RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK: PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHERS’ PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND RETENTION

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Dedication page:

To the women who have dedicated all of their being to my future: my grandmothers and my mother. To my father, who will owe me a dollar when I pass this hurdle. Each of them crossed oceans and barriers I will never fully know to give me the opportunity to present this document in this country.

For my husband, who has been a greater cheerleader than I ever thought possible.

I thank you all, and I thank God every day for your belief in me.

Para mis abuelas, que han cruzado mares y barreras yo nunca pudiera entender. Quien siempre tenian fe que un dia yo pudiera presentar estes documentos en este pais.

Pour mes grand-mères, qui ont traversé des mers et des barrières, je ne pourrai jamais comprendre. Qui a toujours eu la conviction qu'un jour je pourrai présenter ces documents dans ce pays.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT *(optional)*

I wish to acknowledge the efforts of my chair, Dr. Mike Nakkula, for his unending support in this venture. I wish to also acknowledge the support and dedication of Dr. Elliot Weinbaum, one of the greatest teachers I've had the blessing to know and learn from at Penn GSE. I am grateful for their patience and appreciation for the passion I have for my work.
ABSTRACT

RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK: PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHERS’ PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND RETENTION

Sarah Boulos Fye
Dr. Michael J. Nakkula

Teacher attrition rates, especially for teachers in their first 1-5 years of teaching, are abysmal (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). As a result, teacher shortages have become a nation-wide crisis (Sutcher, et al., 2016). Mentorship programs have been proven to help yet have not been enough to stymie teacher shortage and retention issues. Research demonstrates that the key to retaining teachers may be in mentorship teams or communities, cultures of mentorship, in which novice teachers are surrounded by not just formally assigned mentors, but a community of peers who support the integration of a novice teacher into the teaching force long term (Smith & Evans, 2008). By exploring where these relationships are being formed and what is valued in these relationships, we may be able to learn how to replicate these processes and provide better for newer teachers in the profession. This dissertation study used a mixed-methods approach to understand the perspectives of teachers in an urban charter school network with regard what aspects of peer relationships they valued and how those peer relationships have influenced their desire to remain in the field of education. The findings discuss how time, resources, and emotional support were cited as most valuable. The study draws some conclusions regarding the ways in which these traits are helpful to keeping teachers in the field, namely by addressing the struggle teachers experience, the isolation they feel, as well as by providing a supportive community in which they feel compelled to further the success of the community wherein they are in turn supporting newer teachers in the field. Leadership implications include discussion of school climate indicators as well as those for professional development and teacher retention.
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CHAPTER 1

My first year of teaching I worked with 6th grade students at an underperforming charter school in Miami, Florida. I was a recent college graduate and completely underprepared to work with children, much less children who needed much attention and expertise from a qualified educator. I was determined in my desire to work to help my students be as successful as possible, but I faced considerable challenges as a first-year teacher. I was fortunate enough to have my grade-level team lead teacher and our school’s lead teacher, among others take me under their wing and mentor me for the sake of our students. I credit their guidance through that year with giving me the tools and strength I needed to remain in the profession. Educators, and beginning teachers especially, have unique and varying needs, ranging from content and classroom knowledge to emotional and psycho-social development (Desimone et al, 2013; Zembytska, 2015). And while the challenges of beginning teachers are notoriously well known in education, with devastating statistics revealing that nearly 50% of the teaching force leaves the field within their first 5 years (NEA, 2015; Sutcher et al., 2016), we have yet to find what consistently keeps educators in teaching.

While I argue here that few of our institutions are equipped to handle the complex emotional and psychosocial needs of teachers, I believe there is much to be learned from where communities within these institutions are providing for their teachers in less formalized, quantifiable ways. With a teacher shortage plaguing not only my district and state, but also threatening the nation, I would like to explore the power of peer relationships and understand whether there is a link between these relationships and teacher retention. I have formulated the following research questions to guide this study:
• How, if at all, do teachers perceive informal peer support to be associated with their desire to remain in the field?

• What aspects of peer relationships are valued by teachers in a public charter school network?

By researching what is valued in peer relationships, I hope to add to the field of research on teacher retention by providing a framework for understanding the kinds of support teachers value and ultimately need in order to remain in the field.

This first chapter begins by outlining the context of the problem being researched, including the site of study. Chapter two builds the theoretical framework through which I argue the need to understand how educators are using their peer relationships to develop a teacher professional identity, and the micro- and macro-level implications of these relationships. Chapter three outlines the methods by which I seek to answer the research questions of this study via a mixed methods analysis. Chapter four discusses the findings of the study that directly tie to the research questions. Chapter five provides implications and recommendations, expanding on the discussion of the findings directly related to the research questions, and also some additional thematic elements that arose throughout the study.

Background and Rationale

Mentorship programs have been integrated throughout the country with varying levels of success to address concerns about the future supply of teachers as the teaching force retires (Hong, 2010; Ingersoll, 2001; Sutcher et al., 2016). Although the historical concerns regarding a shrinking teaching force were valid, the causes were forecasted to
be a result of teacher retirement rates rather than what actuality is occurring today: a high rate of teacher attrition due to teachers leaving the field for non-retirement reasons (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Sutcher et al., 2016). As a result, I argue the aims and outcomes of mentorship and induction programs, as well as other teacher recruitment strategies such as alternate-route certification, miss the mark by not addressing the contemporary needs of teachers, namely relational and psycho-social support (Hong, 2010).

While teacher induction programs are commonplace—if not commonly defined—across the nation, the most successful of these programs provide formalized induction and strong teacher networks and mentor communities (Hochberg et al., 2015; Smith & Evans, 2008; Sutcher et al., 2016). While some research has explored the compensatory versus complementary nature of these less formal mentorship relationships (Desimone et al., 2013), what interests me in this study is exploring the actual relationships themselves. Although research has confirmed the need for emotional, relational and psycho-social support, it has yet to be implemented into policy (Moir, 2009; O’Connor, 2006). Induction programs which consider the emotional needs of their teachers are needed, since we know “enhanced psychosocial support has proved effective with unsupported novices who are more vulnerable than other occupational groups” (Zembytska, 2016, p. 69). When novice teachers are left lacking these kinds of supports, they tend to react either with vulnerability or defensiveness, hiding themselves and their true needs (Long et al., 2012). The need for emotional support in the first years of teaching indicates a need for changes with regard to the way we consider support systems for teachers.
Research demonstrates that when collegial support networks combine to support new educators, outcomes are more likely to be positive (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Informal mentors have been found to support mentorship programs in complementary ways (Desimone et al., 2014) and the development of mentor teams can provide professional development to informal mentors in order to support novices in a more thorough and complete fashion (Smith & Evans, 2006).

Context

Pseudonym Charter School network consists of nearly 70 schools across the United States, as public charter schools serving over 30,000 students. Pseudonym Charter Schools was founded in a large, urban, school district in the early 2000s. Currently, over 70% of their enrollment are students of color, and 48% of their students come from economically disadvantaged families. In recent years, teacher retention issues have surfaced as a concern from school leaders within the network as finding new, qualified teachers to replace those for whom vacancies have surfaced has proven harder with each passing year. In an attempt to improve retention throughout the network, a teacher induction program to help stymie the outflow of educators was created. The program consists of a summertime week-long planning and professional development series followed by monthly check-ins and professional development on various topics. New teachers are assigned a mentor from their department and those mentors are asked to be part of the introductory process for the new teacher to the school.

Anecdotally, it has been shared that although the program was meant to provide support for new educators, recruitment and retention efforts are not sufficient to supply
the network with enough teachers. Additionally, the amount of time required of new teachers seems to be a hurdle. Many teachers who have left have intimated doing so because their home life suffered as a result of the long hours, counter to their prior belief that holidays and summers off would provide them additional time with their children. Teachers are expected to arrive before school for carpool and traffic duties and stay after school to call parents and provide remediation and tutoring for their students who are struggling. Even if a teacher has a planning period, teachers are often using that time to grade and document assessment results to inform and prepare lessons which inevitably follow them home to be completed. This intrusion into personal time during which they are not being paid can take a toll on those who are caretakers or parents. Less time off at higher paying jobs seemed to be a reasonable tradeoff for the lower stress of a position outside of teaching. As a result, the network has been working towards increasing pay and providing retention incentives for teachers who stay with the network over five years.

As a teacher, although one is surrounded by people all day, one does not necessarily get the opportunity to interact with peers in social or professional networks. By exploring the supports experienced by teachers in Pseudonym Charter Schools, I seek to understand the potential for reframing retention issues through a lens of teacher support in the form of their relational networks. There is clearly potential for these networks to provide powerful and lasting support for educators, leading me to further question how and why do teachers form these informal support networks and what value they place in them? What can we learn about these networks that can help us improve teacher retention? I believe peer support in the form of teachers’ relationships are serving
teachers in an almost invisible way, when really, this phenomenon should be brought into the light.
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This theoretical framework seeks to understand the historical and contemporary responses to teacher retention issues as I confront my own tacit beliefs about how relationships between teachers can influence teacher retention. I will begin by exploring historical attrition rates and concerns about teacher retention, and the mechanisms put into place to address those concerns, specifically focusing on teacher mentorship and induction programs as a tactic to recruit more teachers into the field. I then will move into more contemporary issues surrounding teacher retention, namely high attrition rates and potential causes for those rates. By highlighting areas that have been shown to impact teacher attrition and acknowledging the role that teacher networks play in the development of teacher professional identity, I argue that if we are able to better understand and improve the relationships between informal mentors and novice teachers, we could potentially improve teacher retention at a much higher rate. In particular, I seek to connect the development of teacher professional identity with teachers’ desire to remain in the field.

