

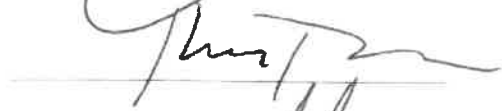
**Persistence and Commitment to Teaching: The Stories of Three Suburban and  
Three Urban Teachers**

By  
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Jarius O. Jones

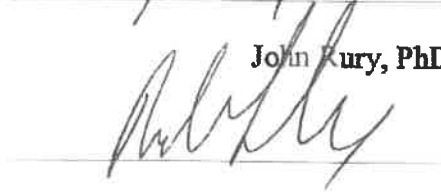
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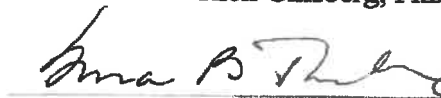
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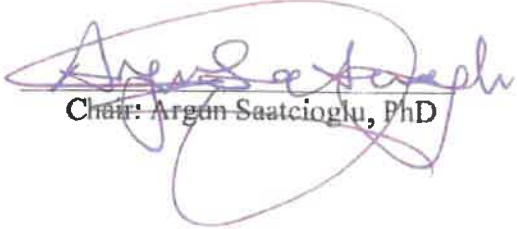


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**Persistence and Commitment to Teaching: The Stories of Three Suburban and  
Three Urban Teachers**



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## Abstract

This dissertation examines the topic of teacher retention in K-12 urban and suburban schools and sheds light on why highly qualified educators continue to serve in these institutions for extended periods of their careers. A small sampling of classroom teachers from a high poverty urban school district in a Midwestern state along with an equal number of educators from a neighboring affluent suburban school district contributed their perspective as well as their thoughts about the conditions in which they serve. Each participant of the study responded to questions posed in an in-person interview. Despite serving in schools where a majority of the student population are considered to be at-risk learners and where student achievement is significantly lower than the state's average, urban school teachers chose to remain committed to the community and its learners. Similarly, suburban teachers expressed their commitment and desire to serve, but for different reasons. Teachers were also given a platform to discuss the dissatisfaction of their teaching assignment and they spoke candidly about what changes to their current conditions would influence their exit from the school system. This qualitative study revealed that urban teachers develop a personal affinity for the community of learners either because of their lifelong connection or through the relationships they developed with students and families throughout their tenure.

*Key words: highly qualified, urban schools, suburban schools, urban teachers, suburban teachers, teacher retention, teacher attrition*

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As a man of faith, I must give honor and thanks to my Lord and Savior for allowing me to reach this milestone in my life. The last eleven years of my life have taken me on a journey that I never would have imagined. During this period, I was tasked with the very difficult decision to transition my two parents into skilled nursing facilities after being diagnosed with terminal diseases. My dear parents, Ted S. and Velma J. Jones, instilled in me a work ethic that required of me to fulfill every aspiration and to complete every task to the best of my ability. Without their messaging of persistence and grit, I would not be the man that I am today. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for being my very first educators. My lovely wife and college sweetheart, Kim (Guthrie) Jones, has been the biggest supporter of every endeavor I pursued throughout our twenty-one years of marriage. As our family began to take shape with the birth of our eldest child, Kim put her academic and career pursuits on hold. Her selfless sacrifices allowed me to reach this remarkable milestone as well as enjoy the lives of our five amazing children. Mija, Jarius, II, Olivia, Alexandria, and Victoria have bestowed upon me the greatest title a man could ever have and I in no way take it for granted. It is an honor and a privilege to be their father and I thank them for their patience and sacrifices as I pursued this achievement. My siblings, Dr. Brandon, Ted, Karene, and Jennifer have uplifted me during this process and their love for me has never wavered. To my lifelong Pastor, Bishop Daniel M. Jordan, Ph.D., Th.D, DD and to the members of the Pentecostal Church of God in Christ in Kansas City, MO, thanks for nurturing me spiritually, for giving me a platform to discover my voice and for believing in me to complete this leg of my journey. Last but not least, I dedicate

this study to my late grandparents, Corean and Olvin Burns, Everlee and Levite Jones,  
and to my late aunt and godmother Olivia Griffin.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Background

The topic of attrition among highly qualified teachers in urban schools has been richly researched and continues to be a salient issue for both researchers and practitioners alike. The body of literature that addresses the question of why educators continue to teach in these school systems, however, is thin and insufficient. The *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) law characterizes a highly qualified teacher as an individual who has earned a bachelor's degree, received full state certification or licensure, and has completed the subject matter credit hours appropriate for teaching in the assigned content area. Despite the many years that have passed since the passage and implementation of NCLB, not every classroom teacher has the aforementioned credentials; where teachers lack highly qualified status, the schools are much more likely to be located in urban areas.

This study begins with a review of the literature on the realities of teacher attrition in schools in general and urban school in particular. Key themes that emerged from a review of the literature on this issue include the following: 1) factors related to educators exiting the profession (i.e. teacher burnout, low salary compared to other educated professionals, emotional and psychological stress, increased demands, and family dynamics), 2) highly qualified teachers leaving urban schools to pursue opportunities in suburban or more affluent systems, and 3) reasons why highly qualified veteran educators choose to teach in urban school systems such as the district showcased in this study.

Researchers have found that many of the nation's urban classrooms are led by less qualified professionals than their suburban counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 1987; Oakes, 1990; Kozol, 1991; Ingersoll, 1999). Jacobs (2007), for example, found that the

level of education a teacher has obtained, along with their scores on standardized teaching assessments, are positively correlated to the level of student achievement in any given classroom; those teachers with higher levels of education and higher scores on the standardized assessments are more likely to be found teaching in suburban schools than urban schools. Ingersoll (1999) also found that lower performing schools (commonly located in urban, metropolitan centers) have fewer highly qualified instructors than those serving in suburban school systems.

Teachers who fit the mold of the highly qualified teacher would create an environment that reflects his or her own drive, determination, and ambition (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2008). In turn, it is believed that students would rise to the challenge and perform at the level they desire. If it is true that these educators are less likely to teach or remain in an urban school setting where historically, academic achievement is low, one must ask whether or not they are leaving the culturally rich and diverse confines of an inner-city school because they were not as effective as they perceived they would be. Another question that evolves from prior research is whether or not those who stay in urban schools are less effective.

Comparisons between the performance of urban schools and suburban schools call into question the effectiveness of urban teachers. A claim that highly qualified teachers (who are more likely to leave their assignments to teach in a more affluent school system) are superior to their counterparts as it relates to instructional effectiveness prevails (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). Although there are exceptions to every rule, there is a significant difference in the ratio of effective teachers in inner-city school systems compared to those teaching in a more privileged location. It could be asked if

teachers choosing to remain in the perceived-as-less-desirable classrooms of urban schools feel that their positions are the only options they have or if they are equally qualified and as fulfilled as teachers in other settings.

It can be a difficult task to educate students who are often faced with social and cultural distractions but educators rarely discuss if teachers in urban schools willingly accept the challenge and are eager to become a part of the solution (Freedman & Appleman, 2009). Practitioners serving within the inner city generally believe that the work and the ideas they bring to the table will have an impact on students. Teachers' influence has the potential to extend beyond the time students spend learning within the confines of their classroom walls (Freedman & Appleman, 2009).

The intent of this study is to examine the differing perspectives of urban and suburban teachers, as well as discover what motivates teachers to work in their respective schools. Although a great deal of attention is given to the urban school experience, this work reveals certain nuances that are particular to both settings.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Many experts and theorists in the economics of education (e.g. Hanushek, Lankford, Loeb, Rivkin, & Wyckoff) have chronicled the decline in the number of highly qualified educators teaching in inner-city schools. Along with magnifying the reality of urban schools' inability to attract and retain quality teachers, many scholars have exposed the personnel problems faced in these situations (Ingersoll, 2003 & 2008). Today's urban schools are indicative of the landscape and community that surrounds them embodying the rich ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural diversities. Contrary to the characteristics of more homogenized suburban schools, where the student bodies are

predominantly made-up of white middle to upper middle-class pupils, districts situated major metropolitan centers offer an array of ideas and experiences that are unique to American society.

Examining the reasons effective teachers remain in such schools may offer ideas for attracting larger numbers of such teachers; this knowledge may have an impact upon the future staffing of educators in these critical areas. Shedding light on teacher dedication as well as telling the story of how veteran educators feel they have a vested interest in schools situated in urban communities, where scholastic achievement is often low, will help illuminate the extent of human capital resources that exist in urban schools.

### **Purpose**

Although it is known that urban districts experience greater difficulty finding sufficient qualified individuals to teach in its schools than its suburban counterparts, that highly qualified educators are less likely to teach in metropolitan centered schools, and that these communities have yet to produce an adequate number of people to pursue degrees in education, there is very little literature explaining why educators remain in urban classrooms over a period of time. (Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff, 2002; Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin, 2004) Research concerning why teachers choose to teach in urban school settings is also scarce and insufficient. The purpose of this study is to examine reasons why educators continue to teach in urban and suburban schools in a Midwestern state.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> After spending a career in urban education as high school mathematics teacher, an instructional coach and now as a building principal, I witnessed colleagues leaving the school district for a variety of reasons. However, I realized that there still remains a considerable number of teachers who choose to educate students in urban core. After being courted and recruited by several surrounding suburban school districts, I realized that I was not alone and that others were routinely being courted to teach in the same neighboring school districts. I remain committed and loyal to serving students residing in my hometown and in the community my wife and I settled in to raise our five children.

## **Research Questions**

This exploratory study was intended to address emerging themes around factors contributing to educators' desire to teach in urban and suburban school systems, the perceptions of those teaching in either a hard-to-staff school or in an affluent school, influences that lead teachers to continue serving in both urban and suburban school settings, and renewed commitments from teachers to remain in their teaching assignments despite the assumptions and the realities of the schools.

## **Overview of the Study**

This study examines similarities and differences between highly qualified educators in urban and suburban schools. A particular interest is what distinguishes a teacher's desire to serve in a Midwestern urban school system referred to as Cottonwood Unified School District as opposed to one serving in a neighboring suburban school referred to as Walnut Unified School District. The evidence for this study was gathered through a series of individual interviews with three teachers (who each had a least five years of teaching experience) in each of the aforementioned school systems. The two districts were selected in order to determine whether or not there is a difference in the characteristics of those who teach in an urban school as opposed to a suburban school.

## **Overview of the Dissertation**

Chapter 2 of this dissertation synthesizes the research literature on teacher labor markets, retention and mobility, with particular emphasis on observed differences

between teachers in urban and suburban contexts. Chapter 3 details the methodological procedures employed in conducting the analysis. Chapter 4 presents the research findings for Cottonwood School District and Chapter 5 presents the research findings for Walnut School District. The final chapter, Chapter 6, draws conclusions by explicitly comparing the findings in the Cottonwood and Walnut districts, noting particular observable distinctions between a small sampling of urban and suburban teachers. Chapter 6 finishes with implications and limitations of the study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Context

Before delving into the topic of comparing the characteristics of urban and suburban teachers, one must understand the factors contributing to the evolution of the urban-suburban dichotomy that exists within many large U.S. metropolitan areas. This is relevant because of the historical transformation in how urban and suburban schools became significantly different. The migration from large urban centers into newly developed suburban areas made a profound impact on the public schools. One of many studies that articulates this was co-authored by Rury and Akaba (2014). They wrote a study of the geo-spatial distribution of educational attainment, cultural capital, and uneven development in a Midwestern urban city between 1960 and 1980. Using historical evidence of the inequities in education and relative indices of community standing, they focused on the effects it had on a metropolitan area. Focusing on inequality in adult education levels, the authors believe it to be an indicator of social and cultural resources available in a community. Their explanation is based on the theory that the background of families plays a significant role in determining a child's educational success and level of educational attainment. Therefore, which has a greater impact lack of school resources.

Further studies rooted in this topic have provided insight leading to the conclusion that children of highly educated parents acquire exceptional levels of vocabulary and reading ability as evidenced in their performance on standardized assessments. Rury and Akaba (2014) further affirmed that the more educated a parent is, the greater interest they have in their child's schooling and they are more likely to demand that educators meet

their needs. They went on to say that these same parents have high aspirations for their students, and have specific knowledge and skills to convey to them.

Educated parents are influential. As Grubb (2009) argued, “the most consistent and powerful effects are those of maternal education” (p. 92). He also adds that parental characteristics are important resources in the educational process for children. Those living in a given community who have attained a certain degree of education “can be viewed as a potent form of capital, a local sum of assets” (Rury & Akaba, 2014, p. 223). This form of social capital that exists within the aforementioned culture can operate as a meaningful resource to adolescents who are privy to its access. Conversely, individuals with minimal educational attainment and who live in a state of economic poverty are unlikely to access the experiences associated with those who embody the cultural and social capital that aids in knowing the full function of school. They refer to this as a “facet of geo-spatial educational inequality” (Rury & Akaba, 2014, p. 223).

Through the late 1940s, suburban schools were perceived to be inferior to the larger urban schools because of their small size and limited course and curricular offerings. Highly esteemed teachers chose to teach within the city limits and they were compensated at with higher wages as well as the opportunity to specialize in their subject areas (Rury & Akaba, 2014). However, 1950 brought a conspicuous change to this norm. According to Rury and Akaba (2014), “[a]s middle class, white families left the city or settled in the suburbs, schools there gained a better reputation. Indeed, some suburban districts became known for education excellence and this proved a major advantage in their development” (p. 225). The middle class left areas of the city and residential tracts were built specifically for the influential and affluent. Pioneered by a local developer, the



concept of racially restrictive deed covenants with the hope of attracting white middle-class residents to live in the newly developed suburbs came to be (Gotham, 2002; Shortridge, 2012; Rury & Akaba, 2014). The objective was to exclude “undesirable people” (ethnic minorities) in order to retain property values “to appeal to the most fashionable residents” (Gotham, 2002; Shortridge, 2012; Rury & Akaba, 2014).

Desegregation controversy and white flight began in the latter 1960s (Moran, 2004; Rury & Akaba, 2014). Integration was not established system-wide in the district and affluent white families sent their children to private schools when desegregation began (Gotham, 2002; Rury & Akaba, 2014). Suburban schools became the most successful schools as the affluent began seeking home ownership in these new communities. The landscape in this Midwestern city resembled that which was done in other large urban settings throughout the United States. Rury and Akaba (2014) asserted that this city was a useful site to examine changing patterns of educational inequality, particularly with regard to geo-spatial differences.

Consequently, the children residing in urban communities no longer had access to vital resources along their quest for an equivalent education afforded to students attending schools in suburban districts. Due to this strategic change, schools located in the highly densely populated areas were viewed and labeled as failing (Shortridge, 2012; Rury & Akaba, 2014). It was clear to see a distinctive region from the data where the most educated population lived along with a noticeable pattern that correlated with wealth, race, and many other factors (Gotham, 2002; Shortridge, 2012; Rury & Akaba, 2014).

