

## **ABSTRACT**

BIGELOW, JENNIFER LISTON. Where Did They Go?: Factors leading to attrition among Catholic School Principals. (Under the direction of Dr. Lance Fusarelli.)

The purpose of this research was to explore the factors leading to the attrition of Catholic School Principals over a ten-year timeframe of 2004-2014. The study analyzed data from a Catholic Diocese in the Southern region of the United States. This research explored the lived experiences of 4 principals who have left their job to understand the factors leading to their attrition. A basic qualitative research design was used to explore the lived experiences of former principals in a Catholic Diocese in the Southern region of the United States in part because a plethora of research and data simply does not exist that uncovers the reasons and thought processes that lead to attrition among principals in Catholic schools. Very few studies probe the reasons behind attrition and even fewer delve into the experiences of those that have left the position. Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews to identify and analyze themes from the transcripts of what was said by the principals to further understand the issue of why they left their positions.

Clarification emerged because of the themes from the analysis of data utilizing a person-environment fit framework. The themes that became apparent were as follows: (a) pastor-principal relationship; (b) support or lack thereof from the Office of Catholic Schools; and (c) role of stakeholders from the church/school leadership. In addition, some of the participants experienced crises of faith because of their experiences.

The researcher has noted several implications for practice including a) the Superintendent of Catholic Schools should inform the decision of Bishop in assigning pastors

to parishes with schools, b) provide for or advocate for professional development and formation of pastors assigned to parishes with schools to understand the needs and nature of parochial schools, and c) increased support from the Office of Catholic Schools to include the development of a robust fit-environment screening instrument for prospective principals and an effective mentoring program. Future research is warranted to study the Pastor-Principal-Superintendent dynamic and the effect on Catholic schools as well as to expand or replicate this study to other Catholic dioceses.

Where did Everyone Go? Factors Leading to Attrition among Catholic School Principals

by  
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## **DEDICATION**

This study is dedicated to all of the hard-working mothers striving to achieve their dreams. It is also dedicated to the men and women who serve the Catholic Church as ministers of education.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Jennifer Liston Bigelow was born in Connecticut, lived in Minnesota but raised in the state of Florida. She attended Catholic grade school at Corpus Christi Catholic School and high school at the all-girls Academy of the Holy Names. Jennifer credits her Catholic school background for her love of all things education. Jennifer began her teaching career at a public middle school. She also taught at a public high school before returning to her alma mater to teach history. Jennifer attributes her love of teaching to the fantastic girls who are now women(!) from the Academy. Jennifer has served in various administrative roles and is currently the Superintendent of Schools for the Catholic Diocese of Arlington.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the love and support of my family during this process. I began my doctoral program at another university in 2003. There were many times when I questioned whether I could or would finish my degree and I am pleased to say, yes, I finished!

This was made possible by the support of many including my husband Todd, my daughter, Caitlin, my parents Ginger and John, and by Fr. Mark G. Reamer, O.F.M.

During this journey, I gave birth to the funniest, smartest, cutest girl I know. It was not easy for me being pregnant and being in a doctoral program at the same time. I am truly grateful to Dr. Lance Fusarelli and Dr. Tim Hatcher who supported me through this specific time and helped me to keep the doctorate in perspective because family is more important than anything.

I am also grateful for the support of my entire committee, Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli, Dr. Umbach, and Dr. Jaeger and in particular to, Dr. Lance Fusarelli who encouraged me to follow my dream of studying Catholic school principals

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM**

Looking around the conference room, I realized that I was no longer the fresh face among the principals. In fact, I was now one of the senior members of the club. How could this have happened so quickly? It was only my sixth year as principal in this area and I realized that I didn't know most of the people around the table. Where did everyone go? Respected colleagues suddenly packed up and moved across the country. Others seemed to have slipped away into the night. While with others, it had become more a question of who would be the next principal at St. ABC School as the principal rotation continued.

I understood that phenomenon. In fact, when I was hired in 2008 at St. Example School, I was the fourth principal in eight years. I asked about this fact during my interview. The search committee was forthright and told me that there had not been a strong working relationship between the pastor and the principal. Fortunately for me, the expectations for my position were clear from the beginning. After I was hired, I began to hear stories about the previous principals and their working relationships with the pastors. I began to think about how that might be influencing what was happening to my colleagues. Did they also have a poor working relationship with their pastors? Were the expectations of the job clearly communicated to them? Or was it something else?

I began a mental count of the attrition among principals since arriving to the area and thought that the number was high. I began examining data from the Diocesan office over the last ten years and learned that, in fact, 42 principals had left their position despite there being

only 24 elementary and high schools in the Diocese. Again, intuitively, that seemed to be a high number. The question that kept persisting was, why were they leaving?

### **Statement of the Problem**

Principals are hired for their ability to lead schools effectively. They must be able to proficiently navigate an environment with a variety of stakeholders and interest groups. Historically presenting a background in classroom management as a teachers, most principals advance after receiving specialized training from a master's program, with or without an internship component. Hopefully that gives them the opportunity to see what life is like “on the other side.”

When choosing to become a principal, one can be lured into the false assumption that the title, itself, conveys a sense of ultimate authority. In reality, principals answer to whoever resides above them on the organizational chart, as well as to teachers, administrative staff, students, parents, community groups, the media, and in the case of Catholic school principals, religious authority. With the variety of constituents that a principal answers to, one may wonder why someone would choose the position at all. Studies have indicated that principals in Catholic schools report higher levels of job satisfaction when they experience financial security, a culture committed to Catholic education, continuing challenges arising from the job, and a vision for the school itself (Fraser & Brock, 2006). Because there are very few studies that explore why a principal leaves, this study attempts to shed some light on the factors that influence this phenomenon. Specifically, this study looks at principals in a Catholic diocese in the southeastern region of the United States.

Schools today require good leadership. In a school community, we look to the principal to serve as the leader for all stakeholders, yet the demands on the principal have changed substantially in the last twenty years. Principals were once seen as managers of a school but now, they are additionally asked to be facilitators, collaborators, coaches, technology innovators, and chief inspiration officers (Hine, 2003). Research tells us that strong management can have positive effects on student achievement, faculty morale, and on school-community partnerships. School level leadership plays a role in the school culture, teachers' perceptions of their work environment, the quality of the teaching staff, and student outcomes (Baker, 2010). In 2012, the Center for Public Education released a meta-analysis of recent studies that detailed the importance of principal leadership. The analysis looked at recent studies in the area of the impact of principals on their schools. Researchers noted that principals have an effect estimated to be second only to teachers (Seashore-Louis, Wahlstrom, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010), with their biggest impact found in elementary schools and in high-poverty, high-minority schools. In general, schools that have highly effective principals:

- Perform 5 to 10 percentage points higher than if they were led by an average principal (Branch, Hanushek & Rivkin, 2012; Waters, Marzano & McNulty 2003).
- Have fewer student and teacher absences (Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003).
- Have effective teachers stay longer (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb 2011; Branch, Hanushek & Rivkin 2012; Portin, et al. 2003).
- Have principals who are more likely to stay for at least three years (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin 2012).
- Have principals who have at least three years of experience at that school (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin 2012).

While change may sometimes be a good thing, research suggests that multiple principal changeovers can be detrimental to a school community. Relative to sites with zero

to one principal transitions, schools with two principals moves have lower test scores on average (Miller, 2013). Over a twelve-year period, schools with three or more principal transitions have still lower scores. Across schools, those which undergo frequent leadership changes are more disadvantaged (in terms of student achievement, student socioeconomic status, and teacher retention) than those with stable leadership (Miller, 2013).

Given this research, it is important to understand why a principal might leave their position at a given school or leave the profession entirely. The problem is not solely found in public schools. It also persists in Catholic schools. As asserted by Durow and Brock (2004):

retaining Catholic school principals in a climate in which fewer individuals seek the principalship is critical to continued quality leadership in Catholic education. When principals leave their positions, not only is the continuity of leadership interrupted, but a discouraging message is also imparted to future candidates (p. 194).

While the principal maintains a key position in a school, there is a lack of applicants for principal positions, not only in the United States but also in other countries such as New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom (Canavan, 2001). Even when there may be sufficient candidates with credentials, not all are applying for jobs. At the same time, the attrition rate of principals is increasing. Brother Kelvin Canavan (2001) of the Catholic Office of the Archdiocese of Sydney shared that:

For the 2001 school year, 27 principal vacancies were advertised in the Archdiocese of Sydney. A total of 39 applications were received. In the previous year, 26

applications were received for 17 vacancies. In both years, some positions were readvertised and some acting principals were appointed (p. 73).

On average, from a given starting point, approximately half of principals no longer remain after about 5 years, and nearly 75% have made at least one move to another school, as evidenced in the state of Missouri (Baker, 2010). The significance of the problem has been noted in public, private and Catholic schools. According to the *Principal Attrition and Mobility Report* for the 2008-2009 and 2011-2012 school years issued by the U.S. Department of Education, attrition of public school principals in the 2008-2009 school year was 13.7%, while attrition of private school principals was 17.1% and the attrition of Catholic school principals was 10.8%. In the report detailing attrition of principals in the 2011-2012 school year, the loss had increased for each group: 15.6% for public school principals, 18% for private school principals, and 16.9% for Catholic school principals. In the current study, the diocese studied during the 2004-2014 time period had an alarming attrition rate of 65% among elementary school principals.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study sought to understand why Catholic school principals leave their position. To do this, I sought to discover the lived experiences of former principals in a Catholic diocese in the Southeastern region of the United States. Catholic schools have been experiencing both a lack of candidates for the principal position and an increase in turnover. Specifically, a Catholic Diocese in the South has lost 42 principals in the last ten years. This is important because longevity can positively enhance school climate and student achievement (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). In an educational world that includes many

choices for parents (public, charter, private, parochial), Catholic schools need to be attentive to the problem of attrition among principals. If we can understand the underlying factors influencing this loss, we can then proactively reduce these rates. This study explores the factors leading to the attrition among these principals and attempts to analyze the themes that emerge from the data elicited from interviews.

### **Research Question and Subquestions**

What factors influence attrition among Catholic school principals?

#### *Subquestions*

How did the pastor-principal relationship impact attrition?

How did family life or personal needs influence attrition?

How did conflict with school stakeholders influence attrition?

What role did the potential or lack of career advancement play in attrition?

How did agreement or disagreement with Church teachings influence attrition?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this qualitative study is derived from concept of person-environment fit. Drawing from organizational psychology, person-environment fit refers to the compatibility between an individual and a work environment that occurs when the characteristics of each are well matched (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Literature in this area provides a useful tool in considering principal attrition. Within this framework, several domains have been devised. In the meta analysis of literature regarding person-environment fit research, researchers reviewed studies utilizing the following categories: person-job, person-group, person-organization, and person-supervisor (Kristof-

Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). The theoretical framework for this study looks at person-job fit, person-organization fit, person-supervisor fit, but not person-group fit. Person-group fit refers to a fit between a person and co-workers. In the structure of a Catholic school, in which the principal is the supervisor and does not have peers/co-workers, this fit type is not applicable and will not be examined.

Person-job fit is defined by the extent to which there is a match between a person's knowledge, skills, and abilities to the job requirements. In addition, person-job fit refers to an employee's needs, desires, or preferences and how they can be met by the job they perform (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). The initial search and hiring process was explored with each participant within the context of person-job fit to see to the extent that there was a match.

Person-Organization fit looks at how well the employee matches with the people in the entire organization (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). The literature also refers to value congruence between the employee and the employing organization. Some research regarding person-organization fit has been completed regarding teachers and their fit at a particular school. In the K-12 school context, person-organization fit has been referred to as the extent to which the needs of an individual teacher are met and/or the extent to which the needs of an individual teacher meets the needs of the school (Youngs, Pogodzinski, Grogan, and Perrone, 2015). In their work, the authors also argue that research ought to be completed in the area of K-12 education utilizing this model. In a personal communication with the lead author, it has been determined that this model would be useful, but to date, has

not be used in the area related to principal attrition (P. Youngs, personal communication, September 21, 2015).

Person-group fit generally looks to the degree of fit between an employee and their co-workers (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). For the present study, this category will not suffice as a delineator. The principal of a Catholic school has no other peer at their organization so it would be difficult to assess the degree of their fit in this regard. Therefore, person-group fit is not studied.

Person-Supervisor fit looks at the degree of congruence of the subordinate and the supervisor (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). For the purposes of this study, the parish pastor is the supervisor and the principal is the subordinate.

One area that has not been studied in the research is a concept I will call person-stakeholders fit (A. Kristof-Brown, personal communication, September 21, 2015). For a Catholic school principal, their fit with the stakeholders of the school is important because principals are accountable to parents and the larger parish community; both of which support the school financially. In the current study, the degree of fit between the principal and the stakeholders is explored.

Person-environment fit provides the foundation of the questions asked of participants. The goal is to understand how fit has impacted attrition and what type of fit match or mismatch are most prevalent among principals who have left their positions in this study.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Types of Catholic schools:** Catholic schools may be categorized in several ways.

Parochial schools are Catholic schools that are part of a larger Catholic parish.

Independent Catholic schools fall under the general auspices of the Bishop of a Diocese but are not attached to a specific parish.

**Attrition:** a reduction in the workforce

**Personal Needs:** refers to the personal welfare of an individual including financial needs, family needs, and social needs

**Career Advancement:** the opportunity to progress in career status financially and/or with title

**School stakeholders:** constituents having business with the school. Stakeholders include but are not limited to parents, staff, students, and community members

**Church teachings:** refers to the teachings of the Catholic Church which are to be adhered to and promulgated by staff members at a Catholic school

### **Significance of the Study**

The factors impacting attrition among Catholic school principals may have changed in the last ten years when a similar study was conducted by Durow and Brock in 2004. In addition, there may be factors that are specific to the Diocese studied in this research. It is the hope that uncovering the factors will lead to further research to find ways to minimize attrition among Catholic school principals.

#### *Significance for Prospective Principals of Catholic Schools*

There is a misconception that Catholic schools are easier to manage than public schools. It is more accurate to suggest that they are different and that each comes with a set

of opportunities and challenges. It is important for prospective principals of Catholic schools to understand the specific challenges leading to attrition in this type of setting. Factors studied in this dissertation such as the pastor-principal relationship and Church teachings may be unique factors to a Catholic school.

#### *Significance for Current Principals of Catholic Schools*

As with any job, individuals look for ways to increase their longevity in the position. By understanding the underlying factors that lead to attrition among Catholic school principals, those individuals can better find strategies to overcome those obstacles. Additionally, they may be able to seek out professional development opportunities to ensure that attrition factors can be minimized.

#### *Significance for Pastors of Catholic Parishes*

The pastor of a Catholic parish with a Catholic school should understand the importance that the school plays in the overall purpose and mission of the parish. The Catholic school is usually the greatest financial risk to a parish and can also yield wonderful opportunities. The pastor-principal relationship can be key to the success for a Catholic school principal and it is incumbent upon the pastor to learn about and to mitigate factors that lead to attrition.

#### *Significance for Diocesan Catholic School Offices*

While most Diocesan Catholic Schools Offices do not have the authority to hire and fire Catholic school principals (that power lies with the pastor), the office undoubtedly has substantial influence on and responsibility for attrition rates. It is the hope of this researcher that Diocesan Catholic Schools Offices will endeavor to provide appropriate professional

development for prospective and current principals to support them in the role. In addition, it is paramount that professional development be provided to the pastors of a given diocese to understand the nature and needs of Catholic school heads to minimize turnover.

#### *Significance for Seminary Directors*

Pastors in a given diocese are formed and trained in seminaries. Most seminaries do not provide training for prospective pastors on how to manage a Catholic school or how to form a positive working relationship with the Catholic school principal (Boyle & Dosen, 2017). Many pastors shy away from leading a parish with a school because they lack the training and education in how to effectively manage the environment (Convey, 1999). Seminary education must include this training as well as providing professional development in this regard for priests who become pastors.

### **Overview of Approach**

The genesis of this study arose from reviewing the results of a study by two researchers at Creighton University in 2004. The researchers investigated the factors influencing retention and attrition among Catholic school principals in a Midwest diocese. The study employed a survey as well as semi-structured interviews (Durow & Brock, 2004). I initially decided to use the last ten years as the timeframe to coincide with this study from 2004. Utilizing that timeframe, there were 42 principals in the diocese to be studied that had end dates or termination dates between 2004-2014. In addition, there are some principals that were interim principals. Given the short-term nature of the positions, those individuals were excluded from the study. I also reviewed the list with the Superintendent of Catholic Schools for this Diocese. Per his instruction, there were seven potential participants that were further

excluded because of reasons related to personnel issues. I also excluded two potential participants because they were principals at the school in which I worked during the interview phase of the study and excluded a third because she was an employee of mine when I was a principal. Thus, there were 32 potential participants to be contacted.

To narrow down the data, I was able to make contact with 23 principals via telephone or email to ask if they would participate in a phone conversation to screen potential participants and to determine why they left their position as a principal of one of the Catholic schools in the diocese to be studied. Based on the responses, I selected thirteen participants, who left their position due to one of the factors addressed in the subquestions, to interview to learn more about their lived experience. I chose to analyze the data of four principal participants who indicated that at least two factors had impacted their attrition.