Graphic Representation
My framework seeks to understand and explain how teacher professional identity is (at least in part) socially constructed, and mediated by relationships with peers, both in formal and informal support networks. In understanding how peer relationships influence professional identity, relationships with peers can potentially be a mechanism for understanding and improving teacher retention. This representation depicts at the center
of the pyramid, teacher retention: the goal to which my research and this study aims to understand and possibly influence. At the top of the pyramid, stands teacher professional identity, the development of which I believe to be key to moving novice teachers towards remaining in the profession. The bottom outer triangles consist of mentorship and peer network relationships, serving as complementary and/or compensatory relationship networks: those that are formally constructed and introduced to teachers, and those which are organically developed, initiated by teachers’ own agency. Each of these relationship structures plays a valuable role in the development of the teacher professional identity and can influence a teacher to believe they have a future in the field. This framework is thus broken down into four areas of study: research on teacher shortages, research on formal mentorship and induction programs, research on socio-emotional and identity-related aspects of teaching, and research on informal professional networks.

**Teacher Shortages**

Beginning in the 1980s, economists and educational researchers began communicating concern for the future of teaching, citing a graying teaching force with a large number of educators close to retirement (Hong, 2010). In fact, the average teacher in the late 1980s had 15 years of teaching experience (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). As a response to these projections, recruitment and teacher preparation efforts were initiated (Sutcher et al., 2016).

The reasons, however, for these shortages have varied significantly from what was predicted decades ago. While traditional predictions cited retirement as becoming
the leading factor in teacher shortages, leading to nation-wide recruitment efforts and policies to create alternative pathways to certification for teachers (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Smith & Evans, 2008), the reality has become that while those recruitment strategies arguably may have worked, the rate of teacher attrition has outpaced teacher recruitment and retirement levels (Hong 2010; Sutcher et al., 2016). In fact, research demonstrates “among the least prominent reasons for turnover is retirement” (Ingersoll, 2001, p. 521). While a lack of effective recruitment and production rates of new teachers have been touted as a contributing factor to the problem of teacher shortages, research indicates that is not actually the case (Ingersoll & Smith, 2001; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011); the stark reality is that the “attrition rate of teachers has grown faster than the supply of teachers” (Hong, 2010, p. 1530) and “the largest portion of demand [for new teachers] is driven by preretirement attrition” (Sutcher et al., 2016, p. 21).

Teachers are leaving the field at alarming rates, with studies citing that over 50% of teachers leave the field within the first 5 years (NEA, 2015). While some level of attrition is to be expected, the rates of teacher attrition have far exceeded that of other professions requiring comparable education and preparation (Ingersoll, 2001), currently exceeding rates of attrition for “lawyers, engineers, architects, professors, pharmacists, and nurses” (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011, p. 202).

The financial burden added to school districts and states as a result of this rate of teacher attrition is considerable; the state of Texas, for example, found that it cost them hundreds of millions of dollars each year to replace teachers as a result of their attrition rates (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). In addition to the calculable and fiscal cost, teacher
attrition can cause incalculable costs in the form of blows to morale and stability (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). The greatest cost may well be at the expense of our children’s education, as teacher shortages force students into larger classes and under the supervision of substitute teachers. Unfortunately, at the current rate of teacher attrition, rather than improving, teacher shortages are predicted to persist well into the next decade (Sutcher et al., 2016).

Mentorship and Induction

In an attempt to recruit and retain more teachers as a result of these trends in teacher attrition, many school districts have turned to induction models, including mentorship as a key element to better prepare and ultimately retain educators longer (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Induction programs have been defined as systems of support for new educators and have included, as their most significant component, some form of mentorship (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Zembytska, 2015) so much so that the terms induction and mentorship have virtually become synonymous (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Although a universally acknowledged definition of mentorship does not exist, research has concluded that the goals of mentorship include “to provide guidance and support, to increase retention, and to promote professional development” (Zembytska, 2015, p. 102).

Ingersoll and Strong define this mentorship component generally, yet they and other researchers acknowledge the lack of a standardized definition of mentoring in the United States (Zembytska, 2015; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). This lack of consensus proves problematic as we see significant variation in what induction and mentoring programs offer, making research on the impact of such
programs extremely difficult to quantify and generalize (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). While some components of effective mentorship have been identified, these qualities are subject to scrutiny, as conflicting research has produced questions regarding the generalizability of these conclusions, leading to the ultimate conclusion that mentoring’s impact is highly contextual, and will vary dependent on school setting (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Induction, by its definition and purpose, is not the same as teacher preparation programs or student teaching, however, as they serve entirely different purposes. Induction is implemented as a result of the understanding that a large portion of what a teacher needs to know in order to be able to do their job effectively cannot be learned but in the classroom and on the job (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Thus, for the purpose of clarification in this study, mentorship and induction may be used interchangeably.

Teacher Professional Identity

While induction/mentorship programs aim to develop new teachers in the capacity of pedagogy and on-the-job training, researchers have found that the variation in what these programs offer impact the effectiveness of programs’ ability to reach those goals (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). While it is acknowledged that much of what a teacher needs to know in order to do their job effectively can only be learned once they are teaching full time in a classroom, what is generally missing from such formalized programs is attention to the real and pressing emotional and psychological needs of a new teacher, as well as to the political landscape of working in a school.
While teachers can receive pedagogical support from a majority of the mentorship programs now mandated in over 30 states in the United States (Moir, 2009; Smith & Evans, 2008), few attend to the intricate and complex relationship networks within schools. Scherff (2008), implores in her research on first year teachers that “schools must invest in the resources…necessary to keep teachers teaching” (p. 1329), including those needed “to negotiate the political environment of schools and feel competent as teachers in order to, ultimately, help them remain in the classroom” (p. 1318). This attention to teachers’ needs is echoed by Desimone et al., 2013, who caution that “[Novice teachers] need supports to help them master emotional, organizational, and management issues before they can focus on instruction” (p. 90), and “often teachers are unprepared for the [socio-emotional] challenges of running their own class” (p. 104).

As a reaction to these issues, some researchers are focusing on emotionality and its place on teachers and teacher identity. While some conceptions of teacher identity focus solely on pedagogical markers (Beijaard et al, 2000), these “almost exclusively cerebral” (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 837) constructions miss the socio-emotional elements that make a good teacher (Hargreaves, 1998). Emotions are a major component of developing teachers’ professional identity (Hong, 2010; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006), since the emotional practice of teaching “demands significant personal investment” (Day et al, 2006).

Yet, while teaching is an incredibly emotional act and an emotional practice (Hargreaves, 1998; Moir, 2009), that fact goes largely unacknowledged by policy (Moir, 2009, O’Connor, 2006; Zembylas, 2004). Instead, the focus is by and large narrowed to
an emphasis on teacher standards (Moir, 2009), which is potentially a hindrance to understanding the reality of the teaching profession. This lack of attention to the emotional aspects of teaching ignores the fact that “educational change efforts affect teachers’ relationships” (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 838).

While various researchers define teacher professional identity (or just professional identity or professional self) with multiple components (Day et al, 2006; Lindqvist & Nordäng, 2016), one element that emerges consistently in the development of the professional identity is its contextual, socially constructed nature. Hong (2010) cites teacher professional identity as an interrelated network, “established and maintained through the interaction in social situations and negotiation of roles with the particular context” (p. 1531) and made up of self-efficacy, value, commitment, emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and micropolitics. Day & Gu (2014) also define professional identity with regard to context, specifically, “how teachers regard themselves in relation to the community of teachers to which they belong” (p. 55), and further delineates professional identity as being comprised of distinct yet interwoven components: personal identity, role identity and organizational identity. Role identity refers to the element of professional identity in which the teacher “see[s] themselves in the particular role they play as classroom teacher” (Day & Gu, 2015, p. 55), whereas the organizational identity focuses mainly on the teacher’s view of themselves in relation to the school in which they work.

In navigating the waters of teacher identity, it becomes evident that traditional forms of induction in which educators are given support in content area knowledge and
organizational techniques (Desimone et al, 2013) may not be able to provide support for this incredibly important component of teaching, and may not be taking these overlapping and contextual identity issues into consideration with regard to how to prepare and develop teachers. These issues are even more concerning and prevalent for educators who are lacking a background with a teacher preparation program and are pursuing alternate route certification (Smith & Evans, 2006).

Informal Networks

If formal mentorship does not provide all the supports necessary for teachers to be successful, how then is induction still making strides in decreasing attrition rates for teachers? Research points to the critical need for informal networks and mentorship as a complement to any formal mentorship structure (Desimone et al., 2013; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Pogodzinski, 2014; Smith & Evans, 2008). Teachers new to the field need “someone who provides them instructional, emotional, or other types of assistance and support related to teaching” (Desimone et al, 2013, p. 100), but who do not evaluate their performance. They may be selected by the novice teacher for demonstrating “sincerity, commitment, skill and knowledge development and organizational ascendancy and impact” (Joshi & Sikdar, 2015, p. 977). Such support may not come from formalized support networks such as mentorship/induction programs, but rather from like-minded colleagues who may be in close proximity to them (Desimone et al, 2013).