For decades, researchers and the general public alike witnessed a crisis in the recruitment and retention of teachers. This crisis stems in part from generational change. When baby boomers began preparing for and entering retirement, the supply of pre-service teachers stopped meeting the demand for vacated positions (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). Colleges, universities, and state and local departments of education noted that there would not be a sufficient number of licensed teachers to fulfill the role of classroom teachers in our nation's public schools. Although this state of affairs permeated throughout the United States, urban school systems have faced an even more difficult challenge of attracting qualified teachers to instruct in their classrooms (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). With the growing number of violent crimes along with the socio-economic adversities that are commonly present in inner city communities, district leaders routinely dealt with the hardships resulting from teacher attrition.

Recruitment and retention of teachers in the urban core has caught the attention of many educational researchers and analyst; thus, creating a forum where individuals publishing their findings are able to bring to light many of the realities educational systems face. For the past several years Hanushek, Loeb, and Wyckoff have been instrumental in the study of why teachers leave urban schools as well as the difficulties of retaining highly qualified teachers.

The balance of the literature review presents several topics that serve as a backdrop to the status of public school teachers. Initially, a focus on the intellectual quality of those serving in the educational workforce and the impact it has on student achievement occurs. It then segues into the effects of cultural relevance in public schools. Eventually, attention is given to teacher sorting, teacher selection, teacher mobility and

teacher retention. Subsequently, the literature review concludes with an examination of teacher retention in urban schools.

Hanushek and Rivkin's (2008) study of teacher quality differences by transition type revealed that there was substantiated doubt to the notion that highly effective teachers were more likely to experience mobility and transfer out of the most challenging schools. Teacher effectiveness is determined by the educator's ability to yield results that student achievement growth in a given school year. They wrote:

“On the contrary, those who exit teaching are significantly less effective on average than stayers regardless of whether they are compared to all stayers in the district or only those in the same school and year. Moreover, those who switch campuses within the same district are also significantly less effective, while teachers who switch districts do not appear to differ significantly from the stayers. Moreover, we find little difference in these patterns by experience level of the teacher.” (p. 3)

Dan Lortie (1975) stated in his book, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*, that “Teaching seems to have more than its share of status and anomalies. It is honored and disdained, praised as ‘dedicated service’ and lampooned as easy work” (p. 10). In other words, teachers are celebrated for their noble service and unselfish sacrifice to educate the nation's youth but criticized over the perceived notion that the work is not as rigorous as that of other specialized professionals. Lortie went on to say that despite educators being respected for what they do and who they serve, they are not given the same deference as those working in “learned professions, occupying high government office” or those who have attained high level of success in business (p. 10). In 1975, teachers

were classified as middle class as they ranked above the craftsmen and others who received higher compensation. With that said, the way in which teachers are deployed into the profession is immediate and abrupt compared to the many other professions. Unlike a skilled worker who trains under an apprenticeship for an extended amount of time before venturing out on their own, teachers experience a short-term practicum prior to being thrust into a classroom of students they are suddenly responsible for teaching and managing (Lortie, 1975).

Based on research presented within the last decade and a half, the status of teachers along with the quality of teachers experienced a decline, when compared to previous generations (Lankford et al., 2014). Over a span of time, it has been documented that those seeking to become teachers - compared to other specialized degree and license bearing professionals such as medical doctors, engineers, and lawyers – on average have lower scores on the SAT and ACT (Ingersoll & Mitchell, 2011; Lankford et al., 2014). As a result of the diminished ability level, the occupational prestige, occupational status and occupational esteem that teachers once benefitted from no longer exists (Hoyle, 2001; Lankford et al., 2014). In other words, prestige correlates with the general public's perception of the career compared to other occupations; status is established by professionals in industries that are held in high regard giving the "stamp of approval" and recognizing teaching as a profession rather than just an occupation; and esteem is associated with society's perception of teachers' job performance (Lankford et al., 2014).

Within the last ten years, states have increased the standards for those seeking to become teachers with the expectation of having a more highly qualified pool of teachers available to serve in public schools (Lankford et al., 2014). Beginning in the 2006-2007

school year, school districts receiving Title I funding are now required to fill vacated core academic subject classes with Highly Qualified Teachers (Lankford et al., 2014). Because of this provision in the *No Child Left Behind* law, the gap between the number of credentialed educators licensed to teach in their assigned courses in “difficult-to-staff high-poverty schools” and others has narrowed (Lankford et al., 2014).

Goldhaber and Walch (2013) reported in their study that focused on the ability level of novice teachers in New York State (NYS) before and after the implementation of the policies developed within the *Teaching to Higher Standards: New York’s Commitment* that the average SAT score of those entering teaching in the poorest schools increased by 50% of a standard deviation while those serving in the wealthier schools saw 32% increase of a standard deviation. Although it is encouraging to see the field of teaching earn its credibility back by enforcing stricter guidelines on teacher licensing, teacher longevity in urban schools being less than that of their suburban counterparts is still a reality that schools and school systems strive to overcome.

The development of suburban communities and White flight made an impact on large metropolitan areas. Urban school districts that were once the envy of those who lived in smaller surrounding towns struggled to close a widening achievement gap between it and the more affluent suburban school districts. While trying to remain relevant, urban school districts competed to attract and retain qualified educators where the demand exceeded the supply. Over the last half century, there has been a persisting decline of society’s esteem of the teaching profession, leaving some to correlate the intellect of a teacher with student achievement. Although the previous conjectures are

derived from several data points within various studies, there still remains additional elements that contribute to the state of public education and staffing.

### **Cultural Relevance**

As the demographics of the United States becomes increasingly diverse, the face of the teaching core is not making the transformation at the same pace. Consideration must be given to the reality that historically; the educational experience American students have been exposed to has been through the lens of a Eurocentric perspective. While urban school districts attempt to narrow the achievement gap between their learners and that of suburban students, traditional methods and pedagogy have not altered the course of the dilemma. At the heart of the reason why the investigation into teachers for urban school matters lies with the idea of cultural relevance. The importance of discussions of cultural relevance goes beyond a casual acknowledgement of its existence and importance; rather, it enlightens interested parties about the patterns of behavior of students and teachers. Ladson-Billings (1994) captured the essence of a culturally relevant education among African American students and the effects that both have on each other. Ladson-Billings believed that the intention of having a culturally relevant education is for the purpose of students maintaining their cultural identity and developing a personality identical to their ethnicity while choosing academic excellence as defined by the dominant culture. Ways in which teachers see themselves as well as their students has an effect on achievement according. She further asserted that “The primary aim of culturally relevant teaching is to assist in the development of a “relevant black personality” that allows African American students to choose academic excellence,” yet retain their cultural identity (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 20)

Teachers must not be afraid to acknowledge color and differences of their students but recognize that they too have worth. When educators subscribe to being color blind, they unknowingly develop “dysconscious racism” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 35). In other words, teachers are aware of the disadvantages and privileges associated with students of a particular race, yet they don’t succeed at challenging the status quo and accept the inevitable. Ladson-Billings posed the question, “If a teacher looks at a classroom and sees the sons and daughters of slaves, how does that vision translate into her expectations for educational excellence?” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 35-36). She asserted that an educator who sees African American students as descendants of slaves may not be suited to inspire them to excel beyond their own “educational, economic and social levels” of attainment (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 32). Teachers cannot ignore the inherent differences among the people they interact with and serve if they truly desire a culturally relevant classroom; rather, they must embrace each individual as they are while providing boundless educational experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2010; Byrd, 2016). Another aspect of a culturally relevant teacher is one who has self-efficacy (or confidence) in their ability as well as having a sense of pride in their profession (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Whether this self-efficacy is observed through the ambiance, décor and neatness of the classroom or the way in which the teacher is groomed, a culturally relevant instructor embodies the aforementioned traits. Within her body of work, Ladson-Billings stated that teachers who demonstrate culturally relevant practices do show an investment in the community, they have a mission and a desire to give back as well as encourage their students to do likewise. Practitioners of cultural relevancy, believe that

all learners can succeed and they are willing to provide paths that ensure students reach their destination.

Cultural relevance and the dialogue surrounding its effect on students - especially African American learners - segues into the important aspect of Lisa Delpit's (2012) research. Delpit challenges the notion that a student's intellectual potential can be measured by their adverse socio-economic status or by the subpar living conditions that are a part of their reality; rather, it is the mindset of the educator and the system that serves the students that can be a determinate for student achievement. Kunjufu (2006) attributed the root cause for the systemic achievement gap between African American and White kids lies in the curriculum they are presented. Rejecting the claim that poverty is the primary reason for low test scores and underachievement; instead, Kunjufu (2006) believes lesson plans and instructional resources are irrelevant to the life experiences of the students they target thus causing a disconnect and student disengagement. In order to engage students who do not identify with the predominant culture, teachers must be intentional about their planning by including content that speaks to their cultural and ethnic identity (Delpit, 2006; Noguera, 2008). Delpit agrees that many of the suggestions Payne (2008) offers are very useful; however, it is the institution that needs to be overhauled in order to turn the tide, not teachers.

Many classrooms serving largely at-risk populations of students are unengaging, uninspiring and are taught with low expectations (Delpit, 2006). Teachers oftentimes assign worksheets for students to complete while they sit behind their desk for long periods of time. In the more affluent schools, students can be found working on rigorous assignments that require deeper analysis and where the classroom teacher is interacting



with learners by checking for understanding, posing questions and re-teaching when necessary (Delpit, 2006). Unfortunately, many schools situated in our urban centers are satisfied with the status quo of doing the bare minimum and rarely does teaching and delivery of educational services improve. Consequently, schools continue to fail and students remain academically stagnant (Delpit, 2006). Delpit (2006) cited Peter Mortimore, a British educator, finding “that the quality of teaching has six to ten times as much impact on achievement” than any other factor (p. 72). Marzano (2003) pointed out the possibility that students from the same population setting could have completely different outcomes based on the way in which they are taught (Delpit, 2006; Marzano, 2003). Quality of teaching and instruction had the biggest impact on student achievement and high-test scores (Delpit, 2006; Marzano, 2003). Classroom teachers serving in the higher-scoring schools engaged learners throughout the lesson, while teachers serving in the lower-scoring schools sat behind their desk while students completed seatwork (Delpit, 2006; Marzano, 2003). Unfortunately, this narrative is common in many of the schools situated in urban centers where there are high incidences of poverty, students being underserved with teachers who lack the skills of a “warm demander” (Delpit, 2006). A teacher exhibiting the attributes of a warm demander, upholds high standards and high expectations for the students they serve, particularly students of color. Warm demanders convey to students that they are committed to providing best instructional experiences that will inspire students to realize their potential and to accept “brilliance” they possess (Delpit, 2006).

This body of research shows that cultural relevance plays a key role in effectively engaging learners academically. The history of a marginalized and historically

suppressed ethnic group can subconsciously influence the way in which a teacher perceives a child's ability and capacity for learning. To dismiss the cultural heritage a student descended from and to haphazardly approach teaching and learning whereby content is delivered generically has the potential to detach the pupil from school. To prevent students from being disengaged customers within the K-12 educational system, educators must hold students accountable be persistent in their approach to teaching. In other words, a teacher who portrays herself or himself as a warm demander in the life of a child of color may have a lasting impact on a student. It characterizes their belief in a student's ability to achieve.

### **Teacher Sorting, Selecting, Mobility, and Retention**

According to Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff (2005), teachers are more likely to teach in the environments that closely resemble the setting of their youth. Because there are a smaller number of individuals from the urban core pursuing and completing degrees in education than those coming from suburban communities, inner-city schools experience difficulties with hiring the most academically able educators. Evidence has shown that educators exiting hard-to-staff schools pursue careers in teaching within higher achieving schools, with higher income students and because of higher salaries (Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff 2002; Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin 2004).

One factor that is rarely considered when analyzing teacher retention is the phenomenon of teachers returning to the school or district after a short leave of absence (Papay et al., 2017). When the inclusive method of considering "returners" was employed, the teacher retention levels among half of the districts considered for the Papay et al.'s study increased as much as 10%. As a result of this, it leads one to surmise

that statistics regarding teacher attrition may be skewed since they may not take into consideration educators who returned to the profession.

Loeb, Wyckoff, and Lankford (2002) analyzed data on every teacher and administrator employed in the State of New York at the start of the 1984-85 school year through the end of the 1999-2000 school year. Because of the significant volume of information, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff were able to disaggregate the data to examine relationships between attributes of highly qualified educators regarding urban schools. The researchers recognized certain trends regarding to teacher quality and the disparity of their presence in urban and in other schools. Although there was not an attempt to explain why the sorting of teachers took place, the authors found four potential explanations in the evidence for why urban schools struggle with teacher recruitment and retention:

1. Hiring differences between schools and school districts with regard to specific desirable characteristics.
2. Differences in the efficiencies of their hiring practices.
3. Schools vary in the political power they exert, within districts.
4. Teachers differ fundamentally from other resources. (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002)

Results of the study revealed major differences in the qualifications of teachers across schools, whereby students attending urban schools were taught by lower-qualified teachers (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Kalogrides, Loeb, & Béteille, 2013). One of the attributes considered when determining the quality of teaching was that of a teacher's own academic accomplishment. Hanushek and Pace (1995) suggested that when considering teacher performance level on reading, vocabulary, and math (which was

administered as part of the High School Beyond survey), it is plausible “that smarter teachers with higher achievement of their own could perform better in the classroom” (p. 103). Alluded to earlier in the paper, this assumption is thought to be acceptable because a person who embodies personal drive and determination will expect the same from those they surround themselves with. Thus, creating a classroom environment where students rise to the occasion and achieve scholastically.

According to Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff (2002), individuals who taught in New York schools left environments where the proportion of nonwhite and impoverished children was 75%-100% greater than the schools in which they were transferring to. It was also noted that from 1970-2000, salaries of urban teachers either matched or exceeded those paid to suburban teachers (Lankford et al., 2002). Conventional wisdom at the time was that the more money a school district offered to teachers in the hardest to staff areas, perhaps the most qualified instructors would choose to teach in these schools. In 2000, beginning teachers serving in urban and in suburban school districts in Rochester, New York earned the same salary (Lankford et al., 2002). Teachers serving in the urban schools of Rochester with 20 years of experience earned an average of \$5,000 more in compensation than those in suburban schools. In New York City, there was a stark difference, where during the same period beginning urban school teachers with a master's degree earned 15% less than their suburban counterparts; veteran teachers in urban schools earned 25% less in salary than suburban teachers. When various characteristics (e.g. socioeconomic status, race, and achievement) of students were considered, the research revealed more disparities in compensation between teachers serving populations with higher enrollments (Lankford et al., 2002). Within the New

York City region, beginning educators received approximately \$2,800 less than starting teachers for white and non-poor students. Novice teachers of low-performing students earned an average of \$1,700 less than their counterparts who taught higher performing students,

Upon the conclusion of their analysis, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2002) stated that the policies directed at closing the achievement gap, must not ignore the dynamics of the labor market for which it is situated in. Doing so will have a profound and adverse impact upon urban inner-city schools and poor students. As a parting statement they argued that there remains a great deal to be understood about the behavior of those who teach and the institutions of learning that higher them (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002).

