have the time, resources, or knowledge to adapt each lesson they taught in a day. Becoming a Culturally Responsive teacher takes time. Many new teachers are still learning how to establish classroom norms, create routines and implement the curriculum prescribed by their school or district. However, in order to fully implement Culturally Responsive practices a teacher must also understand the context of their school and develop relationships with their students, and adapt lessons or materials to best serve individual students. For some new teachers this creates a learning curve that is too steep and leads to teachers feeling overwhelmed and unqualified. Without the necessary structures for community and support, these teachers give up on the profession and move on to a career where they can feel successful, thus increasing turnover rates in the schools that stand to benefit the most from implementing Culturally Responsive practices.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Based on research from the literature review as well as the findings of this project, there is a need for restructuring current school models to improve teacher retention rates and improve student outcomes. In order to lessen the effects of the opportunity gap, strategies and policies to retain quality teachers must be implemented, especially in schools and districts that have traditionally had the highest rates of turnover.

New teachers often feel overwhelmed and unable to respond to all of their students' needs. It is clear that policies aimed at providing equitable access to food, shelter, and health resources are needed to reduce the impacts of the *opportunity gap*. These types of policies are often offered through government programs or community partnerships. However, just because schools and districts do not have control over these programs does not mean that the problem of turnover is a hopeless issue. Schools do not need to wait for these types of policies to begin making changes that will reduce teacher turnover.

The data from this project shows it is beneficial for teacher retention rates to actively cultivate community within traditionally high turnover schools. Several structures that emerged as effective are: shared accountability models to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed or isolated, cohort models to build a sense of community and trust, collaborative learning models to promote professional growth and reduce feelings of isolation while limiting feelings of being overwhelmed, and restructuring the teacher role to include a focus on Culturally Responsive pedagogy.

School leadership should develop systems of shared accountability. When teachers feel solely responsible for all of their students' needs, it can feel overwhelming. By developing

systems where teachers and students can rely on additional staff members for support, it leads to a feeling of shared responsibility and greatly reduces teacher stress. One suggestion to create a system of shared accountability is for leaders to encourage all staff members to interact with all students at the school. This would increase the likelihood that, if a student needed support, they would feel comfortable asking another adult, besides their teacher, for help. This system could be implemented during recess or lunch by encouraging all staff members to be on the yard or in the cafeteria interacting with students as often as possible.

In order to improve retention rates, school leaders should set up systems within the school that promote community and belonging. One way for school leadership to promote community is to pair new teachers with an easily accessible mentor and provide regular time within contract hours for them to meet. Additionally, leadership should encourage all coaches and mentors to take time to make personal connections with the teachers they have been paired with. By prioritizing that meetings take place during contractual hours, it will ensure that new teachers don't feel like a burden by wasting someone their personal time. Additionally, by developing personal connections these meetings will promote a sense of being cared for, increasing a sense of belonging and reducing feeling of being a burden.

Another way for leaders to promote community is to implement collaborative professional learning environments. For schools with many new teachers entering, this could involve structuring cohort models for Professional Development. This would allow new teachers to learn together and develop trust. Additionally, this would allow veteran teachers to continue to grow professionally because they would not be repeating professional development each year. Another strategy to promote collaborative learning would be to create structures for

teachers to choose and co-lead professional development sessions. This would increase a sense of trust by highlighting the strengths and commitments of both new and veteran teachers.

By implementing these strategies, schools can maintain quality teachers and reduce the *opportunity gap* for low income minority students who have had the least access to the proven academic and social benefits associated with long term teachers.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations to this study exist. First, the majority of the teachers and all of the students interviewed for this study were from the same very small school site. Community and accountability may look different in larger schools. For example, at the school where most research took place, staff knows almost every student by name, a feat made easier by the small student population. Additionally, there are fewer adults on campus, which may mean that there is more time to build individual relationships with all staff. A second limitation is that the researcher has a previous relationship with all focus group and interview participants. This comfort level and rapport may have yielded different results than if the researcher was not affiliated with the community or participants. Finally, only students and teachers participated in focus groups and interviews. There are many individuals involved in school communities and they may have different viewpoints or perspectives.

Directions for Future Research

Additional focus groups with parents would be useful to have a fuller understanding of the sense of belonging within the school community. Both teachers and students indicated that parent and guardian involvement in school was essential in building meaningful relationships. Additionally, if all parents and guardians felt more connection to the school, it could potentially

impact student turnover rates. Another area for future research would be to conduct interviews with afterschool staff. Afterschool staff at the primary research site turnover frequently. Students indicated that they build connections and relationships with after school teachers. Teachers interviewed indicated that afterschool staff are often undervalued members of the school community. The turnover rates of afterschool staff may be increasing feelings of insecurity, and loss at the primary research site. Finally, I would recommend replicating or expanding this study to include participants from a larger school where shared accountability may look and feel different due to larger groups of both staff and students.