This study is a basic qualitative design study. Merriam (2016) defines a basic qualitative study as one in which researchers “would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they ascribe to their experiences. The overall purpose is to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 24). Merriam (2016) writes that “all qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives, and their worlds. The primary goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret those meanings” (p. 25). Creswell (2007) asks us to think of qualitative research as “an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material” (p. 35). To be sure, a look at underlying factors influencing attrition can be thought of as intricate. Perhaps the metaphor of peeling away layers of an onion though might be

more appropriate. Personnel and human resource standards dictate that very few details are shared about why someone leaves a position in the official paperwork. Generally, start and end dates are listed and reasons are usually optional. Even when an option such as job transfer is listed, it may not be telling the whole story. This study is qualitative to peel back the layers of what caused a Catholic school principal to leave their position. Was it by choice? Forced? Or “mutually agreed upon by all parties?” Creswell (2007) shares the importance of such as a process in which we seek to discover participants’ meanings. “The researcher keeps a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue” (p. 38). In this case, the focus is on the lived experience of the principals during the process of attrition as well as their reflection on it.

When someone leaves a position, it is rare to hear their perspective. Generally, speculation reigns. Creswell (2007) argues that one of the substantive reasons to conduct qualitative research is “because a problem or issue needs to be explored. This exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that can then be measured, or hear silenced voices” (p. 39). The voices of the former principals need to be heard.

But why? We know that fewer people are seeking to become principals and additionally, more are leaving the profession (d’Arbon et al. 2001; Fraser & Brock, 2006). If we want the professionals to remain, we need to learn why they leave in the first place. At the same time, this is a topic that has not been studied extensively. A search of the *Journal of Catholic Education* reveals that of the 301 articles with the topic “Catholic principal”, only six specifically address job satisfaction and attrition of Catholic school principals.

I interviewed thirteen former principals. Eight of the interviews took place in person, one via Skype and four via the telephone. I chose to analyze four participants since their stories were poignant and provided fertile examples of the factors leading to their departure. The researcher is known to several of the individuals and had already developed a good rapport with the potential participants. The Catholic diocese provided a list of principals and their contact information to the researcher to be able to complete this study. Following contact, the potential participants were asked for dates/times/locations that were convenient to meet with me to conduct the interview. The interview guide included in the appendix was used for the semi-structured interview.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The researcher was a principal of a Catholic school during the interview process of this study and was known to many of the potential participants. This might have affected the limited the number of participants who agreed to be interviewed for fear of sharing too much personal information. It was vitally important to establish and maintain trust with the participants throughout the study. In addition, the researcher has personal beliefs regarding the attrition factors of the particular diocese studied. However, the opportunity to hear the personal experience of each participant and the importance of sharing their lived experience in a thoughtful way dictated the process.

This study may not be generalizable to the general population. It is understood that qualitative research is not necessarily generalizable in the same way as quantitative research but rather, qualitative researchers seek to reveal the depth of a specific event or phenomenon (Miles et al., 2014). It is the intention of the researcher however to share the results with

individuals in the Catholic school system to shed light on the issue and offer suggestions for lowering the attrition rates.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

This study focused on principals who have left a specific diocese in the last 10 years. I chose the research site, not only because of the high turnover but also because of accessibility to potential participants. This timeframe also coincides with a 2004 study that was completed by two researchers from Creighton University studying the attrition and retention of Catholic school principals in a Midwestern diocese.

In addition, I interviewed participants who were screened and reduced from an initial pool of 42 former principals in the Diocese to be studied. I also reviewed the list with the Superintendent of Catholic Schools for this Diocese. Per his instruction, there were seven potential participants that were further excluded because of personnel matters. I also excluded two potential participants because they were principals at my school during the bulk of the study and excluded a third because she was an employee of mine. While there were 32 potential participants to be contacted, I was able to connect with 23 of them.

To narrow down the pool of participants, potential participants were eliminated if they left their position for retirement reasons only. In addition, potential participants had to have left for one of the reasons identified in the research subquestions. Further, potential participants had to agree to participate in additional interviews. As a result, I interviewed thirteen principal participants. I chose four participants for the analysis of this study because they had indicated that there were at least two factors that impacted their attrition.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter detailed the overview scope of the research study including the purpose and significance of the problem. This research sought to discover the factors affecting attrition among Catholic school principals in a qualitative study.

The next chapter is a review of the literature. It includes (a) a discussion of the organizational structure of the Catholic school system in the United States; (b) a discussion of Catholic school leaders: pastors and principals; (c) a review of the existing attrition literature of school principals; (d) a look at principal shortages and succession in schools; (e) a review of job satisfaction and stress among principals in the literature; (f) turnover, mobility, and premature departure literature among principals; (g) and literature specific to Catholic school leadership.

Chapter three contains the proposed methodology for the study. It includes the sample, research design, data collection and data analysis and a summary of the methodology. A description of research findings is set forth in Chapter four. The final chapter includes a discussion of the findings as well as recommendations for future study and practice.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**  
**General Introduction**

There is a paucity of research in general on the career paths of principals (Viadero, 2009) and even less research on Catholic elementary school leaders specifically. The research that does exist on Catholic principals tends to focus on the role of their own Catholic identity, the Catholic identity of the school, and school success. Insufficient research has been conducted on attrition factors among Catholic elementary school principals. However, given the fact that Catholic dioceses across the globe (Canavan, 2001) are facing leadership shortages, it is imperative that the gaps in the research be filled.

Attrition can have a negative impact on the school community. Research shows that multiple principal transitions (a change in the principal as the leader of the school) can be detrimental to a school community (Miller, 2013). Relative to schools with zero or one principal transitions, schools with two principal transitions have lower test scores on average (Miller, 2013). Schools with three or more principal transitions within a twelve-year period have still lower scores. Across schools, those that undergo frequent leadership changes are more disadvantaged (in terms of student achievement, student socioeconomic status, and teacher retention) than those with stable leadership (Miller, 2013).

Data also suggests that private schools face attrition of less experienced principals more readily than in public schools. According to the *Principal Attrition and Mobility: Results from the 2008-2009 Principal Follow-up Survey* (2010), about 16% of private school principals who had less than 3 years of experience as a principal in any school left whereas

only half of the number of principals with the same amount of experience left public schools (p. 3).

This literature review seeks to analyze some of the reports regarding the organizational structure of Catholic schools and to look at their leaders--pastors and principals. It also seeks to examine the pertinent texts related to attrition among principals. Further this research is categorized into four areas: principal shortages and succession, job satisfaction and stress, turnover, premature departure, and mobility, and Catholic school leadership. This review is part of the larger research project that sought to identify the factors influencing attrition among Catholic school elementary principals in a diocese on in the Southeastern region of the United States.

### **Organizational Structure of Catholic Schools**

Catholic schools operate within two separate sets of law, civil law and Church law, also referred to as canon law. While civil laws differ from state to state; canon law provides a common frame of reference for all Catholic schools; and as such, church law is binding in all church institutions. *The Code of Canon Law* (Canon Law Society, 1983) consists of a set of rules and regulations that establish a framework for the governance of the Catholic Church (O'Brien, 1990). Canon 795 specifically addresses the role of education:

Education must pay regard to the formation of the whole person, so that all may attain their eternal destiny and at the same time promote the common good of society.

Children and young persons are therefore to be cared for in such a way that their physical, moral, and intellectual talents may develop in a harmonious manner, so that they may attain a greater sense of responsibility and a right use of freedom, and be

formed to take an active part in social life (Canon Law Society, 1983, Book III, Title III, Chapter I).

Additional canons detail the rights and responsibilities of Catholic schools. Canon 800 states, “The Church has the right to establish and to direct schools for any field of study or any kind and grade.” Canon 803 defines a Catholic school as follows: a Catholic school is understood to be one which is under the control of the competent ecclesiastical authority or of a public ecclesiastical juridical person, or one which in a written document is acknowledged as Catholic by the ecclesiastical authority. No school, even if it is in fact Catholic, may bear the title “Catholic” except by the consent of the competent ecclesiastical authority. Canon 806 clarifies that the local bishop has ultimate responsibility for the Catholic schools within his diocese:

The diocesan Bishop has the right to watch over and inspect the Catholic schools situated in his territory, even those established or directed by members of religious institutes. He has the right to issue directives concerning the general regulation of Catholic schools; these directives apply also to schools conducted by members of a religious institute, although they retain their autonomy in the internal management of their schools (Canon Law Society, 1983, Book III, Title III, Chapter I).

The superintendent of schools in a Catholic diocese is appointed by the bishop of the diocese and acts on behalf of the bishop regarding the Catholic schools within the diocese (Canon Law Society, 1983; Thomas, 1996). The superintendent of schools assists the bishop with his responsibilities and tasks pertaining to Catholic schools (Canon Law Society, 1983). The superintendent of schools is also responsible to assist pastors in understanding their role

in the Catholic school. Superintendents are often called upon to help pastors in the hiring process of principals and subsequently also provide support for the incoming principal. The degree to which this happens varies from diocese to diocese and is a topic explored in the current study. In this study, the degree of support that the former principals felt or received from the superintendent, and whether or not that impacted their departure has been examined and was found to be a major factor of attrition according to my research.

### **Catholic School Leaders: Pastors and Principals**

The pastor possesses both the responsibility and the authority within the parish for the establishment and operation of the parochial school (Weiss, 2007). He also possesses the canonical authority to hire a principal, teachers, and staff to operate the school. The pastor clearly is not only the pastor of the parish, but also the pastor of the school. “In the present structure of the church a pastor may not abdicate or give up responsibility for the parish school, because it is an integral part of the mission of any parish” (Geelan, 2000, p. 6). However, the degree to which a pastor is involved in the life of the school varies. This is explored in the current study. The relationship between the pastor and principals is critical and its “health” can have important ramifications for the school.

Geelan (2000) believes that “one of the most important roles of the pastor in respect to the school and its governance, beyond what is spiritual and sacramental, is being involved in policy making” (p. 9). In most cases, local parish school boards are advisory or consultative boards. As a result, when it comes to policy development, the boards formulate policy but the policy is promulgated by the pastor.

Drahmann (1985) considers the pastor's role in the school primarily to be focused on spiritual leadership and overseeing financial matters. Both are essential if Catholic schools are to continue to function effectively in the future. Barrett (1996) also emphasizes the pastor's role regarding the finances of the school. He stresses the importance of the pastor's presence in the school as well as his willingness to make certain that the school is integrated into the ministry of parish life. Further that pastor must ensure that the school has established both short range and long term strategic plans for its viability and its attention to Catholic identity. Geelan (2000) notes that although the pastor's role in the Catholic parochial elementary school is certainly central, different pastors have different views about the school and their leadership role within it. Geelan states:

Some believe schools are unnecessary and a waste of resources that should be used elsewhere. Some pastors hold such a tight rein on the school that the board and principal may be heard complaining that they cannot get anything done. The pastor wants to make all the decisions and shows little respect for the expertise and judgments of the board and the administration, especially in the areas of finance and catechesis. Unlike the control man, some pastors are simply indifferent. They show no interest in the school (pp. 5-6).

The Catholic school principal is a trained educational administrator, hired by the pastor, who leads the daily operation of the school. The role of the Catholic school principal is most often divided into three general areas of responsibility: spiritual leader, educational leader, and managerial leader (Ciriello, 1996b). Catholic school principals are responsible for the faith development of the faculty and the students; for building community within the

school; for providing for the moral and ethical development of the students and formulating a clear Catholic school mission statement and philosophy for their schools (Ciriello, 1996b).

While public school principals also wear a variety of hats, Catholic school leaders have a unique responsibility. “The principal of the Catholic school shares with the public school administrator the responsibility to be the educational leader of the school, but there are definite differences in the nuances of this role” (Ciriello, 1996a, p. viii). Shaping the culture and forming the Christian community within the Catholic school is at the heart of the Catholic school principal’s role. Catholic school principals demonstrate leadership skills in developing a Catholic school culture, identify needed changes, supervise instruction, provide for the individual needs of the students, and exhibit leadership in curriculum development (Weiss, 2007).

In a study by Durow and Brock (2004), respondents, all of whom were experienced principals, reported that conflicts in school governance, changes in the school’s vision, and politics prompted them to leave Catholic schools. Some of the participants reported that conflicts resulted in non-renewal of their contracts. Pastors were often mentioned as the central figure in the conflict. The principals’ comments on governance conflicts included the inability to work with an autocratic pastor, a pastoral change that altered school governance procedures regarding parents, and being deceived by a secondary chief administrator. Conflict with pastors, secondary school presidents/heads of schools, and governing bodies were significant causes of principals leaving the principalship.

Catholic elementary school principals reported that the interference of the pastor was a serious drawback in the role. Several respondents reported problems in their working

relationship with the pastor, namely disagreement over roles and responsibilities (Durow & Brock, 2004). Conflict with pastors emerged in a study by Brock and Fraser as a factor in job dissatisfaction. Research in this area has noted the critical relationship between the Catholic elementary school principal and the parish pastor. Assuring a good match between principals and pastors is essential to the success of the organization and to principal retention (Brock & Fraser, 2001). Conflicts between pastors and principals can be minimized by clarifying the roles and responsibilities of pastors and principals and educating priests assigned to parishes with schools about their appropriate role in the school (Brock & Fraser, 2001).

Conflict with a pastor, president/chief administrator, or governing body emerged as a major factor in principal attrition in their studies. The themes of pastoral authority, interpersonal qualities, and role differentiation have been identified, among others, as critical in an effective Catholic school leadership approach (Brock & Fraser, 2001). The parish school principal must communicate well with the pastor if she/he expects his support. Likewise, the pastor must support the principal and exhibit trust by not allowing the chain of command to be short-circuited. All involved, including a lay board, must understand the daily operation of the school to be the primary role of the principal.

While there are several factors involved in Catholic school principal attrition, significant time has been spent in the current study to probe and analyze the pastor-principal relationship as a factor in attrition. This relationship is one of the most important ones for the Catholic school. However, very little research has explored this relationship. This study seeks to add to the literature by eliciting responses from the former principals who have not previously shared their story. In many cases, the participants were initially reticent to share

since they were asked not only about their former supervisors but also asked about a trusted spiritual leader in their lives. The majority of principals are parishioners in the parish in which their school is located so issues of faith and trust in the larger Catholic Church have also been uncovered in this study.

### **Attrition among Principals**

In analyzing the literature regarding principal attrition, studies can be segmented into four areas: shortages in the pool of applicants and leadership succession; job satisfaction and stress among principals; turnover, premature departure, and mobility; and Catholic school leadership. While the majority of the literature reviewed is not specific to Catholic schools due to the lack of studies in this area, many of the same issues are found in both public and Catholic school systems.

For example, shortages and succession are important issues in both types of school systems. In the United States and internationally, schools are facing increasing shortages of qualified principals. Some researchers report that while there might be a plethora of candidates with credentials, there are numerous vacancies (Canavan, 2001; Hine, 2003; Moore, 1999). In addition, there are a number of studies that examine the concepts of turnover, premature departure, and mobility. In some studies, these words are used interchangeably. Other studies make a clearer distinction between these concepts because the factors influencing each type of move or leave from a position are different. Premature departure is a concept utilized in the literature to denote when a principal has left the position without their choice (Kruger, van Eck, & Vermeulen, 2005). This is distinct from a retirement in which the principal has initiated the change. This is also different from

mobility. An example of mobility would be to take a position that is considered to be a lateral move, a step up in position, or a move out of the profession altogether. However, mobility is also usually defined as principal-initiated. Further, in general, there is a dearth of research in the area of Catholic schools. The research that does exist focuses on Catholic identity of the principal and of the school. However, there are a limited number of studies that look at factors affecting attrition among Catholic school principals.

### **Principal Shortages and Succession**

Current and future shortages for principal positions have created the urgency to better understand why the deficiencies occur and how to moderate them in the long-run. Several studies and papers have looked at the coming principal shortage in various U.S. states. Holloway (2001) asserted that within the next decade, “public schools will face an estimated 40% turnover of the principals who were born in the baby-boom years and will need about 35,000 new school administrators” (as cited in Beaudin, Thompson, & Jacobson, 2002, p. 6). A common theme is that even though many people are becoming credentialed as administrators, few are taking the appropriate steps to apply for open positions.

Hine (2003) concurred with earlier data suggesting that the United States will be soon facing a real need to replace retiring principals. Specifically, he stated that, “40% of the 92,000 public school principals are eligible to retire in the next 4 years, and in many districts, 67% of principals will reach retirement age during this decade” (p. 267). Interestingly, Hine also noted that while there were ample numbers of teachers who hold certification for administration, few applied for the position. While Hine did not specifically address the

reasons, research about current and recent principals who have left the position can help to fill the gaps in our understanding of the phenomenon.

Moore (1999) had previously recognized the principal shortage and looked to educational leadership graduate students for factors that would motivate them to apply for the principalship and those factors that would discourage them. It is worthy to note that these graduate students had no prior administrative experience and yet, had strong ideas about what would influence them to apply. In this study, the graduate students completed a survey and the results identified the following top three motivating factors – the desire to make a difference, the personal and professional challenge, and the ability to initiate change. The top three factors that would inhibit the graduate students from applying for the principalship included increased time commitments, the influence of outside groups, and too much bureaucratic paperwork.

Bass (2006) noted the plethora of inhibitor studies regarding the job but could only find one other national study that looked at motives to pursue the principalship. Bass used a third generation of the questionnaire that Moore used and found that stress was the top barrier to principalship entry. It is remarkable to note that increased time commitments were ranked first in the 1999 study but second in the more recent survey. Bass found that the motivators were essentially the same – desire to make a difference, positive impact on people and students, and a personal challenge.

