

## **ABSTRACT**

FRIESON, BRITTANY, L. African American Teacher Burnout. (Under the direction of Dr. Jessica DeCuir-Gunby).

The purpose of this study was to a narrative analysis approach to capture the reality of African American teachers' first-hand experiences with teacher burnout through the Attribution theory interpretive lens. Limited research exists on African American teacher retention with Attribution theory as the guiding framework. This qualitative study investigated seven teachers in the state of North Carolina who taught various subjects in grades Kindergarten through twelfth grade and were seriously considering quitting teaching. Using attribution theory as a theoretical lens, the participants' stories were analyzed using a narrative analysis and critical incidents analysis approach. Findings suggest that salary is a primary concern for teachers, lack of respect and support, policies, a sense of belonging, and professional demands as reasons for the desire to leave the profession. Attribution theory is typically used to describe success and failures in academic contexts. However, participants described state policies as being controllable and uncontrollable, which contrasts with current Attribution theory models. In addition to stress-related factors, participants experienced race-related critical incidents which capitalized on their feelings of wanting to leave the profession. Results of this study could potentially impact policymakers, school system administrators in recruiting and retaining African American teachers in the state of North Carolina. Outcomes of this research could also lead to more diverse leaders in the classrooms who are highly qualified and prepared to handle the demands of the educational profession long-term. In addition, the current study could affect national teacher preparation programs

and policymakers since the number of African American teachers is disproportionate compared to the number of White teachers across the United States.

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African American Teacher Burnout

by  
Brittany L. Frieson

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my past and current students. It has always been my dream to make significant changes in the education profession for the students of North Carolina. My students are the constant force behind everything that I do, and I will not stop fighting for them until the job is done.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Brittany L. Frieson is a current English as a Second Language teacher in Raleigh, North Carolina. She grew up in the small town of Saratoga in Eastern North Carolina. Being surrounded by educators who pushed her to excel, she's always known she was destined to be an educator. She attended Meredith College for undergraduate studies as a North Carolina Teaching Fellow, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and a licensure to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) in grades K-12 in 2011. Shortly after graduation, she taught middle grades ESL for the first year and a half of her career. She taught 8<sup>th</sup> grade ESL elective courses, co-taught 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELL Math and English Language Arts Inclusion classes. In 2013, she began her current position as an ESL teacher at a local elementary school where she teaches K-5 ESL classes. In the summer of 2013, she began her graduate studies as a Master of Science student at North Carolina State University in Curriculum and Instruction with a focus in Educational Psychology. Experiencing short-lived teacher burnout as an African American educator herself, it sparked her interest in other African American teacher burnout experiences.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“I am going to come in this weekend and get some work done, what about you? This job is just so stressful. If I could teach all day, I would be fine. I’m so tired of being asked to do everything other than teach.” These are just a few words that capture the reality of a burned-out teacher. Teacher burnout is a growing phenomenon that has been studied to increase teacher retention and decrease teacher shortage for a number of years (Chang, 2009; Chang & Davis, 2009; Friedman, 1995; Hunter-Boykin, 1992, Murray & Murray, 2004). In the United States, up to 25% of beginning teachers leave the education field before their third year of teaching, and about 40% decide to leave the profession within the first five years of their career (Chang, 2009). In the 2013-14 school year, more than 14,000 teachers left the teaching profession in North Carolina (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction). The North Carolina legislature has created several challenges for teacher retention in regards to the last couple of years including, the elimination of both teacher tenure and increased pay for advanced degrees. These actions have resulted in teachers feeling an increased sense of disregard and disrespect by state leaders. Many of these disenchanting teachers are African-American.

The absence of minority teachers in the classrooms especially African American teachers is alarming. However, the presence of minority students is incrementally increasing (see Figure 1). The National Center for Education Statistics reports that in 1995 minority students represented 35% of total students enrolled in public elementary and secondary

schools. It was also projected that the number of minority students represented in U.S. public schools would surpass the number of White students in 2014 (National Center for Education Statistics). The National Center for Education Statistics revealed that in 2012 over 3.1 million teachers filled the classrooms across the United States. However, African American teachers made up less than seven percent of the national total number of teachers. Historically, figures also show that the percentage of Black teachers has steadily declined since the 1990's (National Center for Education Statistics).

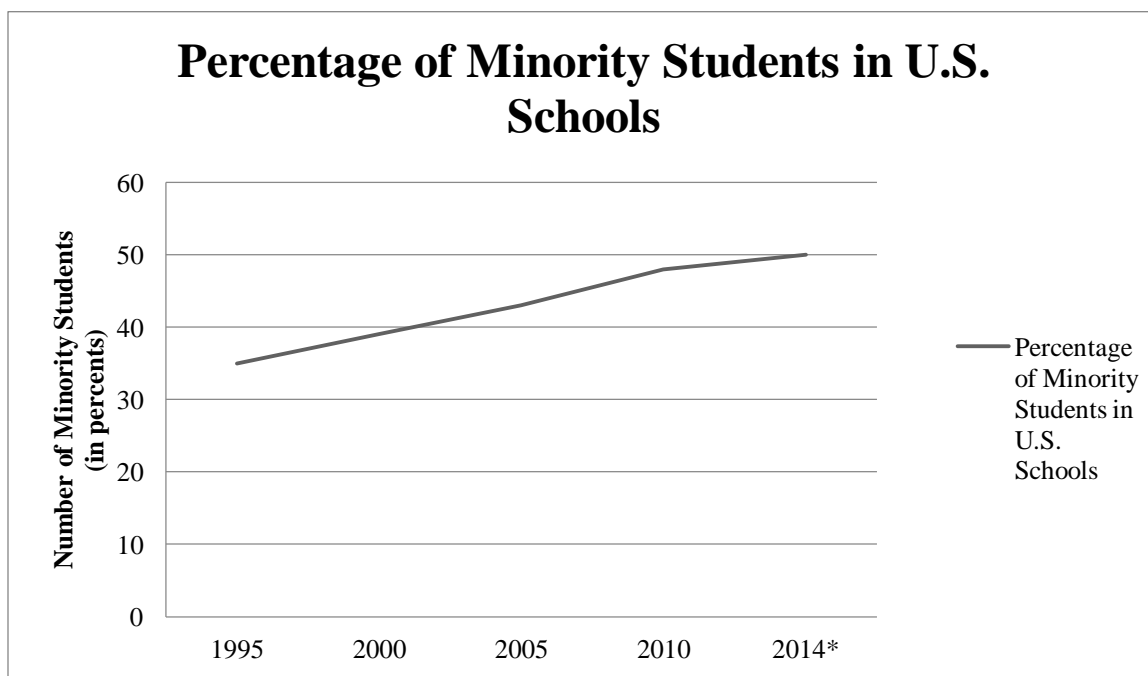


Figure 1. Percentage of Minority Students in U.S. Schools. *Note:* \*projected percentage.

Adapted from National Center for Education Statistics. (2014). *Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and region: Selected years, fall 1995 through fall 2023*. Retrieved from [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13\\_203.50.asp/](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_203.50.asp/)

**Subjectivity Statement.** I am currently an English as a Second Language teacher who has been in the profession for four years. Teacher burnout has always been of particular interest to me as I have worked at two different schools in two separate counties throughout my career. In that short amount of time, I have personally experienced teacher burnout on several occasions. Education is my passion; therefore it puzzled me why I was feeling this way.

It could have been the 80-minute roundtrip commute, the mountains of grading and paperwork that I did on the weekends, the pressure to have grades electronically submitted for a deadline, or the invisible divide that I felt among my colleagues during the first year and a half of my career. It could have been anything or a combination of all of these things; I never could quite pinpoint exactly what it was. But there was one thing that I did know; I was not going to let it take away the energy that I once had for education. I decided to try a few things to alleviate the stress I was feeling. I switched jobs, which brought a sense of renewed energy, along with a new work climate, new colleagues, and new administration. I have also seen my fellow colleagues experience burnout in a multitude of ways. For some, it was a combination of events; but for others, it was one critical incident. My experiences with burnout sparked my interest to see if there were any aligned trends in burnout among African American educators. Therefore, I feel that it is my responsibility to acknowledge and inform readers of any prejudices or bias that I may have toward this topic.



Peshkin (1988) describes subjectivity as “a garment that cannot be removed.” It was not until I conducted interviews with participants that I truly appreciated the truth of that statement. When participants described their frustrations with administration, school climate, salary, and professional demands of the educational profession, it was very difficult to not share my experiences with them to let them know that they were not alone. I also shared personal and professional relationships with the majority of the participants, which made it increasingly difficult to refrain from sharing common experiences with them. However, I was also aware of the subjectivity and did not want to jeopardize the ethics of the current study. Therefore, I never shared any personal experiences with the participants. I wanted this current study to be solely about the experiences of the participants in regards to burnout and not a reflection of my own.

During the coding phase of the study, I manually transcribed each interview. Due to the pre-existing personal and professional relationships with the participants, I found it challenging to refrain from making assumptions during the transcription process. For example, the participants would often make a statement that was unclear; I knew that they meant to say something different because of my relationships with them. However, in accordance with the ethical standards of the current study, I had to transcribe what the participants had verbally stated verbatim.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to capture the reality of African American teachers' first-hand experiences with teacher burnout through the interpretive lens of Attribution theory. Several studies have explored burnout among beginning teachers, special education teachers, university faculty, and senior teachers; but few, if any, explore the reasons why African American teachers decide to depart from the profession (Chang, 2009; Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, & Vanroelen, 2014; Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002; Fossey, Angelle, & McCoy, 2001; Grayson & Alvarez, 2007; Lackritz, 2004). Although there is an increasing body of research on teacher burnout, little research has been specifically conducted on African American teachers' personal experiences with teacher burnout. In addition, there is limited research examining teacher burnout through an Attribution theory lens. The most recent research conducted on teacher burnout focused on beginning teachers, teachers who left their profession within the first five years of their teaching career (Weaver, 2014).