Conclusion

High rates of teacher turnover have continued to be a problem in urban schools serving low income students. This turnover has led to a widening of the *opportunity gap* and lowered outcomes at schools serving these communities. However, efforts to lower rates of teacher turnover can lead to positive change. Many educators feel passionately that their work is important and meaningful and would like to remain in the classroom. One teacher who left the classroom described these feelings when they shared:

> I really did like [teaching], like I really loved it. I felt like it really played to my strengths. I just don't understand how it's a sustainable career. I really envy people that have been in teaching for a long time because, I would really love to have learned how to do that.

This quote demonstrates that the problem of teacher turnover is one that can be solved. Teachers have a desire and a passion to teach, and want to remain within the field of education, they just cannot continuously do it alone. In order to support educators, and transform teaching into a sustainable and desirable career, schools need to adapt to consider teacher needs for support and community. The research shows that if schools implement strategies to actively cultivate relationships and build community amongst students and staff,

there will be fewer stories like the one above. More teachers will have the tools, support and trust in their communities that is essential to overcoming the barriers to retention that are traditionally faced in high turnover urban elementary schools. Implementation of community building strategies will lead to improved equity within in the educational system by reducing teacher turnover rates and leading to improved outcomes for low income and minority students thus lowering the effects of the *opportunity gap.*

References

Adamma, O. N., Ekwutosim, O. P., & Unamba, E. C. (2018). Influence of extrinsic and intrinsic

motivation on pupil's academic performance in mathematics. Online Submission, 2(2),

52-59. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED590932

Anderson, S., Medrich, E., & Fowler, D. (2007). Which achievement gap? Phi Delta Kappan,

88(7), 547-550.

Beltman, S., Mansfield, C., & Price, A. (2011). Thriving not just surviving: A review of research on

teacher resilience. Educational Research Review, 6(3), 185-207.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2011.09.001.

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, & Boston, Consulting Group (2014). Teachers know best:

Teachers' views on professional development. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED576976

Bondy, E., Ross, D. D., Gallingane, C., & Hambacher, E. (2007). Creating environments of success

and resilience: Culturally responsive classroom management and more. Urban

Education, 42(4), 326-348. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0042085907303406

Bonner, P. J., Warren, S. R., & Jiang, Y. H. (2018). Voices from urban classrooms: Teachers'

perceptions on instructing diverse students and using culturally responsive teaching.

Education and Urban Society, 50(8), 697-726.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0013124517713820.

Boston, C., & Warren, S. R. (2017). The effects of belonging and racial identity on urban african

american high school students' achievement. Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and

Research, 13, 26-33.Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1150199

Bouchard, K. L., & Berg, D. H. (2017). Students' school belonging: Juxtaposing the perspectives

of teachers and students in the late elementary school years (grades 4-8). School

Community Journal, 27(1), 107-136. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1146469

Bümen, N. T. (2010). The relationship between demographics, self-efficacy, and burnout among

teachers. Eurasian Journal of Educational Research (EJER), 40, 16-35.

Carver-Thomas D., & Darling-Hammond L. (2017). Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what

we can do about it. Retrieved from https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/teacher-

turnover-report.

Clotfelter, C. T., Ladd, H. F., Vigdor, J. L., & Urban Institute, N. C. for A. of L. D. in E. R. (CALDER).

(2007). How and Why Do Teacher Credentials Matter for Student Achievement?

Working Paper 2. Revised. In National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in

Education Research. National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education

Research.

Collie, R. J., Shapka, J. D., & Perry, N. E. (2012). School climate and social–emotional learning:

Predicting teacher stress, job satisfaction, and teaching efficacy. Journal of Educational

Psychology, 104(4), 1189–1204. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029356.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative & mixed methods approaches.

Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2014). Want to close the achievement gap? American Educator, 38(4),

14-18. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1049111

Darling-Hammond, L., Sutcher, L., Carver-Thomas, D., & Stanford University, Policy Analysis

for,California Education. (2018). Teacher shortages in California: status, sources, and

potential solutions. technical report. getting down to facts II. Policy Analysis for

California Education, PACE. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED594735

Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching. Journal of Teacher

Education, 53(2), 106–116. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053002003

Guin, K. (2004). Chronic teacher turnover in urban elementary schools. Education Policy

Analysis Archives, 12(42) Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ853508

Hammond, Z., & Jackson, Y. (2015). Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting

authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Harmon, D. A. (2012). Culturally responsive teaching though a historical lens: Will history repeat

itself? Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning, 2(1), 12-22. Retrieved from

https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1056428

Herman, K. C., Hickmon-Rosa, J., & Reinke, W. M. (2018). Empirically derived profiles of teacher

stress, burnout, self-efficacy, and coping and associated student outcomes. Journal of

Positive Behavior Interventions. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1098300717732066

Hoffman, M. C. (2018). Culturally responsive teaching--part 1: Acknowledging culture and self-

cultivation. Communique, 47(2), 1. Retrieved from

http://apps.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/periodicals/cq-index-list.aspx

Huisman, S., Singer, N. R., & Catapano, S. (2010). Resiliency to success: Supporting novice urban

teachers. Teacher Development, 14(4), 483-499.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2010.533490

Issues & Action. (n.d). Retrieved from https://www.cta.org/Issues-and-Action/Teacher-

Shortage.aspx.

Maxwell, J. A. (2013). Qualitative research design: An interactive approach. Thousand Oaks,

    Calif: SAGE Publications.

McClellan, C., McKnight, K., Isselhardt, E., Jeffries, J., & National Network of State Teachers of,

    the Year. (2018). Rebuilding the ladder of educational opportunity. National Network of

    State Teachers of the Year. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED595318

Milner, H. R. (2013). Rethinking achievement gap talk in urban education. Urban Education,

    48(1), 3-8. http://dx.doi:10.1177/0042085912470417

O'Connor, E., & McCartney, K. (2007). Examining teacher-child relationships and achievement

    as part of an ecological model of development. American Educational Research Journal,

    44(2), 340-369. http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0002831207302172.

Petersburg, VA. (n.d.). Retrieved January 2020, from

    https://www.greatschools.org/virginia/petersburg/

Rucinski, C. L., Brown, J. L., & Downer, J. T. (2018). Teacher-child relationships, classroom

    climate, and children's social-emotional and academic development. Journal of

    Educational Psychology, 110(7), 992-1004. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/edu0000240

Sanderson, D. R. (2003). Extending the learning community: The birth of a new teacher support

    group. Professional Educator, 26(1), 63-71.Retrieved from

    https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ842391

School Accountability Report Card (SARC). (n.d.). Retrieved January 2020, from

    https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/sa/

Shaheen, F., & Mahmood, N. (2016). Demographic variables as determinants of emotional

burnout among public school teachers. Journal of Research & Reflections in Education

(JRRE), 10(1), 37-50.

Shen, B., McCaughtry, N., Martin, J., Garn, A., Kulik, N., & Fahlman, M. (2015). The relationship

between teacher burnout and student motivation. British Journal of Educational

Psychology, 85(4), 519-532. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12089

Sneyers, E., Jacobs, K., & Struyf, E. (2016). Impact of an in-service training in neurocognitive

insights on teacher stress, teacher professionalism and teacher student relationships.

European Journal of Teacher Education, 39(2), 253-266.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2015.1121985

Steuart, A. (2019, Aug. 19,). Increased stipends announced for teachers at hard-to-staff schools.

SF Examiner - Bay City News Retrieved from

https://www.sfexaminer.com/news/increased-stipends-announced-for-teachers-at-

hard-to-staff-schools/.

Strauss, V. (2017, November 27). Why it's a big problem that so many teachers quit - and what

to do about it. Retrieved January 2020, from

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/11/27/why-its-a-big-

problem-that-so-many-teachers-quit-and-what-to-do-about-it/

Tait, M. (2008). Resilience as a contributor to novice teacher success, commitment, and

retention. Teacher Education Quarterly, 35(4), 57-75. www.jstor.org/stable/23479174

Taxer, Becker-Kurz, & Frenzel (2019). Do quality teacher-student relationships protect teachers

from emotional exhaustion? The mediating role of enjoyment and anger. Social

Psychology of Education: An International Journal, 22(1), 209-226.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11218-018-9468-4.

Terada, Y. (2018, July 13). Burnout Isn't Inevitable. Retrieved January 2020, from

https://www.edutopia.org/article/burnout-isnt-inevitable

Zuk & Chapple, (2015). Mapping Displacement and Gentrification in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Urban Displacement Project. Retrieved from

https://www.urbandisplacement.org/map/sf

Appendix A- Student Semi Structured Focus Group Guide

Thank you for taking the time to come to this group today. I am doing research to understand more about what helps students and teachers feel like they belong to school communities. My hope is that this understanding can be used to create stronger school communities. We will start by reviewing circle norms and have a quick sharing circle to help us get started.