While attempting to look at principal shortages, I discovered some research regarding leadership succession. Meyer, Macmillian, and Northfield (2011) assert that principal turnover has the potential to impact seriously school morale and values as teachers

adjust to new administrators. While few studies exist that touch on the impact of principal succession on teachers, this study suggests that for the new principal, the micropolitics between teachers and principals can have a negative impact on the school community, especially if they are ignored. The authors found that there can be lasting effects on the community if the principal is not attuned to the issues in the organization. This is an important concept analyzed in the current study. The extent to which the principal understood the micropolitics of the school prior to their arrival as well as the role they play in the organization relating to teachers was explored.

Canavan (2001) argued that proper leadership succession planning could help to mitigate problems that succession can have in a school. Canavan presented a 12-phase management process designed to facilitate leadership succession, specifically in Catholic schools. The process is based on the following presumptions:

- the need to enhance the long-term evangelization thrust of Catholic schools
- the need for all organizations to realize their goals
- the need to ensure leadership continuity at all levels
- the need to identify future leadership requirements
- the need to develop a pool of potential leaders

According to Canavan (2001), an effective leadership succession process is developed and implemented by:

- clarifying future strategic directions that embrace the vision, mission, culture, and emerging priorities of the school
- establishing criteria and competencies (linked with the strategic intent of the organization) for the various positions that will eventually need to be filled

- identifying future leaders through a variety of assessment strategies and maintaining pools of high potential staff at all levels of the school
- providing developmental opportunities that are critical to an individual's leadership preparation
- identifying disincentives that discourage staff from seeking leadership roles and putting in place appropriate incentives
- planning for the long-term retention and development of high-potential staff
- assuming those aspiring to leadership positions will accept significant responsibility for their own professional development and career planning
- recognizing that some staff will feel passed over in their quest for immediate leadership opportunities, and keeping them motivated in their current positions
- expecting staff with current leadership roles to accept responsibility for the preparation of future leaders
- recognizing that different institutions require their own unique leaders and that different communities have their own respective needs and expectations
- providing recently appointed leaders with a quality induction program that includes some organizational and professional socialization into their new roles
- communicating about the management of succession planning with those with a stake in future leadership appointments

Canavan's process is an important one for those in the Catholic hiring process to consider. There are very few requirements for how a pastor hires a new principal. In some cases, the pastor delegates the responsibility to a search committee while others handle the process themselves. I inquired about the hiring and recruitment process of each of the former

principals and noted whether any of Canavan's processes were present or lacking and whether or not that impacted attrition.

### **Job Satisfaction and Stress**

While several factors influencing attrition have been examined by scholars, the ideas of job satisfaction and stress stand out as overarching concepts in several studies. Studies of job satisfaction and stress look at factors that impact attrition for principals. While most of the studies are specific to public schools, concepts such as internal and external mandates and parental interference are universally managed by both public and Catholic school principals.

Fraser and Brock (2006) examined job satisfaction for Catholic school principals in the context of understanding how to retain and recruit leaders. The authors conducted a qualitative study utilizing narrative surveys and structured personal interviews. The researchers noted that factors leading to job satisfaction included "economic security, role enjoyment, and the opportunity to contribute" (p. 425). Disincentives reported by respondents included "lack of support from the employing authority, inadequate pay, isolation, growing responsibilities, difficult parents, and interfering pastors" (p. 425).

While Fraser and Brock looked at job satisfaction in this study, they also looked at factors that promoted mobility. These included the freshness of a new location, the principals no longer felt satisfied, or also in response to personal or family needs. In this study, mobility was not a factor in why principals left their positions in Catholic schools.

Some of the research that focuses on female principals (not specifically Catholic) argues for a different interpretation of job satisfaction. In one study by Oplatka and Mimon (2008), the researchers found that the principals interviewed (all were female) equated job

satisfaction with stagnation and therefore was not something to be desired (p. 142). Per the authors, “a satisfied principal, in many of our participants’ view, is one whose performance and motivation to promote her school are relatively low.” Further, the researchers noted that the principals did not feel that their personal feelings mattered and satisfaction should be measured in terms of administering at the school only.

In other research, stress has been identified as an issue of concern regarding job satisfaction. In 2001, Chaplain conducted a series of interviews with heads of school in the United Kingdom to determine the impact of stress on job satisfaction among primary head teachers (the equivalent of elementary school principals in the United States). His research found some discrepancies among male and female heads. While most of the males reported to be very satisfied with the job, the female group was not. Notably, the females mentioned more personal factors, such as family issues, as stressors while the males mentioned stressors that were more job specific. The study details some common stressors among the heads such as feelings of being undervalued as well as the problem of managing oneself, managing others, and managing finances. In the literature itself, this is the only reference to the need to manage finances among school principals. Since Catholic elementary school principals often must deal with tight budgets and enrollment issues, managing finances would seem to be a natural stressor for administrators. This is one of the areas probed in the current study that is not examined in the literature.

### **Turnover, Mobility, and Premature Departure**

A subset of the research on principal attrition focuses on different nuances of the type of departure. Mobility studies tend to look at the moves between positions as lateral moves or

stepping-stones to better positions as a principal. Turnover studies tend to focus on why principals left their position from the perspective of another school official – either their former supervisor, their successor, or even from budding administrators in the ranks of graduate students. While some value can be extracted from this data, these types of studies do not provide sufficient data to tell the story. One might argue that a flaw in the studies is that the respondents themselves are speculating about the cause for turnover or they give incomplete, sugarcoated stories when the respondents themselves are not part of the sample.

Investigators in Missouri studied what motivated a principal to stay or move to a different position. They found that a principal's relative salary, compared to peers in the same labor market, exerts a consistent influence on stability – the higher the salary, the more likely a principal is stable and the less likely he/she is to move to another school (Baker, Punswick, & Belt, 2010). Researchers also found data that suggests that the school's racial composition—specifically the percentage of students who are African-American—may lead to instability and greater likelihood of a second move and that middle school principals are less stable than their elementary and high school colleagues. The researchers acknowledge that the number of studies on principal exit behavior are thin but growing.

The Baker study only looked at public schools but it highlights a major difference between public and Catholic schools – principal salaries. It is difficult to see how this might apply in Catholic schools. Catholic school principal salaries tend to be lower than their counterparts in public schools and are not generally wide-ranging among principals within a diocese. In addition, although not a positive trait of Catholic schools, the racial composition in schools in the diocese studied is relatively homogenous. This would suggest that salary

alone may not exert a consistent influence on stability in Catholic schools, although Fraser and Brock (2006) found that insufficient pay is a drawback to the role of principal in Catholic schools.

In 2007, Papa looked at why principals change schools. The study utilized a quantitative research design and looked at the determinants of principal retention in an attempt to understand how to attract a principal away from their current position. Evidence from the study suggested that schools with higher proportions of at-risk students and less-qualified teachers are disadvantaged with respect to their ability to retain (and thus attract) principals. However, evidence suggests that higher salaries can be used to compensate for such disparities. Again, Catholic school principals tend to have lower salaries than their public school counterparts so higher salaries may not be a way to discourage attrition. Lower salaries are a result of the overall tight revenue streams of Catholic schools, i.e., Catholic schools are tuition-dependent and annual budgets rely heavily on student enrollment. Typically, salaries and benefits account for 65-70% of a Catholic school budget.

Gates et al. (2006) compared data from Illinois and North Carolina to understand mobility and turnover among school principals. The researchers used administrative data from both states. They found that principals in schools with a larger population of minority students are more likely to change schools and leave the principalship but stay in the school system. While there are few minorities in the Catholic schools in the diocese to be studied, the larger concept of student backgrounds is studied. There are geographic and socioeconomic differences among the schools that are analyzed for themes or commonalities in affecting principal attrition.

Gates et al. (2006) found student population size to be a significant predictor for all transitions in Illinois and for the probability of dropping out and changing schools in North Carolina. Larger schools had lower principal turnover. It is noted that principals of larger schools receive higher pay and it may be extrapolated that the salary differential may be enough to keep principals in the position.

Dlugosh (1994) explored why exactly administrators moved positions. His study utilized a survey instrument that was given to school administrators who had left their positions. Respondents moved to improve their salaries, attain higher line positions, or work in larger schools. An unanticipated outcome of this study was a set of detailed explanations supplied by a large number of the respondents who checked the “other reasons” category and provided an explanation for their departure from their previous positions. These were categorized as: a) family-home community/local considerations; b) promotion; c) personal challenge-personal goal; d) returned to the profession; and e) stress, working conditions or climate, school board relations.

Dlugosh’s work has an important impact on the current study. Although several studies ask similar questions, the extent to which respondents provided an explanation for other reasons is significant. Many respondents essentially shared their “life story” with the researchers indicating a desire among former principals to share their side of the story. It is precisely for this reason that I conducted this study utilizing semi-structured interviews. The voices of the former principals deserve to be heard and their stories told.

Another study looked at the district’s role in managing principal turnover. Mascall and Leithwood (2010) used a mixed methods approach to look at how frequently principal

turnover occurs, how turnover affects conditions across the school and in the classroom, and whether or not the turnover significantly impacts student achievement. Further, the study looked to see if distributed leadership has the potential to reduce the negative influences arising from frequent principal turnover. From the study, the researchers concluded that leadership distribution has the potential to moderate rapid principal turnover. Further, the researchers concluded that principal turnover has negative effects on student achievement as well as moderate and negative correlations with school culture and classroom curriculum and instruction. Thus, it is incumbent on districts to find ways to distribute leadership to lessen the impact should turnover occur.

However, student achievement in Catholic schools is measured differently than in public schools. The standardized testing that takes place in the diocese to be studied is formative and less about student achievement. For Catholic schools, enrollment and retention of students are the significant factors related to student achievement. If the parents do not believe that they are receiving value for their tuition money, they will not choose a school or leave the school altogether. The enrollment and retention of students was analyzed at each school in this study to see if patterns emerge in which the attrition impacts enrollment or if changes in enrollment impacts attrition.

Reames, Kochan, and Zhu (2013) compared data from a previous survey of Alabama administrators to understand if factors influencing their decision to retire remained the same or had changed. The results from the initial survey distributed by Kochan and Spencer (1999) indicated that the top reason was to obtain another position. In the 2013 survey, external mandates from state or national sources were the number one reason for retirement.

Another reason included spending more time with their family. This study is significant because it probes into more personal reasons as to why someone leaves their positions. Many studies have only focused on the organization itself and the potential mismatch between the principal and the school. There are often personal reasons why someone leaves, and this was explored in the current study.

Davis' study (1998) looked at the reasons why principals in California lost their jobs (a type of involuntary departure) from the perspective of superintendents. In California, telephone interviews were conducted with eleven superintendents to obtain baseline data for a written questionnaire to be given to a larger sample of superintendents. The results of the telephone interviews and surveys show that a principal's interpersonal relationships outweigh any other factor related to involuntary departure. Factors related to administrative skill were less important.

In the telephone survey, superintendents reported several factors influencing involuntary departures of principals. They noted that poor interpersonal relationships, poor decision making, lack of political skill and awareness and a failure to accurately assess the culture of the school were some of the factors leading to involuntary departure. This information was used to develop a questionnaire that was distributed to 200 superintendents in California. Per the study, fifty-eight percent of the responses fell within the personal-human relations category and forty-two percent fell within the performance of duties category. Without question, no other leadership behavior comes close to possessing the career-ending potential as that involved in maintaining poor interpersonal relationships.

This study is intriguing because it comes from the superintendent's perspective only. That is not to say that the data is not valid; however, it may be only telling one side of the story. There is no information that gets under the surface and provides the "why" a principal might lack strong interpersonal skills. Was this something not addressed in the initial hiring process? Was it a skill that was taken for granted and not developed by the district? Or was it something else? The current study steps beneath the surface and asks these questions of former principals.

A study in the Netherlands (2001) explored the concept of involuntary or premature departure of principals. All primary and secondary schools with job mobility within a three-year period were studied. The investigators then focused on those that left due to premature departure. They defined premature departure as departing a position without choice (Kruger, van Eck, & Vermeulen, 2001, p. 400). The researchers relied on the current principal at the school to make an inference regarding their predecessor about why they were no longer in the position. The significant point in this study was the difficulty that the researchers had in determining whether a departure was normal or premature. The researchers were relying on the official reasons given by the governing board to the new administrator and did not necessarily tell the whole story. In the words of the authors, "the findings of this research into the extent of premature departure immediately suggest, therefore, that further research into the deeper-rooted reasons underlying the premature departure of both male and female principals is necessary" (p. 412). Both this study and the Davis study (1998) look at potential causes of attrition but do not get to the heart of the reasons by speaking with the principal

who left. Again, Kruger, van Eck, and Vermeulen summarize nicely the imperative for the current study:

Investigation of deeper-rooted causes certainly demands input from principals who have experienced premature departure themselves. Those principals have to be traced and questioned. Policy decisions to prevent premature departure can only be made on the basis of research, which explores in greater depth the situational and personal forces that influence leadership behavior (p. 413).

The same authors dug deeper into the concept of risk factors for premature departure in 2005. This study, again in the Netherlands, sought to understand if risk factors for premature departure differed significantly between men and women (Kruger, van Eck, & Vermeulen, 2005). In this study, the researchers sent surveys to former principals they knew via networking as well to the governing bodies that would have their contact information. The surveys also asked respondents whether they would participate in a follow up interview.

This study is significant for several reasons. In the first place, few researchers have directly investigated the reasons behind premature departure. The researchers who did so were looking for personal factors in the principals themselves. They did not research factors concerning the school organization or the principal's working environment. In their work, the assumption seems to be that premature departure is related to ineffective leadership or personal characteristics of the administrator. The study's authors, however, contend that premature departure is not only due to personal characteristics, but also to factors in the organization and culture of the school. Questionnaires were sent to previous principals if they were personal contacts or if not, to the presidents of the school governing bodies to ask them

to send them to the former principals. Respondents were asked if they would also consider participating in interviews. The authors interviewed 27 of the 61 former principals who completed their survey. From the responses, the “damage is already done” in the hiring process. Respondents reported that they were not given sufficient or complete information about the tasks at hand as well as the support (or lack thereof) of the staff. Respondents indicated that they wished they had more knowledge in the hiring process about policy issues and internal relationships (Kruger, van Eck, Vermeulen, 2005, p. 252). This is an important concept that is explored in the current study. I was interested in understanding whether the principals in the diocese studied felt that they had sufficient knowledge of the terrain they were entering prior to accepting the principalship or if there were important issues/topics not discussed in the initial phase of the hiring process.

While the researchers did not find a significant difference in departure between women and men overall, there were some subtle differences. Women did resign more often while men ended up fighting the process in court. Female principals from primary as well as from secondary schools who left prematurely were found to have slightly less management experience at the moment of appointment. From the interviews, it is clear that a lack of management experience combined with the complex situations in which schools are placed nowadays (mergers, reorganizations, educational innovations) constitutes risk factors for principals, both for men and women (p. 258). Although gender issues were not a primary motivator for my study, they will be analyzed. While the majority of Catholic school elementary principals in this diocese are female, there are still several males who left their

positions in the schools studied. Some of the participants in the study did allude to gender as a factor in their attrition in this current study.

### **Literature on Catholic School Leadership**

Research on Catholic school leadership predominately extrapolates data from the leaders themselves - bishops, pastors, and principals. The research looks at perceptions of Catholic schools in general and the role of the principal specifically. John J. Convey in 1999 examined the factors affecting the views of bishops and priests about Catholic schools. He argued that the “attitudes of bishops and priests toward Catholic schools are critical for the school’s success” (p. 248). Convey found that while bishops and priests, overall, had a positive impression of Catholic schools, factors such as the number of years ordained, and one’s own Catholic school background had an impact on their impressions of Catholic schools. This study took place in 1996 at a time when Catholic school enrollment was declining (p. 249). Although the impressions of bishops and priests are important due to the hierarchical nature of the Catholic school system, the study did not specifically address their perceptions of Catholic school principals.

In 2001, however, a study by Brock and Fraser looked at the perspectives of principals and pastors and their roles in school leadership for Catholic schools. It is important to emphasize that while the pastor has the ultimate authority in a parochial school, that power is delegated to the principal for the everyday management of the school. However, the degree to which the principal operates autonomously varies. The study sought to understand this relationship. While the research looked at principals and pastors in both Nebraska and New South Wales, the researchers did not compare the two experiences by geography. Instead, the

researchers compared the perspectives of all principals and all pastors. Similar to the 1999 Convey study, the theme of pastor's experience with schools or their own educational background influencing their perspective on leadership roles in a Catholic school emerged.

In this study, both groups reported that breakdowns in the relationship are attributable to poor communication, lack of trust and support, and the lack of role clarification. Principals also mentioned that differences in personalities, management styles, and excessive financial constraints could be "conflict producing" (Brock & Fraser, 2001, p. 89). The issue of financial constraints is an important one. The financial viability of a school in relation to a parish has been traditionally tied to the amount of subsidy that the parish has given to the school. If a parish provides a large subsidy, it can signal not only the poor financial health of the school but has led to financial vulnerability of the parish (Harris, 1996). It is desirable to maintain a symbiotic relationship between schools and parishes and not create parasitic ones. In my study, I have also probed potential problems such as communication, trust, support, and role clarification for the principal as possible factors impacting attrition.

A later study by Fraser and Brock touched on a different concern, parents in a Catholic school. This study focused on keys to retention and recruitment of Catholic school principals. The researchers found that Catholic school principals stated that one of the drawbacks of the role of principal in Catholic schools was "disgruntled, unchurched and demanding parents" (Fraser & Brock, 2006, p. 435). To be sure, all principals face parents who may be disgruntled and demanding but this can be particularly of concern in Catholic schools in which parents can ultimately decide to remove their children from the school if they disagree with the principal, which is significantly less of a threat or option in public

schools. However, little research about parents and other stakeholders and their impact on principal attrition exists in the literature on Catholic schools. I think the climate in which Catholic school elementary principals operate today with the threat of enrollment declines in the face of parental activism and parental empowerment warrant discussion in the current study. Further, Catholic school principals are accountable to additional stakeholders such as the parish community. Their role in attrition of Catholic school principals has been studied and emerged as a significant factor in attrition.

