RETAINING NON-TRADITIONALLY CERTIFIED TEACHERS IN THE PROFESSION

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Abstract

Relative to the theme of this journal edition, *Leadership in a Time of Change,* one of the most challenging changes in school leadership recently has been finding qualified teachers to teach in P-12 classrooms. Teacher turnover in P-12 schools has increased significantly (Simon & Johnson, 2015), contributing to the teacher shortage in the United States. This shortage of teachers has necessitated the employment of more teacher candidates from non-traditional teacher certification pathways. Researchers report that teachers from non-traditional certification pathways are more likely to leave teaching than fully prepared teachers. Thus, retention of teachers would help solve the teacher shortage problem. Therefore, it is important to determine what working conditions and support systems in schools will encourage non-traditional certification pathway teachers to stay in the profession. This information is critical to educational leaders trying to maintain a faculty that is well-equipped to utilize best-practice instruction to meet the needs of students. Students also benefit from the stability of relationships with teachers who stay in their teaching positions over time. Qualitative, this grounded study findings indicate that strong, positive relationships that support teachers from all levels of the organization are key to retaining teachers from non-traditional preparation pathways. Initiatives that help to build and maintain strong collective efficacy among teachers can also aid in retaining alternatively certified teachers. This study offers a working, grounded theory of teacher retention and suggests implications for practice and future research.

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Introduction

School leadership is a challenging endeavor in the most stable of times. *Leadership in a Time of Change*, such as the current changes we are experiencing in the P-12 school context, is particularly daunting considering the growing shortage of teachers available for P-12 classrooms. Sutcher et al. (2019) defined a teacher shortage as "an inadequate quantity of qualified individuals willing to offer their services under prevailing wages and conditions" (p. 4). Using this definition, a teacher shortage is not merely about the number of new teachers entering the profession, but also the number of those willing to serve in a particular location. Sutcher et al. noted that staffing problems in the field of education are "driven by a myriad of factors, including not only production of new teachers in various fields, but also teacher turnover, changes in educational programs and pupil-teacher ratios, and the attractiveness of teaching generally and in specific locations" (p. 4). Sutcher et al. reported a projected increase in students in the United States by about 3 million students in the next decades. In contrast, the supply of teachers continues to shrink. According to these authors, estimates consistently predict substantial teacher shortfalls by the hundreds of thousands nationwide and report that enrollment in university education programs has declined by over one-third in recent years.

In this study, researchers used a qualitative, grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to explore the experiences of non-traditionally certified teachers in a single, large school district in Alabama. This single district of focus is among 139 districts in the state and employs nearly 200 teachers who have entered the teaching field via a non-traditional certification pathway. Alternatively, certified teachers did not complete a traditional certification process via a four-year institution of higher learning. Instead, they entered the teaching field as emergency certified, or certified individuals, yet work daily in their schools. We used findings from this study to develop a working theory of retaining alternatively certified teachers.

Background of the Study

Over the past 30 years, teacher turnover has increased significantly (Simon & Johnson, 2015), contributing to the teacher shortage in the United States. The Economic Policy Institute reported a shortage of teachers needed to fill 307,000 teaching jobs in 2019 (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). The shortage of teachers has necessitated the employment of more teacher candidates from non-traditional teacher certification pathways. Espinoza et al. (2018) found that teachers from non-traditional certification pathways are "two to three times more likely to leave teaching than fully prepared teachers" (p. 1). Ingersoll (2003) suggested that teacher retention answers the teacher shortage and turnover problem. Comparing the teaching profession to a bucket with holes in the bottom, Ingersoll stated, "Pouring more water into the bucket will not be the answer if the holes are not first patched" (p. 42). It will only be possible to fill the bucket when we stop losing teachers at the current rate.

Statement of the Problem/Purpose of the Study

Given the shortage of qualified teachers nationwide, researchers designed this study to explore what experiences and working conditions could keep teachers from non-traditional educational certification pathways in the teaching profession. Mobra and Hamlin (2020) observed, "Very little is known about the motivations of emergency [and alternatively] certified teachers" (p. 1). Therefore, the study explored the perceptions of alternatively certified teachers

about the conditions that encouraged them to stay in the field of education, as well as those factors that increased the likelihood of their leaving the profession.

Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

We adopted two conceptual frameworks to guide our thinking. The perspective of *collective efficacy* (Bandura, 2000) was useful in examining teacher shortages and retention strategies. Similarly, *academic optimism* (Hoy et al., 2006) was a helpful framework in analyzing participants' lived experiences and forming a theory of how to retain these teachers. Collective efficacy is achieved when groups of individuals are successful because they believe in the effectiveness of the group and is linked to student achievement (Goddard et al., 2004; Hoy et al., 2006). Hoy et al. (2006) combined theories of collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and faculty trust into a construct called *academic optimism.* According to Hoy et al., "a strong sense of collective efficacy [and academic optimism] in a school creates a powerful set of norms and behavioral expectations that reinforce the self-efficacy beliefs of teachers" (p. 430).