Norms: One mic, Listen attentively, Say people not names, Right to pass
Question: What is something you enjoy about coming to school?

Topic	Guiding Questions
General thoughts on school connection	• What makes you feel like you belong to this school? • Who are the people who make you feel like you belong? What do they do? • If there are new teachers on campus who should help them feel welcome? Why should it be that person's responsibility? • What do staff members do to help you feel connected to school? • Is there anything that school staff could do to help you feel connected to school that does not happen or does not happen as often as you would like it to?
Relationships with teachers	• What do teachers do in the beginning of the school year to help all students feel welcome? • What do you think your teacher should do to help a new student feel welcome in the classroom? • In the future, What could teachers do to help students feel like they belong at school?
Relationships with students	• How do you and your friends make sure everyone at the school feels welcome here? If you found out you were going to be getting a new classmate what might you do to help them feel welcome in our community? • What helps you feel connected to other students? • Is there anything teachers could do to help you get along with other students?

Appendix B -Teacher Semi Structured Interview Guide

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I am doing research to understand more about what factors lead to a sense of belonging within communities that have been. My hope is that this understanding can be used to create stronger school communities at all school leading to higher outcomes and increased retention rates.

Topic	Guiding Questions
General thoughts on teacher turnover	- Tell me about teacher turnover and/or teacher stability at your current school. - If applicable Tell me about teacher turnover and/or teacher stability at your former school. - Can you tell me more about how teacher turnover has impacted your life at school? - Why do you choose to work at your current school? - Do you feel like teacher turnover and/or teacher stability has an impact on your job (in the classroom or added responsibilities)? Please explain. - Have you ever considered leaving your current school site? If so why? - If you heard another staff member from your school site was leaving is there anything you might say to them to change their mind? Is there any type of support you might offer? - Does the teacher turnover and/or teacher stability at your school have an impact on students? If so please describe.
Supports for teachers	- What supports exist for teachers that are new to your school? - What advice/support would you give to a teacher who was feeling burnt out?
Relationships with students	- Do you feel like strong relationships exist amongst staff? - What helps you feel connected to certain students?
Relationships with staff	- How would you describe relationships amongst staff at your school? - Do you feel like strong relationships exist amongst staff at your school? - What might you do to welcome and support a new staff member to your site? - What advice would you give to a friend who was interested in working at your school? - Describe your relationship with staff members at your school - Are there any traditions that help you feel connected to staff at your school?
CRT	- How familiar are you with CRT? - Do you/did you use CRT strategies in your classroom? - What do you feel is the impact of using CRT strategies?

Appendix C- Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Hello families!

As some of you may know I am currently completing a Master's Degree at Dominican University of California. As part of my thesis project I am doing a graduate research study to understand how to improve relationships and sense of community in urban schools for both students and staff. My goal is for the information I collect to be used to assist future improvements in fostering a sense of belonging and retaining quality teachers in urban school communities.

Academic and social success can improve when a student feels connected to their teachers. For this reason, I am interested in learning more about the personal experiences and views of students at _____ Elementary. I want to know more about what activities and experiences help students feel connected to teachers and connected to our school community. I selected your child for participation in this survey and focus group because we have worked successfully together either in the current school year or in previous school years.

I am interested in understanding more about your students view about how connected they are with past or current teachers at our school, as well as our larger school community. I would like to know more about what experiences helped them feel connected (or not) to those teachers and the community.

If I agree to allow my child to participate in this study, the following will happen:
My child will participate in a short (approximately 30-minute) focus group/discussion with selected students in grades 3-4-5 either during lunch or afterschool programing dependent on when most students are available.

Risks and/or discomforts
1. It is possible that your student may become uncomfortable with sharing their feelings during the survey or focus group. If this happens I will check in with them individually and remind them that participation is voluntary and that they are welcome to return to their regularly scheduled activity or refer them to the wellness center for support.
2. All information will be kept confidential and no identifying information will be published.

Benefits
There will be no direct benefit to you or your child from participating in this study. The anticipated benefit of this study is a better understanding of the experiences and personal views of _____ students.

Costs/Financial Considerations
There will be no cost to you or to you child as a result of taking part in this study.

Payment/Reimbursement
Neither you nor your child will be reimbursed for participation in this study.

Questions
Please feel free to call or text me with any questions or concerns. If you prefer I can also make arrangements to meet with you in person before or after school.

If you have concerns and do not wish to contact me directly you may contact the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants (which is concerned with protection of volunteers in research projects) office by calling _____ and leaving a voicemail message.

Consent
You may request a copy of this consent form to keep for your own records.

Participation in this survey is voluntary. You are free to decline to have your child be a participant in this study and/or to withdraw your child from this study at any point. Your decision as to whether or not to have your child participate will have no influence on your child's present or future status as a student in my classroom.