Schafer's (2005) perspective of the pastor-principal relationship is that it is inherently problematic because of the governance structure of parochial schools dictated by the Catholic Church. In the church, the pastor is the canonical leader of the Catholic school but the power is delegated to the principal. Schafer notes, however, that "the pastor of the parish remains ultimately responsible for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the entire parish" (p. 234). Conflict appears to be inevitable but Schafer argues that clear role expectations can help to mitigate the issue. The essence of this part of the literature focuses on the role of each player – the principal and the pastor. This is a recurring theme in the literature. The importance of role clarification for the successful governance of the Catholic elementary school is fundamental.

Essentially, the literature about Catholic school principals primarily focuses on their relationships with the pastor. This makes sense since the pastor holds canonical responsibility for the school. From the literature, one can surmise that the pastor and principal must have a good understanding of how to share the leadership of the school, understand each other's roles, and clearly communicate those roles to the wider community. When these things do

not happen, conflict ensues. This may ultimately determine the attrition among Catholic school principals as evidenced in the lived experiences of the principals in this study.

### **Chapter Summary**

This literature review attempts to explain the structure of the Catholic school system as it pertains to the concepts explored relating to principal attrition. While the principal is the head of the school in public schools, the principal of a Catholic parochial school receives their delegated authority from the parish pastor. As noted, this pastor-principal relationship is critical for the success of each principal and in return, for the success of the school community.

Further, attrition research can be delineated into four areas: shortages and succession; job satisfaction and stress, turnover, premature departure, and mobility, and literature specific to Catholic school leadership. It is without question that there is a scarcity of research that is specific to Catholic schools. More importantly, the research that does exist focuses on the perceptions of the pastors, bishops, and current principals. Very few studies exist that explore the lived experiences and perceptions of Catholic elementary school principals that have left their school. This study seeks to fill the gap in the literature regarding attrition among Catholic elementary school principals so that their voices can be heard and so that lessons can be learned by the pastors, parishes, and dioceses.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **General Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the dynamics leading to attrition of Catholic school principals. In one diocese of the Catholic Church in the Southeast region of the United States, principal turnover has become problematic. Almost half of the school principals have left their positions in the last five years (Diocesan Personnel Report). This is critical because the overall effectiveness of the school can be impeded with significant turnover in this position. Parents are well informed consumers and consider staff turnover when making decisions about where to send their children for an education. Since Catholic schools rely heavily on tuition for financial resources, a swing in enrollment can have a devastating effect on a school. Given that information, it is essential to investigate why attrition occurs among Catholic school principals.

#### **Selection of Qualitative Methodology**

This is a basic qualitative study. Qualitative research design was used to explore the lived experiences of former principals in a Catholic Diocese in the Southeastern region of the United States. Merriam (2016) defines a basic qualitative study as one in which researchers “would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 24). Merriam (2016) writes that “all qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives, and their worlds. The primary goal of a basic qualitative

study is to uncover and interpret those meanings” (p. 25). Creswell (2007) stated that qualitative design includes “the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or, signals a call for action” (p. 37). Qualitative data can provide well-grounded, rich descriptions of developments happening in local contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This is especially important for this topic. Data simply does not exist that uncovers the reasons and thought processes that lead to attrition among principals in Catholic schools. Very few studies probe the reasons behind attrition and even fewer delve into the experiences of those that have left. Qualitative studies can uncover the reasons by sharing those previously unheard experiences.

Qualitative research also highlights the relationship between the researcher and the subject. In fact, the term “subject” is often discarded for the term “participant” in a qualitative study. Further, the relationship of the researcher and participant frame the richness of data that is usually produced in a qualitative study. The relationship is one of shared power to construct meaning from the data (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). While the researcher has a general idea of how they want to proceed in the study, the responses and openness of the participants can have a significant effect on the direction of the study. This idea of shared power makes sense for this study. In some regards, I was viewed as a colleague of the participants since, at the time of the interviews, I was a Catholic school principal. I have an understanding of the role and have a solid appreciation of the gift given to learn the firsthand experience of attrition among the participants.

## Participants

In a qualitative study, the participants are critical to a successful process. It is vitally important to have good rapport with the participants in seeking good data (Creswell, 2007). The most appropriate sampling strategy when conducting qualitative research is purposeful (Patton, 1990). Merriam (2002) explains that purposeful sampling assumes that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned. The purposeful sampling flowchart (Figure 1) provides a visual reference for the process of selecting the participants for this study.

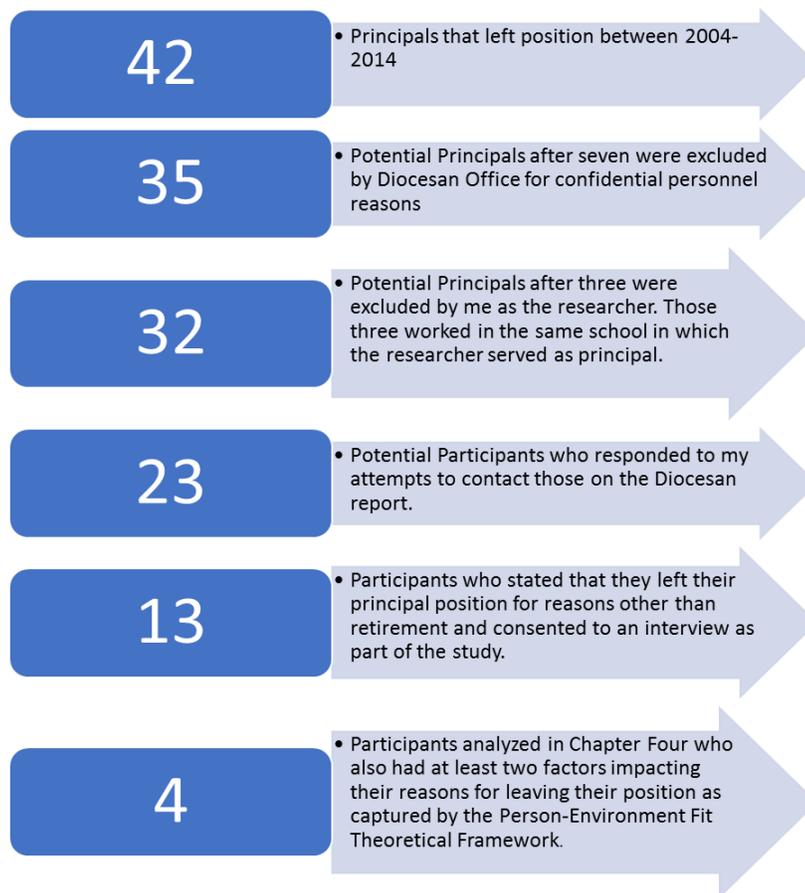


Figure 1. Purposeful Sampling Flowchart

While the diocese selected provided geographic accessibility, the high turnover rate also made it intriguing to the researcher of this study. Because I had established a positive relationship with the Catholic Schools Office of the diocese, I received a verbal commitment from the office to grant access to a report generated by them that lists all principals in the diocese (past and present). The report included the start date, end date, name, address, phone number, email address, and school of current and former principals. I initially decided to use the last ten years as the timeframe to coincide with a similar study about Catholic school principals conducted by Durow and Brock in 2004. Utilizing that timeframe, there were 42 principals in the diocese to be studied that had end dates or termination dates between 2004-2014. In addition, there were some principals that were interim principals. Given the short-term nature of those types of positions, those individuals were excluded from the study. While there were 42 potential participants for the study, there were former principals who were excluded. The Superintendent of the Diocese stated that seven of the individuals could not be contacted for confidential personnel reasons. In addition, two were excluded because they were former principals at the school in which I was principal when I began the study. Another potential participant was excluded because she was an employee at my school when I began the study.

I attempted to make contact with the remaining 32 potential participants. However, I was only able to connect with 23 of them. When I spoke to those 23 potential participants, I asked them a screening question to determine further eligibility for the study. I asked if they left their position for a reason other than retirement, and if so, would they consent to an

interview. Of the 23 that I contacted, 13 responded that they left for a reason other than retirement and would consent to an interview.

Throughout each interview, I questioned the participants to ascertain the actual reasons why the principals left their positions. Four of the individuals that I interviewed left for career advancement. And although no major conflict was experienced by them as principal, these individuals did share information that forms the basis, in part, of recommendations found in Chapter Five. Two of the people that I interviewed indicated that they had missed teaching, either at the college or high school level and wanted to go back into the classroom. One individual left as a result of the need to earn more financially for his large family and transitioned to work in the public school system. One individual shared highly confidential information about their departure and the nature of their story posed ethical considerations that led me to not include their data in the Data Analysis section. However, some information shared from this individual also helped to inform recommendations in Chapter Five.

### **Data Collection**

The method in which I elicited data was primarily through interviews. Interviews bring the private lives of individuals out of the dark (Weiss, 1994). Interviews were employed to gather the rich, thick descriptions of the events from the participants (Creswell, 2007). It was and continues to be important for their voices to be heard. Usually when a principal leaves their position, the reason for leaving is not reported beyond an end date listed on a form. If any statement is made, it is always couched in HR terminology. This is not a criticism per se but a legal reality to protect both the individual and the organization.

Nevertheless, it is important to get the full story. Learning the reasons for attrition from the person leaving can give insights into the decision-making process whether the decision was made by the principal, the supervisor, another entity, or if there was a mutual determination. It is rare to have the lived experience of the person who left the position illuminated. However, to better understand why someone is no longer a principal, we must seek to provide a fuller understanding of their experiences (Weiss, 1994).

In choosing interviews to elicit data, it is always important for the researcher to understand their relationship to the participant. The participant has an active role in the research. While I used an interview guide, I also allowed participants' responses to guide the interview process (Weiss, 1994). The position of interviewer is one of a "privileged inquirer" and the data that is elicited from the participant should provide information that would not generally be made available in another circumstance and may be quite private (Weiss, 1994, p. 65). With this in mind, I consistently emphasized the importance of the study as well as treated the information gleaned from the interviews as confidential.

The interviews took place in a manner that was comfortable for the participants. I offered and often met with participants in locations that were convenient and/or comfortable for them. While telephone interviews were given as an option, face-to-face interviews were more desirable. Research has shown that participants in face-to-face interviews tend to be less cautious about self-revelation and were less evasive in their responses (Weiss, 1994). Of the thirteen interviews that took place, eight were conducted in person, one took place via Skype and four were telephone interviews. There were two interviews planned. While it was anticipated that the first interview would take approximately 60-90 minutes, some interviews

took almost 2 hours. We agreed that a follow up interview may be necessary but one only took place in two cases to confirm/review the information shared in the first interview. This also served in the member checking process to be discussed in the data analysis section.

I used an interview guide for the first interview. An interview guide is a useful tool for the researcher to focus the interview. It is essentially a list of all topics or questions to “suggest lines of inquiry” (Weiss, 1994, p. 48). The questions were constructed to extract as much information as possible. I reviewed interview guides used by other researchers as well as sample interview guides. Based on both, I created my own guide which is found in Appendix C (Brock & Fraser, 2004; Creswell, 2007; Weiss, 1994).

For successful interview experiences, it was important to establish good rapport with each participant (Creswell, 2007). I was particularly sensitive to the fact that attrition is more than just leaving a job. There can be a variety of intense emotions that surround such an event. While I anticipated that it was possible that talking about their departure may stir up feelings from that event or even uncover feelings that had been suppressed; there were three interviews, in particular, that revealed quite personal information. And yet, participants also found that to talk about their experience to someone meant that their experience was validated (Weiss, 1994). Throughout the process, I reassured each participant that their information would be kept confidential. I also reminded them of the importance of sharing their story in this study. I believe that was helpful in having participants reveal such very personal information.

The second interview provided an opportunity to review the data collected in the first interview. It lasted between 10-15 minutes and took place via phone.

In a semi-structured interview, the researcher has a general plan for the topic to be discussed. However, the participant and their story framed the actual discussion that took place. Interviewees are usually given a great deal of latitude in the way they answer, the length of their responses, and even the topics that they discuss. The aim of such an interview is to encourage the person to speak “in their own words” in order to obtain a first person account (Packer, 2011, p. 42).

### **Data Management**

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. I recorded each interview with a hand-held recorder. In addition, I took notes on a notepad but found that it often stifled the flow of information, so I tried to minimize the amount of writing during the actual interview. I separated the notes from the notepad following each interview. The notes were kept in a folder labeled for each participant. The folders were labeled by participant number. The first participant was labeled Principal #1, the second participant was labeled Principal #2, etc. The interviews were transcribed utilizing a transcription service. The transcribed data was printed out and placed in the folder for each participant with the notes from the interviews. The transcribed data was also available as a computer file. The files were placed in a computer folder labeled for each participant. Again, I utilized file names such as Principal #1 and I did not use their names as identifiers. These electronic files and folders were kept on a USB drive. All of the data, paper and electronic, has been kept locked in a file cabinet to which only I have access.

## **Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, the data is analyzed to establish themes and patterns through a process of coding (Creswell, 2007). In this study, the data was first organized into text data from the transcripts of interviews. Then, the data was reduced into themes through coding. The themes are shared in a discussion of the findings in Chapter Four.

During my analysis of the transcripts, I determined that four of the interviews provided data to illuminate the attrition factors impacting Catholic school principals and specifically noted at least two factors that led to their attrition. However, data from the other interviews are used in Chapter 5 concerning implications for further research.

I employed a software program to assist in the coding process. According to Glaser and Strauss, coding asks the researcher to associate one or more categories with each “incident” of data (Packer, 2011, p. 61). Once the data was coded, I then sorted the data. The sorting process filtered the data into categories to make sense of the themes or concepts that flowed from the interviews.

The process of coding took place as soon as each interview was completed. Miles et al. (2004) suggest not to wait until the end of the entire data collection process to begin analysis. In fact, it is more productive to interweave the analysis of data with the collection process. The researcher is able to cycle between data and the process to hopefully obtain better data. In this study, I was able to analyze the data of one interview before embarking on the next one to help in detecting patterns and themes. This process was also helpful in the process of analyzing data with the theoretical framework in mind. I was able to analyze data

according to the fit of person-job, person-supervisor, person-organization, and person-stakeholder.

The coding process proceeded using a first cycle and a second cycle process as advanced by Saldana (Miles et al., 2014). The first cycle is simply a process of putting the data into chunks. The second cycle creates a set of pattern codes based on the first cycle of data chunks. Saldana argues that there are important functions of pattern coding including:

condensing large amounts of data into a smaller number of analytic units, allowing the researcher into the process of analysis during data collection so that later fieldwork can be more focused, and helping the researcher develop a cognitive map – an evolving, more integrated schema for understanding local incidents and interactions (loc 2615).

Pattern codes usually illuminate categories or themes, causes/explanations, and relationships among people.

The data analysis yielded all of these. The pattern codes were written up in analytic memos. Analytic memos served to help the researcher write mini-reports of the data that utilize a researcher's reflections and thinking about the data. These memos helped to formulate the narrative description that was generated from the data.

### **Research Validity and Reliability**

Research validity and reliability are terms usually associated with quantitative studies. The terms are also sometimes transferred to describe qualitative studies. Yet, there is widespread disagreement among researchers about their use in qualitative studies (Merriam,

1995; Wolcott, 2009). In fact, other terms are used by many researchers instead of validity and reliability to better represent the function of a qualitative study.

To establish the ‘trustworthiness’ of a study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) used terms such as ‘credibility,’ ‘authenticity,’ and ‘dependability’, as an equivalent for validity, reliability, and objectivity (Creswell, 2007, p. 202). Moreover, rather than reliability, one seeks “dependability that the results will be subject to change and instability” (Creswell, 2007, p. 204).

Reliability refers to “the extent to which research findings can be replicated” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27). This is not always easy in qualitative research. Qualitative researchers seek to understand the world from the perspectives of those in it (Merriam, 1995). In fact, Wolcott stated that it is not about validity; rather, it is about “understanding” (Wolcott, 2009). Thus, Lincoln and Guba suggest that “the most important question for qualitative researchers is whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 288). The question is, given the data, “do the results make sense?” To strengthen the consistency of the research, an audit trail suggested by Lincoln and Guba was employed. The trail provides a detailed description of how the data was collected, how the information was categorized, and how decisions were made regarding the data. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) suggest that the audit trail should be so complete to allow another researcher to replicate the study (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative research assumes that reality is constructed, multidimensional, and ever-changing; there is no such thing as a single, immutable reality waiting to be observed and measured (Merriam, 1995). However, there are strategies such as triangulation, member

checks, peer/colleague examination, and reporting a potential bias by the researcher can assist in strengthening internal validity. For this study, I employed member checks, peer/colleague examination, and reporting biases to strengthen internal validity (Merriam, 1995).

Member checking refers to sharing the data collected by the researcher back to the participants to see if the material is in fact true. This allows the researcher to “check” the data with the primary instrument in an interview study, the participant. I did this throughout the interview when a specific story was shared as well as at the end of the first interview and in some cases, during the second interview with the participants.

I have also had my doctoral committee chair review some of my data to check the plausibility of the findings. Elsewhere in this study, I described my interest in the topic as well as my experiences and biases related to the project.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

From the outset, I described my interest and involvement in this topic. This is essential for a researcher to disclose from the beginning “so that the reader understands the researcher’s position and any biases or assumptions that impact the inquiry” (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). This increases the trustworthiness of the study and of me as a researcher. It also helps me to establish rapport, understand the experiences of each subject, and not impose my own hypothesis on the topic prior to learning about the experiences of the former principals.