The present study adds to the discussion, extending the literature on Attribution theory and teacher burnout to African American educators. The current qualitative study explored the factors affecting seven African American teachers' reasons for having serious considerations regarding leaving the profession. This study aimed to continue the discussion of African American teacher burnout in Attribution theory literature. The following research questions guided the qualitative study:

1. Using Attribution theory, what factors contribute to African American educators who wish to depart from the profession?
2. Using Critical Racial Incidents, what race-related issues in addition to stress-related issues contribute to African American educators who wish to depart from the profession?

Using a narrative analysis approach, I recounted the crux of African American teachers' feelings of burnout. In doing so, I will first explore the research literature on teacher burnout and teacher emotions.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

Teacher burnout is a widely-researched topic that dates back nearly 50 years ago. The research on burnout began with the exploration of human service workers' experiences (Huberman & Vandenberghe, 1999). Literature on burnout began to quickly spread as researchers discovered that individuals were not only experiencing burnout in the human services profession but other professions as well, specifically in the educational field. The following sections will provide a brief overview on the literature on teacher burnout and the shortage of African American teachers. Lastly, the literature review will provide a summary of the framework, Attribution theory, and provide reasons how the current study can provide contributions to the field.

### **Teacher Burnout**

'Burnout' is a term that was initially investigated in the 1970's by Christina Maslach to explain the crisis of exhausted and depleted human service workers (Huberman & Vandenberghe, 1999). Burnout is an expression that explores three interconnected components that expresses one's dissatisfaction associated with their professional experiences: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Huberman & Vandenberghe, 1999). Emotional exhaustion is the stress component of Maslach's multidimensional model of burnout that refers to the feeling of being emotionally overextended and depleted (Maslach, 1999). Depersonalization is the component of the evaluation describing a negative response to others who are the recipients of an individual's

services, such as students (Maslach, 1999). Reduced personal accomplishment can be described as a decrease in feelings of successful achievement in an individual's work (Maslach, 1999). Although the burnout phenomenon was initially formulated to describe emotional exhaustion amongst workers in healthcare occupations, several critiques cited the lack of literature describing this similar occurrence amongst educators (Maslach, 1999). In response to the criticism concerning the lack of literature on teacher burnout, Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey was formulated (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

As a result of the widespread acceptance of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey, several scholars began to publish more empirical studies in scholarly journals, including studies on teacher burnout since the early 1980's (Maslach, 1999). Teacher burnout can be referred to as "an erosion of engagement that what started out as important, meaningful, and challenging work becomes unpleasant, unfulfilling, and meaningless" (Chang, 2009, p. 195). Researchers argue that burnout is a process that does not occur in a single event, but instead, happens over a period of time when an individual works face-to face with troubled or needy clients (Friedman, 1995). MacDougall (2000) reinforces the idea of burnout occurring over an extended period of time as defined by a four-phase stress reaction process that ultimately leads to job burnout. MacDougall (2000) explains that stress begins with warning signs such as boredom and fatigue that can quickly escalate to heightened debilitating symptoms such as carelessness and the inability to continue working in the same field. The four phases of the stress reaction process include warning signs, mild symptoms, entrenched symptoms, and debilitating symptoms.

It is highly unlikely for a teacher to experience burnout in the first couple of years of their careers, as educators often view their job as significant, meaningful, and challenging in this time period. However as time progresses and teachers become more experienced, there is a greater possibility that work that was previously viewed as significant and meaningful may be perceived as unpleasant and meaningless in subsequent years (Chang, 2009). The negative perceptions of one's job can lead to increased feelings of stress.

### **Stress in the Teaching Profession**

K-12 teaching has been viewed as one of the highest in stress-related outcomes from a database of 26 occupations (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). This high-stress environment could ultimately lead to a teacher dropping out of the profession (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Teacher stress can be described as “the general term for negative emotions of teachers that are reflected in aversive demands to their work” (Rudew, 1999). Negative emotions often displayed with teacher stress are frustration, anger, depression, disappointment, anxiety, fear, and rage, with frustration being the most frequently reported negative emotion by educators (Chang, 2009; Day & Qing, 2009; Rudew, 1999).

Stress can be differentiated by acute stress and chronic stress. Acute stress is the less onerous of the two. Acute stress typically occurs in brief, episodic events that can be limited to one day or extended to a week of teaching (Rudew, 1999). Examples of situations that might cause acute stress include student misbehavior, pressure to assess students by a certain deadline, having a “bad day”, or a negative parent-teacher conference outcome. Teachers often easily recover from acute stress by receiving emotional support or by returning the

following day with a fresh perspective. On the other hand, chronic stress is much more emotionally taxing and can have permanent emotional effects on the way a teacher perceives an unpleasant situation. The effects of chronic stress often last for several months and are characterized by physical symptoms such as permanent anxiety, frequent sleep disorders, high blood pressure, depression and other increased physiological activation (Rudew, 1999). As a result of chronic stress, a teacher can often experience teacher burnout and typically decide to leave the profession.

The relationship between emotional stress and teacher burnout is extensive and has been studied by many scholars (Chang, 2009; Day & Qing, 2009, Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, & Vanroelen, 2014; Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002; Fossey, Angelle, & McCoy, 2001, Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Findings suggest teacher burnout and stress is caused by multi-faceted factors, such as work demands and emotional exhaustion (Chang, 2009; Day & Qing (2009). A teacher's job is never done. Many teachers spend eight hours a day in a classroom and spend additional hours outside of the classroom on holidays and weekends preparing the next lesson. In Day and Qing's (2009) narrative study on teacher well-being, the essence of what causes an educator to feel stressed is thoroughly explained. Day and Qing (2009) describe one teacher's frustrations with not having as much leisure personal time as his friends in other professions. He states, "Saturdays were spent catching up on jobs at home and Sunday [was spent] working." Another teacher narrates that she found it difficult to "switch off" teacher mode at home. Instead of relaxing, additional hours were often spent at school on the weekends working on schoolwork (Day & Qing, 2009).

Teacher burnout is not a “one-size-fits all” issue, as stress factors are complex and vary by individual teaching experiences. Reported teacher stress factors include increased workloads, higher academic testing stakes, lack of support from colleagues and administration, conflicting educational philosophies, student behavior, low salaries, limited resources, and increased class sizes (Chang 2009; Day & Qing, 2010; Friedman, 1995; Grayson & Alvarez, 2007; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Not only is teacher burnout affecting educators at the primary and secondary level, but studies show that university faculty are experiencing teacher burnout as well (Lackritz, 2004). In a quantitative study conducted on a major west coast university campus using three dimensions of the Maslach et al. (1996) burnout measure, including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Findings showed that 20% of full-time university faculty were experiencing high levels of burnout during the study (Lackritz, 2004). Lackritz’s (2004) study also revealed that teaching load, time spent grading, number of service activities, and overall time spent as a faculty member correlated with emotional exhaustion.

This increasing body of literature also suggests stress factors such as classroom management, parent communication, personal and career stability, feeling isolated, low salary, student dependency, and student-teacher relationships can impact the experience of teacher burnout (Chang, 2009; Hunter-Boykin, 1992; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). In a recent quantitative study that explored the three dimensions Maslach’s (2008) Burnout Inventory (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment) findings revealed additional stress factors among K-12 public school educators in southeastern rural



Ohio (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Additional stress factors that contributed to teacher burnout included legislative demands, student-peer relations and parent/community relations (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Although some teachers utilize coping mechanisms to avoid burnout such as problem solving, changing teaching approaches, attending professional development workshops, and receiving emotional support, consequently unattended chronic stress leads to burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Teachers who experience temporary burnout can often revisit an engaged and optimistic outlook on teaching if involved in a life-changing professional development session (Chang, 2009). However, teachers who become “indifferent to the people they serve or to their colleagues” experience permanent teacher burnout, which most likely leads to a departure from the position or educational profession altogether (Chang, 2009, p. 197).

Teachers often experience burnout when they become emotionally exhausted and overwhelmed with various internal factors within the classroom and external aspects outside of the classroom. When extenuating factors begin to affect teacher performance, it is important to refrain from suppressing emotions. Negative emotional expression, such as anger and shame, are discouraged in the educational field; which can cause teachers to suppress any indication of unhappiness they may be feeling. Studies show that teachers who suppress negative emotions experience emotional exhaustion, which can lead to temporary or permanent teacher burnout (Chang, 2009).

### **African American Teacher Shortage**

Permanent teacher burnout, also mentioned as chronic stress leads to an increased issue of a teacher shortage. As previously noted, African American teachers comprise less than 7 percent of our nation's teachers while the presence of minority students is increasing (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012; Ingersoll & May, 2011). According to the National Center of Educational Statistics, in 2012, about 16% of primary and secondary students were Black/African American. The number of African American students is more than twice the amount of African American teachers. Despite program efforts such as the Ford Foundation and the DeWitt Wallace Reader's Digest Fund to recruit minority teachers, teachers of color are experiencing turnover rates at higher rates than they can be recruited (Ingersoll & May, 2011). African American teachers are becoming increasingly difficult to find teaching in the classroom (Hunter-Boykin, 1992).