Signature below indicates that I agree to allow my child to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant's Parent/Guardian _____ Date _____

Appendix D- Student Consent Form

Hello _____!

As you might know I am taking classes to complete a Master's Degree at Dominican University of California. As part of this class I am doing a project to better understand relationships and sense of community in schools for both students and staff.

My goal is for the information I collect to be used to help schools like ours create a sense of belonging for all students and teachers.

I want to know more about what activities and experiences help students feel connected to teachers and connected to our school community. I selected you because we have worked well together either this year or when you were in my class.

If you agree to participate in this study, the following will happen:

You will participate in a short (about 30-minute) discussion with a small group of students in grades 3-4-5 either during lunch or afterschool program.

Risks and/or discomforts

1. It is possible that you might be uncomfortable with sharing your thoughts and feelings during the group. If this happens please let me know so that we can figure out how to support you. This might mean passing on a question, taking a break in the peace corner or going back to lunch/afterschool program.

2. All your thoughts and feelings will be kept confidential (that means I won't say it was you that said something if I write about it) and I won't use your name in my final paper.

Benefits

You will have a better understanding of the experiences and ideas of the students in your

group.

Costs/Financial Considerations

There will be no cost to you.

Payment/Reimbursement

You will not be paid to participate in this study.

Questions

Please ask me or your family any questions you have about this project. If we can't answer your

questions your family can call my professor or my school.

Consent You may request a copy of this form to keep for your own records.

Participation in this survey is voluntary. You are free to say no or quit at any time. Your decision

to participate will not have any impact on your grades or on our relationship.

Signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant_____ Date _____

Appendix E- Teacher Informed Consent Form

I understand that Sarah Fingado is a graduate student in the School of Education at Dominican University of California. Sarah is conducting a research study designed to better understand potential barriers that urban schools face in fostering a sense of community that may lead to impaired student/ teacher relationships and higher rates of teacher turnover.

Procedures

If I agree to participate in the study, the following will happen:
I will participate in an in-person interview that will take approximately 30 minutes.

All names, personal references, and identifying information will be eliminated in the final thesis and no subject will be identified by name, thereby assuring confidentiality regarding the subject's responses.

Interviews will be recorded on the researcher's laptop or cell phone both of which are password protected and interview notes will not include any names or identifying information (e.g., specific grade level taught, address, phone number, personal references).

Risks and/or Discomforts
1. My participation involves no physical risk, but there is the possibility that some psychological discomfort may occur due to the personal nature of the questions in the interview.
2. I have the right to refuse to answer any question that causes discomfort or seems to be an invasion of privacy. I may stop the interview at any time and I may refuse to participate before or after the study without any adverse effects.

Benefits
There will be no direct benefit from participating in this study. The anticipated benefit of this study is a better understanding of how to foster a sense of community in urban schools in hopes of improving student/ teacher relationships and reducing the rate of teacher turnover.

Questions
I have talked to Sarah Fingado about this study and have had my questions answered. If I have further questions about the study, I may talk to her in person or call her at _____. I may also speak with her research supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Lucko, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Education by calling _____. If I have any questions or comments about participation in this study, I should talk first with the researcher and the research supervisor. If for some reason I do not wish to do this, I may contact the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. I may research the IRBPHS Office by calling _____ and leaving a voicemail message, by FAX at _____ or by writing to the IRBPHS, Office of the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dominican University of California, 50 Acacia Avenue, San Rafael, CA 94901. Consent I have been given a copy of this consent form, signed and dated, to keep. PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. I am free to decline to be in this study or

withdraw my participation at any time without fear of adverse consequences. My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in the study.

Signature of the Research Participant: _____ Date_____

Appendix F- IRB Approval

**DOMINICAN
UNIVERSITY**
of CALIFORNIA

1/2/20

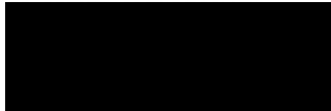Sarah Fingado
50 Acacia Ave.
San Rafael, CA 94901

Dear Sarah,

On behalf of the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants, I am pleased to approve your proposal entitled *Relationships and Belonging in Urban Elementary Schools* (IRBPHP IRB Application #10824)*.*

In your final report or paper please indicate that your project was approved by the IRBPHP and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort.

Sincerely,

Randall Hall, Ph.D.
Chair, IRBPHP

Cc: Jennifer Lucko, Ph.D.

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants
Office of Academic Affairs ● 50 Acacia Avenue, San Rafael, California 95901-2298 ● 415-257-1310
www.dominican.edu