Teacher Shortages

Though circumstances vary from state to state, a teacher shortage exists throughout the United States. In 2017, approximately 80% of states reported teacher shortages, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields and special education (Sutcher et al., 2019). Podolsky et al. (2019) noted that teacher shortages were reaching "crisis proportions in some teaching fields" (p. 1). This statement is corroborated by The Economic Policy Institute, which reported a 307,000-job deficit in education in 2019 (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Sutcher et al. stated that 82% of the districts sampled hired underprepared teachers, with some of the greatest variations occurring between states and schools within school districts. Teacher shortages often impact high-poverty schools and students with the highest needs (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Ingersoll, 2001; Simon & Johnson, 2015). According to Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003), "A much larger challenge than preparing new teachers is retaining existing teachers." These authors stated that the annual outflow of teachers surpassed the annual influx by increasingly large margins, "straining the nation's hiring systems" (p. 15).

Teacher Turnover

Nationally, the annual teacher turnover rate is 16% (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). However, 67% of teachers who left the profession did so voluntarily, not due to retirement. Two decades ago, Ingersoll (2001) wrote that among reasons teachers leave, "retirement is relatively minor when compared to [other] factors, such as teacher job dissatisfaction and teachers pursuing better jobs or other careers" (p. 501). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond explored reasons teachers leave, which "range from teaching conditions, such as class sizes and salaries; unhappiness with administrative practices such as lack of support, classroom autonomy or input on school decisions; to policy issues such as the effects of testing and accountability" (p. 27). Teachers also leave the profession due to teacher preparation and mentoring, teacher age, experience, and working conditions. Other researchers added that while compensation rates for teachers vary geographically (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007; Imazeki, 2004; Loeb et al., 2005), increased salaries can affect teacher retention (Imazeki, 2004; Loeb et al., 2005; Nguyen & Springer, 2021; Shen, 1997). Researchers also reported that teachers of color

leave at a rate higher than their white counterparts, as do teachers who are older but not yet of retirement age (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

Some studies have found that student characteristics can also affect teacher turnover. Stinebrickner et al. (2005) reported a higher attrition rate among teachers who began their careers in high-poverty schools with low test scores and large numbers of minority students. Loeb et al. (2005) concurred, stating, "the racial, ethnic, poverty, and language composition of a school's student body influences a school's turnover" (p. 65). Johnson et al. (2012) provided a caveat, "The seeming relationship between student demographics and teacher turnover is driven, not by teachers' responses to their students, but by the conditions in which they must teach, and their students are obliged to learn" (p. 1). Sutcher et al. (2019) added that working conditions (e.g., class size, administrative support, teacher autonomy) were one of the most positive predictors of teacher retention.

Teacher turnover can have negative impacts at multiple levels of the organization. Student achievement and social-emotional health can be affected when students build relationships with teachers and those teachers leave. Students lose advocates and academic mentors. Such an impact is particularly acute in high-poverty settings (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Kini & Podolsky, 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2011). Teacher turnover also affects teachers who stay, impacting collegiality and trust among faculty members, instructional expertise, and institutional knowledge (Hanushek et al., 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2011). Turnover can impede school improvement efforts when consistency and expertise are lost (Ingersoll, 2001) and have system-wide impacts on professional development investments, curriculum development, and district improvement efforts (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Espinoza et al., 2018).

Non-Traditional Certification Pathways

Traditionally, teachers attend a four-year college or university, achieve a bachelor's degree, then gain state-level certification (Podolsky et al., 2019). Recently, enrollment in traditional teacher preparation programs has declined sharply, falling by 35% between 2009-2014 (Espinoza et al., 2018). One way that states have responded to the shortage of teachers is to provide alternatives to the traditional certification pathway (Mobra & Hamlin, 2020; Redding & Smith, 2016). Redding and Smith reported, "Nearly a quarter of early career teachers entered the teaching profession outside a traditional teacher preparation program" (p. 1086).

In Alabama, in addition to emergency certification, three alternative or non-traditional certification pathways exist for teachers to gain full certification (Alabama State Department of Education, 2023). These include a *Conditional Certificate in a Teaching Field* (CCTF), a *Provisional Certificate in a Teaching Field*, and an *Interim Employment Certificate* (IEC), including an alternative master's program. Candidates can accept a job teaching while being emergency certified; however, they must begin one of the three non-traditional pathways mentioned before their emergency certification expires. A CCTF requires candidates to pass a content knowledge exam, or Praxis, and complete four self-paced modules. A PCTF requires candidates to pass the Praxis and then complete four education classes at a college or university. An IEC is for teacher candidates who have earned a bachelor's degree in a field outside of education. These candidates must pass the Praxis in the content area they wish to teach and complete a 36-credit master's degree program to earn a master's-level (Class A) teaching certificate.