In the State of North Carolina, African American teachers and student demographics are consistent with national figures. In the 2008-09 school year, less than 14% of North Carolina teachers identified themselves as African American while 31% of total public school students enrolled were Black/African American (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction). In 2009, out of the 99,098 total teachers across the state of North Carolina, only 13,983 of them were African American (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction). Further, in the same school year, about 46% of total students enrolled in North Carolina public schools were students of color, about triple the number of African American teachers across the state. Students of color include Black/African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific

Islander, and American Indian/Alaskan native students. At the local level, the narrative is no different than previously mentioned. In the 2012-13 school year, 24.4% of total enrolled students in Wake County Public School System, the second largest school system in North Carolina, were African American (Wake County Public School System Demographics Profile, 2013, p. 13)

So why is the number of African American teachers such a massive issue? Studies show that minority teachers can be an asset to the educational field for many reasons. African American teachers are able to provide students with a multi-cultural perspective, act as a role model for African American students, and provide African American students with an instructor with similar cultural experiences (Hunter-Boykin, 1992). Minority students can often relate to African American teachers' classroom management style, cultural beliefs, and personal experiences. Furthermore, students should have educators who they can easily identify with (Ross, 2000). However, year after year, more African American teachers are leaving the profession while the minority population is steadily increasing across the nation.

As a result of the mass group of teachers abandoning the profession, a teacher shortage is present in the educational field and the overall quality of education in U.S. schools have decreased (Chang, 2009). When teachers decide to leave the profession, remaining educators are presented with increasing challenges such as larger class sizes, limited resources, and an increased staffing shortage in our schools, which could potentially lead to chronic stress and teacher burnout. The impending challenge at hand is to understand

the rationales of why African American teachers are leaving the classroom and to craft solutions to bring teachers of color back to the classrooms across the nation.

### **Attribution Theory and African American Teacher Burnout**

The Attribution model was developed by Fritz Heider in 1958, however many researchers have extended the body of research including Bernard Weiner (Weiner, 1985). The foundation of Attribution theory is rooted in the notion that humans have a need to understand their surroundings (Martinko, 1995). As a result of the human instinct of needing to identify with their environment, individuals create causations, or explanations, for occurrences (Martinko, 1995). In turn, “beliefs about causation influence expectations, which influence subsequent behavior” (8). The causal explanations for significant events are attributions (Martinko, 1995). Attribution theory discusses the causes of events and how they influence our behaviors and emotions (Deschamps, 1983). Attribution theory focuses on successes and failures in achievement-related contexts; specifically, related to self-motivation.

One assumption that Attribution theory holds is that an event has occurred and individuals inherently desire to know how events influence behavior (Weiner, 1985). For example, if a student receives a failing score on a math test that he or she has been studying for all week, one would want to know the underlying causes of the failing grade to prevent repetition of the same mistake. Attribution theory essentially answers the question of “why” when referring to event causes and emotional influences. For instance, teachers utilize Attribution theory when reflecting upon mediocre evaluations when brainstorming solutions

for improvement. Students also use Attribution theory when reflecting upon the results of an assignment and how to extend the number of strengths within a writing assignment.

Attribution theory addresses three causal dimensions of an event: locus, controllability, and stability (see Table 1). Locus of causality essentially explains whether an event was caused by internal nature or external factors (Martinko, 1995). Weiner (1985) explains that locus can be internal or external. Internal locus can be best described as an intrapersonal event or an event that is within an individual. An example of internal locus would be if a teacher is having an internal struggle with the decision to remain in the profession. External locus is more closely related with interpersonal events or events that occur outside of an individual. Controllability can be defined as either controllable or outside of one's control, such as preparing a mediocre lesson plan or getting sick on the day of a scheduled administrator observation. Stability describes the cause of an event as rigid, or without flexibility, such as ability. The cause of an event could also be described as unstable or variable, such as mood. For example, a teacher could be in a negative mood when grading papers, which causes order or fatigue effects. Order and fatigue effects often occur when an existing mood is present when teachers are grading papers. For instance, if a teacher is upset about student misbehavior, the mood could influence the educator to give lower grades than he or she typically would. Before an assumption can be made about the causes of an event, Attribution theory explains that locus, controllability, and stability should be considered (Weiner, 1985).

Table 1

Attribution Theory: Causal Dimensions Table

---

Causal Dimension	Appraisal
Locus	Internal
	External
Controllability	Controllable
	Uncontrollable
Stability	Stable
	Unstable

---

*Note:* Adapted from An Attributional Theory of Motivation and Emotion.

Martinko and Kent (1995) continue the discussion on causations and attributions. Further explanation is given about the relationship between causal explanations and causal dimensions. Martinko and Kent (1995) refer to causal explanations as the attributions that people offer to explain past triumphs and failures. Causal attributions often vary in complexity as various individuals offer different explanations for their experiences. Causal attributions can be explained by mood, effort, luck, coincidence, and many others depending on one's beliefs. However, causal dimensions define the underlying causal structure of attributions. The relationship between attributions and causal dimensions "contribute to the meaning and significance of the cause" of the event (Martinko & Kent, p. 19).

Attribution theory is a suitable framework for the current study as it has been a widely used framework to explain events in the educational environment. Previous research

with Attribution theory has focused on teacher turnover among beginning teachers and veteran teachers; however, there has not been a continuation of the dialogue amongst African American educators regarding the reasons why they decide to leave the profession. I aim to fill this gap in the existing literature. Attribution theory provides an opportunity for narrowing down exactly what causes an African American teacher to depart from the profession. In the following chapter, methods, data analysis, and findings are discussed. The closing chapter continues the discussion with Attribution theory and possible implications on how we can keep African American teachers in the profession.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter recounts how research was conducted in the present study to examine teacher burnout among African American K-12 educators in North Carolina. Attribution theory served as the guiding framework and the researcher was interested in how it relates to African American teacher burnout. The researcher chose to use a narrative analysis approach to find the specific reasons why African American teachers desired to leave the profession. The narrative analysis approach emphasizes an individual's experiences, or stories, as a focal point to better understand an individual. The narrative analysis approach was ideal for the current study as each story contained varying details as to why the educator desired to leave the profession.

### **Methods**

#### **Design**

The first phase of a research project is selecting a topic and finding a solution to an unanswered research question (Thomas, 2009). Research questions can stem from personal experiences, reading journal articles, listening to a lecture, or something that grasped your interest, such as the one that guided the current study (Thomas, 2009). The research questions that guided the present study were:

- (1) Using Attribution theory, what factors contribute to African American educators who wish to depart from the profession?



- (2) Using Critical Racial Incidents, what race-related issues in addition to stress-related issues contribute to African American educators who wish to depart from the profession?

After research questions are chosen, the researcher must then decide to investigate the research question using the best method: quantitative, qualitative, or a combination of quantitative and qualitative, mixed methods. The researcher of the current study chose to use qualitative methods with a narrative analysis approach. The following sections will further describe the research design in depth.

**Qualitative Research.** Researchers who believe that there are multiple realities that are constructed by the observer utilize qualitative research to answer research questions (Lichtman, 2006). Qualitative researchers are different from quantitative researchers in a sense that they believe that there are multiple realities. Researchers who are interested in qualitative methods believe that there are multiple ways of knowing (Lichtman, 2006). Qualitative researchers also believe that there are many ways that we can study a research topic.

The aim of qualitative research is to “provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human experience.” (Lichtman, 2006) I chose to use qualitative methods in the current study to obtain an in-depth description of African American teachers’ attributions for wanting to leave the profession. Qualitative research methods provide participants with the opportunity to describe their experiences through discourse, interactions, and experiences. However, the role of the researcher is to bring interpretation

that clearly distinguishes the participants' experiences from the researcher's interpretation of the accounts (Lichtman, 2006).

Qualitative research often involves human beings as the core of the study, while allowing the research design to evolve as the research is carried out (Wellington, 2000). Qualitative methods are open-ended and provide the researcher with the opportunity to broaden or sharpen the research focus as the research progresses. Qualitative researchers desire to understand the "why" and ask "why" questions to interpret the meaning of data (Lichtman, 2006). Typically, themes emerge in qualitative data, which helps shape the focus of the study. Qualitative methods typically include observations, ethnographies, case studies, and interviews.

**Narrative Analysis.** Qualitative researchers have opportunities to analyze their data in several ways, including narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is often a misunderstood approach used in qualitative research. Researchers who choose to utilize narrative analysis to analyze qualitative data emphasizes the importance of learning from participants' personal experiences and uses it as a central facet of their research (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The narrative analysis approach is deeply rooted in the philosophies of John Dewey, who believed that an individual's continuous experiences were essential to the holistic understanding of an individual (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

An individual's personal experiences are the core of narrative analysis as qualitative researchers capitalize on the experiences to retell stories. The narrative analysis approach can be best described as a methodology that is the study of an experience as a story

(Claudinin, 2014). Narrative analysis is a unique approach as it shares a few commonalities with other qualitative data analysis approaches. Narrative analysis places emphasis on social and cultural components much like ethnography; however it also highlights the importance of story much like phenomenology (Claudinin, 2014). Although narrative analysis takes individuals' experiences to retell personal stories, the stories can be narrated in two forms: problem-solution and three-dimensional space approach. The current study uses the problem-solution approach.

**Problem-Solution Approach.** Narrative analysis can be used to analyze narratives in two ways: three-dimensional space approach and the problem-solution approach. The three-dimensional space approach is based on the philosophies of John Dewey (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The three-dimensional space approach conceptualizes experiences using three aspects: interaction, continuity, and situation. In contrast to the three-dimensional-space approach, which uses personal and social interactions to understand situations, the goal of the problem-solution approach is to understand people and the plot structure of their experiences (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The problem-solution approach is deeply rooted in the theoretical perspectives of narrative thought. Yussen and Ozcan (1997) believe, "Narrative thought involves any cognitive action (activity)—be it listening, speaking, reading, writing, imagining, or recollecting- in which the individual contemplates one or more people engaged in some activity or activities in a specific setting for a purpose." The problem-solution approach analyzes data into five elements of a plot structure: characters, setting, problem,

actions, and resolution. The five elements are described in further detail in the following section.

According to Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002), elements of plot structure in a narrative analysis include:

1. *Characters*: the individuals involved within the study, which would be primary and secondary African American teachers.
2. *Setting*: the environment that the study occurs within, which would be the K-12 traditional or multi-track year-round schools located in the central North Carolina area.
3. *Problem*: the question to be answered, which includes the factors contributing to teachers' levels of burnout.
4. *Actions*: the specific cognitive actions throughout the narrative.
5. *Resolution*: the answer to the problem.