Studies have demonstrated that teachers are more inclined to teach in communities and in educational systems that mirror their K-12 experience. However, this poses a dilemma because there are not enough teachers originating from many of the nation's urban centers to fill all teacher vacancies. Lower achieving schools struggle with staffing qualified teachers because they are unable to outbid or attract teachers away from higher achieving schools. With the inability to lure the brightest teachers into urban schools, students are exposed to insufficient educational experiences and practices that adversely affect a student's learning trajectory. The issue remains unresolved with regards to who is interested in educating urban students.

### **Teacher Retention in Urban Schools**

Hanushek and Rivkin (2008) provided a provocative account of whether or not inner-city schools are losing the brightest educators and only retaining those who have an

insignificant impact on student learning and achievement. They called into question the level of effectiveness teachers embodied when deciding to vacate their teaching assignments. Contrary to the widely held belief that those who are more qualified (i.e. educators holding post-graduate degrees, teachers who completed their education at an elite university, or even those who scored high on their professional teacher assessments) are more effective than their counterparts, their research casts doubt on the theory (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2008). Teacher effectiveness is related to the educator's ability to produce learners attaining high achievement growth within a school year. Perhaps, teachers who witness student growth year after year while continuing to teach in some of the more challenging learning environments, do so by integrating best practices that are reflective of their effectiveness.

Similarly, Abbott, Collins, and Patterson (2004) found that teachers choosing to educate youth within urban settings are no less qualified to teach than those who leave; rather, they opt to persevere in spite of the obstacles unique to hard-to-staff schools. Despite having inadequate resources or having limited access to many of the niceties schools within more affluent districts enjoy, urban educators thrive through their resiliency and determination to see student success (Abbott, Collins & Patterson, 2004). Abbott, Collins and Patterson (2004) along with Hanushek and Rivkin (2008) illustrate the virtues of educators electing to teach in urban schools. More importantly they challenged the belief that just because one has attained a highly qualified status, it is not necessarily so that they are or will ever be the most effective educator in an urban school.

Sadly, one could surmise that most students in urban schools receive inferior services and resources, perpetuating a culture of failure. Noguera (2008) explained that

many of the ills associated with Black boys achieving at low levels are a result of the way institutions of learning have approached teaching and instruction. It is imperative that school systems understand the way in which students learn as well as develop a sense of empathy for how learners view their themselves within an educational setting and socially. African-American students are more likely to develop what Ogbu and Fordham (1986) referred to as “oppositional identities” (Noguera, 2008). Oppositional identities are formed when students of all socioeconomic backgrounds “view schooling as a form of forced assimilation to White cultural values” (Noguera, 2008, p. 9). Rather than subscribe to the socially accepted norms of schooling, some students opt out of scholarly pursuits to avoid being branded a “sell-out” or a “traitor” by their peers, implying that one is “acting White” (Noguera, 2008). African-American students who choose to “walk the plank” and pursue education according to what is socially accepted more often than not develop “multiple identities” in order to survive and thrive.

Kozol (1991) gives numerous accounts of teacher resiliency in low achieving schools and school systems. Such is the story of Mr. Irl Solomon who taught history at a high school in East St. Louis, MO for over 30 years and felt the burn-out of teaching due to unfavorable teaching and learning conditions; he refused to leave his position for more lucrative opportunities because of the emotional investment he had with students and the community (Kozol, 1991). He further put a spotlight on the differences between more affluent/suburban schools and urban schools in America by examining the physical conditions of school buildings, the capacity of classrooms, accessibility of contemporary educational resources and teacher compensation. With knowledge that there were inequities between school systems, educators like Mr. Solomon persisted because they

knew that their students depended upon and valued their service. The question still looms, what becomes of the students in difficult to staff schools when all the resilient teachers retire and the newly arriving teachers who don't share the same compassion for the school packs up and leaves for the more attractive school within a few years of arriving and the classrooms become a revolving door of educators fulfilling the vacancy?

Many educators working in inner-city school systems do in fact exhibit adverse behaviors that may be quite different from their counterparts working in suburban, rural and homogeneous schools. Unfortunately, many of the negative nuisances commonly associated with those serving in urban schools are manifested during a time of reform. As Payne (2008), chronicled, a few veteran teachers became malcontent and rebellious because of the constant change in the way their school system does business. Although many reform initiatives are well intentioned, the social, political and personal affects they have on teachers become problematic and in many scenarios the ability to attain the success that was sought after, is impeded. Though the blame and responsibility should not rest solely on school reform effort, our over indulgence with implementing what some would deem to be the next great hope for improving achievement is taking a toll upon practitioners and it has become a reality that educators are faced with. In other words, the pressure placed on educators to perform is mounting (Payne, 2008).

Payne (2008) further described the state of educators working under the many restraints and the constant criticisms urban schools receive due to low student performance as being socially demoralizing. While teachers situated in suburban schools are being commended for the progress, innovation and sustained success, educators working in more densely populated, economically depressed communities are constantly



being reminded of their failing school systems. The characterization of those who dare to serve as practitioners in the aforementioned schools is unfavorable and unfair, in many respects. Effective urban educators are sometimes grouped together with those who are ineffective; thus, being branded by their community's stakeholders, state departments and parents as incompetent (Payne, 2008). As some teachers are rightfully deserving of the label of ineffective, others simply are victims of the circumstances. In order to combat the negativity and to appease those looking into the fishbowl of urban education, schools set out in search for solutions to the problem in the manner of a reform while ignoring the real social and personal issues that plague students living in urban communities.

Although there is limited research addressing the question of why highly qualified teachers might continue teaching in urban schools, a few essays have addressed the idea on a small scale. Nieto (2003) performed an inquiry that involved eight teachers from Boston Public Schools who were "known as excellent teachers of students of racially, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds" (p. xi). She discovered that participants continued to teach in their respective settings because of the emotional ties, relationships established and for the personal affection they had towards their students and the school community (Nieto, 2003; Cochran-Smith, 2004). Furthermore, Nieto (2003) found that quality urban teachers stay because of a genuine love of, belief in, and respect for the students they serve. Educators imagined the endless possibilities that students could achieve and the roles they would play in seeing that students realize their aspirations (Nieto, 2003; Cochran-Smith, 2004).

Henninger and Finch (2007) conducted a study that focused on the longevity of middle school physical education teachers and the reasons for why they stay. Eight

educators (five men and three women) participated and served as the sample. As a result of the research, it was discovered that those who remained did so because: (a) they felt needed by the students, (b) collegiality with fellow educators, and (c) a perception of autonomy (Henninger & Finch, 2007). In another study, it was reported that minority classroom teachers preferred serving students who shared similar cultural backgrounds, due to a desire to give back to the community (Kalogrides, Loeb, & Béteille, 2013). In neither of the aforementioned studies was it explicitly stated that those included in the studies were effective teachers. One could argue that it is too early to make a conjecture that represents the sentiments of most teachers who decide to stay in urban settings; yet, it may pique the interest of those leading urban school systems to learn what characteristics, conditions and factors to consider when searching for talent.

Papay, Bacher-Hicks, Page, and Marinell (2017) collaborated on a study between 16 school districts in seven states; there were no distinct patterns or a specific range to depict the rate at which novice teachers left the profession. Ingersoll (2013) reported that 14% of all first-year teachers left after their initial year of teaching and 46% of classroom educators exited the profession within the first five years. However, an analysis of the quantitative data produced in this study revealed that between 13% and 35% of teachers serving in the 16 urban school districts left teaching within their first year of service. Additionally, between 44% and 74% of teachers serving in the aforementioned urban districts left teaching by the end of their fifth year of teaching (Papay et al., 2017). Teacher attrition carries with it a financial impact. The study showed that the district with the lowest rate of novice teacher departure saved as much as \$4,000,000.00

compared to the district that recorded the highest rate of teacher attrition (Papay et al., 2017).

Contrary to what some urban district administrators report, the data did not suggest teachers making an exodus from their schools to suburban districts as a substantial driver of teacher turnover (Papay et al., 2017) The allure to teach in an affluent school system did not have as much of an impact on teacher departure as it has been commonly thought or believed. However, what was consistent with prior research was the conjecture that those who left their teaching post in the first five years of their careers, were less effective than their counterparts who remained in teaching post (Papay et al., 2017).

### **Summary**

There are a number of important themes in the literature discussed above. The evolution of suburban schools and their rise to supremacy came at a high cost to urban schools. As families migrated to the newly developed communities, many of the resources, social capital and influence accompanied them. This left the once sprawling urban setting stripped of its longstanding status as the standard bearer. Consequently, opportunities to teach in the more affluent school systems appealed to educators, leaving many urban schools struggling to draw highly qualified educators to serve in their communities. Over time, the social status of teachers declined and fewer individuals pursued education as a profession resulting in teacher shortages nationwide. Alarming rates of attrition within the initial years of educators' careers negatively impacted schools in general. Outpacing the supply of licensed and fully credentialed teachers, the demand for educators created a persistent dilemma that seems to have no end in sight.

Calls for culturally relevant educational experiences are being lauded by many researchers, as studies have demonstrated a correlation between it and higher student achievement. If classroom teachers believe students are incapable of achieving at or above grade level and concede to failure, the ideal of closing the achievement gap seems insurmountable. Effective educators take pride in their work and they have a conviction to serve students to the fullest in order to draw out the best work. Researchers settled on the idea that student engagement impacts improved learning. Unfortunately, researchers found more incidences of student engagement occurring in affluent schools that they have linked to the intellectual capacity of the professional educator.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This exploratory study was undertaken to address emerging themes around factors contributing to educators' desire to teach in urban and suburban school systems; the perceptions of those teaching in either a hard-to-staff school or an affluent school; influences that lead teachers to continue serving in both urban and suburban school settings; and renewed commitments from teachers to remain in their teaching assignments, despite the adverse assumptions about these schools and realities of them.

#### **Field Setting**

Two neighboring school districts were selected as the field setting for this study. Cottonwood and Walnut are school systems with very distinct characteristics. In many ways, as the details outlined below demonstrate, Cottonwood is typically urban and Walnut is typically suburban.

Looking at the data from the 2015-2016 state report card, Cottonwood had an enrollment of 21,890 students while Walnut serviced 22,546 learners. Both districts were among the largest school districts in their state. The percentage of classrooms being led by "highly qualified" teachers showed little variance between the two. Within a state where 97% of all classrooms were staffed by highly qualified teachers, Cottonwood District staffed 96% of its classrooms and Walnut District staffed 98% of its classrooms with highly qualified teachers. The two districts employ similar proportions of males and females as teachers in their districts. There the similarities between the districts seem to cease (Kansas State Department of Education, 2017).

A close examination of each district's demography reveals stark differences. As evidenced in the Table 1, racial and ethnic make-up of the school systems are very

dissimilar. Walnut’s student enrollment is comprised of 74.9% White, 3.3% Black, 5.5% Hispanic, and 16.4% Other. The Cottonwood student population included 12.38% White, 30.58% Black, 48% Hispanic, and 9.04% other. Not only is the racial breakdown different between the school systems, the economic picture reveals an even broader gap. Cottonwood identified 80.92% of its students as being economically disadvantaged (defined as students receiving free and reduced lunch), while Walnut identified with 8.37% in a state that has 49.7% of its students deemed as such (Kansas State Department of Education, 2017). One may surmise that the level of educational attainment of each district is in stark contrast as well. According to the United States Census Bureau (2017), the county in which Walnut is situated revealed 95.8% of its citizens attained at least a high school diploma with 55.1% earning a bachelor’s degree or higher. However, the county in which Cottonwood is located, reported 78.6% of its citizens held at least a high school diploma while only 15.9% attained a bachelor’s degree or higher. Statewide, 90.2% of residents earned at least a high school diploma and 31% earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. (United States Census Bureau, 2017)

Table 1

*Racial and Ethnic Comparisons of Cottonwood and Walnut School Districts*

<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Cottonwood District</u>	<u>Walnut District</u>	<u>State Average</u>
White	12.38%	74.9%	65.01%
Black	30.58%	3.3%	7.01%
Hispanic	48%	5.5%	19.2%
Other	9.04%	16.4%	8.78%

Sources: Kansas State Department of Education. *Kansas Report Card 2015-2016*. (2016, August).

[https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/demographics.aspx?org\\_no=D0229&rptType=2](https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/demographics.aspx?org_no=D0229&rptType=2)

Retrieved July 9, 2018.

Kansas State Department of Education. *Kansas Report Card 2015-2016*. (2016, August).

[https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/demographics.aspx?org\\_no=D0500&rptType=2](https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/demographics.aspx?org_no=D0500&rptType=2) Retrieved July 9, 2018.

Among the many subgroups reported in the state's report card are English Language Learners (ELL) and migrant students. Of the 21,890 students enrolled in Cottonwood District, 39.61% are identified as ELL; alternatively, only 0.84% of Walnut District student population of 22,546 and 10.13% of all students statewide are identified as ELL. Migrant students accounted for 4.9% of students in Cottonwood, 0.01% in Walnut, and 1.86% across the state. (Kansas State Department of Education, 2017)

Graduation rates in this Midwestern state were measured based on students completing high school within four years. The class of 2016 saw 85.7% of its original cohort graduate statewide, while Cottonwood graduated 74.9% of its students and Walnut graduated 96.6% of its students. The statewide dropout rate was 1.6% and in Cottonwood it was twice as large at 3.8%; in Walnut the dropout rate was nearly non-existent at 0.2%. (Kansas State Department of Education, 2017)

Academic performance of students across various grade levels was evaluated by the results of their work on the Midwestern state's high stakes assessment. Tables 2 and 3 detail the results from English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics exams. The differences in achievement level between Cottonwood and Walnut districts are clearly evident. Nearly half of all students assessed in Cottonwood scored below grade level in both ELA and Mathematics, while statewide roughly a quarter of all students scored below grade level. Just over 6% of the students of Walnut scored below grade level on the same assessments (Kansas State Department of Education, 2017).

Table 2

*English Language Arts High Stakes Testing Performance Data*

<u>Performance Level</u>	<u>Cottonwood District</u>	<u>Walnut District</u>	<u>State Avg.</u>
Below Grade Level	51.25%	6.36%	23.33%
Grade Level/not CR	32.1%	25.21%	35.32%
Academic Expectation/CR	14.31%	44.2%	31.16%
Above Expectation/CR	2.32%	24.2%	10.17%

Sources: Kansas State Department of Education. *Kansas Report Card 2015-2016*. (2016, August). [https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/assessment\\_results.aspx?org\\_no=D0229&rptType=2](https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/assessment_results.aspx?org_no=D0229&rptType=2) Retrieved July 9, 2018.