Preparation of Teachers from Non-Traditional Pathways

Despite the nationwide popularity of non-traditional certification pathways, Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002) determined that students from traditional pathways were more prepared than non-traditional ones. Hanushek and Rivkin (2007) highlighted the importance of teacher preparedness on student outcomes and endorsed non-traditional pathways, suggesting that removing barriers preventing candidates from becoming a teacher is the best way to improve instruction. In a 2002 report on teacher quality, the Secretary of Education encouraged restructuring teacher certification systems and changing the emphasis on teacher preparation programs from extensive coursework to fostering content knowledge and the ability to communicate well (United States Department of Education, 2018, p. 19). Considering this, Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) maintained that teacher effectiveness was strongly related to preparation. while acknowledging, however, that teachers from non-traditional certification pathways "may bring different potential strengths with them" (p. 23) and that teacher preparation programs should build on those skills while providing candidates with knowledge of pedagogy. They wrote that content expertise and "knowledge of how to teach content to a wide range of learners, the ability to manage a classroom, design and implement instruction, and work skillfully with [stakeholders]" (p. 20) are critically important.

Attrition Rates of Teachers from Non-Traditional Pathways

There is controversy in the literature about whether teachers from non-traditional certification pathways have higher attrition rates than traditionally trained teachers. Regarding teachers of mathematics and science from non-traditional paths, Clewell and Forcier (2000) found that non-traditionally certified teachers had lower attrition rates than teachers from traditional preparation pathways. Most researchers disagree, however, claiming that non-traditionally certified teachers have a higher attrition rate (sometimes two to three times) and view teaching as a temporary occupation as they look for other employment (Carroll, 2007; Espinoza et al., 2018; Mobra & Hamlin, 2020; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF], 2005). Zhang and Zeller (2016) found that a traditional teacher preparation pathway kept more candidates in the profession because they are better prepared. Podolsky et al. (2019) also claimed that traditionally trained teachers stay in the profession longer. However, they asserted that "it is most helpful to distinguish teacher preparation pathways by the length of clinical experience and amount of coursework, as opposed to whether they are 'traditional' or 'alternative.'" (p. 8). Regardless of this debate, the practical issue for schools is keeping teachers in the profession. Due to the increasing numbers of teachers from the non-traditional certification pathways, it is critically important to find out what conditions would likely keep them in the teaching field (Podolsky et al., 2019).

Teacher Retention

Ingersoll (2003) compared the teaching field to a revolving door and suggested that a solution to that problem would be to focus on the retention of teachers. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2005) concurred. "The conventional wisdom is that we lack enough good teachers. But the conventional wisdom is wrong. *The real school staffing problem is teacher retention*" (p. 6). A massive decline in the number of high school students who express interest in teaching (Sutcher et al., 2019) has resulted in fewer teacher candidates applying for open positions. Researchers stated that strategies to retain teachers and improve instructional skills should be a priority for school districts (Darling-Hammond, 2003;

Wiswall, 2013). Constantly replacing teachers who leave through this revolving door results in substantial expenditures in teacher recruitment and induction (Carroll, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2003). The NCTAF (2005) indicated that the cost of replacing teachers leaving the profession in the United States is over $7 billion annually.

Darling-Hammond (2003) identified four factors that strongly influence teacher retention, including (a) *increasing salaries*, especially for experienced teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Imazeki, 2004; Podolsky & Kini, 2016; Wiswall, 2013); (b) improving *working conditions* through administrative support and teacher input and collaboration (Bland et al., 2016; Carver-Thomas, 2018; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Kini & Podolsky, 2016; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006; Waddell, 2010; Wong, 2004); (c) strong *mentoring and induction* including frequent contact with mentors and a focus on improving high-leverage instructional practices (Bland et al., 2016; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Lynch, 2012; Wong, 2004); and (d) *professional development* for teachers that is meaningful and ongoing (Billingsley, 2004; Bland et al., 2016; Wong, 2004).

Methods

This qualitative, grounded theory study was conducted to gain information about retaining teachers pursuing a non-traditional certification pathway. This study used grounded theory focused on the participants' perspectives and lived experiences. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the researcher's "main goal in developing new theories is their purposeful, systematic generation from the data of social research" (p. 28). The primary method for data collection in this study was an unstructured interview. This allowed participants to tell their stories, providing a glimpse into the world of education as they see it. The use of unstructured interviews encouraged participants to be thoughtful and descriptive. We also used document review as a second data collection strategy. We reviewed transcripts from exit interviews conducted with teachers who left the focus school district in recent years.

The primary research question was: Among teachers from non-traditional certification pathways, what experiences would contribute to their remaining or leaving in the teaching profession? A sub-question was to describe the experiences of teaching from non-traditional pathways.