The researcher chose to use the problem-solution method to narrate her participants' experiences in order to better capture the whole picture of why African American teachers desire to depart from the profession. Each character experienced burnout issues in various settings, which led to actions that proved to be significant to the resolution, if there was one. Narrative analysis seemed to be the most appropriate method as the current research aim was to investigate African American teachers' attributions for wanting to leave the profession. The researcher's philosophy aligned with narrative analysis as she believed that setting and

particular situations plays an essential part in the reasons that a teacher would desire to depart from the profession.

**Critical Analysis.** In addition to daily stressors, critical incidents contribute to an educator's decision to depart from the profession as well. Critical incidents analysis was utilized when some teachers disclosed critical incidents that lead to burnout during interviews. Angelides (2001) defines critical incidents as surprising events that occur in a classroom that are reflected upon as a turning point or a crucial event in an educator's career. Teachers would most likely describe these events as a major contributing factor to their thoughts on potentially leaving the profession as a small selection of the current participants did. However, teachers may not recognize critical events as turning points in their career. Therefore, critical incidents may also be defined by the researcher during the interviews (Angelides, 2001). As a result of critical incidents being classified upon reflection by educators or the researcher, critical incidents analysis will be also be used for the current study (Angelides, 2001). An understanding of African American teachers' experiences with teacher burnout, grounded in Attribution theory, is key to capturing the essence of the unwritten chapter of African American teachers departing from classrooms across the nation.

### **Participants and Context**

**Site selection/sampling strategies.** The study was conducted with K-12 educators across the state of North Carolina. Participants were recruited with an electronic recruitment letter via personal e-mail and Facebook (see Appendix A). Although the researcher knew it was impossible to include the entire population of teachers who were experiencing burnout in

North Carolina, she wanted to recruit a representative sample. Thomas (2009) stresses the importance of having a sample that is reflective of the whole in qualitative studies. In order to achieve a representative sample, the researcher used criterion sampling to determine the participants that would be recruited for the current study.

Criterion sampling is used when the participants are required to meet criteria to be included in the study. In the current study, participants needed to be African American teachers who taught students in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade who had experienced burnout at some point in their teaching career. Purposive sampling was used to screen whether teacher burnout was currently present using a series of questions. Teachers who self-reported feelings of burnout and a desire to leave the profession were selected for the continuation of the study. Snowball sampling was also used to recruit the remaining number of participants needed for the study. Snowball sampling can be described as when a participant suggests another possible participant to the researcher that meets the criteria needed for the study (Thomas, 2009). Although most participants were recruited via criterion sampling, snowball sampling was used to recruit one participant.

Seven participants were chosen to be included in the study. Initially, the researcher recruited eight participants, but seven could only be included in the study due to interview scheduling logistics. In an effort to have a true representative sample, participants who taught at all grade levels (elementary, middle, and high school) were included in the study.

**Participants.** The current study had seven participants. Pseudonyms were given to all participants to protect their identities. All identifying information was removed from data

reports and the master list containing pseudonyms and names were kept on a password-protected USB in a locked file cabinet. The criteria required to be met in order to participate in the study was as follows:

1. The participant needed to be an African American educator teaching students in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade.
2. The participant needed to be teaching in the state of North Carolina.
3. The participant expressed a desire to depart from the profession.

All participants included in the current study met the criterion. Participants had a variety of teaching experience, including teaching for less than a semester to the most experienced, 16 years of service. Participants ranged between the ages of 24 to 40. Six participants currently teach in public school systems, and one participant teaches in a private school. Table 2 contains all participant demographics.

Table 2

*Participant Demographics*

Name	Age	YOE	Subjects Taught	School Type	Staff Demographics
Olivia	27	5	Middle School Science	Public; Charter School	Very Diverse;
Abby	25	3	Elementary	Private; Special	Little Diversity
			Special Education Populations		
Quinn	24	<1	Middle School	Public;	Little Diversity

Table 2 Continued

				Magnet School	
Jake	25	4	High School AP History	Public	Little Diversity
Mellie	30	8	Elementary	Public; Year-Round	Little Diversity
Maya	40	16	Elementary	Public; Year-Round	Somewhat Diverse
Sally	37	9	Elementary	Public; Year-Round	Somewhat Diverse

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### Procedures and Analysis

After the research design was constructed, the researcher implemented the research procedures. Thomas (2009) describes the research procedural process as being one where the researcher should be creative and exclusive to the current project. The researcher collected data and conducted a data analysis while assuring ethical considerations were followed. Although the researcher chose to utilize traditional qualitative research procedures, she recruited individuals in a selective fashion. The data collection methods along with data analysis procedures are described in the following passages.



## **Data Collection Methods**

After participants were recruited via Facebook and personal e-mail, the researcher sent an electronic recruitment letter via e-mail to each interested individual (see Appendix A). The electronic recruitment letter gave detailed information about the study, such as the time commitment and information about the interview. Thomas (2009) stresses the importance of informing potential participants about what they are getting into once a consent form was signed. The electronic recruitment letter fulfilled the importance of these ethical considerations. Once the participant decided to participate in the study, the researcher contacted the participants via personal e-mail with a consent form that the participant signed (see Appendix B). When the consent form was signed and returned back to the researcher, the researcher and the participant decided on the most convenient date and time for the interview. Email information was not shared and e-mails pertaining to the study were deleted when the study was completed.

**Interviews.** Scott and Usher (2011) describe interviews as the “essential tool” in educational inquiry that creates a backdrop of social interactions in educational settings. The researcher thought that engaging in rich dialogue with teachers was a critical component to the current study as there is no better storyteller than the narrator himself or herself. Interviews provide an intimate space to “reach parts which other methods cannot reach” (Wellington, 2000, p.71).

Interviews range in terms of style and structure. Unstructured interviews allow the interviewee the opportunity to guide the interview while structured interviews provide the

interviewer with more control (Wellington, 2000). Although there are a range of interview forms that are utilized in qualitative research, ultimately the researcher decided that semi-structured interviews would be the best approach for the current study. Semi-structured interviews can create a space where the interviewees are encouraged to open up and help guide the interview (Scott & Usher, 2011). Although the respondents never have full control of the interview, typically, interviewees prepare a series of guiding questions ahead of time to structure the interview (see Appendix C). Thomas (2009) refers to semi-structured interviews as “the best of both worlds”, meaning there is an interview schedule present but the interviewer can also probe the interviewees for elaborated responses if needed (164).

The guiding questions of the current study addressed many elements of teacher burnout such as school demographics, working conditions, student/teacher relationships, and factors contributing to an educator’s desire to leave the classroom. The researcher designed the interview questions to be open-ended with the knowledge that open-ended questions would elicit more response from the participants. Although the researcher had an interview guide, she often deviated from the interview guide to probe for a richer dialogue of attributions that lead to burnout among African American teachers.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

**Coding.** DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch (2011) describe coding as a “multistep endeavor” in qualitative research used to disaggregate interview data. The researcher must disassemble the data, make sense of the data, and reassemble it while ensuring that data is complete and unbiased (LeCompte, 2000). LeCompte (2000) compares

the data analysis process to “completing a puzzle”; “if pieces are missing”, then the researcher is unable to produce the final result (p. 146). Upon completing the interviews, the researcher listened to the interview recordings and transcribed them verbatim into electronic documents. Shortly after transcribing the interviews, the researcher reviewed and analyzed the transcripts for themes and narrative patterns.

LeCompte (2000) cautions qualitative researchers of the effects of bias, and specifically, tacit and formative theories. Tacit theories guide daily behavior and could potentially formulate bias within reported data, whereas formative theories are formal, researched-based theories that provide an origin for data collection and analysis (LeCompte, 2000). The current study uses Attribution theory as a formative theory. Attribution theory provided a basis for developing the research questions and coding initial categories that were sorted from raw interview data. The researcher also utilized Attribution theory as a foundation for the field notes that she took during the interviews.

Coding requires that researchers first determine how to organize the raw data into a holistic structure or narrative (LeCompte, 2000). Given that the researcher was analyzing data with a narrative analysis approach, it was vital for the researcher to “identify salient stories” that emerged from the data (165). Scholars who conduct data analysis from a narrative inquiry approach often believe that coding data into categories diverts from the overall narrative (Lichtman, 2006). However the researcher of the current study discovered that sorting the raw data into categories that aligned with causal attributions from Attribution theory was useful to retelling her participants’ experiences with burnout. As a result of

sorting the interview data into categories, the researcher was able to identify holes within the comprehensive narrative. Before the researcher could craft each individual narrative, a critical incidents analysis approach was utilized to address critical events mentioned in a few interviews.

First, I sorted the themes into external and internal attributions from Attribution theory (see Table 3). To further disaggregate data, I sorted the external attributions into categories mentioned in Attribution theory, as well as others that are not included in Attribution theory but emerged during the interviews. External attributions included the lack of respect, lack of support, politics, salary, task difficulty, lack of resources, relationships with parents, and critical incidents. Internal attributions included ability, teacher preparation, classroom management, and mood. Table 4 organizes the categories and themes with the corresponding participants' reasons for wanting to leave the profession (see Table 4). The researcher also contacted participants for additional data that was needed to fill in gaps within the narrative.