Kansas State Department of Education. *Kansas Report Card 2015-2016*. (2016, August). [https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/assessment\\_results.aspx?org\\_no=D0500&rptType=2](https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/assessment_results.aspx?org_no=D0500&rptType=2) Retrieved July 9, 2018.

Table 3

*Mathematics Performance High Stakes Testing Data*

<u>Performance Level</u>	<u>Cottonwood District</u>	<u>Walnut District</u>	<u>State Avg.</u>
Below Grade Level	50.56%	7.92%	26.33%
Grade Level/not CR	37.06%	28.96%	39.21%
Academic Expectation/CR	10.82%	37.44%	24.61%
Above Expectation/CR	1.54%	25.66%	9.83%

Sources: Kansas State Department of Education. *Kansas Report Card 2015-2016*. (2016, August). [https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/assessment\\_results.aspx?org\\_no=D0229&rptType=2](https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/assessment_results.aspx?org_no=D0229&rptType=2) Retrieved July 9, 2018.

Kansas State Department of Education. *Kansas Report Card 2015-2016*. (2016, August). [https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/assessment\\_results.aspx?org\\_no=D0500&rptType=2](https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/assessment_results.aspx?org_no=D0500&rptType=2) Retrieved July 9, 2018.

**Research Design and Participants**

This study used purposeful sampling to identify and select participants. In purposeful sampling, individuals were selected to participate in a study because of their potential to provide in depth accounts for a particular inquiry. Also referred to as “information rich” cases, the individuals selected represent the range of key issues addressing the purpose of the research (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). Since this study focuses



on the perceptions of teachers who teach in urban and suburban schools, the method for gathering and processing data involve seeking information on individuals who meet this criterion. Three urban classroom teachers with at least five years of teaching experience in Cottonwood Unified School District were identified to participate in this study and three additional teachers from Walnut Unified School District, were also selected to participate. Within each district, one teacher each was selected to represent the elementary, middle- and high-school levels.

Participating teachers have been assigned pseudonyms in order to protect participant confidentiality. The Cottonwood teachers have been designated as follows:

- Ellen, a female Elementary School Teacher,
- Melissa, a female Middle School Teacher, and
- Harold, a male High School Teacher

The Walnut teachers have been designated as follows:

- Ernie, a male Elementary School Teacher,
- Madison, a female Middle School Teacher, and
- Heather, a female High School Teacher

For this study, principals within Cottonwood and Walnut districts were consulted and asked to identify individuals with long-term commitment to their respective school districts and who have represented high standards of dedication to the profession. Fully credentialed teachers with at least five years of experience serving in their present teaching assignment were eligible to participate in this study. Participants were randomly

selected from a list of teachers provided by several building administrators from Cottonwood and Walnut Public Schools.<sup>2</sup>

According to the United States Department of Education (2016), 82% of all teachers in the workforce were White, 7% were Black and 8% were Hispanic. The same source reported that, in high poverty schools, 63% of teachers are White, 16% are African American, and 17% are Hispanic. Since Cottonwood Public Schools is a high poverty district, the ethnic identity of the educators participating in this work, became a factor into the decision for determining who to include in this study. Similarly, the ethnicity of participants from Walnut closely resembles the workforce of a suburban school system across the country. Unfortunately, the voice of Hispanic educators was not represented in this study. It must be noted that this work is not intended to be a representative sample for purposes of generalizations. Rather, it is an exploratory qualitative inquiry into differences in teacher perceptions and goals in an urban and suburban school settings.

In addition to having research participants from various grade levels, an assurance that the members of the sample have characteristics that are proportional to the number of educators in Cottonwood was also considered. The following information was gathered with regards to each member of the research sample: gender, ethnicity, age, college or university attended to obtain their teaching credentials (Public, Private, Liberal Arts or Ivy League), and highest degree attained.

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<sup>2</sup> Revealing further details about the method for identifying individuals included in the study threatens to compromise the anonymity of the participants. It must be noted that in order to gain access to individuals who met the criterion for this work, a request to interact with teachers from Walnut Public Schools was submitted and approved by the Assistant Superintendent. A representative from Walnut's human resources department reached out to several elementary, middle and high school principals to assist with identifying and recruiting teachers to contribute to this research.

Due to the nature of this study, a basic qualitative study was the design employed. According to Merriam (2009), "...in applied fields of practice such as education, administration, health, social work, counseling, business and so on, the most common 'type' of qualitative research is a basic, interpretive study" (p. 22,) Merriam went on to explain that those conducting a basic qualitative study are "...interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 23). This is the appropriate research design for this study because the research will yield findings that are constructed as a result of the responses made by all participants to questions posed in during the interviews.

### **Data Collection**

Participants read and signed a human subjects consent form provided by the University of Kansas Human Research Protection Program (HRPP). Each teacher agreed to participate in this study; participants were assured anonymity for their participation in the study.

Face-to-face interviews were the data collection method employed in this study. The interviews, which lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed to facilitate analysis. A semi-structured interview protocol was selected as it allowed a degree of consistency across interviews while still allowing for a natural flow of discussion between interviewer and participants. In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions." (Merriam, 2009, p. 98) For the most part, open-

ended questions were asked and not necessarily in the same order from one interview to another.

Agee (2009) suggested that questions evolve from a writer's curiosity, beginning with reflecting on what it is they want to know from the research. She went on to say that a researcher should develop sub-questions and allow for new questions evolve during the study. As questions for this research were developed, serious consideration was given to what Agee prescribed. To maintain a sense of ethics and integrity, questions were designed so that participants could freely speak to their perceptions openly and candidly throughout the interview; while providing insightful information pertinent to the research. In consultation with graduate faculty, twenty-five interview questions along with three sub-questions were formed for this study. Questions yielded background and demographic information; societal influences; details on the focus and continuity of their work with regards to the relationships between participants' K-12 school experience and that of the students they teach; adversities of teaching and patterns of success; dilemmas, expectations and outcomes; teacher attributes and level of commitment; climate and satisfaction. Appendix A contains a list of questions that constituted the protocol for one-on-one interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

When compiling the data for analysis, digitally recorded interviews were referenced for the purpose of extracting its contents. All interviews were captured on a handheld recording device and notes were collected on an Apple MacBook through a function embedded into Microsoft Word and the Notebook document layout style. Each interview was then converted to a QuickTime Player file, so that a transcription of the

discussions was accurately accounted for. Interviews were transcribed by listening to the recordings of each individual and typing their responses. However, because of the time required to complete the transcription in each instance, key points made during interviews for relevant responses and selected quotes were formally transcribed for this study. Recorded interviews were kept throughout the study period, however, for consultation when necessary.

### **Limitations**

Due to the nature of this exploratory qualitative inquiry, the work was limited in many respects. Another limiting element of this inquiry was that the voices given from every grade level and from every secondary subject area were not considered. No Latino/a teachers were included in the sample. Given that the second largest ethnic population of students and teachers residing in the United States are of Latino/a descent, the sentiments of Latino/a educators could have been included in this dissertation. Also, since there was a reliance upon teachers to self-report on their professional experiences, it was difficult to ascertain whether or not if they were highly effective educators. Teachers were not asked to divulge the achievement results of their students or asked to share the academic growth of pupils rostered to them in the current or previous school years.

## **Chapter 4: Findings from Urban Teachers**

Three teachers from an urban school district in the Midwest region of the United States shared intimate details about their family background, their academic and professional experiences as well as their views of the educational landscape in which they serve. Cottonwood Unified School District – a pseudonym used in place of the actual name of the local school system – serves 21,890 students; where 48% of its students are Hispanic, 30.58% are African American and 12.38% are White. Nearly 81% of all pupils attending schools in Cottonwood School District qualify for free or reduced lunch. Each educator queried, provided insight into their perspective of the work they are tasked to do in an urban environment. As a result of the questioning and value of the responses given, several themes evolved. The data was organized around the following key themes:

- Background Experiences and Family Connections,
- Societal Influences,
- Focus and Continuity,
- Adversities of Teaching and Patterns of Success,
- Dilemmas, Expectations and Outcomes,
- Teacher Attributes and Commitment, and
- Climate and Satisfaction

### **Background Experiences and Family Connections**

Classroom teachers interviewed from Cottonwood School District, ranged in ages from 35 years-old to 65 years-old, with two of three educators being White female teachers and the other an African American male. As previously stated, educators serving at the elementary, middle and high school levels (i.e. First Grade, 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> Grade

Math, and High School Special Education) shared their perspectives and experiences regarding each question posed in the interview.

Ellen is a 35-year-old White female who is a first-grade classroom teacher. Raised in a middle-class family, Ellen earned her undergraduate degree from a public university. Prior to becoming a classroom teacher in Cottonwood, Ellen worked in a daycare center where she taught early childhood learners. She began her career of teaching in Cottonwood and has remained for the duration of her 12-year career. While teaching, Ellen completed two master's degrees. Early in life, she knew what career path she would take and credits her decision to become an educator to her mother. She described her mother as an early influence of her desire to become a teacher: "My mother was a teacher. I observed what she did and felt that it was something I could do."

Cottonwood's Melissa is a 52-year-old White female middle school math teacher who spent her formative years raised in a lower middle-class family. She attended a public university while pursuing her bachelor's degree in education. Before she began her career as an educator, Melissa worked for the humane society and had a brief stint in retail and she served in daycare. A 29-year veteran teacher of Cottonwood, Melissa never had the desire to complete a graduate degree and was satisfied continuing to serve as a classroom teacher. When asked about her decision to become a teacher, Melissa remarked, "I just happened to hit upon teaching and enjoyed being around kids. No aha moment just morphed into teaching. I was an ex-military brat and attended school in many different areas."

A 65-year-old African American special education teacher serving at a Cottonwood high school, Harold experienced impoverished conditions along with his

siblings during his upbringing as a child. Raised by his mother in a single-parent home, Harold attended a public university where he earned a bachelor's degree. Harold later completed a master's degree. Prior to becoming a public-school educator, Harold worked several jobs in various industries. He stated, "I worked at a gas station, I was a shoe salesman, an insurance agent, and a construction worker. Additionally, I worked at Dolly Madison and at a beef packing company." When asked why he chose to teach Harold said, "My mother told me to go to school to be somebody because she had a third-grade education. I was a wrestler in high school and it inspired me to continue on with education. The dream of becoming a wrestling coach was almost dashed, when my counselor told me not to attend college since my ACT scores were low."

Similar to backgrounds of the students they serve, each of the respondents were raised in working-class families. In the case of Melissa and Harold, their families were classified as being low socio-economic status. Each teacher earned undergraduate degrees from public universities within the same state that they are employed and they have worked exclusively in Cottonwood School District. Out of the three Cottonwood participants, Ellen is the only teacher included in this study who had a close relative who was a teacher.

### **Societal Influences**

When asked what influences contributed to their decision to teach in Cottonwood School District, Ellen felt that since she grew up in the district that she needed to give back. She stated, "I was taught as a young adult to have pride in the community that I grew up in." Harold responded with, "Prior to working in this school district, I had two brothers who were murdered and I began working in a correctional facility. I originally



interviewed at my alma mater but I left to work in a building that had air conditioning. My decision to work in this district was based primarily on a desire to give back to my community.” Melissa graduated from a college in the same state that Cottonwood situated in, but she had no connection with the local school district or its community: “My parents moved to Seattle, WA and I applied to work in several districts; however, this was the first place to offer me a position.”

Natives of the Cottonwood community, Ellen and Harold believed it was their duty and obligation to give back to the school system that played a significant role in their lives. They were focused on returning to the district that inspired them to pursue teaching.

### **Focus and Continuity**

In regards to aspects of the school district they presently serve in and that of their own educational experiences, there were some resemblances and variances. Ellen who attended school in Cottonwood responded that “The way the schools are set up are the same as well as the Specials (art, instrumental and voice music, P.E.) recess, and sporting events are still around. The demographics of the community and the families are different. Neighborhoods are different. There is more of a pressure to achieve; more of a focus on accommodating all students; rather than a one size fits all.” Ellen went on to say, “the requirements teachers are expected to do are more than ever before. Teachers are now expected to collaborate with their colleagues.”

An additional similarity is that the school district has a transient population, which is similar to Melissa’s experience as a military student where she moved in and out

of schools. The school district is a working class Low SES population, which is comparable to her upbringing.

Harold, who like Ellen is an alumnus of Cottonwood, remarked that schools educated students to be prepared to attend college then as it does now. However, he noticed that there are many differences between the two eras; notable among them is the racial demographics. “It has changed from predominantly white to now Afro-American, Hispanic and Hmong students. Certain neighborhood demographics have changed drastically. A lot of immigrants are in the school district to assist with farming/migrant workers. So some families are around for just a short while. ESL is now a part of our schools and educational process. The demand was not as great then,” Harold stated. He went on to say, “At one time there was a value for education and young people were motivated by their parents to attend college. Drug use and teenage parenting is far greater now. The way in which parents can discipline their kids is stricter. Kids are more defiant and they have access to technology.” Continuing on, Harold stated, “The district used to have more Afro American teachers and more males at some of the predominantly black schools. Now, it is more white females.” It is his belief that “Kids are not as concerned about their future and the impact education can have on their lives. The misconception is that the younger generation doesn’t want adults to reprimand their young people but for people like me they want me to do what is right.” Harold ended his response to the question on with, “The pressure to have high test scores is a huge problem because kids are tested who are not ready. More of a push to have inclusion of Special Education students. Helping students assimilate more into the school culture.”

Melissa felt that Cottonwood mirrored the school districts she attended when comparing the SES of its constituents. Similarly, Ellen and Harold commented agreed that SES make-up of their native district has remained the similar as it was when they attended school. Although it is the same school district that they attended, both alumni spoke candidly about the differences between then and now. Whether it is racial demographics, organization of schools, curriculum, demands of teaching or community perspective their insights presented both inspiring and concerning revelations about the evolution of Cottonwood.

### **Adversities of Teaching & Patterns of Success**

All of the Cottonwood educators have faced challenges and successes while teaching in the school district. While Ellen identified working with other adults as a source of difficulty, she went on to say, “Having to fight for what is right for the students (i.e. academically appropriate and what a student needs)” is equally as burdensome. Both Ellen and Melissa attribute a lack of parental involvement as being a major barrier to closing the achievement gap and overall educational experience for their students. With the social ills that plague students within their community, neighborhood and/or homes, Melissa struggles to engage her middle school pupils with appropriate grade-level work. Whether it is teenage pregnancy or academic deficits, Melissa stated that the revolving door of building leadership within the school she serves (eight principals in ten years) has compounded the aforementioned issues by making matters worse. “The things I have to do in order to remain a highly qualified and effective teacher,” is what Harold cited as his greatest challenge as an urban school educator. In fact, all of the Cottonwood teachers

mentioned the difficulty to remain relevant and effective given the clientele that they serve.