Setting/Population/Sampling

The sample for this research was purposively drawn from a large county school district in central Alabama. Participants were selected from a pool of secondary teachers who came to education through a non-traditional certification program. Secondary teachers were chosen because secondary school teachers seemed to have higher attrition rates than their elementary co-workers (Keigher, 2010). These secondary teachers have been targeted for retention efforts.

Data Analysis

Coding the data is gathering the essence of the information and translating it into a word or short phrase (Saldaña, 2015). Data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding, which is typical for data analysis in grounded theory (Creswell, 2013). We began by coding in large categories. This is the open coding stage and could be repeated as necessary. Axial coding followed open coding, resulting in emergent themes (Creswell, 2013). In the last step, selective

coding, researchers developed hypotheses and a working grounded theory of how best to retain teachers from alternative certification pathways.

Results

The focus school district serves approximately 35,000 students in 57 schools. Study participants worked in eight different middle and high schools. The district's student population is diverse. Approximately 52% of the student population is African American, 44% are European American, and 13% are Hispanic. English Language Learners comprise 7.2% of students, and 52% receive free or reduced lunches. Demographics of the 10 study participants and schools are presented in Table 1. All individuals and schools were assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1

Demographics for Participants and Schools

Name	School	School Enroll.	Years Taught Content	Path	Gender/ Age	Race	Cert. Status
Nicholas Rhodes	Central HS	767	3/Math	CCTF	M/32	EA	In process
John Oliver	McGraw HS	1158	3/Math	CCTF	M/31	AA	In process
Cathy Butler	Clayton HS	1360	16/ELA	PCTF	F/39	EA	Complete, EdS
Sharma Reddy	Hopewell HS	1204	4/Sci	IEC	F/26	A	Complete, MAE
Mark Perez	McGraw MS	852	2/Math	ECert	M/25	H	Emergency
Alisha Everett	Clayton HS	1360	2/CTE	CTE	F/35	EA	Complete
Dwayne Tyler	McGraw MS	852	3/CTE	ECert	M/30	AA	Emergency
Phoebe Hudson	Erie MS	636	1/Sci	IEC	F/24	EA	In process
Robin Milstead	Brigham MS	800	1/Sci	IEC	F/26	EA	In process
Trent Boggins	Grant HS	1047	1/Sci	IEC	M/25	EA	Complete, MAE

Note: ELA=English and Language Arts; CTE=Career Technical Education; ECert=Emergency Certification; EA=European American; AA=African American; A=Asian; H=Hispanic.

Document Review

Previously, the district conducted interviews with existing teachers. We obtained 12 interview transcripts (all available to us), exploring them regarding job satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Most exiting teachers (63%) rated the district as a good or excellent employer, with 42% saying they received strong support and professional development. Of those who rated the district lower, 25% cited a lack of communication and support. Most respondents (63%) rated administrators as good or excellent, citing professional demeanor as the most important

supervisor characteristic, including guidance, leadership, fairness, and trust. Several said that administrators could improve upon communication. All exiting teachers rated their former colleagues as good or excellent. Approximately 25% of teachers said they left the district because their spouse or partner relocated. A similar percentage said they left for personal reasons. Some left for a higher salary or a shorter commute.

Individual Interviews

The following six themes emerged from interviews with study participants: (1) *Anxiety and Stress*, (2) *District Support*, (3) *Mentor and Peer Support*, (4) *Administrator Support*, (5) *Student Relationships*, and (6) *Compensation*. Here we provide details about these six concepts.

Anxiety and Stress

All study participants reported high anxiety and stress levels for their first year of education, particularly for the first semester. Hudson remarked that the first week was scary, "It is a huge learning curve the first nine weeks," and added that she felt the first semester was just about survival. Milstead concurred. "I was absolutely overwhelmed," she said, "I cried every single day." Butler said she felt like a "train wreck" because she lacked the experience and knowledge to do the job. Following are key stressors respondents reported.

Lack of Knowledge. All participants said their lack of knowledge made their jobs more difficult. "I didn't even know what I was supposed to grade or how to even go about looking at a standard," Hudson explained, "I had never made a lesson plan." Perez stated, "Really, that the organization part was overwhelming. Grading took me forever." Tyler felt that teachers from a traditional preparation pathway were more prepared to plan lessons and more knowledgeable in general.

Classroom Management. Classroom management was another stressor. The sheer number of students in secondary classes was intimidating. For Perez, class size was overwhelming. Rhodes figured out he needed to model the behavior that he wanted to see from students. "You have to teach the kids how to behave," he said. Rhodes figured out that building positive relationships with students made classroom management easier.

Parent Relations. Respondents also struggled to deal with their parents. Several participants mentioned that they felt a lack of trust from parents. Oliver said parents did not believe his explanation of an event involving their child. "They're trying to call you a liar about what I said or what their child did." Milstead expressed a similar sentiment and added that she did not know how to deal with the social media problems she faced.