Table 3

*Attribution Theory: Participants' Attributions and Appraisals Table*

Participants	Attributions	Appraisal	Example	Stability	Control
Olivia	Ability	Internal	Differentiation	Unstable	Controllable
Jake	Task Difficulty	External	Heavy workload	Stable	Uncontrollable
	Mood	Internal	Sense of belonging	Unstable	Uncontrollable
Mellie	Task Difficulty	External	High-stakes testing	Stable	Uncontrollable
	Ability	Internal	Differentiation	Unstable	Uncontrollable

Table 3 Continued

Maya	Task Difficulty	External	Heavy workload	Unstable	Uncontrollable
	Ability	Internal	Student engagement	Unstable	Controllable
Sally	Task Difficulty	External	Parent expectations	Unstable	Uncontrollable
	Mood	Internal	Stifled voice	Stable	Uncontrollable

Table 4

*Participants' Other Attributions Table*

Participants	Attributions	Appraisals	Stability	Control
Olivia	Lack of respect	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable
	Lack of support	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
	Lack of resources	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable
Abby	Lack of support	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable
	Lack of respect	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable
	Politics	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
	Salary	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
	Teacher preparation	Internal	Unstable	Uncontrollable
Quinn	Lack of support	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable
	Salary & policies	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
	Classroom management	Internal	Stable	Controllable
Jake	Salary	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
	Lack of support	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable

Table 4 Continued

	Student motivation	Internal	Unstable	Uncontrollable
Mellie	Salary	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
	Lack of resources	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable
	Critical incidents	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
Maya	Salary	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
	Relationships with parents	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable
Sally	Salary	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
	Lack of support	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable

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## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

The following section recounts the detailed narratives of seven African American educators in North Carolina who are seriously considering leaving the classroom. These teachers have numerous years of experience teaching a wide range of subjects like, Special Education, U.S. History, middle school science, and general elementary education. Most of these teachers have had critical stressful situations that have led to teacher burnout. In semi-structured interviews, the teachers individually shared their frustrations with state and local policies, lack of respect from colleagues and parents, lack of administrative support, lack of resources, ability, student motivation, and salary. Participants also recounted experiences of critical racial incidents in the workplace which led to a heightened feeling of wanting to depart from the profession. The narratives are shared in the order that the participants were interviewed. Critical racial incidents that were shared by the participants are discussed.

### **Olivia's Story**

As a 27-year old, middle school science teacher, Olivia felt like this year, her fifth year, will be her last year with her students. Olivia has taught in a variety of public schools, including traditional, Title I schools. Her current workplace is a charter school with a year-round schedule, and she prefers it over the other schools where she has taught. During her time as a middle school science teacher, Olivia has felt the pressure of politics, a lack of

respect from staff members and parents, a lack of administrative support, a lack of resources for her classroom, low salary, and other stressful factors. These pressures have contributed to her sense of teacher burnout. She has tried to rejuvenate her desire to continue teaching through transferring to other schools with different demographics, but she still occasionally finds herself in stressful situations. Although she desires to continue in the education field, she feels like a curriculum specialist or a curriculum facilitator would better suit her current needs. However, she has not always felt so disenchanting towards teaching. At the beginning of the interview, Olivia shared her background in teaching and her relationship with past and present co-workers.

**School demographics.** Olivia began the first three years of her teaching career at a Title I middle school where the majority of her students were African American, like herself and many of her co-workers. She explained that the majority of her co-workers were African American with the exception of the Teach for America teachers who were Caucasian and made up about three to five percent of the faculty. After spending three years at the first school, she decided to move on to another Title I middle school that had drastically different demographics than her first place of employment. She described, “Then the school that I...worked at after that, I probably worked there for one year. Um, the students were majority Caucasian and the teachers were majority Caucasian.”

Her current place of employment is a bit of a contrast in comparison to the first two schools where she worked. Currently Olivia works at a Title I charter school with a year-



round schedule that serves students in kindergarten through eighth grade. The staff make-up is very diverse with Caucasian, Indian, Filipino, and African American colleagues. She attributes the diverse staff, including the international teachers, to the international partnerships that the school leaders share with other countries. Her current workplace also has a partnership with Teach for America, where teachers are recruited from across the nation.

Olivia also credited the welcoming school climate to the diversity of the school staff. Her current workplace works diligently to introduce various cultures to the student body such as taking the middle school students on an international field trip. She described how her school culture has embraced and celebrated various cultures in the following passage:

“Um, I really like it because it brings like a lot of diversity and it helps the teachers that work together offer a diverse [perspective on a] topic. And it’s not just you have to learn this, or it’s just about this is the way we do it because this is how we do it in America...like we celebrate. Its a few Indian teachers that are there...and when their holidays come around, like we celebrate those holidays. We celebrate Jamaican holidays, so it’s not just like American, like Americanized. We celebrate other people[’s] beliefs-even if we don’t believe in them, we appreciate their beliefs. So I like that about the school and it just makes me a lot more aware of what’s going on besides just what’s in my little world. And it helps the students to become more diverse later in life.”

Although she maintains a close bond with other teachers on her team, she didn't always have a positive experience with colleagues. The following sections shed some light on when Olivia began to feel disrespected as an educator and more importantly, as an African American.

### **External Attributions**

**Lack of respect.** During our conversation, Olivia shared how she began to feel “less than” as an African American teacher during her third year of teaching. She described it as one of her toughest years as an educator and as an African American working at an all-Caucasian school. Olivia shared her feelings of disrespect from students in the following quote:

“...the school that I'm currently working at, I don't have a problem. I don't feel belittled because of my race...but in the past, I really felt like being an African American teacher in a group of mostly Caucasian teachers and all Caucasian students that I felt, felt like I was *less than*. The students even talked to me like I didn't even know what I was talking about.”

She also mentioned other racial micro-aggressions that were displayed from students: “And I do feel like in certain places, African American teachers are looked down on, especially by Caucasian students, or students of different races, like you don't know what you are talking about...” Students even questioned her content knowledge with question like,

“Are you sure you’re right?” Although students disrespected her, she felt like these racially charged ideas were being passed down from parents. She described, “I even heard students say: What college did you go to? How are you a teacher? So I feel like those views are passed down from their parents. They just don’t make those things up.”

As previously mentioned, not only did the lack of disrespect come from her students, but parents would also question her professional abilities. Olivia disclosed that parents would come to the school and question her classroom management like in the following situation:

“And the parents would come to the school and question...[like] did you say this to my child? Why did you talk to them this way? And why did you say this? It would be something as minuscule as a child needing assistance, so I just felt belittled as an educator at that school. And that was the reason why I left.”

When asked about her weaknesses as a teacher, Olivia mentioned the uncomfortable feeling that the lack of disrespect has left on her as a young educator. She explained:

“I just feel like because of my age, even with some students, because of my race...I’m not accepted as an educator. They feel like well I’m too young to be a teacher or I don’t look like a teacher. I’ve had students who don’t care...or the parents will say, are you a teacher? And like, what grade do you teach? Trying to like, you know...so I still feel uncomfortable in that area.”

**Lack of support.** Not only were the parents and students displaying a lack of respect toward Olivia, she also sensed a lack of respect from her administrative staff, which eventually led to a lack of administrative support. She also disclosed her frustrations with the lack of support during post-observation conferences. She explained:

“But the African American assistant principal would question me a lot. [Along with the parents] She would question what I would say to students. The Caucasian and African American one [assistant principal]...on several [occasions], they said make sure...that you, um, keep your professionalism at all times. And of course I would question them. And I would say, well you are talking about my classroom observation [so, she would think to herself] you can't say that I'm being unprofessional in my classroom observation. So I know it was based off of what students would go back and tell their parents.”

Olivia shared that she did not feel supported by her administrative leaders, which made her feel uncomfortable, and ultimately, lead to her departure from the school at the end of the school year. She described:

“So they did question me and that really made me feel uncomfortable. But when the year was over and I told them I didn't want to work there anymore, they were all like; can you please stay another year? And I was like no, I don't feel comfortable here.”

Leaving her Title I middle school did not alleviate her lack of administrative support. However, the lack of administrative support at her current workplace is slightly different than what she experienced during her third year of teaching. The lack of administration support at her current workplace is rooted in her uncertainty of her dean's satisfaction of her job performance. She stated, "Sometimes you only hear from your admin [administrator] when you are doing something wrong and that can be a stressor. I like to know when I'm doing good and when I'm doing bad."

**Lack of resources.** Another issue that Olivia is experiencing at her current workplace is a lack of resources. Early in the interview, Olivia disclosed that she presently works at a Title I, year-round, charter school. Moving from a school where resources were not hard to come by to transitioning to a place where resources are scarce is proving to be a struggle. Olivia's current school is a Title I school that receives federal dollars; however, Olivia said that accessibility to the money is more difficult than she imagined. She shares, "...you get money from the federal money, but that money is not always used in a way that the teachers can get their hands on it to purchase resources for the kids." She added, "We don't have textbooks. We don't have iPads. We do have computer labs for the students, but there's stipulations on how often you can go to the computer lab."

Although Olivia collaborates with other teachers and considers herself to be a resourceful teacher, sometimes she uses her personal money to buy resources for lessons. She explained, "...Sometimes it's hard...sometimes I find myself if they don't understand the

concept, [I will find] my own way to go out and get materials for a lab that the school may or may not have.” A lack of resources results in another challenge for Olivia: ability to differentiate.

### **Internal Attributions**

**Ability.** With the other factors being out of her control, Olivia feels like her ability to differentiate is controllable. Olivia further shared about her students and range of academic abilities present in her classroom. She explained:

“...um, my students range from the lowest of the low...I hate to say it like that, to students who are just academically gifted. And there’s a mix...we don’t have ...like this is the low class, this is the high class. You know, students are mixed.”

As a result of the students being groups heterogeneously, Olivia discusses how she tries to utilize scaffolded teaching and group work strategies to help support all of her students.

She also has students who have learning disabilities as well as students who are non-native English speaking students. She further explained that a good number of her English Language Learners have exited the English as a Second Language (ESL) program; however she does have a few students who have just arrived to the United States. Olivia also discussed her close relationships with her students, stating that her students are her “first priority” and finds herself worrying about them after she returns home from work every day.