When asked about the achievements experienced in their teaching careers, all the teachers felt a sense of accomplishment seeing a light bulb turn on when a struggling student eventually recognizes his or her ability to learn. Ellen stated that being “able to see kids from the time they started school until the time they graduate,” is a success of hers. She went on to say, “Seeing students who struggle become better learners. I assumed leadership roles in school and around the school district. In an effort to provide other colleagues an opportunity to see how I teach and support students in the Literacy Lab.” This has become one of Ellen’s proudest accomplishments.

Similarly, Harold assumed leadership roles in school and around the district (i.e. instructional coaching, presenting, athletic coaching, and mentoring), which proved to be gratifying as it gave a sense of validation of who he had become as an educational leader. Harold finds solace in knowing that his decision to remain at the same school for over 20 years, where he served multiple generations of students, has yielded a positive reputation and enduring relationships with administrators, colleagues, students, parents, guardians and those within and around the school community.

Melissa identified taking students to state math competitions and excelling as being her crowning moment of success as a teacher. She said, “I have had kids who were taken into protective services and the young lady gave her the stuffed animal she loved so that she could take care of it. I made a connection. Took many students to state math competitions. Teaching grandkids of former students. Charged students with developing activities around kindergarten standards and they had to teach a class of kindergarteners.

An ADHD student partnered with a Kindergartener who had ADHD and was able to connect with the young person. Students I have taught have become teachers in the school district.”

Despite the adverse conditions that are inherent in an urban school system, Cottonwood teachers were able to narrate the positive experiences during their tenures of teaching. Educators shared crowning moments of their careers; each having profound impacts on the lives of students and colleagues.

### **Dilemmas, Expectations and Outcomes**

When confronted with problems, (i.e. adverse student data, student discipline, parental complaints, administrative concerns or discourse among colleagues) many of the educators have similar approaches. Ellen will do her own initial investigation and will refer to research for a response. Melissa tries to figure out why the problem is happening and then work to resolve it. Harold advises not to overact to anything and to respond with caution; listen before reacting.

In regards to the impression of the colleagues/peers that they serve with in the district, there were a variety of stimulating and comparable responses. Ellen stated, “I serve alongside dedicated and hardworking professionals. Many of them could easily teach in a different district, but they are dedicated to the children. Unfortunately, there are many teachers who are tired because of the demands of the job which carry great personal responsibilities.” Melissa responded with, “There are many hardworking people teaching in the district. About 90% of the people teach because it is a true vocation; however, there are some who may not have the best intentions. Some have come into the profession thinking they that they will solve every problem in the world because of their

skin color, but they are not able to do it.” Harold said, “We have some really dedicated and educated people. There are a lot of people who care about educating our students. There are many who work hard to achieve district goals. Sometimes colleagues feel overburdened with what they have to deal with or contend with. The behaviors and the struggles that come along with the misbehaviors of students. The amount of discipline needed weighs heavy upon teachers. Having collaborative teachers is new. Having enough time to do what is needed to provide to their students is great and very little time to balance family/social life with work. Colleagues feel overwhelmed with meeting the demands of common core and other things that we have to do for kids to meet kids where they are.”

A common dilemma presented by Cottonwood teachers is their weariness caused by the tremendous pressure they feel to produce achievement gains, improve graduation rates and decrease disciplinary infractions despite the adverse societal climate that their students are exposed to. Teachers felt that their colleagues were dedicated professionals, who want what is best for all learners. However, the continuous changes and various initiatives introduced into their practices, shrouds limited gratification of any success that they lay claim to.

### **Teacher Attributes and Commitment**

All of the Cottonwood teachers represented in this study recognize that they could teach in a different district, but they are dedicated to the students. When asked about some of the other possible teaching opportunities they’ve had outside of an urban (or suburban) school setting, the interviewed teachers noted some options they had. Ellen worked in Walnut School District during her practicum. She stated, “The number of

children with special needs was lower and the ratio of teachers to students was less. Accessibility to resources and modernized facilities equipped to service all learners was much more prevalent.” Melissa commented that she has always taught at the same school, but she considered teaching at another school in the same district at one point in her career. She has no interest in teaching outside of the district. According to Harold, he declined other opportunities that were presented to him.

There are several factors that contributed to the educators to remain in the school system in which they serve. One of the main factors for two of the teachers is being committed to the community that they reaped benefits from. For all three – the teachers expressed an interest in staying connected to the district. Ellen felt that she has benefitted by working in same city and county she has called home throughout her life. She stated, “It’s helpful to know where everything is in the community. To be able to help others familiarize themselves with the community is rewarding.” When asked whether or not she would have stayed in Cottonwood if she were a transplant into the community, Ellen said, “I am not sure if I would have remained. Having a vested interest made a difference for me remaining. Probably, I would have pursued working in a less stressful district.”

Harold expressed that he remains committed to serving the community as a person of color since parents appreciate the fact that he resembles them and shares some of the same experiences they encounter. “I am committed to serving the community I grew up in; especially, as an African American. Parents appreciate the fact that I look like and have some of the same experiences they are dealing with. When I retire, I will not substitute or double dip by teaching somewhere else. I will be done for good when I leave the district.” Melissa articulated her reasons for remaining in Cottonwood:

“Continuity of care with the families and teaching multi-generations of students.

Because I moved a lot as a kid I don’t like moving and I prefer to stay put in the same place. I understand that the grass may not be greener on the other side.”

All of the Cottonwood educators expressed that they continue to teach in the district because they have a vested interest in it. Ellen considers the district as home and is proud to say that she teaches kids who she can see grow up and graduate from schools in the community. She can relate to some of the difficulties that parents in the community experience. Additionally, she also has pride in seeing her twins attend some of the same schools she attended. Melissa has worked in the district for a long time and she believes it would not be advantageous for her to leave. However, she is compelled to remain in Cottonwood because she really loves the people that she serves and realizes that the families are hardworking citizens. Melissa also has a great rapport with the leadership in the central office and she feels that this relationship is beneficial to her career. Harold continues to teach in the district because he loves his job, the students, and giving back. He asserted that “education will always be one’s equal opportunity.”

There is very little that would make these educators leave the district in which they serve. For Ellen, “If the benefits that teachers are accustomed to receiving are challenged and or revoked that would drive teachers away. Perhaps, if the district went to merit pay, I probably would not want to stick around.” She went on to say, “If the district focused only on testing and not learning that would be another factor driving teachers like myself away.” Melissa feels that if the school had a bad principal then she would leave the school but would remain in the school district. She would also leave if something



blatant happened where the civil rights of students were being abused. According to Harold, nothing could provoke him to leave and it will be done on his own terms.

Luckily there has never been an instance where the educators were close to leaving the school district that they presently serve in. They are extremely committed to the community in which they serve. Outside of school hours the teachers are found cheering at a soccer game, skating party, beautifying the schools, and tutoring. When Harold retires from the district he plans to get involved in some other way to give back to the community. The Special Olympics is something that he has a passion for because everybody needs an opportunity. There are a lot of people that assisted him when he was poor and didn't have a father present in the home.

Each teacher has witnessed their colleagues leaving for other opportunities outside of their district. Ellen recounted, "A lot of times it is money. They don't feel as though it is as much work if they go to a different a district." She went on to say, "A great principal leaving to serve in a more affluent school district looks as though they are taking the easy road out."

When Melissa addressed the question, she stated, "A colleague left due to poor management and not getting along with administrators. There was another instance where someone moved because of the opportunity to serve in a bigger school." Melissa asserted that others have left in order to teach a different content that was unavailable to teach in Cottonwood. She finished her thoughts with, "Unfortunately, some teachers moved because of the unique situation of an urban school."

Harold encountered individuals leaving the school district because they did not get along with their administrator(s) as well as for the purpose of career advancement in a

different school system. He also stated, “If they feel as though they can’t discipline the kids with the support of the administrators that may deter them from staying. Some colleagues were prompted to leave after suffering debilitating health issues, while a few left due to their incompetence being exposed.” Harold completed his thoughts by suggesting, “When there is a lack of stability in what the district promotes (i.e. programs and reforms changing frequently) it drives colleagues away.”

The commitment of Cottonwood teachers included in this study is steeped in their experiences of growing up in the community and the relational bonds they have created throughout their personal and professional lives. Declaring a sense of loyalty to Cottonwood, every teacher believed that their calling to teach is for the exclusive purpose of educating students living in the community. Harold realized through personal and professional experiences, that there very few African American males fulfilling the role of classroom teacher, specifically in urban schools. It remains a moral obligation for him to serve in the community that he and Ellen believe made impacts upon their lives.

### **Climate and Satisfaction**

All of the teachers had different but interesting views on how the school system is run (i.e. organization, reforms, implementation of programs, etc.). Ellen feels like “the district is hiding essential things and that they are not forthcoming as they could be. Decisions are made that have no reason or logic behind them.” She added, “Shuffling personnel around for a variety of reasons that are never shared. Moving administrators around because they were able to develop great relationships with their school community. I feel that the district is against buying resources that would help students and improve the growth of teachers.” Ellen would find it beneficial for all teachers to be

in agreement when teaching the same subject matter. There are good resources that would teach teachers the format to improve consistency. “Every school has guided reading and balanced reading but everybody is doing it differently and the components are different.”

Melissa was impressed with the last four Superintendents; however, at times, she felt that the central office can be far removed from the realities of the schools. According to her, “They can at times become myopic. The school I serve has access to resources but in other schools they worry about the items that should be made available to them.” During her conversation, Melissa shared that, “Students have spent the last two months testing and the testing will continue for several more weeks.” Although standardized testing is a non-negotiable expectation, Melissa feels that teachers are given some liberties to make decisions. She stated, “We have a lot of autonomy in our school system and we don’t have to worry about the backlash from parents when we redirect [discipline] students.”

Harold feels that the district is run fairly well and that administrators have input on how their schools can be run. “When individual schools are run well, the results reflect it.” He feels that the Superintendent really cares about what goes on in the schools; however, some administrators have experienced teachers turning on them when dissatisfied. “PLCs [professional learning communities] are important and there is further encouragement for teachers to work together. Cottonwood has developed a format for literacy and math meetings. I am proud to see Scholar Bowl and Debate functional once again as well as seeing students being recognized by district leadership for their

accomplishments. Last but not least, there is also an increase focus on preparing students for higher education.”

Cottonwood teachers shared adverse conditions they believe will cause dissatisfaction among the teachers. Ellen feels that the district is not following through on what they promised. She makes her point by comparing medical professionals and educators. “Medical professionals are expected to make mistakes but they are given the respect because it is possible for mistakes to occur. However, educators are not granted the same respect.” Melissa believes that if she is displeased with management and if she were required to do scripted lessons and follow pacing guides exactly how they are developed, there would be a great dissatisfaction. She would like to have the ability to personalize and customize her teaching so that learning becomes relevant. Harold mentioned what it would take for him to be dissatisfied, “Lack of support from the Superintendent and administration as well as a lack of commitment to education. An unwillingness to educate our students and think that minority students are unable or unwilling to learn because of whom they are is disheartening. The way in which the government is dealing with education has been sad for teachers. Teachers are stressed out because the government has attacked education in so many ways. Students and parents receive the negative message and use it against educators and schools.”

All of the teachers have some useful advice for novice educators. Ask them to set the expectation for students the first day. Be fair, honest and proactive with what they do with their students. Know that the students really do want to learn but they don’t know how to. Be fair with the parents and don’t lower your standards. Frustration is normal because you are dealing with people. Do what the administrator requires you to do as a

teacher. Find a quality and effective veteran teacher to learn from. Avoid gossipers and complainers. Believe in what you do and rest at night knowing you did the best. Look for the best in each situation.

## **Conclusion**

The comments of Cottonwood teachers were revealing. The voices of Ellen, Melissa and Harold revealed that their upbringings were in some ways similar to that of the constituents they serve. As the school district and the demography of the city have changed, educators articulated both the pros and cons. Cottonwood teachers were very candid about the demands they face, which for all of them been very taxing. In some ways they feel the pressure to catch up to neighboring suburban school districts who maintain high achievement scores year after year. Since the *No Child Left Behind* law was enacted and a greater value was placed on the relevance of high-stakes assessments, Cottonwood teachers realize their students are lagging behind as the achievement gap persists. The pressure that Cottonwood teachers speak of aligns with the findings of Payne (2008), about teachers serving in lower performing schools - more often than not situated in urban communities - are reminded frequently that their students are not meeting the mark set by suburban students (Nieto, 2003; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Payne, 2008). Despite being demoralized socially, they exhibit perseverance and resilience that coincides with their effectiveness as educators (Nieto, 2003; Abbott, Collins & Patterson, 2004; Payne, 2008).

The three Cottonwood teachers believe they are a part of the solution and they are willing to stay in the fight to see to it that the needs of students are being met (Nieto, 2003). Community connections, professional contributions and having a sense of pride in

knowing they impacted the lives of young people living in an economic depressed environment was evidenced in their statements (Nieto, 2003; Kalogrides, Loeb, & Beteille, 2013). Similar to the belief of “Mr. Solomon” in Kozol’s (1991) work, these three Cottonwood teachers have made an “emotional investment” in the school system they serve and they are insistent on being a part of the solution (Nieto, 2003). The fact that all of the teachers interviewed from this urban school district attended schools that had similar characteristics to Cottonwood – with two of them being alumni from the school system – aligns with what Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff (2005) asserted. They found that educators are more inclined to teach in schools that resemble that which they attended during their early adolescent years (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Kalogrides, Loeb, & Beteille, 2013). Absent from the responses contributed by the three veteran Cottonwood teachers is the ideal of cultural relevance. Perhaps, one could say that the topic was implicitly referred to when teachers declared a desire to remain in the district that closely resembled that of their own K-12 experience. Ladson-Billings (1994) suggested that a culturally relevant educational experience is a key component to engaging students of color to become academically astute. Harold mentioned that his commitment to serve the students of Cottonwood was even more meaningful because he is an African American male. He felt that parents appreciated the fact that he looks like the constituents he serves as well as the fact that he is a lifelong resident of the community. Ladson-Billings believed it is important that students find education to be relevant without being perceived as one who denies or denounces their ethnicity. Students maintaining their cultural identity while choosing academic excellence can be

fostered by a “relevant black personality” (or a teacher) serving as an educator (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Surprisingly, teachers spent very little time lamenting about the lack of parental support as the root cause of stagnant to incremental academic growth. Additionally, teachers made little mention of salary being a reason for teachers departing Cottonwood. Ellen alluded to that fact that several colleagues left Cottonwood in search of making more money, while Melissa and Harold mentioned career advancement as reasons for leaving the school district. However, with the small sampling and perhaps due to the structure of the questions posed, teachers did not go in depth about salaries. Even then, Ellen stated hypothetically that one of the main reasons she would consider leaving Cottonwood would be if merit pay is considered as a factor in teachers’ salary. According to Ingersoll (2003), salary is not a primary reason for teacher turnover; instead, it is large class sizes, infringement on instruction, and limited planning time.