District Support

District instructional coaches and content specialists prioritized assistance to teachers from the non-traditional certification pathways. Hudson mentioned that their support made a significant difference for her. She described the planning and content knowledge support as "awesome" but requested further support with the certification process. Oliver agreed but praised the assistance from the district human resources department in finding the most appropriate certification pathway for him. The district was also engaged in a new teacher *onboarding*. Butler endorsed this focus but shared, "It would have been nice to have more structured onboarding because I didn't know what I didn't know." Butler mentioned that, at first, she would have benefitted from more district support in grading and noted that the district did not provide the

depth of instructional support she needed. She said that often, "There really weren't people in my classroom observing me and giving me feedback."

Boggins stressed the importance of *new teacher orientation,* felt it was "rushed," and encouraged the district to spend more time here. Respondents mentioned that new teacher orientation competed with new teacher mentoring for the time at the beginning of the school year. Boggins said that he sees the importance of teacher mentors but asked that "the district prioritize the process of providing new teachers with detailed information about the resources and tools available to them."

Mentor Support

All teachers mentioned the importance of mentor support. Butler credited her mentor with helping her build connections with other teachers. She also credited her mentor with shaping the educational leader that she would become. "Having her believe in me made me believe in myself." Everett said her mentor taught her "everything that I needed to know about grading; how my labs should go, how my curriculum should go, and what labs were." Her only warning was that she needed more scheduled time for interaction with her mentor. Tyler said his only time with his mentor was in the hall during class changes. Oliver had a very influential mentor, but when his mentor moved to another school, she was not replaced. At the suggestion of his mentor, Rhodes was given time to observe classroom management strategies in other classes. "We got a sub for my class one day, and all I did that day was observe (classroom management) in other classes." Hudson shared that the mentor/mentee relationship is powerful when regular communication is expected. Boggins viewed his mentor as a safety net. They met daily, and he did not hesitate to tell her when he struggled. His mentor would let him struggle to find his way, but said he felt supported by her and explained, "It was almost like she was holding me by the loop on the back of my pants, and when I tripped; she'd catch me and pull me back up."

Peer Support

Study participants also considered peer support extremely valuable, and all of them noted a feeling of family at their schools. Everett said, "The beauty is that the teachers around you want you to succeed." Milstead said that her colleagues were encouraging and were powerful examples. "They really love their jobs. They are here for the kids," she said. Perez said that his co-teacher walked him through teaching techniques. "She was always giving me tips and advice on classroom management and organization," he said, "If it weren't for her, I'd have been fired," Reddy said that her faculty has a very collaborative approach and works to build relationships and cohesiveness through faculty parties and potlucks. Boggins also described his faculty as hospitable to young teachers and said they will "support you with every ounce of their being."

Administrative Support

All but one of the participants in this study mentioned how important they found administrative support and encouragement to be. Rhodes praised his principal's open-door policy and said that having "people that are willing just to take time out and share a short conversation really goes a long way into trying to stay connected with the school." Hudson appreciated that her administrators knew that she was learning and helped in the learning process. The assistant principal at Butler's first school made her feel capable and valued. "She took me under her wing very quickly and gave me many professional development opportunities." Butler's principal at

that same school encouraged her to leave the classroom and become an instructional coach. Reddy's principal identified her as a leader and placed her on his leadership team in her first year. "I don't think that I would be in the position I am in without him identifying (leadership) qualities in me," she explained. "He gave me a voice, and I loved it!" Several study participants mentioned that they feel supported and valued by their administrators. Milstead credited administrative support with keeping her in the field. "If I'd had an administration that didn't really support me, I don't think I'd still be teaching," she said.

Building Student Relationships

Participants agreed that building strong relationships with students was critical and enabled them to influence student lives positively. Even though he left the teaching profession, Perez still said what he loved most about teaching was "the bond and the impact that I made on kids." The most important thing to Rhodes is building strong relationships with students. "It is a joy being able to inspire kids," Oliver said. Butler credited relationship building with much of her first-year success. "I'm a relationship builder," she said, "So most kids stuck with me and let me grow." Student relationships are transformative, according to Hudson. She says her students changed her. "I love them, and I love this." Rhodes said it is about influence, relationships, and being a positive role model.

Compensation

Respondent opinions varied sharply regarding teacher compensation. Some felt teachers were "grossly underpaid," and some said they received highly desirable compensation. Oliver felt that teachers were underpaid, even with recent increases provided for individuals to teach math or science. Reddy agreed that teacher salaries are too low "if you do what you're supposed to do for your students." Perez stated, "You work your eight hours and still have to grade afterward." Rhodes said, "I always feel like I need a little more, especially with a kid on the way." He also noted how teacher pay increases with experience.