I served as a Catholic school principal for ten years; with most of my time in the diocese studied. I have been intrigued by the amount of turnover among principals in that specific diocese and curious to uncover their lived experiences. As a former Catholic school principal and current Catholic Schools Superintendent, this is an area of high interest for me.

I find enormous value in Catholic education and I have concerns about the future of the system as well as concerns about the ability of schools to attract and retain principals. While individuals may seek advanced degrees in educational leadership, fewer people seem interested in actually becoming a principal. It is also rarer that someone is genuinely interested in becoming a principal of a Catholic school. It is troubling to me that there is at least a perceived high rate of turnover in the position and it has been important to discover why that phenomenon has taken place for some time.

### **Safeguards Against Researcher Bias**

This study has both personal and professional interest for me. Personally, I was selected for my most recent principal position following three principals who left the position over a short time span. I have often wondered why some principals stay and why others go. In addition, I am committed professionally to Catholic education. I believe it is imperative to understand why people leave the profession in Catholic schools and am interested to find ways to mitigate that problem.

In qualitative design, the focus is on the personal nature of the participants. There is a concern that the researcher may also interject personal views and biases in the process. While no qualitative study is bias-free, there are ways to minimize its effect. One way is to utilize a bracketing process. This strategy, as discussed by Miles and Huberman (1994), asks that the researcher suspend or “bracket” preconceived ideas about the topic being studied. It was important for me, as the researcher, to bracket my own perceptions and opinions about the factors leading to attrition among Catholic school principals to allow the lived experiences of the participants to guide this study.

In addition, I have included a subjectivity statement for this study. I am aware that my position as a former Catholic school principal and current Catholic school superintendent brings with it a concern about objectivity in this study. However, I reported results in a factual manner and allowed the data to reflect the lived experiences of the participants; not my own experience.

To further protect against bias, my study has been reviewed by experts including my doctoral committee chair, Dr. Lance Fusarelli and members of my doctoral committee. Their expertise in the editing and discussion process help to serve as a safeguard against partiality in the results of this study.

### **Ethical Issues**

Informed consent was obtained from each participant in this study. North Carolina State University requires researchers to obtain consent from all participants to protect them. All guidelines were followed per the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research. Because participation in the study was voluntary, participants had the opportunity to end participation in the study at any time. Although the Diocese does not have a review process, I did seek and obtain approval from the Superintendent of Catholic Schools to conduct this study.

All tape recordings will be erased at the conclusion of the study. I have referred to participants by pseudonym instead of using their real names and described the area of the school system instead of providing a name to protect participants' identities. Data collected was stored in a secure location and kept strictly confidential. Some of the responses from participants were excluded from the study because of ethical issues.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The researcher was a principal of a Catholic elementary school when this study began. The researcher was known to several of the potential participants. In general, this did not limit the number of participants who agreed to be interviewed for fear of sharing too much personal information.

This study may not be generalizable to the general population. It is understood that qualitative research is not necessarily generalizable in the same way as quantitative research but rather, we seek to reveal the depth of a specific event or phenomenon (Merriman, 1995). The researcher will share the results with individuals in the Catholic school system to shed light on the issue and offer suggestions for lowering the attrition rates.

One significant limitation to the study is that only former principals were interviewed. The perceptions of other school administrators, pastors, teachers, students, spouses, and parish members were not explored. Therefore, the data may be biased toward the views of the participating principals.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I have summarized the qualitative methodology for this study and provided an outline of methods I used when conducting this study. Details regarding the selection of participants, the creation of the interview guide and the protocol phases were addressed.

The primary vehicle to obtain information was interviews. Using purposeful sampling, I narrowed the sampling frame on twenty-three potential participants who were identified and that eventually led to thirteen interviews. In the end, the data of four former principals who departed for at least two of the reasons outlined in the subquestions was

shared in this study. There was at least one interview, and a second interview was used when necessary to elicit additional data, or to clarify points from the first interview. I employed an interview guide for the first interview. The second interview was part of the member checking process. The data was collected and transcribed. A process of coding was used to analyze the data. The data was then used to write a rich, thick description of the reasons for attrition. Further, member checking and the disclosure of biases was reported as part of the validity and reliability process. The findings of this study are discussed in Chapter Four.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction to the Analysis of Data**

The background information about this study begins chapter four. The background section is followed by the researcher's perceptions of the qualitative method since the qualitative method was used to conduct this study. Next, a description of the demographics of the participants' experiences follows. Individual interviews are presented with an analysis of the themes of the study. The chapter concludes with an overall description of the meaning and essence of why four (one male and three female) former Catholic school elementary principals left their positions.

#### **Background**

A basic qualitative research design was used to explore the lived experiences of former principals in a Catholic Diocese in the Southern region of the United States. Creswell (2007) stated that qualitative design includes "the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or, signals a call for action" (p. 37). Qualitative data can provide well-grounded, rich descriptions of developments happening in local contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This is especially important for this topic. A plethora of research and data simply does not exist that uncovers the reasons and thought processes that lead to attrition among principals in Catholic schools. Very few studies probe the reasons behind attrition and even fewer delve into the experiences of those that have left the position. Qualitative studies can peel back the curtain of mystery and add to the knowledge base on Catholic school principal attrition.

Qualitative research also highlights the relationship between the researcher and the subject. In fact, the term “subject” is often discarded for the term “participant” in a qualitative study. Further, the relationship of the researcher and participant frame the richness of data that is usually produced in a qualitative study. The relationship is one of shared power to construct meaning from the data (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). While the researcher has a general idea of how they want to proceed with the study, the responses and openness of the participants can have a significant effect on the direction of the study. This idea of shared power makes sense for this study. In some regards, I might be seen as a colleague of the participants since I was a Catholic school principal when the study was conducted. As a veteran Catholic school principal, I have an understanding of the role and have observed first-hand the attrition among my colleagues.

### **Researcher’s Perception**

I found that this process, in utilizing the qualitative method, was very helpful because a survey instrument would not have elicited the same type of data. I was able to establish a rapport with each of the participants to ensure that they would be able to trust me with their stories. I use the word stories because that is what took place. Participants shared their professional lives and what happened. While I had an interview guide, it was clear that the participants were very comfortable sharing without much prompting. In fact, three participants shared that their experience as a Catholic school principal at their specific site led to a crisis of faith. One participant actually left the Catholic church as a result of the negative experience. The participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share their story. One participant shared for over two hours during the first interview. The ability to tell

their story provided a fuller explanation of their departure. In one case, the participant started out sharing that they had left because of a family illness. Over the course of the interview, however, it was clear that was not the actual reason for the departure. In fact, the participant called the family illness a “cover story” for the real reason for their departure which was a hostile working relationship with the pastor. Because qualitative research highlights the connection between the researcher and the participant, I found that participants were able to share easily with me as a current principal. We spoke the “same language.” This also enabled me to ask follow up questions that had meaning for the principals that could elicit even more data.

### **Demographics**

For the purposes of the study, I interviewed thirteen participants. During my analysis of the transcripts, I determined that four of the interviews provided data to illuminate the attrition factors impacting Catholic school principals and specifically noted at least two factors that led to their attrition. However, data from the other interviews are used in Chapter 5 concerning implications for further research.

This section will relay the lived experience of each of the participants. In addition, their experiences will be analyzed utilizing the theoretical framework of the facets of person-environment fit and the degree to which their experiences relate to the research question and subquestions.

## Individual Participant Interviews

*Anna*

As principal, Anna experienced significant incongruence with her supervisor, the pastor. In her experience, the pastor overstepped boundaries in his role and fostered a hostile working relationship. In addition, Anna had problems with both members of the Office of Catholic Schools and with parents who were overly influential in the school.

The major incongruence in the experience of the principalship of Anna was the person-supervisor fit. As previously defined, the supervisor, for the purposes of this study is the parish pastor. The parish pastor holds canonical responsibility for the parish school and delegates power to the principal. Anna did not express any concerns related to the person-job fit as she had been interested in becoming a Catholic school principal. She stated, "I had wanted to be in a Catholic school for many years. So I thought it would be a good chance to try and get in and see how it worked from there."

Regarding the person-organization fit, it is less clear about whether there was fit congruence. While Anna indicated that she had a traditional interview with a committee and with the pastor, her reflection on the process revealed that perhaps she did not have as much information as she should have at the outset:

So as far as the expectations are really, other than the job description that was on the diocesan web page, I think, there weren't a lot of expectations. The feeling I got at the school was the pastor was actually more running the church and he also did a lot of running the school.

Over time, it became clear that the person-supervisor relationship would be the reason Anna left. It is important to note that at the outset of our interview, the Principal stated that a family illness was the reason she left. However, after probing, it was evident that the relationship with the pastor led to her attrition. She stated, “The pastor was the most difficult thing I had there. That was probably the number one problem I had. The teachers were great.”

Anna also indicated that the degree of unpredictability in the behavior of the pastor stood out as problematic. She commented, “Not knowing, not being able to predict; not being able to have power. I felt – and when I thought there were problems that occurred, I did not feel like I had a resource, a back-up, to offer any support.” Anna revealed an additional incident that illuminated her turbulent relationship with the pastor:

Well, one day I was told to change my clothes. I had on a skirt with boots, and I was not happy about that because I didn't think it was unprofessional but I said that's fine. The weird part about that was that the following Monday, when I came back in, I had a laptop, a cup of coffee on my desk, and a note to thank me for being a team player. That was probably the final straw for me. That's when I decided, call it the exit plan. My father had been diagnosed (medical issue) and it was starting to take a toll at night. So I said, 'you know what this is probably my exit strategy out.' So then it became kind of disappointing I was already planning the exit strategy. I remember thinking it's not worth the money.

Anna also faced conflicts with stakeholders. Although the person-stakeholder dimension has not been addressed in the literature, it became an emerging piece of the theoretical framework specifically in how we think of Catholic schools. According to the definition provided by the Catholic School Standards Project, the stakeholders of Catholic education are “a person or group that has an interest in a local, system, or diocesan enterprise or project. The primary stakeholders are the parents, staff, employees, investors, board members, parishioners, business community, etc.” (Catholic Schools Standards Project website, n.d.). In the case of Anna, parents, as stakeholders, created issues for her in her role. While parental involvement is necessary and should be welcomed in schools, principals must create a set of boundaries for parents. Anna shared her perspective on the parents and their role in the school:

The parents were so involved. They would, I almost hate to say, hover. And I had parents hover. I’ve had them hide in the bushes when their child is going to be assessed. I mean, I would even get calls from teachers to ask the parents, ‘the parents have been in my trailer for an hour and a half, can you come get them out?’

In addition, the parents did not necessarily respect the principal in her position.

So the parents were very involved and they would not hesitate to complain directly to the pastor. They bypassed me all the time. And he would make a decision. With the parents, they felt that they had his ear. When they were planning events, they would do a field day event or if we’re going to do a 5K race, it really wasn’t about whether I

was going to be involved or not. He would just do it. The parents had a lot to say and they were validated which is also another problem.

Another stakeholder in Catholic schools is the Diocesan Catholic Schools Office and specifically, the Superintendent of Schools. The Superintendent is the representative of the Bishop in educational matters in the Catholic Church. Anna reported not receiving adequate support by the office:

I didn't feel very supported by them. I did go in one day and I did talk with the HR director and superintendent and I said, 'These are the things I see.' And they said, 'Well you are not telling us anything that we can do anything about.' And I said, 'Maybe you can't do anything about it, maybe he's there because there was no other place for him to go. He micromanages, he gets, inserts himself in the school culture.'

In most circumstances, it is normal and welcomed for a pastor to be involved in the school community. However, as Anna described her situation, the involvement took on a new level of distrust not just with her but with her faculty.

I told them (Diocesan office) that I had no admin access to any of the computers. He did. It sets a tone. He can access all of my faculty's emails. All their websites, whatever they're doing. It made me nervous. I said, 'every day I leave I'll clean my cached out. I delete all email. I don't open anything personal on that computer.'

When asked if there were any incidents in which the pastor had gone into people's emails she replied:

They suspected he did. I don't think he did. But when he gave me the laptop, I never opened it. I never used it. Because, I didn't, I thought I don't want that to be somewhere and have my kids on it or something. So I just used the desktop. I did work at work and home at home. He probably didn't, but I think he created a fear among the faculty that he could do it. And that's not an appropriate way to manage. I didn't think.

Anna left her position disappointed but feeling like she had no other choice. She did indicate that experience impacted her faith. When asked if the experience caused any struggled she responded, "Oh yes. A big time struggle. I think it disappointed me more in that I can't believe they're letting someone like that go on in the diocese. Because, everybody I've met in the diocese has always been wonderful."

Anna reflected on her experience and made an interesting observation of the difficulties of the roles and role expectations for Catholic school principals:

And I think the only one frustration – and I don't know how you fix it – is what I call the triangle. I work for the diocese but I'm accountable to the pastor who doesn't have the experience in my field area. But I had a superintendent that really didn't have any say of the day-to-day, which was fine. In some schools the pastor just backs off and you run the school. Here, I felt like he was running the school.

When I probed later in the interview regarding the expectations by the pastor of her role, she acknowledged that perhaps she didn't have a clear picture of how he would be interacting with the school. She stated:

Well, the pastor paints a very good picture. And he offered a little bit of a bonus. I got a great office. I mean he really marketed it, and I didn't really pick up on how integral and how much he was going to insert himself in the day-to-day operations of this school, without being an educator.

After Anna made the decision to leave, she informed the pastor in the winter that she would be leaving at the end of the academic year. Interestingly, he stated that she was probably really leaving because of him:

He did say some nice things when I left. He did say a couple of things like, 'I realize you might be leaving because my management style didn't gel with yours.' And I told him, 'yeah, that was a big factor.' I said, 'yes, I felt that you were micromanaging to where I couldn't make decisions. You have teachers that feel like you are going after them, and you're touching people's livelihood.' It always surprised me that he lacked empathy.

Anna had a relatively positive relationship during her tenure with the faculty. While many faculty left the school, it was after the principal left herself. However, it is evident that the major incongruence in the person-environment fit for this principal was the person-supervisor role as manifested by the parish pastor. In addition, Anna's experience highlighted an incongruence in the person-stakeholder fit as evidenced by her perceived lack of support from the Superintendent. The "triangle" as she described explains a common dilemma of the reporting structure in Catholic schools. While the principal is accountable to the pastor, the

Superintendent, should, as the educational expert, provide support and resources for the principal. Evidently, that was not the experience of Anna.

### *Debbie*

Debbie became principal of her school after working as assistant principal there. There was a major incongruence between Debbie and her supervisor, the pastor. In addition, Debbie experienced hostility from additional stakeholders such as lay volunteers on parish leadership councils. Debbie also shared her experienced of a lack of support from the Office of Catholic Schools.

The principal at her school moved on to a new position and asked her if she would be the next principal:

I'm trying to remember and be exact now-- I remember that the principal asked me if I would be the next principal, take his place, and I said, 'Yes,' and he said, 'Okay.' I think I went over and talked with the pastor. I remember that. I remember sitting down and talking with him at some point. He was perfectly supportive and happy with my choice and trusted the principal's decision and that was that. There was no search committee. There was no anything else. It was kind of a-- just a-- yeah.

Because she had served as Assistant Principal for the year, Debbie believed that she had a good idea of what she was walking into when she accepted the principal position:

The school needed a principal that knew the school and that knew the teachers, needed some good transition. A lot of stuff was going on, and there needed to be a

good transition, and I was studying to be in Catholic school leadership. Solid school, great enrollment. The teachers already knew me, and the parents already knew me. It seemed like a good fit so I just took that step and kept going with it.

In fact, she believed it would be a “good fit.” From the analysis of person-environment fit however, it is evident that there was a congruence in fit with some stakeholders; specifically, with the teachers and the parents. Later stories reveal that there were little problems with either of these groups. However, it was not clear what the potential fit would be with the pastor, her supervisor, since he was not directly involved in the process to hire her to be principal. When asked to describe her relationship with the pastor, she relayed the following:

A very fine man, a very brilliant man. Personally, one-on-one, we got along fine and we pretty much saw eye-to-eye. But, when he was in pastor-mode, he was very militaristic. There was an order and a pattern and a procedure and a protocol for everything. And if it didn't fit in, then I'm sorry. For example, graduation was on - I don't remember what night. It had already been set for ages, but he had in his schedule that he was supposed to have dinner with [others] that night. He was not going to come to graduation. Because in his world, his schedule said that he was supposed--well, his confreres talked him out of it. I was like, “Are you kidding me?” There was this dichotomy in our relationship. He was brilliant. He just wasn't real pastoral when it came to a lot of things. He wasn't involved directly with the school, like he wasn't a pastor that would come over and spend time with the kids. Every once in a while he would walk through and throw a ball or something, but he

wasn't kid friendly. And unfortunately, the priests that we had there at the time, none of them really were. So that created a little bit of distance. He and I had totally different opinions when it came to tuition and scholarship, and who should be given tuition breaks, and the idea of, in order to get the Catholic school rate, you have to prove that you give money to the parish. We totally had opposite points of view about that and about the way it was done. We butted heads in many areas of the larger picture, but when one on one, he was a great guy. At one point, I just knew that I wasn't going to be able to work with him. For the good of the school, I was not going to be able to work with him because I felt that his policies were just causing way too many problems.