In fact, research suggests that rather than an induction model on its own, mentorship teams, that is, “a group of people responsible for mentoring a novice or colleague” (Smith & Evans, 2008, p. 270), can provide additional supports that can
increase the likelihood of retention among teachers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). In addition to these formalized support networks, informal support can complement an induction program (Hochberg et al, 2015). Developing this kind of support culture within a school depends heavily whether the school leader is one who invests in social and relational trust among the faculty (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). This requires a school leader to invest in supporting these kinds of informal and formal relationships, be they in time or structure (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010).

Considering the fact that teachers’ professional identities are constructed based on context and social interactions (Hong, 2010), it stands to reason that the professional networks created in schools could have a lasting impact on one’s developing teacher identity. This is especially true if these relationships are developed as a result of novice teachers’ own agency (Pogodzinski, 2014), which may further serve to strengthen an association between the teachers’ developing teacher identity. Some research has found that the impact of these informal relationships is so powerful, that they “have been shown to impact teacher outcomes, including their perceptions of their working conditions and career decisions” (Pogodzinski, 2014, p. 472), and strong teacher networks coupled with induction can actually reduce attrition rates (Sutcher et al, 2016). This study would help to fill gaps in the literature which focus more on the relational and emotional aspects of the teacher-student relationship by providing insight on how the relational aspects of teacher professional identity are influenced by peers.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>How, if at all, do teachers perceive informal peer support to be associated with their desire to remain in the field?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What aspects of peer relationships are valued by teachers in a public charter school network?</td>
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Teacher attrition rates, especially for teachers in their first 1-5 years of teaching, are abysmal, with close to 50% leaving within those first 5 years (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Researchers have noted that although recruitment efforts have been helpful in attracting people to the field, there are still gaps in our need for teachers, specifically with regard to staffing high needs schools and with regard to diversifying the teaching force (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006; Taie & Goldring, 2018). As a result, teacher shortages have become a nation-wide crisis (Sutcher, et al., 2016), with the cost of replacing teachers estimated at being in the billions of dollars nationally in the United States, as well as being detrimental to student learning (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006). Mentorship programs have been proven to help yet have not been enough to stymie teacher shortage and retention issues. Research has indicated that the key to retaining teachers may be in mentorship teams or communities, cultures of mentorship, in which novice teachers are surrounded by not just formally assigned mentors, but a community of peers who support the integration of a novice teacher into the teaching force long term (Smith & Evans, 2008). By exploring these relationships and what is
valued in these relationships, we may be able to learn how to replicate these processes and provide better for teachers in the profession.

In order to determine whether and in what ways teachers perceive their peer relationships to influence their retention decisions and desire to remain in the field, I designed an explanatory sequential mixed methods study, utilizing a connected approach, indicating “the data analysis of one data set informs the data collection of the other data set” (Creswell, 2014, p. 230). The first data set consists survey data from a larger group of teachers within a public charter school network, and the second data set consists of focus group data from teachers within that same network.

Methods: Context and Participant Selection

Pseudonym Charter Schools is a charter school network that was founded in a large, urban, school district in the early 2000s. It has since grown to over 70 schools across the US. Like many school districts and networks throughout the US, Pseudonym Charter Schools as a network has also been impacted by the nation-wide teachers’ shortage. According to the most recently available data, the total number of instructional staff in the network is over 1,700. Retention records shared by the network indicate a slight decline in retention rates from 74% to 75% to 72% in the last three years. Anecdotally, school leaders have decried these retention rates, which may be somewhat conflated due to the fact that up until and including this year’s calculations, the network’s human resources department had some discrepancies in the formulation of how the rates

\[\text{1 This data was updated to include and reflect the network’s reported retention rates from the 2017-2018, 2016-2017, and 2015-2016 school years.}\]
were appraised. More consistent documentation and calculation has identified as a priority for the next few years as a result of the network’s stakeholders’ desire to improve recruitment and retention throughout the network.

Pseudonym Charter Schools provided access to their school leaders through which to distribute the survey instrument to the teachers in the network. The survey was distributed via email in May of 2018, with several reminders sent throughout the remainder of the school year. School leaders were asked to share the survey with their teaching staff.

The sampling design for this mixed method study was two-fold: the first phase for this population included a single stage of sampling during which the potential respondents of the survey were contacted via the school leader. The second phase for the focus groups subsequently included purposeful sampling from the sample surveyed, using a sensitizing concept exemplars sampling plan, which chooses samples that “illuminate sensitizing concepts: terms, labels and phrases that are given meaning by the people who use them in a particular context” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 133).

Furthermore, sensitizing concept sampling was chosen as an emic strategy, that is, one that gains and uses information in hearing voices of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this case, the sensitizing concepts were peer support and desire to remain in the field, given my focus on understanding the context and meaning of teacher relationships and their value to the participants. Such a strategy allows for the opportunity to gain understanding about “how the concept is given meaning in a particular place or set of circumstances being studied” (Patton, 2015, “Sensitizing Concepts Exemplar Sampling”

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para. 2), getting at the heart of the study’s goals to better understand the value teachers place in peer relationships. In choosing this particular sampling strategy, participants were chosen in order to better understand responses to the survey regarding peer support.

Methods: Data Collection and Analysis

Survey

The survey instrument was distributed via email using a weblink to the survey, which was designed and hosted on the online platform Qualtrics. The survey instrument was sent to the previously identified school leaders for distribution to the teachers within the network. The survey instrument was developed for the purpose of this study, with items designed to focus on elements that would support the answering of the research questions:

- Which systems of support did the respondent experience as a teacher?
- Did the respondent experience peer support, and if so, in which forms?
- How did the respondent rate those systems of support in terms of impacting their desire to remain in the field of education?

In addition to responses to the survey items, demographic items were used to ascertain the extent to which the sample represented the larger population of teachers. The survey instrument was designed to identify cases for focus groups as well as to better understand the sample and potentially to observe trends within it. The table below indicates a description of survey items, their relevance to the research questions, and its analysis within the study, the results of which are discussed in the following chapter. A full copy of the survey is provided in Appendix A.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>Relevance to Research Question</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey item inquiring about systems of support the respondent received</td>
<td>This item served as a baseline of understanding perceptions of support experienced as indicated by respondents</td>
<td>Frequency and descriptive analyses were conducted to gain an understanding of the sample. Each bullet in this item was used to route the respondent to further questions regarding this support. Each bulleted item (with the exception of peer support) was eventually combined to form “formal support” as a variable. Peer support was used to route to the next item.</td>
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| Participation in a new educator support program | Survey item to determine the kinds of support experienced from peers, if peer support was chosen as an option before. Kinds of peer support include:  
- Emotional support  
- Instructional strategies support  
- Support in administrative tasks  
- Time management support  
- Support in planning | This item served as a baseline of understanding perceptions of the kinds of peer support experienced as indicated by respondents | Each bullet in this item chosen routed the respondent to more questions about the impact of this item on their desire to stay or leave the field of teaching  
---  
Survey items inquiring about the respondent’s desire to remain in the field, including questions regarding:  
- job satisfaction  
- future plans in the profession | This item served as a proxy for retention, since actual retention could not be determined from a single stage, cross sectional survey in the same manner that a longitudinal study could have provided, given that any questions regarding years in the field are  
--- | Frequency and descriptive analyses were conducted to gain an understanding of the sample. |
| Survey item inquiring about the respondent’s perceptions of each of the systems of support with regard to influencing their desire to stay or leave the field—part 1: formal supports (all items selected from formal supports variable); part 2: informal supports (all items selected from the informal supports. This survey item modeled on a self-efficacy scale in which there is both the desire to leave and desire to stay, inquiring the participant to rate how useful each system of support and peer relationship quality was to them. | Respondent’s perceptions of the value of peer support and impact on desire to remain in the field directly relate to the research questions. | Frequency and descriptive analyses were conducted to gain an understanding of the sample. |
Survey items with demographic information, including
- Gender
- Race and ethnicity
- Years in the field
- Level of education
- Traditional or alternative route certification
- School size
- Grade levels taught

Frequency and descriptive analyses were conducted to gain an understanding of the sample.

The survey instrument was piloted and vetted through a dialogic engagement process using a group critical friends within my cohort of students at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education who served as thought partners in February of 2018. In addition to the piloting of the instrument, it was approved by Dr. Mike Nakkula, the chair of the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education’s Human Development and Quantitative Methods Division before its distribution. The survey was administered at the beginning of the data collection period, before the qualitative portion of the study, from May-June of 2018.

There were 122 respondents to the survey, indicating a response rate of nearly 10% of the population of teachers within the charter school network participating in the
study. Of those 122 responses, 94 of them completed 100% of the survey. There were 64 respondents who indicated they would want to further be a part of the study by participating in the focus groups.

To determine eligibility for the focus groups, I had a set of questions that would need to be answered a certain way to ensure only those who met the criteria were selected; specifically, criteria that confirmed that they were full-time, certified classroom teachers within the network who were willing to participate further in the study. I set those guidelines in SPSS for an if/then setup using the following criteria:

- Q30 answered 1-current classroom teacher
- Q16 answered anything less than 6-I have not and do not work in education
- Q17 answered anything less than 6-I have never been a classroom teacher
- Q29 answered anything less than 3-I am not a certified teacher
- Q18 answered anything less than 5-I have never worked in education
- Q35 answered anything greater than or less than, but not equal to 11-I do not work within this network
- Q56 answered 1-yes.