## **Chapter 5: Findings from Suburban Teachers**

The three classroom educators from a suburban school district in the Midwest region of the United States shared details about their family background, their academic and professional experiences as well as their views of the educational landscape in which they serve. Walnut School District – a pseudonym used in place of the actual name of the local school system – serves 22,546 students; where 79.4% of its students are White, 5.5% Hispanic, and 3.3% are African American. Only 8.37% of all pupils attending schools in Walnut School District qualify for free or reduced lunch. All educators interviewed for this study gave insight into their perspective of the work they are tasked to do in a suburban environment. Their responses were organized around the same themes as in Chapter 4:

- Background Experiences and Family Connections,
- Societal Influences,
- Focus and Continuity,
- Adversities of Teaching and Patterns of Success,
- Dilemmas, Expectations and Outcomes,
- Teacher Attributes and Commitment, and
- Climate and Satisfaction

### **Background Experiences and Family Connections**

Three white teachers from Walnut School District between the ages of 36 years-old and 43 years-old were interviewed for the study. A male elementary school teacher (Ernie), a female middle school teacher (Madison) and a female high



school teacher (Heather) spoke candidly about their evolution into teaching as well as shared their perspectives of the career path they have taken in an affluent school system.

Although he was born and raised in an upper middle-class home, Ernie's community was not as affluent as Walnut. Currently teaching third grade at an elementary school in Walnut, Ernie is completing his 14<sup>th</sup> year of teaching in his present school district. He is a 35-year-old who attained his undergraduate degree from a public university situated in the same state where he teaches. He teaches classes part-time at the university to pre-service teachers. Since completing his undergraduate degree, Ernie furthered his education and earned two master's degrees. Originally, Ernie pursued a degree in construction science and management; however, he could not escape the allure of teaching as he was surrounded by educational practitioners throughout his life: "My grandfather and aunt were educators and it stood out to me as a possible option. I took an introductory course in education and I changed my major, never looking back."

Madison is a female middle school teacher from Walnut who teaches 8<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts. Serving in her 18<sup>th</sup> year as an educator in Walnut, Madison earned her undergraduate degree at a public university. She was born into a lower middle-class family and had no work experience prior to serving as classroom teacher. Madison knew early on in life that she would become a educator. She recalled, "I have childhood memories of pretending to be a teacher, very early in life. So that I could do more work at home, I stole workbooks from my elementary school teacher ... However, I grew up in a very strong feminist home thinking I could do more than any man could do. Initially, I attended college to pursue a degree in Pre-Med, but realized that I appreciated

Psychology. While pursuing my degree in in Psychology, I realized that I appreciated working with kids and earned my master’s degree in education.”

Heather is a 37-year-old high school high school math teacher, who teaches 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students. Prior to becoming a teacher, Heather worked as a waitress and as a tutor with Sylvan Learning Center. After completing her bachelor’s degree from a public institution, Heather completed a master’s degree and 60 additional graduate credit hours. Finishing her 15<sup>th</sup> year of teaching in Walnut, Heather realized that she experienced a very different economic situation than many of those she teaches. Raised by college-educated parents who served as teachers in the state capitol where she spent her early adolescent years, Heather described her childhood economic status as middle-class. She said, “Both parents were teachers in some form. Mom was a music teacher and Dad was a social worker, who retired and became a college professor. I enjoyed teaching and the experience as a whole.”

Unlike the students they serve, a majority of the Walnut teachers represented in the small sampling were raised in middle-class families. Only Madison’s family was identified as low socio-economic. Each teacher earned undergraduate degrees from public universities within the same state that they are employed and two of the three teachers have worked exclusively in Walnut School District. All of the educators included in the study were children of college educated people; in two out of the three cases, the teachers were inspired to teach by family members who preceded them as educators. It must also be noted that all three of the teachers interviewed in Walnut obtained graduate degrees.

## **Societal Influences**

The decision for Ernie and Heather to become educators may have resulted from the fact that they were pre-exposed to the field of education and influenced by a family member who served as educators. Although Madison did not speak of any family members serving in education and impacting her decision to teach, she recalled having lifelong passion for learning. When asked what factors contributed to their decision to teach in Walnut, all of the educators had similar responses explaining that they didn't target the district; rather, they needed a job and the district was one of the first to make an offer. Ernie stated, "My parents live here in the city where I teach. I applied at nearly all of the local school districts in the metropolitan area; both urban and suburban schools. However, the priority was to teach in the current school district because my younger siblings attended schools in the system." Since Ernie was a December graduate, he substitute taught and was asked to take on two different long-term assignments as a 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade substitute teacher in the same building. The principal offered him a position for the next year and he accepted. Madison taught in a small town in a neighboring state for a few years before moving to her present location. She went on to say with regards to accepting a position in Walnut, "They are the ones who hired me. I applied to teach in several suburban and a few urban schools in metro area. No, I didn't target the district I am teaching in; rather, I needed a job and they were the first school district that offered." In the case of Heather, she applied to work in several neighboring districts; including Walnut. As she shared her recollection of the events leading to her decision to work in Walnut, Heather mentioned that her only stipulation was that she worked in a district and city other than the one she grew to know as home. She stated,

“My husband applied for jobs in the city and wanted to find work as well. I wanted something different than staying in my hometown because I had always known it.”

According to each of the Walnut educators, there was no preference as to where they worked among the various school systems they applied for; however, they were aware of the benefits to working in the affluent community.

### **Focus and Continuity**

In comparing the various aspects of Walnut School District to that of their own adolescent educational experiences, there are similarities and differences. Ernie alluded to the fact that the demographics, SES, and academic privileges were common to that of his childhood experience. He said, “This district is very similar to the school district I grew up in. The same demographics and similar social economic status of its community members.” However, Madison and Heather spent their youth living in working class communities where access to a wide range of Advanced Placement (AP) courses other resources for a rewarding education were not as prevalent as the district they now serve in. Madison stated, “This is certainly a more affluent school district than where I attended. I attended school in a district in the [northern part of the metropolitan area] where it was a working-class community. What I love about this district is that the needs of middle school kids are put first as opposed to that of a Junior High School model I experienced as a pupil. The team teaching model along with the district’s philosophy of exposing students to a variety of things, draws me to teaching in the school district I serve in.” Other than the school sizes being similar in size the fact AP courses were offered at the school she attended, Heather noticed differences between Walnut and the school system where she was a student. She stated, “The school district is more

privileged than where I grew up. Access to more resources and the diversity of the schools I grew up in had more African American students and few Hispanic students. The school I serve in now has more students from India and Asia. The kids are more fortunate here than the kids growing up in the district I grew up in. Children have access to more AP courses and clubs.”

With the exception of Ernie, Walnut teachers described the school systems they attended during their youth as very different from where they presently serve. Madison, the middle school teacher, mentioned that she graduated from a school district that paled in comparison to the affluence of Walnut. Along with Harold, Madison noted the many differences their school districts had compared to where they work. Overall, Walnut teachers were very optimistic and happy about the high level of resources, organization of schools, curriculum, and the community’s perspective of the school system. They recognize that that their schools are a draw to many who live within or relocate to the metropolitan area.

### **Adversities of Teaching and Patterns of Success**

Teachers addressed the successes and challenges they faced while teaching in the Walnut School District. Ernie took pride in his ability to integrate technology into the classroom that allowed him to receive a new Smartboard to use for instruction: “We have a lot of resources to choose from in my school. I had the great fortune of having technology made available to me that may not have been available to others. Because, I did an excellent job of integrating technology in my daily instruction (such as a Smartboard in the classroom), I was given a stipend to purchase and use newer technology.” When Madison spoke of her success, she stated, “I am proud of the school I

teach at and the people I teach with. The mission of the school district speaks volumes and we try to produce really solid learners every day. Daily, I greet students with a handshake and I build really great relationships with students. Character education is huge at my school and it is important that we implement the principles of developing a safe atmosphere for all learners. The ability to think and to grow as a professional along with the support of leadership is tremendous and it keeps me energized.” As Heather reflected on her experience while teaching in Walnut School District, she mentioned how important it is watching students catch on to something that they thought they couldn’t do. She went on to say, “I teach Algebra 1 students who are normally the students who struggle the most at the high school level and I teach honors students who ironically experience issues. The ACT and state assessment scores along with student achievement have been great. I feel like the district has pushed me to do great things.” Being recognized as a “master teacher” by her peers served as a crowning moment for Madison, giving her a sense of accomplishment knowing that her colleagues labeled her as such.

Despite serving in an affluent school district that is often admired for its academic achievements, each of the educators faced challenges. Ironically, all three Walnut teachers commented on the extremes of having a lack of parental involvement on one hand while dealing with helicopter parents on the other. There is also an entitlement issue where parents and kids feel entitled to certain things (i.e. grades, retake tests, multiple chances to get things right). With both extremes, teachers believed they infringe upon instructional time and limit their ability to be more effective practitioners. Ernie suggested, “On one end you may have it where you lack parental involvement and you may have helicopter parents who take away from the instructional time.” Madison stated,

“Parents are a challenge for good and bad. We have some disengaged parents and families and some students do not get the support from home that they need. There is also an entitlement issue where parents and kids feel entitled to certain things (grades, retake tests, multiple chances to get things right). At times, I encounter overly aggressive parents wanting their students to be nearly perfect or parents who believe their child isn’t being challenged enough. I struggle with the commitment of some of my colleagues who simply come to work to punch in and punch out. Education isn’t necessarily valued in every home.” In addition to experiencing issues with parents, Heather commented that there are a variety of challenges she faces in Walnut. She said, “Motivating students who don’t want it or that they don’t care. Parents can be a challenge as they can be overbearing and try to save students from failing and not allowing students to take responsibility. Resilience and perseverance is something that some students lack because the parents try to fix problems.” In addition to being confronted by overbearing parents attempting to rectify student issues, Heather mentioned a limitation of time and resources can be a problematic. She went on to say, “Completing the curriculum in a set time and with the responsibility of doing more, as a teacher can be cumbersome. My principal does an excellent job of keeping the lowest classes small. Space is a challenge, as I have to share space and travel around (for one hour) between two classrooms.”

Heather noted that despite the affluence of Walnut School District, there are a few students who don’t have Internet access, which is a problem for students who are expected to access online textbooks that the district has adopted: “Students have access to graphing calculators in the class but may not have them at home. Financially, it may be a struggle for a few of our students to afford.” Finally, Ernie highlighted non-classroom

controls that impact his work. He said, “The longer you teach, the more politics you see. Certain people getting more interviews and opportunities to grow than others.”

All of the teachers shared anecdotes of success they experienced during their tenure in Walnut School District. They too feel that their contribution to student learning has been impactful and appreciated by their students and administrators. However, they also spoke candidly about the attitudes and behaviors of parents that adversely affect their drive and determination to be effective educators. In some instances, parents take a hands-off approach to their student’s learning and neglect to check in on their progress. On the other hand, “helicopter parents” attempt to intervene on behalf of their learners and try to dictate what teachers will do to provide a desired outcome. Walnut teachers stated that they feel like some of the students are unable to persevere through problems because of their dependency on being rescued by their parents or guardians.

### **Dilemmas, Expectations and Outcomes**

When confronted with problems, (i.e. time constraints, depth of the curriculum, student discipline, parental complaints, administrative concerns or discourse among colleagues) many of the educators have similar approaches. Heather alluded to the fact that she is expected to complete curriculum in a set time with the responsibility of doing more. She emphasized that she has students who live in households that are economically distressed and that some are unable to access the online assignments because they do not have the luxury of having internet service in their homes. Madison noticed during her tenure as an educator in Walnut that the commitment of colleagues was sometimes questionable, as it appeared that some simply came to work to punch in



and to punch out. In other words, she felt that they were not as passionate about the work associated with teaching in Walnut.

When confronted with issues many of the teachers had positive and similar approaches. Ernie said, “My first response is to communicate with parties involved. Try to stay ahead in communication and avoid being reactive. Be proactive.” Madison consults with her team of teachers or to her administrators who are very supportive. Heather tries to be more thoughtful in her reaction. She said, “I’m not an impulsive person and resist jumping to conclusions because some things settle themselves.” She also believes that when a kid acts inappropriately in class that something else is going on. As a school, they have minimal behavior issues compared to the urban school she attended. If something bothers her and she is unsettled, she will say something and work to resolve the situation.

In regards to the impression of the colleagues and peers that they serve with there were a variety of interesting responses. Ernie believed that he is becoming one of the more experienced teachers in his school. He went on to state, “The younger teachers leave after school lets out and don’t put in the extra time as those who have been in the game much longer. Some of the more veteran teachers feel jaded at times.” However, overall Ernie believed people love their jobs and do a great job of teaching students. Nobody hates their job.

Madison responded with, “There is a real difference between middle school and high school teachers. High School teachers are less collaborative than Middle School. The high school teachers struggle with participating in Professional Development. Many

of them think they know more and don't need any other directions to improve. Some may not have their heart in teaching as they once were.”

Heather on the other hand thought that her school has a “dynamic and very kid focused staff” who are fun to be around and willing to take risks. She continued to say about her colleagues, “They are very supportive and pretty diverse in their styles and personalities. Effective teachers. Kids mesh with different styles of learning.”

To hear Heather suggest that she encounters students who are “economically distressed” and unable to afford certain resources was unexpected, given the level of affluence in the district. When one thinks of the constituents of Walnut School District, poverty and limited access to necessities are the last things that come to mind. Most of the respondents explicitly stated that the commitment of some employees poses a problem. They felt that more often than not, some of the younger teachers work the bare minimum and are unwilling to go above and beyond the call of duty to see to it that work is done. Along with colleagues exhibiting a lack of passion, the middle school teacher felt that her high school counterparts were egotistical and self-absorbed. On the contrary, the high school teacher viewed her fellow high school colleagues to be collaborative, student focused, and willing to do what is best for kids.

### **Teacher Attributes and Commitment**

Addressing the question regarding some of the other potential teaching opportunities they have had outside of a suburban school setting, Madison and Heather mentioned that they were approached to serve in district-level positions but felt most comfortable with the classroom setting. “I taught in a rural school district and which had a population of only 16,000 people,” stated Madison. She went on to say, “Because it is

a college and a blue-collar town you had a mixture. I have never been recruited to teach outside of my current school district, but I was asked to apply to serve at the School District level. However, I wasn't ready to leave the classroom or the school setting."

Similarly, Heather recounted, "I have never looked for another job and I teach at the job I started with. My home school district offered me a position but that was early in my career. I can honestly say that I am satisfied where I am. My family and I live in a different district than where I serve, but they are able to attend schools in the same school district I teach. I want them to attend high school there as well."