Boggins felt teacher salaries were good and mentioned the benefits provided in this state (e.g., retirement). He said, "[Teachers] work for nine months, and then you are off for almost three months, and you get all the holidays." Milstead agreed and said that she thinks the salary is fine. Everett had a different take on teacher salaries, as they are higher than her previous career as a pastry chef. "I'm getting more than I've ever been paid," she remarked.

Nevertheless, all participants mentioned other non-monetary rewards they received from teaching. Rhodes mentioned the reward of seeing student success. "Seeing the students have that 'Ah ha' moment where they start getting the material," he said, "It just puts a smile on my face." Butler said that sharing in student learning is invaluable and, "There's no bigger high that can compare to it." Tyler said, "The kids really make me want to come to work."

Discussion, Implications, and Future Research

One thing that school leaders can always count on is change. The theme of this journal edition is *Leadership in a Time of Change.* Perhaps one of the most profound changes in U.S. schools today lies in an increased inability for schools and districts to find and hire qualified, fully trained teachers to fill all the open teaching positions. Given this challenge, schools and districts have turned to hiring individuals who have gained certification (through their respective states) following non-traditional pathways.

This grounded theory study aimed to explore what experiences and working conditions would keep teachers from non-traditional certification pathways in the teaching profession. We purposively chose 10 study participants to represent the most varied demographics possible. We also reviewed exit interview transcripts from teachers who previously left the district. Here we discuss the implications of study results as they apply to practice and present a working theory of teacher retention for consideration among educational leaders and scholars. We conclude the article by providing recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

We categorized the findings of this study into the following six concepts: (1) Anxiety and Stress, (2) District Support, (3) Mentor and Peer Support, (4) Administrative Support, (5) Building Student Relationships, and (6) Compensation. These findings confirmed much of the professional literature. Study findings about teacher compensation were mixed and differed somewhat from the results of previous studies.

Darling-Hammond (2003) identified four factors influencing teacher retention: working conditions, mentoring and support, teacher preparation and professional development, and teacher salaries. Study findings confirmed that these factors could influence teachers from a non-traditional pathway. Administrative support, part of working conditions, was considered critically important by 80% of study participants. Two study participants indicated they would have left the profession without their strong and supportive relationship with their administrator. This finding confirmed the importance of the professional relationship between teachers and administrators (Waddell, 2010). According to Waddell, teacher retention increases when teachers feel valued. One study participant noted that her administrator's belief in her made her believe in herself.

Peer and Mentor Support

All study participants advocated for peer and mentor support. One even credited her mentors with keeping her in the profession during that difficult first year. These findings support Bland et al. (2016) that peer and mentor support helps teachers stay in the profession. Wong (2004) suggested that close and constant communication with mentors was particularly important for teachers from the non-traditional preparation path. Findings also confirmed Wong (2004), as three participants said they believed they would benefit from extending mentor collaboration. Findings also confirmed the importance of collegial relationships in teacher retention (Bland et al., 2016; Kini & Podolsky, 2016; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006). All study participants said that collaboration with others was critical. The information provided to them by their more experienced colleagues helped, but collegial relationships also imbued them with a sense of belonging. That sense of belonging engenders the belief that one is part of something larger than oneself. Collegial relationships are a crucial component of collective efficacy.

Teacher Compensation

The study findings differed somewhat from previous findings regarding teacher compensation. The findings of both Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) and Imazeki (2004) indicated that increases in teacher salaries would lead to higher teacher retention rates. For half of the study participants, those findings were true. However, the other half of the study participants either disagreed that salaries were too low or indicated that other rewards of teaching were more important than salary. One study participant said that teacher salaries were fine.

Another said that salaries in her earlier career as a pastry chef career were much lower and had no benefits such as retirement or insurance. However, another agreed that teacher benefits were attractive but expressed the belief that teacher salaries were comparable to other fields considering the time teachers are required to work.

Gunther (2019) noted that factors other than salary are important to teachers. This study confirmed Gunther's findings. Every study participant said that teaching has rewards other than money. All participants said that they teach for their impact on students. Even the participant who had left the field noted that while teaching is difficult, the interaction with the students made it all worthwhile. Two participants mentioned their feeling of accomplishment when students mastered a concept. One participant said that his interactions with students make him look forward to work. Another valued her involvement in the lives of her students. However, a third participant said that feeling needed by his students is what encourages him to go on.

Revisited Theoretical Framework

Regarding the theoretical frameworks presented previously, collective efficacy theory undergirds much of the work of this study. Bandura (1977) first defined self-efficacy as a person's belief in their ability. Bandura then noted that self-efficacy is related to collective efficacy. Bandura (1977) defined collective efficacy as "a group's shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainments" (p. 447). Goddard et al. (2004) and Hoy et al. (2006) linked teacher collective efficacy to student achievement, making clear that student achievement is tied to teacher beliefs. The findings of this study identified efficacy as a critical component of teacher retention.