Based on these criteria, I was able to whittle down the number of eligible participants from the 64 who volunteered to 56. Of those 56, only 49 had filled out the contact information section sufficiently enough for me to be able to reach out to them. Of these 49 participants, I had to determine in which focus group each respondent would

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2 This percentage was determined using the information on teacher staffing provided by the network in 2018 (at the time of the distribution of the survey). Earlier mentions of teacher staffing numbers within this study were updated with information from the network as of February, 2019.
participate. The determination was made to have four different focus groups, dividing participants into four quadrants based on survey responses to items indicating peer support received and desire to remain in the field: high support, high desire; high support, low desire; low support, high desire; and low support, low desire.

These quadrants were identified by developing a simple scatter plot with the variables “Informal Support Scale” and “Desire to Remain Scale Overall” with lines placed on the X/Y axis at the median in order to see the distribution of cases equally in the four quadrants relative to each other. The median of “Desire to Remain Scale Overall” variable was 19; the median of the “Informal Support Scale” variable was 4. The focus group quadrants were thus organized as the following quadrants:

- Quadrant 1: high support, low desire (\( \geq 4; < 19 \))
- Quadrant 2: high support, high desire (\( \geq 4; \geq 19 \))
- Quadrant 3: low support, low desire (\(< 4; < 19\))
- Quadrant 4: low support, high desire (\(< 4; \geq 19\)).

Focus Groups

The second stage of the data collection included four focus groups. The focus group protocol was designed to follow the survey, in alignment with the explanatory sequential methods plan. It was designed for the purpose of this dissertation study, and included items to interpret the responses from the survey, specifically:

- what kind of peer support they have received
- what kinds of relationships they have/had with other teachers
• what those relationships provide them in terms of support
• what they value in those relationships
• whether the support they receive is influential in their decisions to remain in the field

Specific data from the surveys were used to determine eligibility in the focus groups, specifically with regard to support received and desire to remain in the field, as was described earlier in this chapter. Focus groups were identified after the surveys were distributed and collected, and grouped participants into one of four quadrants:

• high support, high desire
• high support, low desire
• low support, high desire
• low support, low desire.

Of the group of 49 respondents determined to be eligible for the focus groups, each were contacted to further participate in the study. Several attempts were made to reach them using a variety of methods including emails, phone calls, and text messages. Interestingly, participants seemed to return messages more consistently when sent via text than emails and voicemails (phone calls). Although all the eligible survey respondents were invited to participate in the focus groups, in the end 17 educators actually participated in the focus groups in the following distribution:

• 5 participants had survey responses which placed them in Quadrant 1
• 7 participants had survey responses which placed them in Quadrant 2
• 3 participants had survey responses which placed them in Quadrant 3
• 2 participants had survey responses which placed them in Quadrant 4.

At the onset, the plan was set to have four homogenous focus groups, however, logistically, some participants who were eager to participate were unable to attend the session during which their quadrant was scheduled, thus accommodations were made to include them in another group for which they would be able to attend. Originally, the data collection plan intended to have each focus group member attend in person, however, due to distance and work schedules (although the focus group sessions were hosted over the weekend, some potential participants had second jobs over the weekend that made being physically in attendance problematic for them), several participants requested to Skype in to the focus groups, and were also accommodated. The result was that four participants engaged with the focus group virtually, and subsequently 8 participants engaged in a hybrid live-and-virtual focus group experience. Although this presented some potential challenges, the participants were able to respond to their virtual and live colleagues alike, and those participants who joined virtually expressed their appreciation for being included.

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed in order to facilitate data analysis through coding. *First cycle coding*, that is, those which are “initially assigned to the data chunks” (Miles, et al., 2014, p. 73), was employed, specifically, *in vivo* and *values* coding (Miles et al., 2014). In vivo coding was chosen as particularly valuable in this analysis as it “uses words or short phrases from the participant’s own language” (Miles, et al., 2014, p. 74) in order to preserve the participants’ voices as much as possible. Values coding
was chosen as particularly relevant for this study as its strengths include helping to
categorize and understand participants’ “cultural values, identity, intrapersonal and
interpersonal participant experiences” (Miles, et al., 2014, p. 75). After the preliminary
analysis, second cycle pattern coding was conducted, a method that helps to organize the
data into “categories, themes, or constructs” (Miles, et al., 2014, p. 86), specifically,
patterns relating to “four, often interrelated, summarizers:

1. Categories or themes
2. Causes/explanations
3. Relationships among people
4. Theoretical constructs” (Miles, et al., 2014, p. 87).

These second cycle codes were developed after refining the code lists with regard to the
values expressed by the participants. First and second cycle code lists with definitions
were compiled and are represented in Appendix C.

Methods: Timeline

February 2018: Instrument design: survey design and focus group protocol design,
piloting of instruments

March 2018: Revision of survey as suggested by piloting and feedback from dissertation
committee

April 2018: Further revision; Submission to IRB and subsequent approval

May 2018: Data collection period

June 2018: Closed survey, organized and cleaned data, begun data analysis on variables
to further refine focus group protocol and select participants.
July 2018: Data analysis and data cleaning; selected participants for focus groups, invited participants to join focus groups for August, organized logistics for focus groups.

August 2018: Focus groups were conducted; data was transcribed. Data collection and coding memos were prepared.

September 2018 – February 2019: Data analysis of transcripts of focus groups through first and second cycle coding.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The following chapter is divided into two main sections, one delineating the findings of the survey data, the second outlining the findings of the focus group data.

Research Question 1: *How, if at all, do teachers perceive informal peer support to be associated with their desire to remain in the field?*

Perceptions of support and desire to remain in teaching

There were 122 responses to the survey, 35% of which were teachers with less than five years of experience. Respondents with 5-10 years of teaching experience made up 29% of the responses, while those with 11-20 years of teaching experience also made up 29% of the responses. Teachers with over 20 years of experience made up 7% of the sample. Teachers of color made up 51% of the respondents, and 48% of respondents had advanced degrees (beyond a bachelor’s degree). Respondents were asked to indicate what areas of support they had received, both formally and informally. Formal support mechanisms included: participation in a formal mentorship program (assigned to a mentor); professional development in classroom management, assessment, or other instructional tools; prior to employment, a pre-service classroom internship; professional development in your content area or grade level; and/or participation in a new educator support program. Informal supports were indicated by selecting a response of peers in the field who supported you, and if so selected, identifying whether that support was inclusive of any or all of the following: emotional support; instructional strategies support; support in administrative tasks; time management support; and/or support in planning. Participants were asked to identify the extent to which support elements were
perceived to motivate them to leave or stay in the field. The survey item ranged from 0-100, with 0 identified as motivating factor to leave the field, and 100 identified as motivating factor to stay in the field.

Survey results indicate that the aforementioned elements of support are perceived to influence participants’ desire to remain teaching to various extents. As illustrated in figure 2, in analyzing the means of the elements, the elements provided by peers in less formal structures (Support from peers, Emotional support from peers, Support in lesson planning, Instructional strategies support, support with administrative tasks) were higher than those of the more formal structures provided by schools or university systems (pre-service classroom internship, Professional development in content area, Participation in formal mentorship program, Participation in new educator support program, Professional development in instructional tools).

Of the support elements indicated, the one with the highest minimum and highest mean rating was “Emotional support from peers” with a minimum of 52. It was the only element ranked over the midway point between 0 to 100 as being a motivating factor to remain teaching. The second highest minimum was “Support in planning lessons, curriculum from peers” with a minimum of 47. These two elements also had the lowest range of scores, indicating that for those participants who received those supports, the perceptions of their positive impact on their desire to remain in teaching were consistently higher than other elements, with standard deviations of 13.54 and 14.98, respectively. Two elements of more formal elements of support provided by a school, mentorship assignment and participation in a new educator support system were by
comparison, much less consistent in perceptions of positive impact on desire to remain in the field, with ranges of 100 and 99, respectively, and standard deviations of 20.49 and 25.70, respectively.

Support elements that were reportedly experienced by the most participants were Peers support (with 76 out of the 92 respondents indicating it), content area professional development (with 74 out of the 92 respondents indicating it), and professional development in instructional tools (with 78 out of the 92 respondents indicating it). By comparison, peer support was rated much higher, ranging from 41 to 100, with a mean of 87.18 and a standard deviation of 16.36, again indicating a more consistently positive impression of the impact of the element. Content area professional development was rated from 20 to 100, with a mean of 74.85 and a standard deviation of 21.96. Professional development for other instructional tools had the lowest rated mean of 65.54 and a standard deviation of 22.30. In figure 2, these elements are arranged in descending order of means, to best illustrate which elements were rated highest in terms of their perceived impact on the participants’ desire to remain in the field.
## Descriptive Statistics

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<td>Of the following items, please identify the extent to which you feel it motivates you to leave teaching or the extent to which you feel it motivates you to stay in teaching. - Professional development in classroom management, assessment, or other instructional tools</td>
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Figure 2: Descriptive statistics of perceptions of various supports and their influence on desire to stay/leave—Arranged by descending means
Research Question 2: *What aspects of peer relationships do teachers in this charter school network value?*

In the second phase of the study, focus groups were employed to gather further data regarding the value of peer relationships for participants in four quadrants of the survey, those indicating high or low support and high or low desire to remain.

![Diagram showing quadrants]

While the subsections below outline several findings from this data, it is interesting to note that although these segments were separated out to ascertain patterns of similarity or difference, and since the groups were eventually heterogenous, no noteworthy patterns emerged. In fact, as will be discussed in the next chapter, it was surprising to discover that many of the participants in the low desire to remain in the field quadrants had, in fact, *remained* in the field, as participants with low desire to remain had more years of
experience than those with higher desire to remain. To clarify, this is not meant to be a predictor of retention, but an interesting discussion that will be explored later.