As has been the case with other principals in this study, Debbie found herself dealing with other stakeholders in the parish that were problematic. Specifically, she found problems with the chair of the Finance Council for the parish. The Parish Finance Council has canonical responsibilities for the financial health of the parish but ultimately, the pastor has the responsibility to “take care that the goods of the parish are administered according to the norms” (Canon Law 532, 537). However, her experience at the school was that the pastor deferred to the Finance Council without question:

The pastor told me on numerous occasions, ‘the finance council, by canon law, has jurisdiction.’ So if the finance council says this, I have to do that. And I would say to the pastor, ‘But you're the pastor. You can talk to them.’ And he would say, ‘But they're in charge.’ And I'd be like [chuckles]... I found that very, very difficult - very difficult.

The difficulty seemed to lie with a historical tension between the parish and school. There was a sense among school faculty and parents that the parish did not support the school and in the mind of Debbie, she felt that the school was a “cash cow” because it was financially solvent in contrast to the parish’s finances. She noted that things became particularly tense when the parish decided to start charging the school for the use of rooms in what was considered the “parish” part of campus. She commented, “if we needed to have a faculty meeting – we had 42 faculty, we needed to use a room over there. We’d have to pay to have that. It got to be ridiculous.”

While it is not uncommon to assess a school a payment to cover the operational expenses that the parish incurs to help support the school, this is usually a process that takes place at budget preparation time. However, Debbie shared that there seemed to be a more haphazard approach at her parish:

Because the school was financially solvent, the previous principal had made sure that we had a good physical plant fund, a good operations fund, that we had savings behind us in case something went wrong. And the parish finance council, one year, without consulting me, decided that our contribution to the parish finances for the loan of the school, they'd raise it by \$20,000. And, I was like, ‘Our budget has already been made for this year. I can't come up with another \$20,000.’ They were just like, ‘You can afford it. Pull it out of savings.’

At the same time, Debbie felt that there was a disconnect between her idea of Catholic education and that of the parish Finance Council. She shared the following story to illustrate that point:

The chair of the finance council was not supportive of the school at all. In my opinion, yeah. I had parents on the finance council. One parent in particular, I have great respect for. But we were debating tuition raise. They wanted me to raise tuition like crazy. I mean, just way more than one can raise in one year. And I was like, 'No, my parents can't afford it. They cannot afford this.' And he said, 'You know, my children will be at the school no matter what the tuition is.' I was like, 'Yeah [chuckles], you're a country clubber, you can afford it. The majority of my parents would not like that.' So I had a difficult time--I actually got escorted out of finance council meeting. While tempers calmed down and then they came back and got me in, and agreed to what I thought was right. But it was a--that was very, very, very contentious, very contentious. But my idea of Catholic education was something that they couldn't wrap their minds around. Maybe it's too idealistic for Catholic education, but I don't think so. Catholic education should be available for everyone.

When asked, Debbie shared that the Pastor did not step in to quell the tension. Rather, he again deferred to the Finance Council regarding financial matters.

Debbie also shared her dissatisfaction with another stakeholder, the Superintendent. She felt that there could have been more support from the Catholic Schools Office in general and from the Superintendent specifically:

Absolutely no support. Absolutely no support, absolutely no support at either school I was at, at either school. The superintendent kept saying, 'Well, I can't do anything about the parish, I can't do anything about the pastor, it's the pastor.' The superintendent was there but in terms of teacher education, principal education, principal meetings, there wasn't anything there. And if I had a problem and I'd call him and I'd say, 'You know, I've got this problem with this parent.' I made sure. If I had a parent that was going bananas, I would call him because my theory is, 'You let your superior know what's going on so when they get that call, they've already heard from you.' It's not like it's a big surprise. He always knew what was going on, but I never got any sign of support from him. When I resigned, he called to talk to me and he said, 'If the pastor were to leave, would you stay?' I said, 'Are you telling me the pastor is leaving?' He says, 'No, I'm not.' I'm like, 'No, I wouldn't stay at this point.' But by then, I had already had plans and there were--other things were already in the works. It was too late by then. That was like in April or May. That conversation should have happened a year before. Is something going to be done about this pastor who's killing our school? No, I don't feel the Catholic Schools Office was any help whatsoever. No.

When we discussed her departure from the school, Debbie was clear that she felt it would be more beneficial to the school to leave than to cause a disruption:

I could see that the pastor was becoming more and more distant from the school and that his lack of empathy for parents was affecting the school in many ways, it was beginning to affect enrollment. I was having--a lot of parents were really struggling

to decide to stay at the school. It was affecting morale. There was the ongoing issue of the financial strain on the school that the parish kept increasing, and I was not feeling able any more to mediate any of that. There were several options open to me. I could have simply said in public what I felt and said, 'This is what's going on at the parish, no, I don't agree, I would never do that.' But that would have harmed the school to do that. And I didn't want to harm the school. So, because I knew that my teachers supported me and appreciated me, and because I knew that the parents by and large supported me, I knew that the simpler thing to do would be to resign with something else in mind to do, so that everybody would calm down and they wouldn't look at, 'Oh, look what the parish has done now,' kind of a thing. So, that's what I did.

Although Debbie felt that taking the role would be a good fit, reflecting on the situation, she admitted that perhaps she didn't have the whole picture:

I thought, from my previous school, that I had seen just about every shade of ugly that could possibly happen. I really did. I didn't think I would ever see the like of that again. And fortunately, we didn't have those issues at the school. From my time as an assistant, I could sense the unrest, and I could sense this break between pastor and school. But the principal had such a lock on things. He was a good principal, but he was like a man's man. He said this and, my God, it was done. It was a different way of being that I didn't necessarily agree with all the time. But the thing with the finance council, and the attitude of the pastor towards the people, I didn't foresee that. I don't know that there would've been a way to figure that out.

And yet, Debbie had served as Assistant Principal of the school, albeit briefly, she did not have sufficient understanding of the role expectations for her. From what was shared by her, the person-supervisor and person-stakeholders fit were problematic. She did not receive clear expectations from the pastor. It is alarming that she was so isolated in her role as Assistant Principal that she did not know these expectations. In addition, the lack of support from the parish finance council as well as from the Catholic Schools office impacted her ability to effectively lead the school which culminated in her departure from the position.

### *Sam*

Sam faced a bevy of problems as principal at his school. He walked into a school that had recently faced a financial crisis and was still reeling from it. In addition, a small group of parents, assisted by a staff member, caused a multitude of problems for him as principal. The support he received by the pastor, his supervisor, could be described as benign neglect.

Sam had the requisite experience for the position. He was an accomplished administrator and felt that he knew what he was getting into when he accepted the position. He described his reason to accept the position as an opportunity to “fix a situation”. He stated,

When they did call to make the offer, I said yes because I really felt it’s going to sound bad but, this is a place that needed some fixing, and I’ve done that in the past.

This principal’s conflicts, however, focused on a series of issues with the stakeholders which illuminates an incongruence in the person-stakeholder dimension. The principal agreed to accept the position in April but he was still under contract with his current

employer until June. He believed that he told the school that fact clearly from the outset and that they were fine with it. However, it quickly became clear that the stakeholders believed he was in charge:

In the course of the process, unfortunately, people were told that the new principal will handle it (situations). And issues that took place in November and December with sports and were just some issues at school all of a sudden, my presence in April was needed, it was necessary, it was essential because people were told well you have to wait to get that new principal and they just were tired of waiting. That's why they emailed me [before I officially started on my contract].

At the outset of the interview with me, Sam shared that he felt that he was brought in to fix things so he shared a bit about these changes:

Curriculum changes, just taking a look at scheduling and some electives, changing just bell to bell teaching, observations of faculty, working in groups collaborative education, faculty meetings that were more time on task than just again talking as a principal and just giving the things I could have presented them with a paper, using a lot of that opportunity working network, bringing in specialists who the teachers wanted rather than felt like they had thrown down their throat, putting a lot more school programs in for students. This is going to sound ridiculous. I wanted my faculty to be happy. I wanted my kids to be happy. Because when they're happy, you can get a whole lot more from them. You can. You get harder work. You get a higher work ethic. You get longer after school hours. You get meetings without them

questioning why. For faculty, you get them working closer in classrooms, and your kids, oh, my gosh, when they're happy, how much better they learn and succeed. So that was one of the things. Well, that was all under the umbrella of academia at that moment.

The faculty appeared to appreciate the changes. One of the things that Sam also did was to try to reduce teacher turnover. However, he soon discovered that turnover was considered to be a good thing, at least in the minds of some parents.

I met faculty who were obviously needy, who needed to just get that breath of fresh air and feel affirmed again. That's one thing that I feel that I am gifted with that's affirming others. As so that immediately started happening. It was all about affirming faculty first and foremost because they needed that. The revolving door there was just unbelievable in regard to faculty turnover. And I remember when I said that at my first meeting, a group of parents, they very clearly were like, 'we like that; that's good education. We roll these people in and out of here. We want that, so you're going to say you're not going to do that?'

The group of parents that Sam referred to had a major influence on his decision to leave the school. While it was a small group, they represented an influential group in the parish and school. Those families appeared to fight against the changes, relatively positive ones, that the new principal was attempting to implement. At the same time, the school and parish had just endured a financial crisis and Sam stated that the school was feeling the repercussions of it despite the fact that he wasn't even there when the crisis happened:

Now, ridiculous because unfortunately they had gone through that little bit of a setback. But you know what though? The way they tried to handle that was just ludicrous. I mean, they literally shut down everything and you had to keep reminding them, ‘Whoa, whoa, whoa. I didn't do this. I didn't do this. My kids are suffering [as a result of what happened]. My teachers are suffering. Our parents are suffering because we can't spend \$2 to buy-- first thing, no exaggeration. No exaggeration. I bought six dozen donuts for my first faculty meeting. You would think I'd committed a crime worse than Hitler, and I'm not exaggerating. The HR office came over with the finance person, dangling keys to remind me what my job was. And then telling me about those six dozen doughnuts. I remember listening to their tongue-lashing. And when they were finished, I said, ‘I'm sorry, I must have missed that memo, so you're not just going to tell me how I need to spend the money at the school, but you also tell me how I spend my own personal money? Is that how that goes? I didn't see that.’ ‘What do you mean?’ I said, “I bought those doughnuts.’

It was also clear that someone on his staff had been working in conjunction with the parents who did not like the changes that Sam instituted. As it turned out, the staff member was an administrator who had been a long-time employee of the school. The staff member exhibited some quite unusual behavior throughout his tenure which made it very difficult for him to not only trust her, but to be able to lead effectively. He shared the following:

{She set} the oven on fire in the faculty room, so that we would have a fire drill, so that she could prove that I didn't do my job because she claimed I didn't have fire drills all the time, even though they were all documented in the book. All of a

sudden, out of the book [documenting fire drills], we're all missing months. October, November, January. I was like, 'Where did those fire reports?' [She stated,] 'We never did them. We never had fire drills that time.' [I corrected her and said] 'We had a fire drill every month. Here they are on my calendar.' So, the last time, when she got caught, because she removed the pages, I put them on the shelf in her office. I went in, and I said, 'By the way,' She said, 'We're missing... ' [I said,] 'by the way, here they are.' [She questioned,] 'Where did you find them?' [I answered,] 'On your desk.'

The problems with the stakeholders at the school clearly demonstrate an incongruence in the person-stakeholders dimension. Parents, as stakeholders, were able to undermine the good will and positive changes brought by Sam to the school. In terms of the person-supervisor fit, the dynamic was uneven. Sam reported that they rarely met. The pastor would often forget to show up for meetings:

No, because he never showed up. Did we have them? Yes, but he didn't show up. He always forgot. It's just how he was. This was all new to him. He also got no support. None – not as a pastor, not as a pastor at the school. I don't blame him. But as a pastor, he really had no support. I lived it, I know.

Sam resigned after feeling that the situation had truly taken a toll on him:

And I thought, 'I can't do this anymore.' No, no, let me change that. 'I won't do this anymore. This isn't right. This isn't how I've been raised. This isn't what I've ever experienced in Catholic ed.' And I feel bad because I loved that community. Loved it.

But I felt that this is one of those cases where if you love something, you've got to let go of it. And it's only then that it will grow to where it has the potential to go.

Although he had turned in his resignation, the antics of the parents continued which illuminates the continuing problems he felt from parents:

[One parent] meant to send [a] vicious, horrible, rotten email like she always sent anonymously. She meant to send it to me, and to the faculty, and to a number of parents, under [an] anonymous name. And this day, unfortunately, instead of blind copying her posse of families, she accidentally put their name in the subject line.

Needless to say, they didn't get that e-mail, but I did, and so did everybody else who's on that list.

While it is not unusual for a principal to have resistance from parents for changes when they come on board new to the school, it is unusual the lengths that the parents at this school went to in their disapproval of the changes. In addition, the principal received little to no support from the pastor or from the Office of Catholic Schools. The principal had been an administrator elsewhere but clearly, he needed assistance in this role. Each school community is unique and from the stories shared, there was an incongruence between the person and stakeholders as well as person and supervisor in this particular community.

### *Helen*

Helen was a principal at multiple locations. Helen essentially had the support of her pastor but that support came at a price. Helen worked with the pastor at two different locations. Through time, it became clear that Helen and her pastor both lacked clarity of their

roles and role expectations as well as experienced a breakdown in communication. In addition, Helen was plagued by parish stakeholders who overstepped in their own roles which in turn, had negative impacts on the school.

She had come to the diocese as an administrator when she saw the first position advertised online and called to apply. The interview committee which consisted of the pastor, teachers, parents, and school advisory council members interviewed her in person on one day and offered her the job the next day. From her perspective, there was congruence between herself and the job as well as with the organization. It was not clear until sometime later, after her second working relationship with the pastor, that there was incongruence between her and the pastor as her supervisor. In both situations, there was incongruence between the principal and the stakeholders.

During the interview process, she received a tour of the building and remarked on how beautiful it was: “It was, here is this beautiful, beautiful, beautiful campus, and led to believe that everything was just really wonderful at the school and with the community and that it was a great position going into.” We spoke about the interview process and I asked her about the expectations for her in this role. Having the experience of working at other schools, she noted that the committee didn’t have many answers for her questions:

They had no strategic plan. They'd never done strategic planning. Quite frankly found out that a huge benefactor had left the school and they had never had financial problems in the past and suddenly did. So their expectation was, of course, to do the educational portions, but to really work with getting the school advisory going and

back together, and a lot of expectations of someone who could be a peace broker between factions of people who had left and people who had stayed.

Helen was hired in April and moved to the area in June. During that transition, she had been promised that there would be time to interact with the former principal but she soon found out that was no longer an option:

They wanted me here early. I was promised I would have be able to do a crossover with the principal that was here. I got down here and he had left June 1st. There was no crossover, and the secretary was on vacation. There was a brand-new business manager, there was no one there who knew anything. Over half of the faculty had already quit, or quit during the summer, had found new jobs.

She was also greeted by unexpected information.

I was taken out to lunch that first week by two people who were very much-- they were both involved in the hiring and both had positions of importance in the parish. And then told everything that had happened in the past, the whole history and what was really going on. So that was what greeted me.

And to top it off, her application and transcriptions had been lost.

Everything. Everything was lost. No one could find them. We didn't find this out until the first payday came, and there was no checks, because the Diocese had no-- they couldn't enroll me. I was just like, 'But you have everything.' I had filled out

everything, and it was all gone. This new business manager that we had at school had to start from scratch, gathering all my stuff again. That was [laughter]...

Nerve-racking? I asked. No. “Foreshadowing” per Helen.

The literature regarding Catholic school principal turnover points to the pastor-principal relationship as a key factor. It was important to ascertain the relationship between this particular principal and pastor especially in light of the fact that they served together in two different locations. I asked the principal about whether they met frequently and the expectations that the pastor shared with the principal concerning their roles within the school.

We did meet. I insisted, that didn't come right away. I insisted on a regular meeting schedule with him. He's a very hands-off pastor. He's very much ‘you deal with it all’. I would say no, most things would be - it was more the backbiting and everything that happened, happened in the parking lot, happened in the school community. It was with the secretary, okay? Very much more of like that. If I would tell him things, he was more removed from it.

She also articulated that he never visited classes even when asked directly by her to come by. She commented, “No, both places I was at [he would say] ‘oh, yes, yes’; but both places that I was with him, he never came in. He would walk outside, but he would not come into the buildings. I've always been, just stop by, just walk in, but he did not.”

The lack of pastor involvement in the school community, such as the lack of presence among students, can be an indicator of an incongruence in the relationship between the pastor and principal. Like other participants in this study, this participant had to deal with another

outside figure, a former principal. A former principal, who had been in her role for a significant amount of time, was still employed by the parish but in a different capacity. However, her influence was noticeable.

It was very much [backbiting] the person who had been there for the 20-something years was obviously was very controlling, and was very much, 'Do it my way, or just get out. Just leave.' I hired over half the faculty throughout my time there, and so those people would come and say, 'Just you need to be so careful. People are out there including the secretary just going after you.'

One of the problems that Helen faced was not being able to trust the school secretary. Helen shared several examples of when the secretary was not forthright with information:

Yes, and it was even things like people would call me or see me and say, 'Now when I called you, you never called back,' or, 'I told your secretary to tell you this.' And I'd be like to her, 'Why didn't you tell me this? It's making me sound like' and she'd say, 'Well, I just decided that you didn't really need to know that.' Records of people who left, I found out that she was never sending them on to the next school.

The records in question were student records. According to Helen, that's how the secretary "got back" at the families for leaving.