However she admitted that she still struggles with differentiating for every child. She explained:

“I’ve gotten better trying to give each student what they need, but it’s so hard when you’ve got a classroom of more than thirty students. You’ve got one kid who is severely EC, one kid that is like super smart, and all of the other kids that are in the middle. How to make sure that each one of them [gets] the instruction that they need...is the area that I’m still trying to perfect and get stronger in.”

Olivia also shared that her ability to differentiate fluctuates from year to year depending on the needs of her students.

### **Actions and Resolution**

External attributions, such as lack of respect, lack of administrative support, and lack of resources coupled with internal attributions, like her ability to differentiate have contributed to Olivia’s strong desire to leave her position as a classroom teacher. To alleviate her stress Olivia has tried many alternatives, such as switching schools with different demographics and switching grade levels. Despite her efforts to rejuvenate her love of being in the classroom full-time, when asked, Olivia reported ‘highly likely’ to leave the profession. She is currently in graduate school earning a Master’s degree with the anticipation of working with teacher preparation programs at a community college or university, being a curriculum specialist or a curriculum facilitator.

### **Abby's Story**

The beginning years of an individual's teaching career can be a challenge and there was no exception to 24-year old, Abby. Although Abby is in her third year of teaching, she has had plenty of moments that have made her question the profession. Abby has taught in a few schools in different areas of the state, including a Title I school, a traditional school, and a private school. At her current workplace, a small private school, Abby enjoys smaller class sizes and autonomy to specialize the curriculum to fit her students' needs. However, Abby hasn't always taught in a school system with this philosophy. As a former kindergarten and special education teacher in the public school system, factors such as salary, lack of administrative support, classroom workload, a critical situation, and a lack of preparedness from a teacher preparation program have left Abby disenchanted.

Abby does not desire to leave the profession altogether; she just prefers a different approach to being involved with students. Recently, Abby and her husband started a private education consulting business. Abby called it her "saving grace"; and without the inception of the business, she would have left the profession a while back. The following passages tell the narrative of Abby's unique journey.

**School demographics.** Abby is in her third year of teaching, but her first year started at a traditional elementary school as a kindergarten teacher. Working at the only non-Title I school in the entire county, Abby had about 28 students in her classroom. She was the only African American teacher in the school; however, the assistant principal was an African



American female as well. The entire staff was female with the exception of the librarian, which she had very little interaction with. Abby recounted feelings of isolation and loneliness. She also cited feeling that she couldn't reach out to anyone about her struggles as a first year teacher without being reprimanded or judged, "...I didn't feel safe talking to anyone about my frustrations. I didn't feel like there was a community at all."

Abby spent her second year of teaching at a different school within the same county. She taught a K-2 autism inclusion classroom at a Title I elementary school, but disclosed that the classroom operated as an inclusion/mainstream classroom. She was only one of five African American faculty members with a male principal and a female assistant principal. Similarly to her first year, Abby felt isolated at this school. She would spend the majority inside of her four classroom walls working day in and day out. Abby became very discouraged about the teaching profession and decided to move to another school in a different county.

Currently Abby works at a small private school in a large North Carolina city. The population of students at Abby's current school are students with learning disabilities. Most of the students at her school are adopted children that have sensory attachment disorder. The founder of the school is a therapist and Abby credited the unique population of the school to the founder, citing that the population of the school is targeted. Abby's students are all Caucasian and she is the only African American educator at the school.

Abby was initially weary about being the only African American teacher on staff.

She stated:

“I think that they were trying to capitalize on having an African American teacher there, which at first I thought was kind of strange, and was offended by it. But once I saw what they were trying to do and stepped out of my comfort zone...I’m very comfortable there.”

She feels respected and supported as an educator, but she has not always felt this way.

The following passages describe in detail the factors that contributed to Abby’s desire to leave the profession during the first two years of her teaching career.

### **External Attributions**

**Lack of Support.** At the beginning of our interview, Abby described the factors that contributed to her experience as a first year teacher. She discussed a lack of administrative support as one of the major contributing factors. Abby experienced a lack of support from administrators and co-workers as an educator. During her first year she expressed feelings of being teased and picked on by administration. It all started with the close relationships that she established with her kindergarten students. Before the first day of school, she recalls contacting the family of every student to inform them about procedures, to wish them good luck, and to welcome them to the school. Her administrator at the time did not share a similar philosophy. Many times throughout the interview Abby stated that the administrator

told her that she “cared about the students too much”. As a result, Abby would continue to have multiple meetings with the principal during her first year.

The principal observed her almost every week and would comment on his dissatisfaction with her classroom management style. Abby stated that she had several students in her kindergarten classroom, with the majority of her students being English Language Learners. Abby shared that most of the families she worked with did not speak English which made communication difficult as Abby is a monolingual speaker as well. In the county that Abby worked in, the county paid for a certain number of translators that would be shared among all schools. Therefore, parents would come in for a conference and a translator was not present to bridge the communication gap between Abby and the families.

Another area where Abby experienced a lack of support from administration was with her students. One student in particular enjoyed challenging her on a daily basis; although Abby’s other students would ignore her actions. Abby discussed that this particular student had behavioral issues that resulted from an unstable home life and often disrupted the class. Taking into account the personal challenges the student was going through, Abby would “pick her battles”. However the principal did not agree with this stating, “You can’t let her have control. She has control of you.” Abby shared that she took this criticism to heart and began questioning her decision to be a teacher. She explained:

“I just became very weary and very discouraged about what the actual goal was.

What am I here to do? What is my purpose as a teacher? You know, am I just here to

label children...or am I actually here to change a life and make a difference? And it just didn't make sense anymore.”

Abby also experienced a lack of support as a beginning teacher. During her first year, she disclosed that she did not participate in a beginning teacher program. Instead, she was assigned to a retired teacher who would meet with her once a month and assist with lesson plans. She also stated that she would observe her and leave notes on her classroom management. Abby's assistant principal would also observe her and leave positive notes and comments on her observations. However, her principal disagreed, which left Abby feeling confused on how to move forward.

**Lack of respect.** Not only did Abby feel unsupported by administration, but additionally felt disrespected by the administration team and her colleagues. Abby disclosed that her co-workers at the time told her that she would likely be picked on. She asserted, “...my first year was really bad, so you know all of my co-workers would tell me, well you know the principal is going to pick on your because you are the new kid...so I was picked on.” Abby also elaborated on how the disrespect from co-workers did not stop even though she transferred to a new school in her second year of teaching. During her second year, Abby switched roles from a kindergarten teacher to a K-2 inclusion special education teacher of a roll-out program. Fearful of how the new special education program would work, colleagues were apprehensive about having her students in their classroom. Abby stated that her colleagues did not trust her judgment about what would work best for her students.

**Politics.** Abby experienced a turning point in her career during her second year when she was pregnant with her first child. While Abby was working in the special education classroom, a student kicked her, which resulted in Abby going into pre-term labor. Instead of going home to rest, Abby continued to work for two weeks after the incident. Abby stated that she had no choice due to county policies. She explained:

“I kind of kept making myself work because in the school system, Special Ed world [is]...if you have a substitute and the substitute is not a licensed teacher, you have to, you owe the children back compensatory hours...which [was] basically all the days I was out. All the hours I was out of school, in the summer I [had] to go back and make those hours up if the parents want[ed] to.”

Abby expressed her frustration with the school’s inability to find a licensed substitute for the majority of the days that she was out because of the incident.

However, Abby clarified that she was not upset with her administrators as she felt like they tried their best to find a substitute. Abby shared her frustrations with the politics of the county and the lack of certified special education substitutes. She also stated that several co-workers tried to transfer their sick leave days, but the county human resources office denied her request. As a result of the incident and county policies, Abby returned to work when her newborn child was two weeks old. She also continued to work through the summer in order to repay the hours she owed back to the county and her students.

**Salary.** When asked about long-term stressors, Abby stated salary as a primary factor for wanting to depart from the profession. She stated that it is financially difficult for her husband and her to support their family as a young couple:

“... And I know people always say when you go into teaching; it’s not for the money. But when I put in extensive amounts of work and I would come home and...it would be in the middle of the month and the money didn’t add up for the time that I was putting in. It was devastating. Being newly married with a new child, that was one of the most horrendous things that I ever had to deal with, especially with the student loans.”

Abby feels that there is no growth in the education profession, especially with a frozen pay scale. She also expressed her frustrations with the amount of time she spends on professional development and not receiving compensation for it. In an attempt to help her finances, Abby decided to go back to school for her Master’s degree to receive more compensation. However, North Carolina legislature passed a law stating teachers earning their Master’s degree after a certain time frame would not receive additional compensation. Therefore Abby hasn’t finished her degree and is frustrated about her finances:

“You know that’s a year of college. [I’m] already paying [in addition] to what I’m paying on now [her student loans] is a lot. It’s a lot. You know, it was either go back to college [or] pick up more debt for my professional growth. That comes out of my

pocket, but yet I can't move up on the scale. It just doesn't add up...[so] it's one of the long-term things that I look at."

### **Internal Attributions**

**Teacher preparation.** Abby also stated during the interview that she felt underprepared to cope with the emotional strain that comes along with teaching. She commented on the emphasis that her teacher preparation program placed on educational theories and the lack of emphasis on field experiences. Abby discussed that when she stepped into her classroom, she did not have the ability to deal with situations such as when a child was sick or going through a tough time, such as parents' divorce or losing a pet. She cited that she was not emotionally prepared to deal with those classroom situations.

### **Actions and Resolution**

External attributions, such as a lack of support, a lack of respect, politics, and salary, along with internal attributions such as underpreparedness have left Abby with mixed feelings towards teaching. Determined to earn more money and potentially leave the classroom, Abby returned back to school to get her Master's Degree, but decided to not finish because of the possibility of not being compensated for furthering her education. After an unsuccessful experience for two consecutive years, Abby and her family relocated to another city. Abby and her husband also decided to start a private educational consulting business. Abby described the business as, "educational enrichment, like tutoring and

emotional development for kids who have emotional attachment disorder or any other disabilities.” With the positive potential of the business, Abby still has hope, “...because I love teaching and I love being so involved with students and watching them grow...the business has kind of been my savior.”