**Resources**

Participants indicated that resources shared were among the most valuable elements of support from peers, specifically in the early years of being in the field, or if transferring from a different system of education (from a different county, from a different country, or transitioning from private education into a public charter school for the first time).

Veteran and novice teachers alike expressed the value placed on peers who share knowledge and resources that would help them perfect their craft. The idea that they desired feedback and reassurance in their teaching practice was shared by several participants as being especially valuable in the first years of teaching when feeling of inadequacy and doubt were prevalent. Peers who provided a friendly face and a caring critique provided a solution rather than causing them to feel further failures, “The truth is that I was far from doing a good job and he was always there trying to mentor and give better ideas of how to do things. (from FG1, participant with 11-20 years teaching)”

Receiving feedback from peers provided an opportunity to learn, as did shadowing or co-teaching with more experienced teachers. These opportunities to engage with other teachers and to reflect on their own teaching provided guidance for novice teachers to distinguish between teaching styles and make more confident decisions about their pedagogical practices, “I think learning from other teachers is what’s definitely helped me figure out how to start teaching correctly, in a more
manageable way” (from FG3, participant with 5-10 years teaching). The desire for this kind of reflection, validation and confirmation was not unique to educators new to the field, however. Participants with more years of experience echoed the desire to receive more critique in order to improve their craft, as well, “even if you are a veteran teacher, you want that feedback. How can I improve my lesson?” (from FG1, participant with 5-10 years teaching). And while feedback was appreciated, the relationship between observer/critic and receiver was important to the reception of said feedback. Participants desired feedback from peers who shared honest, trusting, collegial relationships with them in order to hear criticism in a way that would improve their pedagogy, “I think it takes a while to be honest with someone. And when you’ve worked with them for enough years, you kind of let them know, ‘Hey do you realize that you let those kids in the back kind of chitchat for a while?’” (from FG3, participant with 5-10 years teaching).

One participant furthered this idea by expressing their appreciation for the culture of feedback in which that level of honesty was embedded throughout their place of work (from FG1, participant with 2-4 years teaching), “When you get that kind of culture, where you’re constantly trying to improve and improve and improve, and you have everybody around you that sees the things that you are doing to try to make that happen, the ones who don’t do not last because they can’t keep up.” As was to be expected, feedback from administrators was valued and desired as well, but several participants expressed the feedback from their peers to be preferred, indicating a sense of defensiveness that arises when provided feedback from a supervisor or evaluator rather than a peer.
One aspect participants specifically recognized as being particularly valuable was in regard to support from peers in the form of resources that related to working with or engaging with students. Collaboration on ideas and best practices for how to be more efficient, or how better to engage their students was cited as being particularly valued. As one participant indicated, watching the interactions between a colleague and his students inspired them to try new strategies and also not to take their work too seriously, “He has been the biggest help, like, ‘oh this is what I do with my students’ [and] he jokes around about half the stuff. I’m like that’s what I’m going to do” (from FG3, participant with 11-20 years teaching). Being able to talk through concerns with a friend who can help them laugh and provide real suggestions gave this participant an opportunity to think about new ways to engage their students.

Understanding how to engage their students was appreciated, as was understanding how best to connect with students beyond the classroom. Stories were shared in which colleagues taught them to be more than just a teacher to their students and to invest in their students’ lives outside the content areas being taught. One participant intimated that what they appreciated learning from a peer mentor was that they demonstrated how to reach out to students and let them know that they are a valued “not just as a teacher, but as a supportive person to them. We’re there many hours with the kids and so for some of them, they see us not only as their teacher, but maybe their mom...how much of an influence we have on these kids and how much they look up to us for more than just teaching. It’s life lessons” (from FG1, participant with 11-20 years teaching).
Beyond understanding how to connect with students in and out of the classroom, the idea that students had a difficult and complex life beyond the boundaries of school life was something learned from peers, and was valued as important to understanding their role as an educator, “She let me know, this student has this situation going on in their life, so I know now how I can handle him…to get him engaged in my classroom” (from FG3, participant with 11-20 years teaching).

Relationships with their peers provided practical resources, but also provided opportunities to step out of the silos of their classrooms, and how not to get too bogged down in the minutiae of classroom tedium. Participants shared the mere fact that another adult was around, or made themselves available to talk was invaluable, specifically due to the insular nature of teaching. These expressions of gratitude for peers who provide these relationships indicate an appreciation for a sense of belonging, a sense of humanity, and a sense of friendship. They need not feel like they are alone or on an island. Once they feel that, they want to do a better job, for their students and for themselves, to be the best version of themselves. Being a part of this supportive community (one of trust, common goals) encourages them to be a better teacher because they want to fit into that community. In the stark situations in which this kind of support is withheld from them (and there are plenty of counterexamples), they feel isolated, unappreciated, and want to leave the field, or at the very least, the school site.

Appreciation for on the job resources that related to administrative tasks, documentation, protocols, understanding the various systems in place at the school was an area cited as being valued by participants, particularly in situations in which the
participant was recalling being new to the school system. Feelings of confusion and isolation were attributed to these transitional periods during which teachers struggled to understand and navigate the ins and outs of the non-teaching aspects of working in the school. These tasks were attributed by one participant (FG4, participant with 11-20 years teaching) as being extremely frustrating time sucks for teachers, “one of the things I noticed that I think causes burn-out that’s just unnecessary, would be the excess administrative tasks that are put on teachers that aren’t really teacher tasks to begin with.”

Working with colleagues who helped to decode the complex and context-based system and provide efficient workarounds provided a sense of reassurance that they, too would be able to navigate it as well, (from FG1, participant with >20 years teaching), “As a first year teacher that can really make you understand how the school works, how the system works, and how you can work with that system.”

There were several comments of appreciation for peers who’ve provided more general levels of guidance and resources, with specific mentions of lessons being shared and/or ideas of how to improve their performance at work through best practices. These comments were followed by an example that highlighted the value of working collaboratively, appreciating teamwork as an antidote to the insular nature of teaching. Some mentioned that they had ongoing group chats via text message with colleagues in which they would share resources and help break up larger tasks, “we text each other all the time… yesterday, I put together a list, and then my break was over, so I messaged them and asked them to finish if for me. And they did that, and we got everything done.”
So it’s nice that we can work as a team and get things done that are due” (from FG2, participant with 5-10 years teaching).

**Time**

Appreciation for colleagues who “went out of their way” to spend time with/on another teacher was shared, (from FG1, participant with 2-4 years teaching) “For me, the most valuable relationships in the beginning were really those other teachers who were willing…just to take time out of their personal job, to poke their head in and give me their extra 15 or 20 minutes.” This appreciation for time was cited in various ways, from giving a teacher a few minutes to use the restroom to offering to drive their students’ work to the school district offices for a competition. This sacrifice of time for another teacher was valued highly as a demonstration of friendship and team membership. An interesting point of contention arose related to which teachers offered up their time and discussion of teachers expressing they did not have enough time.

While colleagues who offered time, specifically if those colleagues had visible, external obligations on their time (such as having their own children, living in a different city, or having a second job) were regarded as extremely valuable in discussions of time, there was also a sense of being offended by coworkers who leave at contracted times if no visible, external constraints were observed, as these coworkers were perceived as not having the same sense of duty as those who made sure to spend time outside of their contracted hours at the school, “I don't want to offend anyone, but it's like, you have a hard time and you leave at 3:30 and then you go home…you don't, you're not studying, you don't have like a second job, you don't have kids, what is your struggle? …That's crazy to me” (from FG3, participant with 11-20 years of teaching). This sentiment
received support from others in the focus group, most of which had expressed low desire to remain in the field while having received high support throughout their career, as revealed in the survey. This phenomenon is further explored in the next chapter with regard to comments surrounding *struggle*.

Emotional Support

Reassurance from peers was an appreciated quality, specifically reassurance that one was not alone in their struggles as a teacher. This reassurance was something desired and potentially only available from the relationships they had with other teachers, (FG4, participant with 11-20 years teaching) “the positive part of that I feel is that we get to know that we are not alone in this and everybody is also going through the same thing which is just not being communicated with a lot of people.” Also, the idea that the experience of teaching is something that is not easily communicated or understood by those outside the profession was communicated as being a barrier to receiving that desired reassurance from anyone other than those sharing in the same experience of being a teacher, “There’s a sense of trust and just shared hardships sometimes. I think we all kind of get it, so there’s compassion (from FG4, participant with 11-20 years teaching).

Emotional support and a demonstration of care from other teachers was another aspect valued in peer relationships. Outreach from a colleague that demonstrates they were looking out for their colleague, providing a helping hand just for the sake of benefitting the teacher who was in need of that outreach, both in person and virtually, as group chats and text messages were mentioned frequently as a way that teachers could feel connected to the world outside the classroom and feel supported by a peer,
“especially the bad days you’re like ok, I can text [my colleague and they’ll reassure me] 
‘ok, no you’re fine, you’re fine we can talk after school’ it does make a big difference in 
this relationship, in wanting to come to work and wanting to stay where you work” (from 
FG3, participant with 11-20 years teaching).