Ernie has not looked or been approached by another school district; however, he is completing his administrative degree and he is seeking opportunities to lead in his current school system and in surrounding districts as well. Contributing factors for continuing to serve in Walnut School District rested in the fact that teachers feel they have good jobs, good compensation, and great colleagues. Teachers also felt that the appreciation from students, colleagues, and administrators has contributed to them remaining in the school system that they serve. Ernie stated, "I take comfort in knowing that I have a good job. One may say that I am complacent, which I am ok with. I am being compensated at a higher pay rate than other surrounding districts." Madison suggested, "I feel like I am a strong contributor and that I am giving it my best. I am motivated to do so. The adults have made it an enjoyable to place to serve and my school system has given me the room to grow." Last but not least, Heather said, "My happiness and my love of my job everyday are contributing factor for me wanting to stay. It's fun and every day is different. I feel that I always have room to grow and I feel supported and appreciated."

Teaching in a very successful school district, being a strong contributor, having room to grow, and motivation are a few reasons why they continue to teach in the school district. Not only are the educators committed to the boundaries of their schools, they are committed to the community in which they serve as an educator. Whether it is tutoring, volunteering at the church, or assisting others with understanding the educational process, they have made the surrounding Walnut community their own. Ernie rated his commitment as “very high.” He went on to say, “I tutor and volunteer at the church I attend, which is located in the community. Not to mention, I live in the community and I consider myself to be very active.” Madison stated, “I am strongly committed to the school I serve, but I appreciate living 20 minutes away from the community. I don’t want to live in the neighborhood which my students attend because I need the anonymity for my mental welfare. I appreciate my boundaries. Nevertheless, there is no question that I am very committed to serving the school community.”

While there has never been an instance where the Walnut teachers were close to leaving the school district that they presently serve, there are some scenarios that may prompt them to consider making an exit. Ernie would leave for a vertical opportunity where he can earn higher pay as an administrator. Madison has concerns with the district looking at pursuing a new middle school model with the next two years. She continued to say, “If I struggle with the philosophy of the middle school model and we lose focus on being student-centered, I may have to think about a change. There may be other working conditions that may contribute to me leaving, such as the elimination of plan time or adjustments to the contract.” A departure for Heather would be warranted if she stopped loving her job. “If I had more bad days than good days. If I no longer had the love and

drive for teaching. If I do not enjoy or feel valued by my administrators and if they ignored my critiques and concerns,” stated Heather.

Whether or not if Heather leaves Walnut on good terms, she would want to continue teaching as long as it is in a district where she is supported and challenged. “It depends on why I left”, Heather commented. She declared, “If I continued to love teaching I would prefer to teach at the high school level. I would go somewhere that I feel supported, but I don’t know where I would teach.” Although Heather is uncertain where she would continue teaching beyond Walnut School District, she would be open to serving in a rural, urban or suburban school; with the condition of it not being a school with a small enrollment. “I haven’t had as much experience teaching in an urban school district, but I would not be opposed to teaching in one. What’s important to me is that I find a place that I feel comfortable with and that I be challenged.” Heather is confident that wherever she chooses to teach, she will be able to inquire from someone she knows who could verify that the school and/or district embodies the attributes that are most important to her.

Other districts throughout their tenure ever courted none of the Walnut teachers interviewed for this study. The secondary teachers remarked that they were asked to consider serving in district-level capacities, but neither person had the desire to leave the classroom at the time. Based on their responses, Walnut teachers do not have a desire to teach in a different school system. They love their jobs and they feel as though they are making an impact by serving as classroom educators in their respective schools. The educators mentioned their satisfaction with the current salary structure and the amount they are compensated to teach. Ernie is pursuing an administrator position and is open to

serving wherever an offer is made. Naturally, he would prefer to continue working in Walnut, but he is not restricting his search to just one school district. Walnut secondary teachers stated that they would voluntarily leave their school system, if their zest for teaching diminished. Each believed that the passion to teach must be present in order to be effective.

### **Climate and Satisfaction**

All of the educators know of someone who voluntarily left the school district. Some left for vertical promotions and others left for not feeling appreciated which lead to unhappiness. One of the teachers left to serve as a director of testing/professional development at a charter school. Recently she became an Assistant Principal at a charter school and hopes to move up to a building principal. Madison knew others who left to pursue other career interests and industries. It was suggested by Heather that, “Some colleagues did not feel appreciated and were unhappy for a variety of reasons, like not being allowed to teach things they wanted, asked to do something they did not want to do (Collaborating, working in PLCs), politics, getting sucked into drama, not enjoying teaching or feeling as though it was not worth it and not supported.”

Each of the three teachers had different but thought-provoking views on how the school system is run (i.e. organization, reforms, implementation of programs, etc.). Ernie feels that things are underway but never reach the finish line. For example, they start a lot of initiatives but they are short-run, software and resources are purchased but they are never trained on how to utilize it and eventually drop the program and commence to doing something else. He also believes that very little research is done as to why they are using the reform or too little time permitted to collect data to determine its effectiveness.

Another challenge is that quality professional development that teachers are connected to is hard to come by. Some are better than others but it is challenging to find something that everyone will connect to. Madison offered her opinion by saying, "For the most part, it is a pretty cohesive school district. The superintendent and the school board work very well together. He is a visionary who sees the big picture and he believes in bringing teachers along. Our superintendent is an advocate for teachers and values them." She ended her comments by stating, "I am excited for where the school system is headed. We are not getting pressured for higher test scores as it was in the previous regime." Heather senses that the district is very competitive at wanting the best for the students. The district is student focused and emphasizes making a difference for kids as well as very progressive and willing to try things to enhance the profession and learning experience. The "growth mindset" is prevalent in her school district. The district likes to compare themselves Nationally and Internationally and believes success should be measurable in test scores.

When probed about what would make you dissatisfied with your school district, Ernie said that it would have to be something from an administrative point of view (building, district-wide) or someone in authority that is so egregious that goes against his moral and personal beliefs. Madison has a major focus on the middle school model. If it is not a win-win there will be some dissatisfaction. If teachers' rights and respect deteriorated to a degree and adversely affected the work, she indicated that would push her to look elsewhere. Heather would be displeased if the kids were not first and if the betterment and the well-being of students was no longer the focus. If she felt unhappy,

unvalued, or no longer making a difference with the students, that would increase the discontent.

Each of the Walnut educators offered advice to novice educators teaching in the school district in which they serve. Ernie stated that teachers needed to take the “begin with the end in mind” approach. If you get your master’s degree get it in Administration, more doors could be open for you. Avoid getting a master’s in something that won’t provide you with opportunities to advance. Make yourself sought-after and become highly qualified. Enjoy the moments with the kids and hold onto the cards and notes that demonstrate the gratitude others have for your work. Always consider yourself to be a professional. Madison, who was honored to receive recognition as a finalist for teacher of the year, emphasizes the importance of a quality educator in every classroom is what matters. “You and your commitment to building is what matters. A good teacher can teach anything,” stated Madison. She also reiterated that teaching is not for everyone and that there needs to be mechanisms in place to determine who can teach in the classroom. Finally, Heather recommended teachers to enjoy the little things and to have fun doing what they are called to do. However, she cautioned new teachers to stick to what they know is right for the kids and to keep a level head when dealing with kids and parents.

### **Conclusion**

Walnut teachers spoke openly about their life experiences and about their professional well-being. It was evidenced through teachers’ responses that their parents provided middle-class living accommodations that were a stark difference from what the students enrolled in their classrooms are accustomed to. Unlike the teachers in Cottonwood, none of teachers interviewed from Walnut attended schools within the



district that they work; thus, making the experience of teaching in Walnut School District unchartered territory. It appears that it is not important for Walnut teachers to be alumni or to have experienced attending a suburban school in order to be attracted to and remain committed educators teaching in the district. Farber's (1984) study, revealed that suburban teachers seldom feel "a psychological sense of community" in the schools they serve. According to Farber, 60.8% of the suburban teachers queried in his research felt that they rarely or never perceived there to be a sense of community in their schools; while only 15.2% thought that there was a sense of community within their institutions of learning (Farber, 1984). Despite his findings, suburban students score higher on achievement exams than their urban counterparts and they tend to set the bar for what academic excellence looks like.

Educators represented in the study recognized that they serve in a high performing school district within the state. Since Walnut School District is the standard bearer for all other school systems in the state, they do not feel the pressure to improve; rather, they work to maintain their prominence. Interesting enough, the teachers who contributed to this study feel that they are committed to the children and in their own unique way committed to the community in which they serve. With that said, none of the educators expressed their service as educators as being a moral obligation or discussed having made an "emotional investment" in Walnut. Undoubtedly, healthy relationships have been forged among teachers, students, parents and patrons, but the emotional ties are not as prevalent as that of Cottonwood. This line of thinking aligns with what Farber (1984) asserted in his work when he said concerning suburban teachers, "That many are

committed to teaching, that their motivation for continuing in the field consists of positive, rewarding contact with students” (p. 330).

One topic that nearly everyone spoke explicitly about was the issue with parental involvement. Some parents have adopted a hands-off approach to responding to students’ needs, while others are completely overbearing. In the eyes of Walnut teachers, students don’t take on the responsibilities for failures. “Helicopter parents” are to be blamed for students’ lack of resiliency. Once again, this point is supported by the findings of Farber’s research. Only 5.7% of suburban teacher believed that parents made their jobs easier while 66.1% of teachers surveyed felt that parents were a hindrance to their work. Although Farber’s study did not state why teachers’ perceptions were such, it may be assumed that the problems Walnut faced with parents would have been the same as the teachers questioned in the various suburban schools in the three New York counties of Westchester, Putnam and Dutchess. In spite of the parental annoyance, the good attributes of their students and that which is unique to a suburban school district outweigh any adversities.

When asked what conditions would lead them to consider leaving Walnut, Madison stated that she would make her exit if district leaders decided to alter the middle school model they are currently using. This aligns with Ingersoll’s (2003) findings when he stated, “school staffing problems are rooted in the way schools are organized.” Additionally, Madison went on to say if teachers were not given adequate time to plan or if the teacher contract was modified in a way that no longer honored them for the professional service they provide, she would leave her school system and seek opportunities elsewhere. Similarly, Heather suggested that she would leave Walnut if

leaders no longer valued her contributions, concerns and critiques. Once again, the assertions of both aforementioned teachers connect with Ingersoll's findings when he argued that teacher turnover can be attributed to a devaluing of the occupation of teaching (2003). Farber (1984) similarly found that 79.9% of teachers surveyed believed that society did not respect their profession; while just 6.2% disagreed.

## **Chapter 6 Conclusion - Comparison of Urban and Suburban Teachers**

After analyzing the responses of each subject from both Cottonwood and Walnut School Districts, it was clear that educators possessed commonalities with their respective views on education. It was also clear that respondents had varying perspectives about their experiences and overall outlook of the system. Despite the limitations associated with a qualitative study and a small number of participants, one could ascertain common themes between the two school systems as well as themes unique to each district. As in Chapters 4 and 5, this chapter is organized around the following themes:

- Background Experiences and Family Connections,
- Societal Influences,
- Focus and Continuity,
- Adversities of Teaching and Patterns of Success,
- Dilemmas, Expectations and Outcomes,
- Teacher Attributes and Commitment, and
- Climate and Satisfaction

### **Background Experiences**

All of the respondents stated that they were from working class families. Two out of three teachers from Cottonwood reported that their families were classified as low socio-economic status along with only one Walnut teacher identifying as such. Public universities are where each of the educators earned their undergraduate degrees. Two of the three educators from Cottonwood attained at least one graduate degree, while all of the teachers in Walnut attained at least one master's degree. It was interesting to note

that two out of three teachers from the suburban school district were pre-exposed to teaching during their childhoods. Although Melissa, the female middle school teacher from Walnut, did not speak of a relative serving as an educator, she fantasized and mimicked the actions of her teachers as a child. Only one teacher serving in the urban school district (Ellen) mentioned that they had a relative who served as an educator during her youth.

### **Societal Influences**

Based on the responses of those interviewed for this study, teachers from Walnut accepted their teaching assignments because it was either the first school district they applied for that responded with an offer. Madison stated, “They were the ones who hired me. I taught in another city within a neighboring state for a few years but decided to move to the metro area where I applied to teach in several suburban and a few urban schools. I didn’t target the district I am serving; rather, they were the first school district that offered.” Although there were no emotional ties to the suburban school district, each of the educators realized the significance of teaching in a highly regarded school system such as Walnut.

In Cottonwood, two of those questioned (the elementary teacher, Ellen, and the high school teacher, Harold) were products of the school district. Harold initially wanted to serve at his alma mater but was content serving at another school in the same school district. Both he and Ellen took pride in the fact that they were serving in the very school district that served as a foundation for who they became. Cottonwood was not a random selection for either educator to choose, and they were very intentional about where they wanted to be. Ellen shared, “I grew up in the district. I was taught as a young adult to

have pride in the community I grew up in, which led to me wanting to give back.” The notion of giving back appeared to be a common theme among the classroom practitioners from Cottonwood. This aligns with what Kozol (1991) found. Being driven to serve and reside in the community of their youth was important and served as the primary factor for their decision. According to several researchers, individuals are drawn to teach in schools that mirror the educational experience during their early adolescent years (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Kalogrides, Loeb, & Béteille, 2013). Moreover, educators are more inclined to teach in the school district they attended, which is the point made by Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff (2004). Although this holds true for the teachers interviewed from Cottonwood, the same could not be said for the Walnut teacher participants.<sup>3</sup>

### **Focus and Continuity**

With the exception of the Ernie, elementary school teacher from Walnut, teachers from the aforementioned school district attended educational institutions in communities that were very different from where they serve. Respondents mentioned that they grew up in blue-collar, working class municipalities. They considered Walnut to be a far more affluent district that offers far more opportunities for students than the school communities they were accustomed to during their childhood and youth. Conversely, the teachers of Cottonwood attended schools similar to where they teach. In fact, as noted earlier, two of the teachers received their formal education in Cottonwood while their colleague attended a school with similar demographics. Interesting enough, the teachers

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<sup>3</sup> A larger sample of Walnut teachers undoubtedly would have included a number who did attend the district’s schools. The small sample of participants in the study may not have been reflective of such experiences.

working in the urban school setting noted that the demographics of the school district and community are different from what it was during their youth. Harold reminisced how the school district was predominantly White when he attended school in Cottonwood, whereas now there are more African-American and Latino students enrolled in the school system. Ellen shared the same sentiments, but she went on to say that there is more of a push to accommodate learners in order to meet their needs, rather, than providing “a one size fits all” approach to teaching.

### **Adversities of Teaching and Patterns of Success**

The teachers from both districts were able to verbalize the challenges they have and continue to face. It was fascinating to see that each educator mentioned adults as being directly responsible for the adversities they face. However, the reasons why and who those adults are that impede the work of teachers are different. Teachers from Walnut exclaimed that they must deal with what Ernie referred to as “helicopter parents” who hover around their students, the classroom and teacher to ensure that their children get what they are “entitled to” academically. Heather described some of the parents as being “overbearing” and always attempting “save students from failing and not allowing them to take responsibility.” She went on to say that this adversely affects students and prevents them from being resilient learners who are unable to persevere. Madison mentioned that she sees both the very active parents and she has encountered parents who are disengaged with what is going on with their students’ academic progress.