### **Quinn’s Story**

Quinn’s narrative is quite a bit different from the other interviewed participants. Quinn is a 24-year old, first-year teacher at a middle school in a mid-sized North Carolina city. Since this is Quinn’s first year teaching she has only taught in one school, which also happens to be the school where she completed her internship. Quinn’s concerns with her teaching experiences primarily stem from administration support. She shared that feels like she needs guidance and is not finding it at her current school. She also credited her curiosity of other careers to her lack of teaching experience and young age. The following sections describes Quinn’s first year in detail.

**School demographics.** Quinn teaches at a public, magnet middle school in North Carolina. Her school focuses on STEM, (Science, Engineering, Technology, and Mathematics) and has strong connections with a local, large university. Although she has only been teaching for a total of six months, she shared that she enjoys teaching at a public school because of the diverse population and the unique opportunities that a magnet school provides for students. Quinn elaborated that she enjoys the extended curriculum, “...every Friday, we do STEM Friday. So that’s 45 minutes out of the day where kids get to explore a



specific topic within STEM, which I think is really cool because they don't normally get that opportunity..." She also commented on the freedom her students get to explore the STEM fields, "And even just in the regular school day, we try to incorporate and get into a lot of things where having guest speakers come in or finding a project that is geared toward the STEM aspects."

One thing that is unique about Quinn's school is the staff demographics. About half of Quinn's staff are beginning teachers, which creates "a really interesting dynamic" with the entire staff being split between beginning teachers who have taught less than three years and veteran teachers. The administration is diverse, with a Caucasian female principal, an African American female assistant principal, and two male administrative interns. Quinn is disappointed with the amount of African American teachers at her current school. She asserted, "I would like to see more diversity because the student population is very diverse." She is only one of one about five African American teachers out of 50-member faculty at her school. Although half of the faculty are veteran teachers, Quinn is disappointed about the amount of instructional support.

### **External Attributions**

**Lack of support.** The staff at Quinn's school is divided in the number of beginning and veteran teachers. Quinn elaborated that the beginning teacher program is disproportionate in regards to the number of beginning teachers to every mentor. "We only have 3 for the 20ish beginning teachers that we have at our school, so the support can seem

to be kind of lacking there as far as beginning teachers go.” Having almost triple the number of beginning teachers than mentors can create challenges, such as not enough individualized support for every beginning teacher.

Another frustration Quinn is currently experiencing is lack of support from her administration team. She has been teaching for six months with no guidance from her principal which frustrates her. She explained:

“So I’ve been teaching full-time at my school for six or eight weeks now and I haven’t had any administrator come into my classroom once...which is kind of . . . well. . . very disheartening. How do you know if I’m a good teacher, bad teacher? Do you know if I’m doing best practices? Things like that where I don’t know because no one has come in to observe me, give me feedback or anything like that.”

Quinn also expressed that though she realizes there is a lack of administration support at her current school, she is uncertain as to how much administration support is usually provided as the result of her lack of teaching experience. She shared:

“I feel like the question that I’m asking right now is that is there really good administrative support at other schools or is this something that all teachers struggle with? How do I know? And what if I interview to switch schools, how do I know?”

These ongoing questions about administrative support have Quinn seriously considering if she can continue to teach with the lack of support.

**Salary and policies.** Quinn also expressed concerns with her salary. She shared that she feels that her salary is low as a beginning teacher with a Master's degree. She stated she believes that teachers do not get paid what they deserve to be paid. She is also fed up with state policies. Although she loves her job, she recognizes that she may not be in the profession long-term. Quinn stated:

“I love teaching. I love my students. I love giving strategies and resources to kids who receive special education services, but it is things like lack of administration support, low pay, low salary...ridiculous policies that change all the time, that make me think I don't know if I can stay in this [profession for] 20, 30, 40 years.”

### **Internal Attributions**

**Classroom management.** When asked about her weaknesses, Quinn does not hesitate to say that classroom management is one of them. Quinn described the 19 students on her caseload as not being academically diverse, with 15 of them being male students. Her caseload is not racially diverse either as 13 of them are African American, five students are Hispanic, and one student has a different nationality than that two that were previously mentioned. The majority of her students are diagnosed with ADHD, which Quinn stated is typical for a middle school special education caseload.

Quinn described the relationships that she shares with her students as being positive. She explained that she has created a respectful, welcoming, learning environment, which

gives her students the freedom to come to her about almost anything, including academic help to middle school relationship advice. Quinn further discussed her classroom environment:

“It is a lot of fun. My classroom is loud. It is kind of chaotic at times...but they know that in my classroom, they know [that] they come to learn, and whatever they need to do to do that, they can. Sitting on the floor, laying on the floor, turning the lights off to learn, turning the music on...it’s a comfortable environment, so they feel comfortable coming into my classroom.”

Quinn additionally added that her students have serious behavior issues that interfere with the learning environment. She has an ongoing challenge of deciding how to handle it and she credited the lack of support from administration as the cause of this. She further added that she is uncertain about the discipline policy when a child misbehaves. She explained:

“So one structure that is not very strong at my school is...what you do with those students who are disrupting the learning environment? Do you send them out[side of the classroom]? Do you call the office or do you just suck it up and deal with it? That has really been stressful to me and my first year of teaching.”

She also stated that she struggles with transitions and student engagement as well:

“...some weaknesses I would say is um, I would say classroom management. Just keeping students on task, engaged for longer periods of time, and having shorter transitions [is difficult]. We know that our transitions are long and students are lurking around, [which causes] crazy things [to happen].”

### **Actions and Resolutions**

Lack of support from the administration and beginning teacher program, salary, and policies are external attribution factors that Quinn feels like is out of her control. Throughout her first year of teaching, Quinn has joined the Beginning Teacher Network to collaborate with other beginning teachers within the state to promote change among educational policies. She also stated she enjoys Beginning Teacher Network because she has also met other policymakers, learned about policies and how they are created, which has resulted in having other education allies.

Quinn is frightened at her interest in other careers considering this is her first year of teaching. She feels like being a young educator who is uncertain about her future plans is a major contributing factor to her curiosity of other careers. Quinn added that she has been thinking about other jobs such as a camp director, or returning back to school to further her studies:

“Like I’m just feeling this adult thing out, like maybe I could do something else. Maybe I could get a PhD and do research, or even teach at the university level. I

don't really know what I want to do with my life, so I'm always questioning if I should go back to school and do something else and be successful at it."

### **Jake's Story**

Jake is a high school history teacher in his fourth year of teaching at a public high school in a small town located in North Carolina. During Jake's first year of teaching, he taught in a public middle school but transferred to the high school level shortly after his first year of teaching. He mentioned his preference for teaching at the high school level because of block scheduling and students' independence. Although Jake does not have a strong desire to leave the education profession, he stated that he prefers a position other than a classroom history educator. Several small, enduring factors have led to his decision to depart from the classroom, such as, student motivation, high-stakes testing standards, salary, and professional work demands. The following sections recount Jake's four years of teaching and the reasons that contributed to him wanting to leave his position as a high school history teacher.

**School demographics.** Jake spent his first year of teaching in a traditional, public middle school. During the first year of his career, he taught North Carolina history to over 160 eighth grade students. At this particular school, the staff was somewhat racially diverse. Although Jake was the only African American male on his eighth grade team, there were two other female African American educators on the same team. Jake mentioned that he had great working conditions at this school because he felt that he had colleagues whom he could

connect to in a way that he could not connect to other co-workers. His administrator was Caucasian and his assistant principal was an African American male.

Although he felt a sense of belonging on his eighth grade team at the middle school, this is an area that is lacking for him at his current job. Currently, Jake teaches high school history, including Advanced Placement U.S. History and African American Studies. He is the only African American who teaches a core subject out of 90 staff members with ten of them being African American. He teaches 3 sections of history courses with a total of 75 students. The following sections disclose Jake's external and internal attributions for wanting to leave the classroom. He mentions only having a close relationship with one other African American staff member.

### **External Attributions**

**Task Difficulty.** One of the external attributions for wanting to leave the classroom that Jake discussed was the professional demands of being a high school educator. With a total of 75 students in three different courses, Jake has a full workload that he feels is out of his control. Although he described his leadership as one of his strengths during his interview, these roles come with additional workload demands. Between grading and extra-curricular activities such as being the senior class advisor, graduation coordinator, and department chair, his leisure time is few and far in between. However Jake admitted that he struggles with the workload demands and wanting to be a role model for his students, "You know I have leadership skills leading, being out front, since I'm a young Black male in the

school. You know being out front, trying to make an example, have an example...for students and staff.”

He also mentioned meeting deadlines as a struggle. Jake further explained that his workday doesn't end when the last school bell rings. He stated that he takes work home and becomes frustrated with others who do not take work home. Jake explained his frustrations:

“Um, just the long process, the overhaul of bringing work home every day. You know some teachers you see come in with nothing and leave with nothing. And you are the only teacher that takes out your stuff and you're like...well, what am I doing wrong?”

Jake also mentioned other professional demands as daily stressors, such as making sure grades are completed before report card periods, participating in departmental meetings and professional learning communities (PLCs), and utilizing PowerSchools. He also discussed balancing professional demands as a contributing factor to burnout, “Also our balancing...you know, you have a fire drill, tornado drill, or a lockdown drill...or there's a two-hour delay, rescheduling, balancing...oh we forgot, we have a departmental meeting.”