Participants described experiencing intense emotional situations and with violent 
and desperate language. The extreme isolation and pain articulated by several 
participants provided moving examples of how the intervention of a colleague can 
provide a respite from the unique stressors involved in being an educator, “they don’t tell 
anyone that they did it is what really lets you know that they [care]….they don’t say ‘by 
the way, I rescued this person who was crying and the grades were behind.’ They just do 
it. And you just have this camaraderie and you just look them in the eye and you’re like, 
‘thank you’” (from FG4, participant with 11-20 years teaching). Attribution of 
emotional support as an aspect of peer relationships that has influenced their decisions to 
remain in the field of teaching was made explicit, “I think without him that year, I don’t 
know if I would have been able to settle down enough in class because I took things too 
hard, took things the kids said too personally. And I think that it got to me too much” 
(from FG1, participant with 11-20 years teaching), also with regard to emotional support 
(from FG4, participant with 11-20 years teaching) “I would say that that’s probably what 
kept me from leaving that first year because there were times I left work with the weight 
of the world on my shoulders.”

Participants expressed appreciation for peer relationships in providing reassurance 
and friendship that permeated the work environment, and beyond, (from FG3, participant
with 11-20 years teaching) “We’ve all kind of struggled, new [and veteran], we’ve all worked through it together and we’ve all professionally have learned to work together, but also...outside we’re friends...we help each other out.” Comments ensued that confirmed that they didn’t feel all coworkers needed to be friends, but aspects of good coworkers from their perspective included offering empathy and reassurance to each other. These elements of friendship incorporated honesty and trust, and was directly attributed to participants’ comfort level with their place of work, “you get to the point where you can trust the people around you, and you can be honest with them...you feel better about going to work. Where you feel kind of like, ok, this person is my friend, they have my back” (from FG3, participant with 11-20 years teaching). This level of comfort was attributed to engendering a more positive culture that improved the school climate. One participant, in particular, attributed the benefits of their friendships with coworkers to be one that directly impacted students as well as colleagues, “I feel like it helps us, we’re better with the kids, even, because we’re friends on a personal level. The kids see that, and it helps them value relationships when they see ours, too” (from FG2, participant with 5-10 years teaching).

Honesty in friendship was also directly attributed to participants’ openness to criticism on improving their pedagogy. Honesty tempered by a trusting relationship with a peer in the context of critical feedback was discussed as a doorway to receptivity on their teaching practices, “constructive criticism is always so helpful when you have the relationships...you value it because you know what they do...and it’s not going to be harsh” (from FG3, participant with 5-10 years teaching). When feedback was provided
by a peer with an established relationship, participants expressed in addition to increased receptivity, increased agency to ask for feedback on what they could be doing better in the classroom in an effort to improve the collective efficacy of their and their friends’ instructional practices, (from FG3, participant with 11-20 years teaching) “they can see things that you can’t see because you’re in your class, but when it’s someone with fresh eyes coming in the classroom and say, ‘oh, well, I think this could’ve been better’ and your relationship is already there, so you’re not on the defensive going ‘oh why are they trying to tell me what to do?’ No! They’re my friends so they’re trying to help me be a better teacher. And we all as a group become better teachers together.”

Furthering this sense of community and desire for collective improvement was the reference to coworkers as a family. Several participants indicated a progression of relationships from coworkers to friends to family, the evolution of which was spurred by situations in which colleagues went out of their way to provide non-work related support to give that person a leg up, to help ease their burden. Two specific cases were shared regarding actual family emergencies in which the participants’ own children had suffered medical crises. These stories mirrored each other in that they both had a spontaneous need that would have possibly necessitated taking a leave of absence or leaving their job entirely to support their own child’s recovery. In both cases, these teachers received unsolicited and generous support from their colleagues, cementing their position in their hearts as “family” rather than mere coworkers. In both cases, the teachers were able to feel supported in their jobs because others stepped in to take over their work and were able to focus on their own families’ healing, “I swear, every day…tough…and I was like,
‘how?’ And --- [my coworker] was like, ‘I’ll take care of this’…I mean, it was moral support…support with…with everything so I could get through” (FG3, participant with 5-10 years teaching).

Participants directly attributed friendship and outreach from colleagues to enabling them to find a work/home life balance. Emotional support from peers was credited as being critical both during extreme situations such as family medical emergencies and during highly stressful transitions into a new teaching position, for example, “And I loved it, but I also didn’t have a life, and so I burned out way too fast. And so the ones showing me that there’s more to me than just teaching all day…I was able to go relax, have other things to do to let out that stress and everything else going on” (from FG1, participant with 11-20 years teaching). The emotional support provided by these relationships also prompted participants to want to provide opportunities for friendship, community, and support teachers new to the field, “…it makes you want to do that for someone else, and not do it to be a hero. I think that's how you know, is that it's just genuine” (from FG4, participant with 11-20 years of teaching). This phenomenon is discussed further in the next chapter, under the subheading Support Begets Support.
CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS

The findings presented above in the previous chapter represent direct responses to the survey and focus group questions. In this final chapter I will discuss how those findings relate to the larger questions of my study: namely, how the participants’ perceptions and experiences shared through the focus groups help to explain how these relationships are valued and how they are perceived to impact teacher retention. As I discuss these thematic elements which surfaced through the focus groups, I make a case for recognizing the development of the teachers’ relationships and their development of their professional identity as concurrent, using professional identity as a filter through which the subsequent implications are theorized. Next, I explore what could be done with the results of this study as school leaders and policy makers. Finally, threats to the validity of this study and implications for further results are discussed.

In the findings section, there was direct attribution between the values participants held within their peer relationships and their desire to remain in the field. What makes this even more interesting is that this sentiment was shared even by educators who had low desire to remain in the field, and who had relatively high retention with over ten years of experience. This seemingly paradoxical sentiment may suggest that while peer support may not necessarily contribute to a demonstrably high desire to remain in the field, it has in actuality contributed to the participants’ decisions to remain. What teachers attribute to their relationships, I argue and add is the inextricable development of the self and the community, symbiotic in nature, growing together. Goodson & Cole (1994) conceptualize teacher professional identity as dependent on the development of the teacher’s ability to see themselves in the broader context of the institution. As
mentioned in chapter 2, these contextually-dependent and socially constructed identities relate both to the self—role identity and the community—organizational identity (Day & Gu, 2014). Within the broader context of their school and even across the network, teachers have opportunities to grow their personal and professional networks if the school community encourages such growth. This network growth in turn provides a stronger development of the teacher as such: seeing themselves as a teacher as an essential part of their personhood. When the community proves itself to be infertile soil, the disassociation of self and of the self within the community takes place.

The Struggle

The basic premise/hypothesis of this study was that although conventional wisdom and anecdotal records indicate that the strength and importance of relationships between educators can potentially influence their decisions to remain in the field, there seems to be a lack of consensus as to how and why. As the survey results provided clarity on the impact and value participants perceived with respect to how peer support in general—and emotional support from peers more specifically— has on their desire to remain teaching, so the focus groups in turn provided further explanation of what emotional support provided them. One word that was prevalent throughout each of the focus groups was the word struggle. In valuing emotional support from peers, there were a variety of examples of appreciating and understanding of the struggle of being a teacher and the complexities involved therein. Two younger teachers (FG2, participant with 5 years teaching 1; FG4, participant with 2 years teaching) cited a shift in their personal friend groups as their friends and family members not associated with education were
harder and harder to connect with as they became teachers. They developed proclivities for spending time with other teachers in and outside of work, because they “understand the struggle” (from FG4, participant with 2 years teaching) and provided a sympathetic outlet to vent.

The mention of the struggle, and the desire to have the struggle listened to, understood, respected, appreciated was pronounced. There was a desire for boundaries, the sharing of responsibilities, the request for another adult “just having a second person, a body to circle around and help out” (from FG4, participant with 11-20 years teaching). Someone to share the burden. Someone to understand their struggle.

This phenomenon of struggle was so widespread, and I think there is something to be said here about the insular nature of this struggle that I didn’t question it once during these interviews. I think in the context, each of us understood what was meant by struggle. This internal idea that what we’re going through as teachers is this singular experience that outsiders don’t really understand, because this is not a “normal” profession providing adult socialization, “You don’t interact…you can just be by yourself”… “It really is very isolating” (from FG1, participant with >20 years teaching). It is noteworthy that the struggle is not unique to novice teachers in this data, nor is it described as something that subsides as time goes by, but rather it is an ever present weight that novice and veteran teachers alike carry on their shoulders that they express as part and parcel of the experience of being a teacher.

The Disconnect

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Part of what makes the struggle ineffable, and what peer emotional support provides a remedy for is the physical and emotional disconnect teachers experience. Several participants pointed out the difficulty of transitioning from other professions into teaching as being stark due to this disconnect and isolation, “the reality is you’re not connecting on your normal communication levels”… “we don’t have an office life like a normal company. We don’t have a relation with the other teachers unless we go for it, we try to find it” (from FG1, participant with 2-4 years teaching). The attribution of other teachers understanding the struggle, and being the only ones aware and equipped to handle the isolation and fear teachers experience in the classroom was made explicit, “it really is very isolating, and I think if you don’t have those connection, that it makes it easier for you to break off and say ‘I can’t do this’ because it’s hard to find that support cause you come in, you do your thing, you clock out, and you leave” (from FG1, participant with 2-4 years teaching). This disconnect was expressed at times emotionally, the idea of being isolated driving them to their wit’s end and the end of their ability to handle feeling as though they are the lone man struggling.