An interesting dynamic in the school was the opening of a competing school in 2006. The competing school sought recognition as a Catholic school by the diocese but the diocese declined to give such approval. Thus, the school opened as a Christian school. However, the opening of the school greatly impacted the area and many students left the local Catholic

school to attend the new school. Helen spoke about the impact of the new school when I asked her about the parent community:

I don't know, I would say most were just happy. Most did not know anything would be going on. And that's one of the hard pieces I think, because you had this whole group of people who, when this other school split apart and started going from high school taking grade in, grade in, grade in - by the time I got there, they were down to fifth grade. I was actually asked by a student, 'What country club are you joining and how long are you going to be here?' And I said - she was in third grade - 'I hope to be here through your graduation.' 'I won't be here. We go to the other school.' So you had this whole split very much in this community, which was one of the hopes of course, of the pastor and the parish, was to try and not have people want to leave. But you had these families that already had two at one school and two left down here, and then as they kept bringing it down, eventually those families. I had been through accreditation a number of times - and I am sure you have too - where you do the flowchart which shows you, okay, your school's viable or your school's not viable. The chart showed it was not viable because if you took the amount of students and how it was going, down, down, down, it was like how do you stop that? And it had been named on purpose, not Catholic school, in order to bring all these people who weren't Catholic, because these people were all not Catholic. Those were all the people who were sending, because this person who was the benefactor is nationally known, everybody wanted to send their child. And when that person went to the other school, the whole country club group left. But then you had this group there who

were empowered because, 'We stayed, so now you should listen to us and do what we said.'

Helen did find that the parish was very supportive of the school community and had very little to no negative interaction with the parish in her first school in the diocese:

The parish loved the school community. And the parish, obviously elderly parish, very, very supportive. People were very supportive for-- that's how we got all the whiteboards, the SMART Boards and they were just-- computers, they were extremely, extremely supportive. And the parents were, like I said, with finances, with all of that, they were very supportive.

Most Catholic school elementary principals deal with some type of pressure related to enrollment numbers. Helen shared that one of the problems when she assumed the position was that the enrollment numbers were not accurate:

Well, one of the problems that we realized over the years is that the secretary padded the numbers. So I was told there was 190 kids in the school when there was 172. So she would just keep saying, 'No, they're coming, they're coming.' And actually, she tried to handle turning in all the numbers to the diocese, to everywhere, and she was padding the numbers. So we really started-- I started at 172, and I think when I left it was like 160. They're down now, 8 years later, to 124, which, like I had said to you, was if you took the numbers and the progression down in the study, that's where it was headed.

As with other participants, we discussed the level of support received by the Diocesan Office. Although Helen had been a principal in another diocese, the lack of support was noticeable:

I was assigned [a mentor]. So it was more of them assigning somebody out in our-- who she had been out [of the principalship] for quite a long time, a principal in this diocese. And we got together for lunch, you know. I would say - and I'm just going to come out and say it - the difference in support from the diocesan between my last one and this diocese, this diocese does not have the support structure. ... really you feel like you're just left out there. I hate to say it, but half the appointments [visits from Superintendent] would be made and then they'd cancel. And so I just find that because it's a smaller diocese, and because it doesn't have a mean of Catholic churches it isn't as large here in this diocese obviously that the people at the diocese and level are expected to handle too much.

Helen in fact shared that she did not believe that issues that she thought were important were taken seriously at the Diocese level:

I will say that I felt that I reported things that were very serious that were not taken seriously. They have been just recently. If they had been taken immediately, a lot of things wouldn't have gone on for so long that went on.

This participant had a unique story. She left her position at that school due to illness and had essentially retired. However, the pastor at that parish moved to another parish and was looking to hire a principal. He called the participant and asked her to come to the second school:

He was like, ‘How are you doing?’ And I was like, ‘I feel great! And he was like, ‘Good, because I need you to come back to work.’ I thought there's no way I'm going to take this. I was raised Catholic. I have guilt [chuckles]. I get down there, and I talked to him, and seriously, I felt so sorry for him, so sorry for him, that I said yes.

Helen revealed some inner conflict when she accepted the second position. She had already shared that the pastor had not been very supportive of her as principal. It was curious, then, that she would agree to serve as principal again, especially since she had left her previous position due to illness. When pressed, she shared:

Oh, okay. That principal had been there five years, was not certified, had been told to get certification, and never got it. I loved that school, oh my goodness - the most Catholic school I've probably have ever been in and I mean that - and the most Catholic faculty. Oh my goodness, the support of the parents of that school and of the parish, it was a wonderful, wonderful place.

Not surprisingly, there was no formal search process or interview process as the pastor had already made the decision to hire her. The pastor was looking for someone who understood accountability and could provide that for the school. As before, he was very hands-off and saw Helen as someone who could be hands-on with the school. At the second school, there was a unique working relationship. The parish business manager was married to the previous principal (who did not comply with the directive to obtain licensure). In the estimation of Helen, the parish business manager yielded wide influence in the school:

What happened was that's when I came to realize that that pastor needed to have this axe man, this person who, hatchet, who would so-- really, seriously not running anything. Business manager running everything. They had just hired a business manager for the school. So this person was--she's fantastic and we got along great, the problem was Canon Law-wise and parish-wise, diocesan-wise, all of that still funnels through the parish budget and he would keep all the codes and he had all the codes which meant he could change things. So we would have September, October, November and have all these figures and January that all changed and when I went to say what was happening the pastor wouldn't believe me.

It was also problematic, too, that the former principal was still on the payroll. She was now responsible for cleaning the school, hired by her husband, the parish business manager. Helen stated, "It would have been heaven without that other person being there, and that other principal he hired back in doing cleaning at the school."

Helen shared some of the problems in which the business manager and the pastor created obstacles for her regarding her duties of personnel management. While it is not unusual that both individuals would have a desire to ensure that personnel matters are handled appropriately, it is the responsibility of the principal to handle personnel decisions reflective of instructional matters. In the story that Helen shared, the business manager had an issue with a teacher as a parent of a child in the school and in the opinion of the Principal, the business manager overstepped:

Yeah, so he had sent a letter. I don't know if he sent a copy - this is the business manager - he sent it to the pastor, and he sent one to me. And they were like, 'Well what are you going to do about that?' and I looked at him, and I was like, 'Absolutely nothing.' 'Well, you're putting it in the file.' And I was like, 'No.' I said, 'That was a very personal thing between you and the teacher over your son.' And I said, 'Well, did you send that as a parent or did you send that as the business manager with the business manager and everything logo and on parish stationery?' Yes, he did. I said, 'Okay. Then no, it's not going in her file.' Because I said it had nothing to do with your business manager, you know what I mean? So that was another reason why I left.

Leaving. There is the official reason and then there is the story. When asked why she left, Helen shared her poignant story:

I once worked for a pastor a long, long time ago, and we went through staff counseling, and he was alcoholic. And what finally came that was so clear was you cannot change another person. If you cannot work in this situation, you'll have to be the one that decides to leave. Okay. And in that case, the pastor's totally supporting the business manager, won't believe, in fact even said, 'I was jealous of the principal before,' who now by that time was cleaning the school, cooking, and they (former principal and current parish business manager) owned the cleaning service. With everything that was being done, and realizing again, being Catholic, being my--I have a master's in theology. I did Catholic School Administration. I was taught that the money is very hard to come by, that we are supported by the good people in the pews,

which, oh my goodness, at the second school, the monthly amount that would come in in that second collection was fantastic. I mean, it was just really, really supported that we are stewards of what we're given. And that it's our responsibility to make sure that we are spending the money in the way that we're supposed to. And maybe I'm a controller, because I couldn't see it. I couldn't see it happening. I couldn't condone money being taken from an account and moved to a different account and everything else that was happening. Being told time and time again the money that comes in that collection gets put into the school account immediately and then having it four months later change the amount and being told that I was, you know, by the pastor that that was wrong my information. That he (Pastor) supported him (business manager).

Catholic school principals face a unique situation when working in their positions. According to diocesan guidelines, the principal of a Catholic school must be a practicing Catholic. Therefore, the principals of these schools are not only administrators but members of the faith. In most, not all circumstances, the principal worships at the same parish that employs them. Several of the participants in this study talked about how their experiences led them to question their faith. Helen shares how this impacted her in her roles:

They did lead to questions of faith. The pastor actually sat there and told me, at one point, that if I had more faith there would be more money. Now that blew me out of the--because I'm praying up a storm. But, to actually say, for him to say that it was my faith that was keeping the school from having the money, that blew me away right there.

When asked if she would ever consider working in a diocesan school again. Helen reflected and shared the following:

I'd think about it. My husband says no, my husband says no. I think one of the hardest things--I've taught in public school, okay, but obviously, you get so much more--what would you call it? I don't want to say protection but the infrastructure's so huge. So, yes, you've got a superintendent but you've got school board, you've got all of these different things. It's a different process. In Catholic schools, because of Canon Law, pastors are the head. Not even the bishop. The bishop can make recommendations but the pastor is the head. And there are pastors who all-- everybody has their guess, and there are pastors who are just the best pastoral person that you've ever had in your life who would help everybody and has all this ministry going on and they're in the hole financially and can't do that. And then there's the ones who are the business side of it and that's their personality and their gift and there's absolutely no [chuckles] ministry going on because everything is about keeping the budget going. It's very hard. It's very hard sometimes to be a Catholic school principal and have to deal with all of that.

Helen presents a unique case. Not only did she serve at two different schools, she served with the same pastor at both schools. On the surface, there was person-supervisor fit. If not, why would the principal even consider taking the position a second time? However, she saw the opportunity to be of assistance and helping the pastor in a difficult situation. And yet, she found that the tables turned on her when the pastor sided with the business manager on financial decisions impacting the school. In an analysis of the data, there was in fact an

incongruence in the fit between the person and supervisor. The problems with the Business Manager as well as the lack of support by the Catholic Schools Office shows an incongruence between the person and stakeholders too.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, the results of the study on the attrition factors of Catholic school elementary principals were presented and analyzed. Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews to identify and analyze themes from the transcripts of what was said by the principals to further understand the issue of why they left their positions.

Clarification emerged because of the themes from the analysis of data utilizing a person-environment fit framework. The themes that became apparent were as follows: (a) pastor-principal relationship; (b) support or lack thereof from the Office of Catholic Schools; and (c) role of stakeholders from the church/school leadership. In addition, some of the participants experienced crises of faith because of their experiences.

Through the information gathered and analyzed it was determined that each of the participants experienced different issues that contributed to their premature departure. The discussion of the findings, implications for research and practice, and lessons learned are presented in the final chapter of this study.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion

The results of this study mirror what several other researchers have found. Most notably, the impact of the pastor-principal relationship on attrition is confirmed in this study as it was previously in the literature (Durow & Brock, 2004; Brock & Fraser, 2001; Weiss, 2007). Each principal shared stories in which the expectations of the pastors impacted the decision to leave their positions. In addition, interference of other stakeholders in the pastor-principal relationship as well as the lack of support from the Catholic Schools Office were contributing factors of attrition.

One of the common breakdowns appears to have happened at the beginning of the process with the search for a new principal. While three participants recalled having an interview with a search committee, one had no interview, not even with the pastor. When an opening exists, the pastor should employ some best practices for the search process as articulated by experts in the field. One source is the Diocesan Handbook for Catholic Schools. However, the diocese in this study did not mandate that the process be followed. Canavan's (2001) research is specific to leadership succession and focused on the general need to expand the pool of potential leaders and thus, his recommendations are useful for schools facing current openings:

The clarification and articulation of a school's future strategic direction is the starting point for any leadership succession initiative. Once the strategic intent is clear, leadership competencies can be established and future leaders identified and

developed. Included in this strategic intent should be the specific articulation of the culture that binds and motivates the entire organization as a corporate entity (p. 77).

The articulation of culture is very important in this process. From the interviews with the principals in the current study, the incongruence between the person-stakeholder fit shows a lack of shared culture. A shared culture should really drive the process to ensure fit between the principal and stakeholders as well as between the principal and pastor.

In the search process, the pastor should solicit feedback from constituent groups about their desires or hopes for knowledge, skills, and abilities in a new principal. While the pastor makes the decision on who to hire, the research presented in this study suggests that the stakeholders within a school and parish have a significant impact on the success of the new principal and thus, they should be a part of the process. Canavan further suggests that, “the involvement of a cross-section of staff in the development of competencies and criteria for various positions should ensure ownership of the outcomes as well as understanding of succession planning” (p. 77). I would argue that additional stakeholders, such as parents, should be included in the process.

The buy-in of the stakeholders in the process is critical to the success of not only the new principal but for the school as an institution and ministry of the Church. This was also echoed by the Ohio Conference of Bishops outlined in Schafer’s study:

Catholic schools need the advocacy of pastors, parish staff, parish leaders, and total parish membership. As all ministries in the Church, Catholic schools depend upon the vocal and active support of Church leaders. Parish leaders must be unequivocal about

the school's religious purposes in service to the community. The school must be a vital part of total parish life (Ohio Catholic Bishops, 1990, p. 7).

The need for a new principal can create an enriching opportunity for dialogue among constituent groups centered around the educational philosophy, the vision for the school, division of duties, expectations for the pastor and principal, and procedures for handling problems (Brock & Fraser 2001). While these items may not be explicitly enumerated in a position description, it is important that a pastor's understanding of each be communicated to candidates through the interview process.

At the same time, the search process is a period of discernment for potential candidates. Multiple schools may advertise for an open position and it is simply not the case that a principal should blindly think they are the right fit for all open positions. In their recommendations on their study of pastor-principal relationships, Brock and Fraser (2001) learned from principals in their study that "candidates seeking positions as principals [should] learn as much as possible about the pastor's views prior to accepting a job. Interviews should be considered two-way opportunities for pastor and candidate to become acquainted and determine compatibility" (p. 95). Although their study did not specify which "views" of the pastor should be learned, from the current study, role expectations for pastor-principals, influence of stakeholders, and the theological ideas of the pastor related to the Catholic faith and Catholic education should be considered. When considering role expectations, it is important for the pastor to be clear on what they want the principal to do as well as what they will do as the leader of the school. Authority in the school is delegated to the principal but the pastor must be clear on what responsibilities he is delegating to the

principal i.e. spiritual formation of the faculty, disciplinary actions, personnel issues, etc. Fit is also important. Per Weiss (2007), “how the pastor and the principal view each other is very important as we look at the ‘fit’ in their relationship” (p. 20).

In addition, potential candidates need to understand the structure of power in a Catholic elementary school. As part of the recommendations from their research, Durow and Brock (2004) suggest the following:

Prospective Catholic school administrators should be briefed and screened before employment as principals to determine their willingness to accept the ultimate authority of the pastor/chief executive. If coming from a public school background, each principal needs to know that the pastor likely has not been trained as a school chief executive to the same degree as a public school superintendent. Each principal should also understand the role of the pastor, aspects of successful pastor/principal relationships, and potential pitfalls (p. 203).

Schafer (2004) echoed this when he discussed the need for role clarifications in his study:

If the principal and pastor do not have a clear understanding of their own role and the role of the other in the school, then a positive working relationship between these two leaders may be affected; as a result, the education and the formation of the children may also be negatively affected (p. 248).

The process of developing a carefully crafted position description for potential candidates should not be underestimated. This document should be able to reveal much about the expectations for the new principal, the culture of the school, and the relationship between

the school and parish. Although someone may be qualified to be a Catholic school principal, it does not mean that they can simply be dropped into a position based only on credentials without regard to the needs of the community and their particular skills. Canavan (2001) writes:

Different schools have different needs and require different leaders. This fact must be recognized by both applicants and selection panels. In the final analysis, there must be a good match between the specific position requirements, the talents of a particular person, and the culture of the organization. Sometimes achieving this match requires considerable discernment by all parties (p. 80).

Once a principal has been hired, it is incumbent on the pastor and the principal to maintain open lines of communication. In his study of superintendents and why principals left their positions, Davis' chief finding was that "without question, no other leadership behavior comes close to possessing the career-ending potential of maintaining poor interpersonal relationships" (p. 80). Indeed, a Catholic school principal has a higher probability of losing their position than the pastor being reassigned to another parish. Strong interpersonal skills are necessary and maintaining effective communication is crucial to maintaining a successful school. In her work, Weiss points out that this relationship is not only important for the school as an academic center, but as a ministry of the church, "if the pastor and the principal are not working as a collaborative team, their leadership is ineffective. A tension may be created which does not serve to advance the teaching mission of the Church" (p. 19).

In Brock and Fraser's study (2001), one pastor suggested a method used in Marriage Encounter programs to promote communication: "I would suggest that the pastor and the principal talk 10 minutes every school day for 90 days. By then, they'll know what side of the tracks they are on or where on the tracks they are" (p. 95). A failure of proper communication, especially on the part of principals, was cited by pastors as problematic in Brock and Fraser's study (2001):

Pastors suggested that relationships fail when there is a lack of communication, trust, support, and understanding of each other's roles, which results in the pastor not being involved in the school. One pastor mentioned that a lack of shared faith could create problems. Pastors agreed that conflict is generally the result of 'a lack of common understanding of roles,' and 'a lack of effective communication.' (p. 94)

In this current study, there were several instances in which the principals appeared to fail to maintain communication either by not insisting on regular meetings from the beginning or through learned behavior to not bring issues to the pastor.