For example, the participant who stated the belief that his students needed him would not leave his current school because he would never want to let his students down. All participants said that they teach for their impact on students. Teachers who believe in their capacity to provide integral support for their students are unwilling to leave their schools, despite their personal challenges. Therefore, self-efficacy is a consideration in teacher retention. Additionally, teachers who believe in the collective efficacy of their faculty are equally unwilling to abandon their colleagues and their work when they experience tough times.

Significance and Limitations of the Study

Previous research has documented the teacher shortage well (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Ingersoll, 2001; Podolsky et al., 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015; Sutcher et al., 2018; Sutcher et al., 2019). The Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) exacerbated the issue. A RAND survey in January 2021 showed that nearly 25% of teachers polled wanted to leave their jobs at the end of the year, a 9% increase (Steiner & Woo, 2021). With over 200 non-traditional certification pathway teachers in this district alone, clear, information about the experiences that would keep them in the teaching field is invaluable. The research team acknowledges, however, that including teachers who work for a single district in central Alabama limits the generalizability of any findings and the study's external validity.

What We Learned

The intensive stages of the coding process in this study led us to construct a theory regarding what experiences keep teachers from non-traditional pathways in the field. Study findings indicated that strong and positive relationships are key to solving the teacher retention.

problem. These strong and positive relationships can be built with various support structures and a focus on efficacy.

Non-traditional certification pathway teachers who reported strong and positive relationships with their students, colleagues, and administrators seemed more likely to stay at their school and in the teaching profession. Support and efficacy were the keys to building strong and positive relationships with these teachers. Administrators, colleagues, mentors, and district personnel were primary sources of teacher support. Teachers who worked collaboratively with colleagues and whom their colleagues supported were likely to experience self- and collective-efficacy. There also appeared to be a strong reciprocal relationship between teachers and students. Teachers who built strong relationships with students reported positive feedback from their students, which led to increases in teacher self-efficacy. Being well-connected to the school and the district encouraged non-traditional pathway teachers to persevere.

Teachers who participated in this study reported high anxiety and stress, particularly during their first year of practice. Participants talked about how difficult and overwhelming it was; one termed the first year a train wreck. However, they all reported that the encouragement and support of administrators and colleagues helped them get through that challenging time. Several reported feeling overwhelmed, but the encouragement and support they experienced from their colleagues and mentors helped them persevere. One of the implications of this study is that teacher support is a powerful retention strategy.

District support includes onboarding/mentoring, professional development opportunities, professional learning communities, and help from specialists and instructional coaches. All study participants said that mentor support was vital. Several asked that the district schedule more time for mentors to meet with them. One study participant asked about the onboarding process before school begins. Several of the teachers interviewed said that they would have been happy to attend professional development opportunities if they were offered during the summer. Participants suggested that the district should offer professional development in areas that non-traditional certification pathway teachers would not have experience with, such as lesson planning, assessment, and classroom management. District support personnel, content specialists, and instructional coaches could begin building relationships with non-traditional certification pathway teachers while facilitating professional learning.

Several study participants said that the time spent at the beginning of the year in the onboarding process was valuable but noted that before school started, they did not know what they did not know. Several study participants had little knowledge of lesson planning with the course of study standards and the assessment process. They suggested that the onboarding process continues throughout the first year, possibly on days when students do not report to the school building. As students were engaged in online tasks at that time, teachers could work with district support personnel to address any questions they had about pedagogy or their specific content material. District support also needs to include ways to identify leadership capacity in teachers. A pipeline for educational leaders would assist the district in growing its leaders and aid in retention, as it would be one more way to connect with teachers.

Administrative support is a critical piece of retention. Administrators can increase teachers' likelihood of staying by building professional relationships that make teachers feel valued and empowered (Waddell, 2010). Study participants noted the value of principal check-ins. One participant mentioned a conversation with his principal that meant much to him. It was a

short and casual conversation, but it made him feel seen and heard by his principal. Teachers expressed feeling valued when the administrator took the time to talk.

Administrators can also increase retention rates by identifying and communicating leadership potential to teachers. Both study participants, now in leadership roles in the district credited their administrators. One mentioned that her principal saw something in her that she did not see herself. Another said that her former principal identified the leadership qualities in teachers and did an excellent job of providing teachers with opportunities to develop those qualities. Teachers tended to stay in a school when they felt themselves integral to the work.