Physical isolation and social disconnect was also cited from the perspective of being disconnected from sources of power, namely school administrators and/or the front office “I feel sometimes that there's a huge disconnect between the people in the office and everybody else in the classroom. If you say you want to take care of us in the classroom, get in our classrooms. Don't send emails.” This disconnect and these feelings of isolation were manifested through extreme, violent language, ranging from references to feeling completely unprepared “they threw me in with the sharks” to not having the
skills to cope “that rough experience that kind of traumatized me” to crying out for help “I’ll be like, I need some help, I need this before…I’m gonna kill myself or something. You know what I’m saying?” (from FG3, participant with 11-20 years teaching).

“I had a break down last week” said yet another participant (from FG3, participant with 11-20 years teaching), crying, and another participant put their hand on her shoulder. She shares what pushed her over the edge, and credits her colleague—the selfsame one with the hand on her shoulder—with being able to talk her off the ledge. As was mentioned earlier, several participants shared family crises that were mitigated by unexpected outreach of friendship by colleagues, and the language used surrounding those incidents mirrored the language appreciating their coworkers for being there for them to overcome the struggle they face as teachers, “those times of struggle kind of draw closer together out of necessity and everybody pitches in and does their part.”

Grappling with the power hierarchy of the school was a source of tension that was explicitly cited by participants in each focus group. The availability of coworkers providing emotional support and reminding them of their value and purpose at the school was directly attributed to mitigating teachers’ retention in high pressure situations and throughout the year, “I kinda held back, try to be professional, but I walked out, [named person] knows that, I walked out the other day. And um [fights back tears]. Sorry. And it's like, screw you. That's how I feel a lot of times. And it has helped a lot of times with having relationships because it's like other people are feeling the same way. And we realize that doesn't matter, we're here for the kids, we're here for this program. What is
my purpose here? And this is what matters. And I can help and I can make other people feel more welcome, more helped” (from FG3, participant with 11-20 years teaching).

Support Begets Support

This helpful sentiment was expressed throughout the interviews as one inspired by the reception of help they, themselves, received initially from another teacher. The idea that a supportive environment motivates newer teachers in that environment to pay it forward was not only in existence, but a desired quality expressed by participants, “It’s just part of what we do because we care, and we want the whole school to succeed” [in response, from another participant] “Right. The school succeeds, the community succeeds, right?” (from FG4, participant with 2-4 years teaching). Teachers expressed that they put out support because they received it and wanted it to be furthered in the environment, and it was made clear that this kind of supportive environment among peers was tied directly to the kind of community that is nurtured by the administration, specifically the principal.

The inverse of this support begets support mentality was also true, taking on a less positive you reap what you sow angle in which participants expressed leaving work environments that were generating less desirable climates and putting the onus on the principal for sustaining that negative environment, “But I mean, she kind of did it to herself…acting as she did and micromanaging us. And it was just a miserable environment. I don’t know if I would still be in the field if I stayed at that school” (from FG2, participant with 5-10 years teaching). The power of the administrator to build a sustainable climate is perceived to be not only great in its own right, a concept in line
with established research on school climate and trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003), but for this participant, directly related to determining their desire to remain in the field.

Participants expressed a desire to see other educators demonstrating inspiration, positivity, and an example that they, too, could be successful because someone else paved the way for them and had overcome similar obstacles they were facing. This modeled behavior that they, in turn, provide as supports and use to be an example for other teachers, “I saw her being able to be a kind person and a genuine person even though she was [facing adversity and difficulties at work] and that was really tough...[and thus I know] I can do it, I can just figure it out and be more flexible. And that’s what I tell the new teachers now” (from FG3, participant with 11-20 years teaching). This desire for positivity is pronounced, and is demonstrated also in examples in which a participant described particularly negative encounters with colleagues, “when people complain all the time, that definitely puts a damper on the environment and it was hard sometimes to just go in and sit at lunch because all it was was complaints” (from FG2, participant with 5-10 years teaching).

Community and Identity

There is a definite sense that what emerges is the idea that what these teachers value in these relationships is a sense of belonging, a sense of humanity, a sense of care and friendship. They need to not feel as though they are alone, on an island. Once they are disillusioned of the isolationist nature of the classroom, they want to do a better job, for their students and for themselves. They want to be the best version of themselves as teachers. Being a part of this supportive community, one of trust and common goals,
encourages them to be a better teacher because they want to fit into that community. In the examples in which this supportive environment does not exist (or they feel excluded from that group), they feel further isolation, they feel unappreciated, and they want to leave the school and possibly the field.

Recommendations

The elements valued by the participants in this study provide a look at what may be missing in the discussion of the supports considered when preparing educators to enter the field: the sheer intensity of the loneliness and isolation educators experience. A number of potential interventions come to mind that may work to provide some remedy to this experience, such as developing schools’ master schedules to allow for common planning periods, for example, in order to provide formal time and space to allow these informal relationships to take root and flourish. Perhaps opportunities to have mixers of sorts in which teachers can develop friendships not specifically related to their work could be incorporated into professional development days. Each of these would provide an opportunity for “constructing professional communities” (Goodson & Cole, 1994) in which teachers can see and experience the overlap of their professional and personal lives which contribute to the feeling of community that ultimately leads to the cementing of the teachers’ identity and in essence anchoring them in their place of work.

Considering the generative nature of the supportive community, it is a recommendation that school leaders consider this kind of space as an investment not only in retaining educators, but also as a tactic to improve the quality of the educators within the system. While further study would need to be done to determine the actual quality of
the teachers that participated in this study (a variable not discussed herein), the expressed desire of participants in this study to work towards becoming better educators and *perfecting their craft* was directly related to the kinds of relationships they had with their peers. The development of these relationships, I suggest, are as important as and can strengthen traditional professional development programs.

Something happens in the overlap of the professional and the personal relationships—something larger is sparked when the teacher feels that the other person is invested in their wellbeing, not only at the school level, but on a human level as friends. In that overlap, in that space, they become a part of the community, a part of the family, and they don’t want to leave that community, that family, that sense of belonging. They want to better that community, to be a contributing part of it, to better themselves as educators so they can provide sustainability to that system. In the cases in which there was not overlap from the professional to the personal, participants cared to do well to an extent, but felt disconnected from the community, felt more transactional in their relationships, and felt more validated in decisions to leave. This development of a teacher’s professional identity is thus inextricably tied to the relationships they are able to build with their peers.

**Threats to Validity and Implications for Further Study**

In developing this dissertation study, there was always an awareness of the fact that as a practitioner researcher I have a relationship to the work that is different from a researcher who may be farther removed from the data. In addition, I have personal and professional relationships with more than one of the participants in the study. While that
may present a threat to the validity of the study, I also feel it presents a responsibility to be authentic to the voices presented in this study in a more personal and unique way. It also presents me with a hyperawareness of the need to ensure confidentiality in the attribution to participants. I want to be true to my participants and capture the pain and struggle and emotion of what they have experienced. In so doing, it has to be said that this work has been emotional and quite difficult at times. In listening to and re-immersing myself in the data, I am aware that there are voiced represented in this data that are not always heard. Collecting data from educators in urban settings who are themselves people of color provides a context for this data that may not have been fully explored in the questions presented to the participants. There is a realization on the part of this researcher that there is emotional work to be done and identity work to be done in order to project the voice of educators of color. My own voice as a Hispanic, Arab, female educator has its own unique context, and as I am still developing my own understanding of what that means for me in my journey, I can only imagine the gaps in representing the educators in this data. As such, there are identity factors at play that I am not fully aware of, as everyone is in a different place in their consciousness and willingness to express and understand the nuances of the pain they are experiencing (myself included) and thus there is a threat to my being able to read what is happening and represent it accurately.

Some responses to this threat include the clarification that objectivity, as it is not possible, is not the goal of this study, nor is generalizability. The goal, rather, is to be as true to the experiences of the participants who have entrusted me with their stories, and to
provide the academic world a glimpse into better understanding their experiences. In further attempts to triangulate and validate this study, I participated in research communities at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education in which data, methods, findings and implications were shared with “critical friends” who confirmed, among other things, the phenomenon of struggle articulated throughout the data and the violence being expressed as thematic throughout the interviews, particularly as indicative of being consistent with narratives of people of color. This research can be seen as confirming anecdotal records, or highlighting what is often understood as an undercurrent of school culture that is not often named or discussed in academia, potentially as components of niche research in softer studies not considered hard research (Hargreaves, 1998).

The goal is also to be reflective and to ask whether the established literature provides space for these educators, or whether there are gaps in our own understanding of their experiences. Are their gaps in our recommendations and conclusions? I would argue there are, and I believe there are implications for further research which include understanding the extent of the isolation felt by educators as expressed in this study. It would strengthen this study to have explicitly been able to include former educators who had left the field, which was a limitation in this study. There were respondents to the survey who were eligible to participate in the focus groups who expressed hesitation to do so due to the fact that they had left their school. Although they were encouraged to still participate in the group interviews, due to scheduling conflicts and/or personal extenuating circumstances, there was only one participant in the focus groups who had
left their teaching position. This provided a unique perspective, and one that could potentially be rich if pursued further for the purposes of a study that specifically set out to understand specific reasons why educators have left. Another limitation of this study was, of course, time. An implication for further study might be to pursue a longitudinal study that tracks educators throughout their career for those who have perceptions of these supportive environments and measure outcomes related to their retention. In understanding the relationships between the communities being developed and the desire for participants in this study to perfect their craft as educators, it would be interesting to see whether that phenomenon is present in other contexts, and if so, whether there are measurable relationships between that desire to perfect their craft and their effectiveness and/or quality as an educator.
APPENDIX A: SURVEY

The survey is available via an online preview here:
https://upenn.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/preview/SV_da1Ho4BNNxbxjT?Q_CHL=preview.