With the exception of Ellen, teachers in Cottonwood did not mention parental involvement as being a challenge; rather, they focused more on the issues of leadership and the bureaucracy of their district. When the Walnut teachers spoke of the overbearing

parents they often encounter, it aligns with the research that suggests highly educated parents are more likely to demand that the needs of their children are met by their teachers than the parents with an inferior caliber of educational attainment (Rury & Akaba, 2014). Oftentimes, parents who have attained higher degrees of education, reside in suburban communities where their students attend school and they require what Farber (2001) insists as being “unrealistic and unfair expectations of teachers.” (p. 330) There was mention of a lack of parental support, but the principal cause for concern was rooted in the ability to remain relevant and appropriately credentialed to serve the students they encounter.

Teachers from both school systems spoke candidly about what they considered to be success. Every teacher alluded to the fact that he or she got joy out of seeing students become confident learners as a result of their actions and support. Cottonwood educators spoke about the significance of their role in the lives of students and the contributions they made towards cultivating successful learners. In each of their responses, these teachers spoke of their ability to develop healthy and sustainable relationships with students. In each case, teachers alluded to the fact that they were proud of their longevity in the same school system because they were able to educate generations of students from the same families.

Additionally, the respondents from the urban school district revealed aspects of their jobs that enabled them to exercise leadership attributes for the betterment of students. Freedman and Appleman (2009) highlighted this notion when they alluded to the idea that urban school teachers believe that they have the ability to impact and influence the lives of their students with the knowledge and skills they possess. Ellen



works in a “Literacy Lab” where she models for colleagues how they can best support learners. Melissa spoke passionately about the connections she made with students that endeared her to them and vice versa. Melissa also recalled the instance where she took students to participate in a state math competition as well as developing a student with ADHD into becoming a mentor to kindergarten student who struggled with the disability.

Similarly, Walnut teachers spoke of their influence on students and the positive impact they made in the lives of students. Whether it was their ability to incorporate innovation in their professional practice, nurturing character-building within each of their learners or witnessing struggling learners achieve mastery of complex concepts, educators felt that their roles were important. Heather expressed satisfaction in knowing that a majority of her students have been able to attain scores that reflect college readiness on the ACT and on state accountability assessments. Marzano (2003) and Delpit (2006) associated higher achievement with quality of instruction. They surmised that students exposed to lessons that are engaging throughout an instructional period of time are more likely to perform at a higher level on standardized exams.

Although teachers from both school districts spoke of the achievements and gains they have made throughout their careers, one may wonder if Delpit’s (2006) conjecture based on what she observed during her research is true in these instances. It was suggested that high achieving students experience engaging instructional practices from their teachers as well as high quality lessons that captivate their attention throughout its duration.

Certainly, the urban teachers represented in this sample do not appear to be the stereotypical urban educator described by researchers who proclaim that low performing students are more likely to receive less engaging learning experiences than their suburban

contemporaries. (Marzano, 2003; Delpit, 2006). However, Hanushek and Pace (1995) believe that it may be related to the aptitude of the teacher as to whether or not if students can and will achieve at higher levels. A teacher who is identified to be high achieving (or highly intelligent) will influence the students that they teach to excel. Unfortunately, this study does not lend itself to determine whether or not if this is true regarding the Cottonwood and Walnut teachers included in this study.

### **Dilemmas, Expectations and Outcomes**

Respondents from both districts use caution when confronted with daily problems and are not quick to judge situations without performing a thorough investigation. Cottonwood's Harold stated, "I don't overreact to anything. Respond with caution and listen before I react. This keeps me from experience burn-out." Similarly, Heather in Walnut said, "I try to be thoughtful in my reaction. I am not an impulsive person and I resist jumping to conclusions because some things settle themselves." Overall, teachers included in this study avoid making a rush to judgment when confronted with problems.

As teachers reflected on their impression of their peers, differing thoughts emerged from each school system. Colleagues from Cottonwood believed they served alongside "dedicated" and "hardworking" educators who were constantly working to improve upon their practice. One could sense from their responses that teachers serving in the urban school district felt a sense of pressure to close the achievement gap between the students of Cottonwood and students from across the state. Despite being committed to playing integral roles in the success of Cottonwood students, educators stated that the demands of the job have taken its toll upon their colleagues.

There was no clear and consistent theme realized from the sentiments of Walnut teachers; rather, they spoke of the self-centered attributes colleagues embodied. Those interviewed from the suburban school system voiced their frustration with newer teachers who end their workday at the precise time they are allowed. They also stated their annoyance for colleagues who do not engage in professional development and show little to no interest in its benefits. Essentially, some of the Walnut teachers included in this study believe that there is not a sense of community within their schools. This possibly reflects Farber's (1984) findings that a majority of the suburban teachers did not perceive their schools to have the characteristics of a community. Heather's view of Walnut colleagues was a bit different from what had been espoused by the other Walnut teachers. She saw colleagues in a positive light and expressed her pleasure of working with them. Although this may vary from one building to another, Farber (2001) suggested that a majority of suburban teachers have rewarding contact with their colleagues and they are more than likely to get along with those they interact with.

### **Teacher Attributes and Commitment**

Out of the six educators interviewed for this study, only two from Cottonwood have been courted by other school districts to teach. Two of the educators from Walnut admitted that they were asked to apply for district-level positions within their current school system, but none have been recruited by other school districts. All of the teachers interviewed are content and committed to serving the students attending their respective schools and districts. According to nearly all of the teachers, with the exception of Walnut's Ernie, it would take something major to happen within their respective districts

in order for them to consider leaving. However, the reasons for teacher commitment are differ between the urban and suburban teachers represented in this study.

Respondents from Walnut appreciate the compensatory benefits and scholarly rewards associated with teaching in a very high performing school district. Motivated by students' success, teachers are empowered to grow and pursue opportunities that may enrich and empower their professional standing. Much like Cottonwood teachers, Walnut teachers believe they are committed to serving the students within their schools. However, there is a stark difference in their dedication for serving the community at-large. It must be noted that Walnut educates students from three different municipalities situated in the same county. As it was revealed through their responses, two of the three teachers from the affluent school system have never resided in the district's boundaries and it did not appear to be something that they felt was necessary in order to be effective teachers there.

Cottonwood teachers appear to have a deeply rooted passion and connectedness to the students, parents, and patrons of the community. Each teacher spoke with conviction about their decision to teach in Cottonwood. Despite the various forms of adversities that are often experienced in an urban school, the teacher participants in this district feel that it is their responsibility to demonstrate to students that they can achieve a better life when aspiring for academic excellence. Harold believes the fact that he is a man of color serving as an educator in the school district he attended as youth, allows him to influence the lives of every student he encounters. According to Freedman and Appleman (2009), the perspective of Harold is the norm for many urban school educators. Urban school teachers accept the burdens and the challenges associated with high poverty schools

because they believe their influence and expertise will make a profound impact upon the lives of their students (Kozol, 1991; Nieto, 2003; Payne, 2008; Freedman and Appleman, 2009). Only among the Cottonwood respondents did the teacher participants graduate from schools in the district, which is a valued characteristic associated with urban school teachers (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Kalogrides, Loeb, & Béteille, 2013). When an African American student has the great fortune of having a highly qualified teacher who shares the same ethnicity, it has the potential to be the defining moment of child's path to becoming successful learner according to recent research (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

### **Climate and Employee Satisfaction**

One could surmise that longevity of teaching in an urban school correlates with one's background of either being homegrown or someone who received an education in their formative years in a similar setting. Perhaps, highly qualified veteran urban educators are as effective in what they do because of the emotional ties that exist between them and the community that they serve (Kozol, 1991; Abbott, Collins & Patterson, 2004). Based on the responses, it appears that the teachers from Cottonwood believe their contributions towards educating students in an urban school system are critically important, and that it is up to them to assist with guiding students towards pursuing a better life. In essence, they feel compelled to teach the next generation of underrepresented students. A sense of duty to the students of Cottonwood and a sense of purpose are driving forces for their continued service as urban educators (Nieto, 2003).

## **Limitations**

Although an attempt was made to understand the perceptions of highly qualified veteran urban and suburban teachers and to discern why they continue to serve in their respective school systems, the limitations of this exploratory qualitative study do not lend itself to form a conjecture. Given the brevity and the format of this inquiry, it was delimited in its scope. Ideally, a larger sample of classroom teachers – proportionate to the overall demography of districts’ teacher workforce (i.e. ethnicity, gender and average age of all teachers) – would be represented in this work. If this study could be extended, representation from each grade level along with all core subject areas would be included to gauge respondents’ perceptions as well their level of commitment to teaching in urban and suburban schools. Furthermore, a comparison could be made to see if there is a link between educators across grade, content and school levels. It would have also been nice to interview multiple educators from each of the three grade levels. We could have expanded the insight of teachers with varying backgrounds (i.e. various ethnic backgrounds, more males, and Walnut alumni serving as teachers) to get a sense about the educational landscape.

## **Implications**

Through participants’ responses from Cottonwood and Walnut Public Schools, it is evident that they are committed to serving the children in their various school communities. The six educators felt confident in their ability to teach and they believed that they contributed to the well-being of students’ academic growth. With this said, there was a distinct difference between the three teachers from Cottonwood and the three teachers from Walnut with regards to what draws them to educate students in their

respective school communities. Russo (2004) stated that teachers for social justice recognize oppression in various ways and they take action within classroom to disrupt the oppressive cycles. Cottonwood participants have a social justice mission that is predicated on changing the status of the students they serve by helping them realize endless possibilities that they can pursue. Not only do they want students to succeed, but they want parents, guardians and patrons of Cottonwood to realize that they can rise above their circumstances and improve their quality of life. All of the urban teachers believed it was their responsibility and their duty to give back to a school system that educates underprivileged children. In Delpit's (2006) terms, Cottonwood participants identified themselves as warm demanders who refuse to allow students to fail as a result of mediocre instruction and subpar learning environment. Ellen and Harold explicitly took pride in knowing that they could inspire students from the same community of their youth as they saw themselves as role models who went on to further their education and to pursue fulfilling careers. Along with Melissa, Cottonwood participants believed the relationships they formed with students, parents and guardians made a profound impact towards the betterment of the surrounding community in such a way that they could not walk away.

A sense of influence that dramatically changes the lives of students was absent from the dialogue of the three Walnut teachers. As previously stated, none of the teachers were alumni of Walnut or spent their childhood living in the community.<sup>4</sup> Because of the ideal attributes of an affluent community such as Walnut, teachers did not feel compelled to rescue learners and show them a better way of living, because many of their students

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<sup>4</sup> Although none of the participating teachers attended Walnut schools, it is very likely that they have colleagues who did. This was a consequence of randomly selecting participants.

were living at a higher economic status than their teachers. Similar to Cottonwood educators, Walnut teachers want their students to succeed academically. However, the thrust of their mission is to ensure that a majority of their students maintain their social and economic standing.

A glaring difference between the three teachers of Cottonwood and the three teachers from Walnut was their relationship with or perspective of parents and guardians. Despite pointing out a lack of parental involvement and a desire to see it increase, urban teachers interviewed for this study spoke of the bonds they have formed with parents, guardians and families; in some cases, the bonds are multi-generational. Cottonwood participants felt empowered to present to parents and guardians the possibilities they and their students can excel. Unlike Cottonwood teachers, Walnut teachers spoke candidly about overbearing parents and guardians getting in the way of their work. They believe there is a feeling of entitlement among many of their parents and that they oftentimes are burdened by unreasonable demands. Two of the educators stated that they periodically encounter parents who consume time, resources and energy; whereas the teachers from Cottonwood felt that their purpose for educating urban students was so that they could access whatever it took improve student achievement. Despite their discomfort regarding the attitude of helicopter parents, Walnut participants realize that their purpose is to ensure academic success for all students is influenced by the desire of parents, guardians and patrons of the community.

There remains a sense of curiosity as to the messages and themes that would be derived from an extensive quantitative study that addresses the questions posed for this study. It would be revealing for school districts to conduct exit interviews as well as



record and compile the results of teachers' attitudes and perspectives of their work and of the educational entity they serve at various points of the school year. This could lead to increased understanding of teacher retention and a development of interview questions that serve as a gauge for identifying candidates who will possibly better serve students.

Because the achievement gap remains between urban and suburban schools and because there continues to be demand for highly qualified classroom teachers to fill the vacancies caused by teacher turnover, school systems across the country must begin developing teachers from within. In addition to developing sustainable alternative teacher certification and licensure routes that are targeted towards those who serve in the district as educational support personnel (i.e. Paraprofessionals, parent and community engagement specialists, school nurses, secretaries, custodians, bus drivers, nutritional service, security officers, etc.), it would behoove schools to establish programs that attract students to pursue careers in K-12 education. Perhaps, schools can begin partnering with local colleges and universities to begin grooming scholars in their initial high school experience to become teachers.

So much attention has been given to promoting career paths that involve science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; while not addressing the proverbial teacher shortage and impending vacancies caused by attrition. Simply instituting a "Teachers of Tomorrow" chapter in a high school will not suffice; rather, students will need to be exposed to the field of education early and through various routes (such as tutoring, apprenticeships with classroom teachers, student teaching experiences in schools, and similar experiences). If well-planned, intentional programs are developed to "grow your

own” teachers, perhaps the tide will be turned and even greater numbers of highly qualified teacher will choose to serve and remain in urban schools.

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## Appendix A

- What is your age?
- What is your ethnicity?
- What grade level of students do you teach?
- How many years have you taught in this school district?
- Which category best describes the type of college or university you completed during your undergraduate degree: Private (Jesuit, Ivy League or Liberal Arts) or a Public institution?
- What is the highest level of education you've completed?
- How would you describe your family's socio-economic status during your child rearing years?
- Do you have previous work experience?
  - If so, what industry did you work in?
- Why did you decide to pursue a career in teaching?
- What factors contributed to your decision to teach in this district?
- What aspects of the school district were/are similar or different to that of your own educational experience while growing up?
- Describe to me some of the successes you've experienced while teaching in the school district.
- Describe to me some of the challenges you've faced while teaching in the school district.
- What is your first response when issues arise?
- What is your impression of the colleagues/peers you serve with in the same school district?
- Talk about some of the other potential teaching opportunities you've had outside of an urban (or suburban) school setting.
- What contributed to you remaining in the school system you serve?
- Why do you continue to teach in the school district?
- How would you rate your commitment to the community in which you serve as an educator?
- What would make you leave the school district?
  - Where would you go?
- Has there ever been an instance(s) where you were close to leaving the school district presently serve?
  - If so, what made you stay?
- If you know of someone who voluntarily left the school district, what was the reason for his or her departure?
- What are your views on how the school system is run (i.e. organization, reforms, implementation of programs, etc.)?
- What advice would you offer to a novice educator teaching in the school district you serve in?
- What would make you dissatisfied with your school district?