### **Reflections and Interpretations**

All of the principals interviewed expressed many positive aspects of their role. However, it was noticeable in several of them that they were also despondent about the crisis of faith that existed for them because of their experience. As a Catholic school administrator, I can attest to the difficulty one may find in worshipping and working in the same environment. People often seek solace in their faith but when their faith is tested in the very environment that forms them, it can be thorny and complicated. My sense is that more work

is necessary, both at the parish and the diocesan level to recognize the specific tension that working in the faith can cause and how to mitigate such crises. This issue was also raised in work by Belmonte and Cranston (2009) looking at the religious dimension of lay leadership in Catholic schools. The authors noted the following regarding principals in their study:

Although principals themselves acknowledged that they had a significant responsibility for their own faith formation, they identified that diocesan agencies, such as Catholic education offices, too, have a responsibility to facilitate and support the spiritual as well as the professional growth of principals. In the past, when the overwhelming majority of principals were vowed religious, spiritual opportunities were provided by religious congregations and inherent in the religious lifestyles. This is no longer the case (p. 311).

Historically, members of religious orders served in larger numbers as teachers and administrators of Catholic schools. In 1995, there were 118,761 teachers in the nation's Catholic elementary schools. The religious numbered 10,002 – an 86.8% decrease from 1965 (Jacobs, 2013). Those members of religious orders had the benefit of spiritual direction within their communities as well as a built-in network of support living in convents with fellow educators. Lay Catholic school principals do not have the same benefit. As a result, it is important to look at what structures could be put into place, specifically at the Diocesan level, to deal with a crisis of faith. Could there be a person designated to serve as a counselor? To my knowledge, this type of position does not currently exist in dioceses throughout the country but would be an important topic to explore with Diocesan educational leaders. While attrition is difficult for any number of factors, it can be particularly damaging

for a principal who leaves not only the position but the Catholic faith as was the case with one of the participants.

What I found disturbing was the lack of attention with which the problems that surfaced were dealt with at the diocesan level. While one principal indicated that they voiced their concerns, others did not even bring their concerns forward and it remains unclear why they did not aside from speculating about possible retribution. Perhaps an appropriate vehicle does not exist or they were unaware of it. It is a difficult triangle of power for a Catholic school principal. The principal reports directly to the pastor but also works with the Superintendent of Catholic Schools which represents the Bishop on matters of teaching the faith in Catholic schools. If a pastor and a principal have a difficult relationship, where does the principal turn? The Superintendent does not have authority over the pastor but can offer advice to the Bishop regarding personnel matters. While a Bishop could decide to remove a pastor, there is a higher probability that the principal would be removed. In the cases studied in this current study, none of the pastors were removed. If there is gross misconduct on the part of the pastor, attention could be brought to the Pastor Personnel Committee. In most cases, there is no gross misconduct, rather, an incongruence of fit between the principal and the pastor and/or community.

### **Implications for Practice**

From the data gathered, it was clear that the pastor-principal relationship has a significant impact on the principal's choice to leave their position. In multiple cases, the principal related stories in which they did not have robust support from the pastor. The

support was more often benign neglect. Principals were left to their own devices and did not effectively partner with the pastor to lead the school. In at least one case, the pastor was personally responsible for creating a hostile environment for the principal.

To mitigate attrition in Catholic elementary schools, the following recommendations are made based on the data elicited in this study:

- Because bishops are responsible for assigning pastors to parishes, it would behoove bishops to carefully examine the needs of parochial schools prior to placement of pastors. Specifically, bishops should have the conversation (that already does take place in some dioceses) with potential pastors about their perceptions of Catholic schools and appoint accordingly. However, it is widely recognized that there is a lack of vocations and thus, not every bishop has the luxury of placing pastors at parishes with schools who have a positive view of schools. In those cases, I would recommend that the bishop, in conjunction with the Office of Catholic Schools, develop professional development to acquaint the new pastor with the necessary information and skill development to lead schools.
- Bishops should also evaluate the pastors about their ongoing support of the schools as part of their performance appraisal. Such appraisals exist already in some dioceses and it is recommended that it be adopted throughout the country.
- Priests should receive more pastoral formation and supervision in the role they need to play in the administration of the parish school prior to assignment.

Those pastors who have successfully managed a parish school in the context of the total parish might provide such formation and supervision (Durow & Brock, 2004, p. 203).

One formation program has been developed at the University of Notre Dame entitled School Pastors Institute. According to its website, the program was developed in response to a request of bishops in the United States to create a program to “respond to the unique and increasingly complex challenges and opportunities related to serving as a pastor of a parish school” (SPI/ACE website, n.d.). The program provides a summer professional development opportunity for pastors with schools to learn about various topics such as “transformative school leadership, Catholic Culture and Identity, Formation of Personnel, Welcoming of Latino Children and Families, and the Pastor-Principal Relationship” (SPI/ACE website, n.d.). While no long-term research has taken place to determine the effectiveness of this specific program, anecdotal evidence suggests that pastors have reported the program is beneficial, especially for new pastors (Personal Conversation, Fr. Mark Reamer, 2/9/17).

The support, or lack thereof, of the Catholic Schools Office was another recurring theme. Each participant in the study reported that they wanted greater support from the Superintendent and staff at the Catholic Schools Office. For dioceses that experience attrition issues it is recommended that an audit be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the Office. One aspect of the audit could be a survey sent to current principals to evaluate the Superintendent, the results of which could form the basis of professional goal setting for the Superintendent. In addition, the diocese should evaluate the staffing levels of the office to be

sure that they meet the needs of pastors and principals in the diocese. A needs assessment, such as ones developed by the Archdiocese of Omaha and Diocese of Arlington, could be used to survey pastors and principals (Office of Catholic Schools Archdiocese of Omaha document & Office of Catholic Schools Diocese of Arlington document).

Several dioceses in the country, such as the Diocese of Arlington and the Archdiocese of New York, have developed Leadership Academies to support new principals. While there is not extensive research on the effectiveness of these programs, I would argue that a similar, on-going program of colleagues for seasoned principals needs to be developed. None of the principals who were interviewed were first year principals. This was not by design in the study, rather, the reality. However, participants shared that while they were not new administrators, they could have benefitted from a stronger mentoring program

In his research on leadership succession in Catholic schools, Canavan (2001) recommends an induction process for those new to their position:

While most newly appointed leaders can expect to receive some orientation to the position, the provision of a quality and systematic induction process extending over a year or two is the exception. Leaders new to the position should take the initiative in seeking this support from their organization. Induction is a process rather than an event and will touch on major aspects of the role as well as the context in which the new leader is operating. The process will allow the new leader to reflect on the match between early leadership behavior and the perceptions and expectations of those being led as well as on the school's culture and climate. The lack of success of some

leaders is related to the quality of the induction process and the importance the organization's leadership attaches to such a process. (p. 81)

Another common theme from the data was the interference and/or pressure felt by the principal from key stakeholders. Common stakeholders would be members of the parish Finance Council and the School Advisory Council as well as staff members of the parish or school. It is important that everyone who volunteers in a leadership capacity at a parish/school understand their roles and how they work in relationship to the pastor and the principal. While the parish Finance Council has a canonical responsibility for the finances of the parish and all ministries, including the school, it is important for the pastor to take the lead in how the Finance Council will interact with the principal. Best practices say that principals should serve as a member (ex-officio) of the Finance Council and provide an opportunity for the principal to give a report to the Council at each meeting. In addition, it is important for the pastor and principal to provide guidelines/by-laws that clearly delineate the role of the members of the School Advisory Council. These foster positive relationships between the stakeholders and the principal as illuminated in other studies such as Durow and Brock's work (2004):

The parish principal must communicate well with the pastor if she/he expects his support. Likewise, the pastor/chief executive must support the principal and exhibit trust by not allowing the chain of command to be short-circuited. All involved, including a lay board, must understand the daily operation of the school to be the primary role of the principal. When these procedures break down and pastors or chief executives attempt to run the school, conflict is the inevitable result (p. 202).

## **Implications for Future Research**

This study focused on the lived experience of four former Catholic elementary school principals in a specific Catholic diocese. It would be helpful to replicate this study with former principals from dioceses in other parts of the country. The combined data could be used to create an ongoing study by a university or the National Catholic Education Association. In addition, it would be helpful to construct a qualitative study of pastors to determine, from their perspective, why principals left their positions. The current study is limited to principals' perceptions which make it difficult to generalize the findings of the study. The study also illuminated the need for a type of exit interview. While some dioceses may use them, the diocese studied does not. The researcher recognized that there is not always a complete story or reason given to a Superintendent why a principal leaves their position. A third-party entity could be utilized to conduct an exit interview. That data can then help the Office of Catholic Schools better understand attrition and develop plans to mitigate departures. Although nine of the individuals studied were not included in the Data Analysis section, the themes of career advancement and the desire to return to the classroom, which were factors in their attrition, could be explored in future studies.

The theoretical framework used in this study was person-environment (P-E) fit. Specifically, I utilized the components of P-E fit of person-job fit, person-supervisor fit, person-organization fit and an additional component that I added, person-stakeholder fit to account for the unique organizational structure of Catholic elementary schools. While it was a useful framework to contextualize the data, it became apparent that the organizational structure of the Catholic school "system" may necessitate some alterations to the framework.

In Catholic schools, the parish pastor holds canonical responsibility for the school. However, it is very clear that pastors do not share the same view of how much authority the pastor should exert versus how much authority is to be delegated to the principal. In addition, the role of the Catholic Schools Office is a bit nebulous in terms of authority. The Superintendent of Catholic Schools does not have the authority to hire or fire principals. Pastors can rely on the professional advice of the Superintendent but can also decide to not follow the advice. Lack of support from the Superintendent, however, was frequently cited by principal participants in the study as a factor in their attrition. While the Superintendent is not a supervisor in the traditional sense for Catholic school principals, their influence as a stakeholder in the school must be acknowledged. Further research into the relationship triangle of the pastor-principal-superintendent should be explored to better understand the relational dynamic and the influence each has on the relationship on the organization.

In their meta-analysis of person-environment fit studies, Kristof-Brown and her fellow researchers concluded that one of the problems in the research is that flawed decision making is happening by both applicants and prospective supervisors in the pre-entry period to a new position (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). To remedy the problem, it was recommended in the same study that “to improve decision making during pre-entry periods, fit-based instruments with demonstrated criterion-related validity must be developed” (p. 326). Development of such an instrument would be useful in the recruitment and hiring of Catholic school principals. While individual schools and dioceses may use a locally-produced document, there is no current instrument available for commercial use for the hiring of Catholic school principals (Personal communication with Superintendents of

Baltimore, Washington, and Wheeling-Charleston, 2/2/17). The development of an instrument and subsequent research following the use of the instrument would assist the principal and the organization to determine if better decision-making during the pre-entry period would result in less attrition.

A further area to explore is the transition period of candidate to new principal for Catholic school principals. Anecdotal evidence in the participant interviews suggest that there may be some basic actions taken by the organization to ensure a successful transition period which may result in less attrition. In particular, principals cited some positive examples of when they had a job that did not lead to attrition. They shared that having a transition committee focused on helping the new principal navigate the organizational chart was helpful. One principal also shared a story in which the school parents literally helped to move his family into a new house and provided groceries for the family. Attending to the basic needs of a new principal had a positive effect. Research into this area would be warranted to help school communities understand the needs of the new leader, express their sense of value for their role, and perhaps lead to less attrition.

While the study did not exert substantial time to understanding the role of gender in Catholic school principal attrition, anecdotal stories suggest that this area should be explored. There were at least four participants that were interviewed who shared stories that suggested there was tension between the male pastor and female principal. In one case, a principal shared her real story why she left her position but only after the recorded interview took place. She did not want her real story to be shared in the study but it was clear that it was related to tension between the genders. There were also two male participants who made

comments during their interviews that their pastors seemed to have difficulty with women. Since the majority of Catholic school elementary principals are female and all pastors in the Catholic Church are male, this is an area that requires future exploration.

### **Lessons Learned**

The process of gathering data was easier than anticipated. I had expected more resistance from potential participants to be interviewed for the study. In fact, some had expressed surprise that they were contacted. Although much time and thought was put into the IRB protocol to protect the participants, I was caught off guard by the impact of the interviews on me. I conducted three interviews in consecutive days and was emotionally exhausted on the fourth day. The personal stories impacted me greatly. I was dismayed by the crisis of faith that at least three principals had faced as well as angry at the behaviors exhibited by some of the pastors. It was necessary for me to meet with my major advisor to discuss the findings and how to proceed. None of the behaviors were criminal and any ethical issues had already been reported. I was reminded that I was not conducting an investigation which allowed me to detach appropriately from the rest of the interviews.

When I began the study, I considered using a survey instrument but decided to exclusively use interviews. I truly felt these were more effective than the surveys. Once rapport was established, the participants were very willing to share their stories. I cannot emphasize enough the importance that rapport and trust played in this process. Very personal details and stories were shared and I am convinced that this would not have happened

through a survey instrument; even if I had followed up with an interview. There is something about a face-to-face interview that allowed for a raw sharing of intimate details.

The data from this study confirmed what the literature had to say regarding the pastor-principal relationship and its impact on attrition. The stories shared proved that this is the most important relationship for the Catholic school community and greatly impacted whether a principal would remain in their position. However, I was not expecting to hear that the lack of support from the Catholic Schools Office would be such a predominant factor related to attrition for the principals. Every principal noted the lack of support from the Superintendent. What support should look like differed from participant to participant but all seemed to indicate that just visiting the school would be helpful. As a new Superintendent myself, I took this to heart. I visited 1/3 of our schools in the first 90 days. Presence is important.

### **Conclusion**

I began this study as a Catholic school elementary principal and I conclude it as a Superintendent for Catholic Schools. I knew the story was important to tell but it's my mission as a Superintendent now. While I was not writing an autobiography, I have first-hand knowledge of the impact a change of pastor can have on the role of principal which reinforces for me the critical nature of the pastor-principal relationship. I knew the story was important to tell; as Superintendent now, telling the story and working to change the ending is my mission.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### North Carolina State University Informed Consent Form for Research - Individually Interviewed Participants

Title of Study Where Did They Go?: Factors leading to attrition among Catholic School Principals.

Principal Investigator Jennifer Bigelow

Faculty Sponsor (if applicable) Dr. Lance Fusarelli

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#### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this research is to learn why people leave their positions as Catholic school principals for reasons other than retirement. This research will explore the experiences of principals who have left their job to understand the factors leading to their attrition.

#### **What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two interviews. The interviews will take place either face-to-face or utilizing a video service such as FaceTime, Skype, or Google Hangout. If you are unable to participate face-to-face or through a video service, a telephone interview will be used. The first interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. The second interview will last approximately 30 minutes. The second interview is part of a process to review the notes from the first interview.

### **Risks**

There are minimal risks to participating in this study. You may feel uncomfortable sharing stories related to your past work experience. You will have the option of not answering questions during the process if they make you feel uncomfortable.

### **Benefits**

Your participation will contribute to a growing body of literature concerning why principals leave their positions at Catholic schools. There is very little research that involves the experiences of the former principals so this study will contribute greatly. In addition, it is anticipated that the study will be shared with Diocesan personnel around the country to learn best how to mitigate attrition of Catholic school principals.

### **Confidentiality**

The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be stored securely in a locked location. Audio taped interviews will be kept under lock and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. You will NOT be asked to write your name on any study materials so that no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide.

### **Compensation**

You will not receive compensation for participating.

### **What if you have questions about this study?**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Jennifer Bigelow at [jbigelo@ncsu.edu](mailto:jbigelo@ncsu.edu) or (919) 592-2722.

### **What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb

Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator at dapaxton@ncsu.edu or by phone at 1-919-515-4514.

**Consent To Participate**

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

**Subject's signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Investigator's signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Basic Demographic Data Questions of Participants Interviewed

1. How many years of teaching and administrative experience do you have?
2. How many years were you specifically in Catholic schools?
3. How long were you a Catholic elementary school principal?
4. What was your administrative experience prior to becoming a Catholic elementary school principal?

## Appendix C

### Semi-Structured Interview Guide

How are you doing today? Are you able to hear me clearly? (If interview is conducted by phone or video conferencing.) Do you have any questions of me before we begin?

Thank you so much for meeting with me today. I appreciate the time that you are offering for this research project. As shared in our initial telephone conversation, the purpose of the study is to learn more about the reasons why Catholic school principals leave their positions. The information you share will be kept confidential. However, I will be sharing the results of the study with the Diocese to assist them in possibly developing processes to mitigate attrition of principals and programs to support principals. No identifying information will be used in the study. If you need a break, have a question or would like to stop the interview, please let me know.

You left \_(name of school)\_ in (Month/Year), why did you leave?

You told me in our phone conversation why you left. Could you tell me a little more about that?

How long were you a principal at \_\_\_\_\_?

Could you describe the search and hiring process? How did you learn about the position? What was required of you in the application process? What was the interview process like for you? Did you feel that you had a good understanding of the school and parish community when you were hired?

When you were hired, did you participate in an induction program as a new administrator either at the diocesan or school level?

Can you tell me a story that illustrates the relationship you had with the pastor?

Could you describe your relationship with parish staff members?

Could you describe the level of parental involvement at your school? Could you tell me a story of support you received from parents? How about a time in which you felt that the parents were not supportive of a decision you made?

Please describe the faculty. Was there much turnover? What was morale like?

What was the enrollment of your school? Did you face pressure to increase or maintain your enrollment numbers?

What drew you to the profession of education and specifically, Catholic education?

When did you decide to go into administration? What factors influenced your decision in becoming an administrator?

Throughout your tenure, what type of support did you receive from the Diocesan office?

Under what conditions would you consider being principal at that school again?

Under what conditions would you consider working for the Diocese or any Diocese again? (If no longer in the Diocese or Catholic school system.)

Under what conditions would you consider a return to career in education? (If no longer in education.)

Is there anything else I should know that would be helpful for this study or for the Diocese related to principal turnover?