Dissertation Survey Instrument

Survey Flow

| Standard: Informed Consent Statement |
| Standard: Demographics               |
| Block: Default Question Block        |
| Standard: Further participation in study |

Page Break
Q1 Which of the following support systems have you experienced as a teacher? Please choose all that apply.

☐ Participation in a formal mentorship program (assigned to a mentor) (1)

☐ Professional development in classroom management, assessment, or other instructional tools (2)

☐ Prior to teaching, a pre-service classroom internship (3)

☐ Peers in the field who supported you (4)

☐ Professional development in your content area or grade level (5)

☐ Participation in a new educator support program (6)
Q2 Of the following support systems you received, how would you rate their usefulness in supporting you as a teacher?

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<thead>
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<th>Level of Usefulness</th>
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<th>Support System</th>
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<td>Participation in a formal mentorship program (assigned to a mentor) (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional development in classroom management, assessment, or other instructional tools (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prior to teaching, a pre-service classroom internship (3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peers in the field who supported you (4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional development in your content area or grade level (5)</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in a new educator support program (6)</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support from peers (7)</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional strategies support from peers (8)</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support in planning lessons, curriculum from peers (9)</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support in administrative tasks from peers (10)</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management support from peers (11)</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Display This Question:

*If Which of the following support systems have you experienced as a teacher? Please choose all that... = Peers in the field who supported you*
Q4 Which of the following characterizes the kind of support received from peers in the field who supported you?

- [ ] Emotional support (1)
- [ ] Instructional strategies support (2)
- [ ] Support in planning lessons, curriculum (3)
- [ ] Support with administrative tasks (4)
- [ ] Time management support (5)

Q3 Of the following items, please identify both the extent to which you feel it motivates you to leave teaching and the extent to which you feel it motivates you to stay in teaching. You will select an answer on BOTH sides of the statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Leave</th>
<th>Stay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This makes me want</td>
<td>This does not influence me to leave teaching</td>
<td>This does not influence my decision to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to leave teaching</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>stay in teaching (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>This does not make me want to leave teaching</td>
<td>This does not make me want to stay in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>teaching (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>This does not make me want to leave teaching</td>
<td>This makes me want to stay in teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in a formal mentorship program (assigned to a mentor) (1)</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development in classroom management, assessment, or other instructional tools (2)</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior to teaching, a pre-service classroom internship (3)</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers in the field who supported you (4)</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support from peers (5)</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional strategies support from peers (6)</td>
<td>☒ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support in planning lessons, curriculum from peers (7)</td>
<td>☒ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with administrative tasks from peers (8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management support from peers (9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development in your content area or grade level (10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in a new educator support program (11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q5 To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
Please select one answer per statement on the left.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree (1)</th>
<th>Disagree (2)</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)</th>
<th>Agree (4)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with my current teaching position. (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am looking forward to teaching next year. (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I look forward to teaching next year, but will not be returning to the same school. (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I look forward to teaching next year, and intend to stay at the same school. (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I look forward to working in education until I retire. (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

End of Block: Default Question Block

Start of Block: Further participation in study
Q7 Are you interested in participating further in this study?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Q9 Please enter your name:

Q10 Please enter your email address:

Q11 Please enter your phone number:

Q12 What is the best time to reach you?

☐ Weekday Mornings (1)

☐ Weekday Afternoons (2)

☐ Weekend Mornings (3)

☐ Weekend Afternoons (4)

End of Block: Further participation in study
APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Purpose: The purpose of this focus group analysis is to understand what value teachers receive from their relationships with their peers, whether they are socio-emotional, professional, or otherwise valuable to them. I want to know what aspects of their peer relationships are most valuable, and whether or not these relationships are attributable to supporting teachers in wanting to remain in the field.

Description: This protocol will be used to facilitate focus groups discussing peer relationships among teachers, and the qualities and characteristics they value as part of those experiences.

Time of each FG: Approx. 1 hour

This protocol is designed to facilitate focus groups in the dissertation study on peer relationships among teachers. Before the focus group can take place, several steps need to be taken: securing an assistant moderator (listening partner) to take notes while the moderator is facilitating the group; ensuring a central and convenient location for the participants; purchasing and arranging some light snacks for the participants; alerting participants of the time demands; and securing a recording device that is compatible with the transcription service.

1. Welcome: participants are welcomed as they walk in, and are encouraged to have a snack or a drink. Seats are arranged in a semicircle with some cards and pens on them.

2. Purpose: the purpose of the focus group is explained—they are there to answer general questions about their own experiences as a teacher and to help the facilitator get a better idea of what they value or would have valued in peer relationships.

3. Confidentiality: participants are asked to keep the focus group a safe space and to remember that what is said or shared as part of the study is kept securely and confidentially. Participants are requested not to share anything that is heard in the focus group.

4. Participation: participants are told that each of their voices is critical to the study, and they should feel free to share their input while listening and reacting to the voices of the other participants. Moderator mentions that she may move on to other people to ensure all voices are heard throughout the process.

5. Questions are initiated:
   a. Sample questions:
      i. Can you describe the kinds of relationships you have had with other teachers?
         1. Follow-up: What about those relationships would you say was particularly valuable?
         2. Follow-up: Did you find these relationships to be supportive in your experience as a teacher?
            a. How would you characterize the support you received?

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ii. Can you give an example of an encounter that stands out to you as particularly supportive?
   1. Follow-up: What about this encounter was especially valuable?

iii. Can you think of a particular time you felt you needed support, but it wasn’t available?
   1. Follow-up: What actions could have been taken to make you feel supported by another colleague?

iv. Do you feel that the relationships you have with your peers has influenced your decision to stay in this field one way or another?
   1. Follow-up: What other factors play a role in your desire to remain in the field of education?

More questions may be developed and/or refined as the result of the surveys.

6. Ongoing: moderator will use active listening to ensure the tone and message of the participants are being communicated. Participants will be asked to think back to a specific event to trigger episodic memory.

Closing: participants will be thanked for collaborating in the focus group. Time will be respected so participants may be dismissed before the end of the hour.
## APPENDIX C: CODE BOOK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Cycle Coding: <em>In Vivo</em> and <em>Values</em> Codes (developed as indicated in response to values expressed by participants):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Time: the desire for or the valuation of the sharing of time from others; the mention of time as a commodity that is precious, the mention of time as a precious resource that others don’t have much of, the mention of the lack of time in the profession as a stressor and thus appreciated when shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reassurance (this ultimately was combined with empathy/emotional support): the desire for or valuation for reassurance that they were doing a good job, doing the right thing, on the right track, namely as a response to uncertainty and often as a result of the lack of feedback on job performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Empathy/Emotional Support (eventually combined with reassurance): the desire for or valuation of a colleague providing emotional support or empathy in a time of crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Resources/Practical/On the Job Support: the desire for or valuation of support from colleagues in the form of resources for the classroom, connecting to and engaging students, dealing with parents, content knowledge, etc., specifically in the following areas:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Perfecting the craft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Administrative/documentation/protocols, systems, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Working with/engaging with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Explicit Attribution: reasons for staying directly related to peer support; the crediting of peer support as part of their reason for staying in the field; explicit attribution of a peer’s negative influence to leave a teaching position.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second Cycle Codes (developed according to emergent themes):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Isolation/Fear/Disconnect: the feeling of disconnect or isolation expressed by participants directly related to their profession as an educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Support begets support: Culture is replicated, good or bad, elements of wanting to pay it forward if they were treated positively, and feeling the negative culture replicate itself as well</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D: CODE FREQUENCY TABLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Support begets Support</th>
<th>Explicit Attribution</th>
<th>Isolation/Fear/Disconnected</th>
<th>Reassurance/Empathy/Emotional Support</th>
<th>Resources/Practical/On the Job Support</th>
<th>Administrative/Documentation/Protocols/Systems</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Perfecting the Craft</th>
<th>Working with/Engaging with students</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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### APPENDIX E: CODE CO-OCCURRENCE TABLE

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<th>Support begets Support</th>
<th>Explicit Attribution</th>
<th>Great Quote</th>
<th>Isolation/Fear/Disconnection</th>
<th>Reassurance/Empathy/Emotional Support</th>
<th>Resources/Practical/On the Job Support</th>
<th>Administrative/Documentation/Protocols/Systems</th>
<th>Perfecting the Craft</th>
<th>Working with/Engaging with students</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Totals</th>
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</thead>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
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<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Great Quote</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>52</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Working with/Engaging with students</td>
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<td>15</td>
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</table>

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## APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT CONTEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Charter School Population, NCES 2018</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n=122</td>
<td>n=218,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years of Classroom Experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 5 years: 35%</td>
<td>&lt; 4 years: 28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5-10 years: 29%</td>
<td>4-9 years: 33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11-20 years: 29%</td>
<td>10-14 years: 17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; 20 years: 7%</td>
<td>&gt; 15 years: 23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of Education</strong></td>
<td>52% Bachelors</td>
<td>50% Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>47% Masters</td>
<td>38% Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1% Doctorate</td>
<td>9% &gt; Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender—Female</strong></td>
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<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender—Male</strong></td>
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<td>24%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Survey Sample^ vs. Charter School Population, NCES 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Survey Sample^</th>
<th>Charter School Population, NCES 2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>% Asian</strong></td>
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<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hispanic/ Latinx</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
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</table>


Source:
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