Administrators should take care to schedule collaborative time for teachers. This is particularly important for non-traditional pathway teachers but good practice for all. Teacher collaboration fosters a sense of unity and connectedness. It is those connections that promote teacher retention. Professional learning communities (PLCs) allow teachers to collaborate on student work, assessment, instruction, and achievement. Administrators who encourage teacher facilitation of professional learning communities empower teachers. This district is implementing Networked Improvement Communities (NIC) along with PLCs. In NICs, teachers collaboratively determine a problem of practice and its root cause. Together they decide on a possible solution or change idea and implement it for a predetermined period. The NIC work empowers and encourages teachers to make instructional decisions together. Teachers who felt they had the autonomy to make instructional decisions were generally less likely to leave. Providing teacher collaboration time encourages the building of relationships and leads to an increase in collective efficacy (McGuigan & Hoy, 2006).

Support from colleagues and mentors was essential. Several teachers said they would not have made it through that challenging first year without their mentors and colleagues. One mentioned how much she valued the culture of support she found in her school. She added that teachers were willing to help one another, not because they had to, but because it was the way they did business in that school. That culture of unity was expressed by another participant who said they have the motto, "We is greater than me," at their school. That belief in one another was crucial in building collective efficacy.

Self-efficacy is also important for teachers from the non-traditional preparation pathway. They must believe themselves capable of the task. Administrators can help teachers build that belief in themselves. One participant mentioned a conversation with his principal when he felt unsuccessful. The principal said that the teacher needed to give himself time. Another participant said her administrators knew she was learning and supported her through the learning process. Facilitating non-traditional certification pathway teachers in self-reflection during that learning process helps make them aware of all that they are doing well and encourages them to focus on improving just one thing at a time.

District support personnel can also assist teachers in seeing their impact on student learning through data dives and examining student work. However, we found that students themselves may be the best tool to build teacher self-efficacy. One participant said she wanted to be the best teacher because her students deserved the best. For many non-traditional certification pathway teachers, knowing that they positively influenced the students they served was enough. When discouraged from the day-to-day struggle, they returned to their *why*. The difference they made in students' lives was rewarding enough for many of them. Those teachers would not leave a culture where they believed they made a difference for their students. The district can also

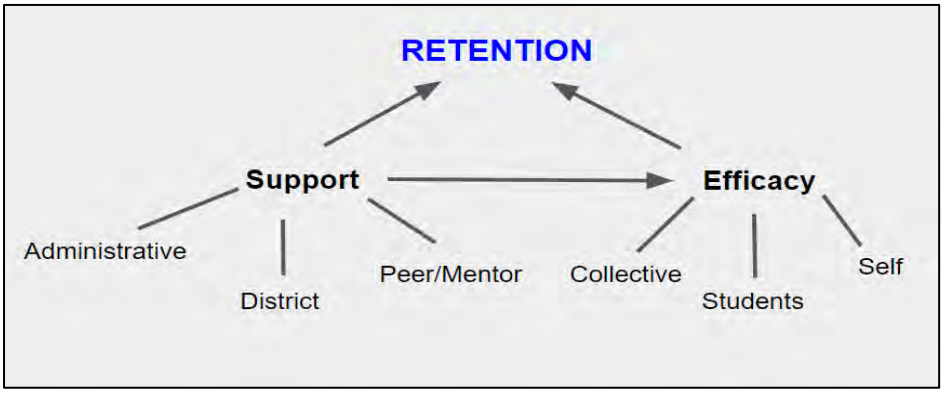
implement programs that provide student affirmation to teachers. We suggest an initiative like a Most Valuable Teacher program (MVT) wherein students write letters to teachers who have positively impacted them. Anything that illustrates teachers' strong and positive relationships with students serves as a teacher retention strategy.

Grounded Theory of Teacher Retention

Figure 1 coalesces findings from this study into a working theory of best practices for retaining teachers, especially teachers who have entered the field through an alternative certification pathway. The model suggests that teachers are more likely to stay in the field when administrative, district-level, and peer and mentor support work alongside efforts to develop collective efficacy drawn from other teachers and students and through teacher reflection on their efforts and practice. Individual schools and districts could examine this model of teacher retention and implement contextualized interventions to address relationship-building in their organizations. Such initiatives help develop support from various levels of the organization that encourage and help encourage a sense of collective efficacy. Our study suggests that initiatives supporting teachers in building such a belief system can effectively achieve improvement goals and retain teachers from traditional and nontraditional certification pathways.

Figure 1

Visual Model of Teacher Retention Theory



Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative grounded theory study explored what working conditions and experiences would keep teachers from non-traditional teacher certification pathways in the teaching profession. It only included secondary teachers from one large county school district in central Alabama. Replication of this study in other settings, in rural districts, for example, and with a larger pool of teacher participants, is recommended. For example, research into what working conditions and experiences of elementary teachers would keep them in the profession might be beneficial, as more of them have also begun to choose non-traditional teacher certification pathways. Researchers might also examine the working conditions and experiences of teachers who chose the traditional teacher preparation pathway, comparing results between these populations. Further, a study of educational leaders and what they are doing to recruit and retain teachers might also be interesting as a follow up to these findings.

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