**Salary.** Along with professional demands, Jake explained that he feels that he does not get compensated enough for all of the time that he devotes to his job. He described salary as, “...pay is one of the saddest things. You know we don't get paid anything and you know



they want you to do so much with so little time.” Further, he explained his frustrations with salary as, “...doing something extra all the time with so little in return.”

**Lack of support.** During the interview Jake discussed his struggle with the lack of administration support. He has had a difficult time adjusting to the leadership because he had had four different leaders throughout his four years of teaching. He explained that he struggles to understand the philosophies and goals of each administrator due to administrator turnover. He also explained that teachers do not feel supported because administration does not hold students accountable for their actions at his workplace.

### **Internal Attributions**

**Mood.** Although not clearly stated by the participant, a sense of belonging among colleagues has contributed to Jake’s desire to leave the classroom. Jake positively spoke about the relationships he had with his other teammates during his first year of teaching. Knowing that he had an African American female colleague across the hall who had been teaching for 25 years, he felt like he had a great connection with her. He also mentioned that he had a great connection with the other African American teacher who was next door to him.

However, he doesn’t have the same professional relationships with his current colleagues. Being the only African American in his department creates a difficult space of having connections with other colleagues. When asked about how he feels being one of few

African American educators at his job, he replied, “It depends. Um, sometimes it makes you feel uncomfortable because there is no one else like you in a core subject. But then there’s other times where you just deal with it, you know? It’s work.”

Jake also doesn’t share the same close professional relationships with other African American colleagues that he shared with the ones during his first year of teaching. He described his relationships with other African American colleagues as “good working relations”. He mentioned that he is not very close with other African American colleagues except for acknowledging one another and discussing students that they share. He further explained his lack of genuine relationships with colleagues:

“Um, sometimes I feel isolated. Sometimes I feel um, kind of...you know; you don’t have too many people that you can go to for assistance or help. You have to pick and choose who you feel comfortable speaking with, being the case that there’s very few within the school building.”

**Student Motivation.** In contrast to the relationships that Jake shares with his colleagues, he stated that has close relationships with his students. He teaches 75 diverse students who understands where he’s coming from, which he attributes to their close age proximity. Although his students like to think that they are “best buddies”, Jake quickly added, “...other than that we understand. Well they understand what I expect of them in the classroom, what I expect from them in their work and stuff.” He also explains that he,

“...likes to keep it professional, but I want them also to feel...comfortable enough to come to me if they have a problem or concern.”

Jake’s main concern with his students was their motivation. He mainly teaches high-achieving students, but explained their lack of self-motivation. Jake stated that teaching his students is challenging at times because they complain about the course difficulty level. Jake described that his students just want a good grade, without having to put in the effort of earning it. He stated:

“Student behavior has really changed. You know the sense of apathy, of not wanting to do [hard work], is very high. You know? And they just feel like I’ve got to have it and you’re going to give it to me [good grades]. And I don’t have to work for it.”

He also explained student motivation as a reason for leaving the profession:

“...you want your students to have a thirst for learning and sometimes we find that...or you may encounter that they don’t have that passion anymore, or see that passion. Sometimes that can feel like a major contributing factor to stop teaching.”

### **Actions and Resolution**

Although Jake has felt the pressure of being an educator for four years, he has done various things to change his feelings toward teaching. Jake switched jobs at the end of his first year of teaching from middle grades to the high school level. He has also assumed

responsibility for various roles such as department chair, senior advisor, and school bus driver. Currently, Jake is in graduate school earning his Masters of School Administration. Jake explains that he wants to be an inspiration to his students. He also added that if he decided to leave the profession he would consider changing school settings, such as working in a private or charter school. He also expressed an interest in policy and educational law. When asked if he would consider staying in the profession, he responded:

“...it’s a happy medium, but I enjoy my job. I really do like teaching, but all the other little things that’s added on to it that makes it bad. All the extra hoops, all the extra junk, all the extra that you have to do to keep up or stay afloat with teaching. You always have to keep doing more, you know to stay ahead.”

### **Mellie’s Story**

Mellie is an eight-year veteran teacher who spent her entire teaching career in North Carolina. In the past, Mellie has taught kindergarten and fifth grade; she currently teaches fourth grade students in a year-round, North Carolina public school. Mellie’s narrative is very unique. Mellie’s primary reasons for wanting to leave the profession are salary, high-stakes testing, parent-teacher relationships, lack of resources, and a couple of critical incidents. In the past two years of Mellie’s teaching career have been characterized with two critical incidents with an administrator and a parent who made her question her desire to remain in the profession. The following sections further explain the two incidents along with other reasons Mellie disclosed for leaving the profession.

**School demographics.** Mellie has been an educator for the past eight years to elementary students in North Carolina. Mellie has previously taught kindergarten, fifth grade, and currently, fourth grade. She spent the first six years of her teaching career at a year-round elementary school where she was the only upper-grades (grades 3-5), African American teacher for the first two years. There were a few other African American teachers who taught in the lower grades (K-2). At her previous school, she was under the leadership of an African American female administrator and a Caucasian male assistant principal.

For the past two years, Mellie has worked at another year-round school in the neighboring county. At her current school, Mellie teaches 21 fourth grade students. Her students are mainly African American students who are academically gifted. The faculty at the current school are under the leadership of an African American male administrator. Mellie also stated that 75% of the fellow educators that she works with are African American. She also considered them more than co-workers; she calls them her friends. Mellie's reasons for wanting to leave the profession mainly are characterized by external attributions.

### **External Attributions**

**Task difficulty.** One of the major contributing factors toward Mellie's desire to leave the classroom is the pressure of testing. Mellie disclosed that her administrator places a lot of emphasis on getting high scores and achieving proficiency. As a result, Mellie felt

pressured to guide her students to achieve these goals. Mellie shared her frustrations with pressure from the administrator:

“They put a lot of pressure on for getting test scores. You know, to be proficient and making growth. Um, so the testing and a lot of the kids making growth. The administration is really big on [that]. We take a lot of benchmark tests and things like that, so they kind of ride you a little bit if you are not making those goals that you are supposed to make.”

Mellie stated that she feels like the high-stakes testing is out of her control, and the pressures that are coming down from her administration causes her to feel overwhelmed on a daily basis. She is mostly frustrated with policymakers who create laws that do not understand that children learn differently. She explained that she believes that it’s unrealistic to expect every child to pass high-stakes academic testing. She further explained:

“...sometimes people higher up [policymakers] don’t really understand that all kids learn different. They come from different places but we give them the same test, which is not very smart to me. If I’m teaching at a different level, if I’m teaching differentiated texts, teaching a differentiated curriculum, then I feel there needs to be a differentiated test. And that should be taken into account and it’s not...so that’s just one thing that just burns my biscuits because it really just doesn’t make sense to me.”

**Salary.** Similar to other participants in the study, Mellie's primary concern was towards her salary. She described the salary as "ridiculous" and feels like she is not compensated for the time she devotes to being an educator. She stated,

"If I could find another job today that would pay more, then I would leave teaching. [However] probably not until the end of the year because I wouldn't want to leave my kids...but definitely at the end of the school year if I could just find another job."

She also described that she feels like the pay for educators in North Carolina is rigid; it will not change. For the last five years, Mellie has not received a salary increase; she has been getting paid as a first-year teacher.

Not only does the salary affect her professional reasons for wanting to leave the profession, but her personal reasons as well. She has a family at home with two small children, whose college funds she wants to be able to save up for. Her current salary also places her future plans on hold. Mellie further discussed:

"But I guess my goal, believe me, I would like to be in a different tax bracket...I want to make sure that my kids are comfortable. I want to be able to save for their college funds and things like that. And I need to make sure that I'm able to buy my children a car when they turn sixteen, and not have to go through hoops just to do that. You know and I think that with the salary, I want to be able to make sure that my home is

what I want it to be and what I dream it to be. Um, and sometimes that's difficult with the salary of a teacher.”

**Lack of resources.** Another external attribution that contributes to Mellie's desire to depart from the classroom is lack of resources. At the school that Mellie spent the first six years of her teaching career, there was an “endless supply of resources”. The previous school also had a supply closet where teachers could replenish their supplies when their stock was low. However at the new school, Mellie explained that sometimes she has to pay out-of-pocket expenses to get simple supplies.

She further explained her frustrations with out-of-pocket expenses:

“...sometimes even just supplies, the use of supplies, having them readily available, that is an issue at this school. There is no supply closet that you can just go into. You have to buy it and get reimbursed...and that's ok, but you know that's getting back to the salary, where I can't really afford to buy materials with.” She explained that there is a waiting period between purchasing supplies and receiving a reimbursement check. Mellie also clarified if the school she worked for supplied all the resources that students needed and her pay was higher, that she would “teach forever, but that's not the case”.

**Critical incidents.** In addition to high stakes testing, salary, and lack of resources, two critical incidents have contributed towards Mellie wanting to leave the profession as



soon as possible. Last year, a parent was unhappy with a comment that Mellie said to her child concerning testing. Instead of calling her, the parent decided to post a status on social media about Mellie. In a parent-teacher conference later on in the school year about the child's performance, the parent mentioned the social media incident. Mellie tried to redirect the conversation back to the academic data. But the parent kept going and made an inappropriate comment, which prompted Mellie to end the conference. Mellie stated, "...so those kind of interactions are definitely kind of sticky and that day, in that moment, I wanted to quit."

This year another incident occurred that made Mellie questioned her decision to remain in the teaching profession. It all began when the assistant principal, created a racially charged PowerPoint presentation to discuss at a staff meeting. Mellie disclosed that the PowerPoint contained statistics on how minority students who do not learn how to read at the elementary level go on to fill the nation's prisons. She also explained that the administrator asked how it related to their school and presented literacy statistics of the students at their school. Mellie felt really offended when the assistant principal showed pictures of her former students with an offensive song as background music. She explained that she has a child who also attends the same school and in that very moment, she said, "I wanted to quit, I wanted to quit." Despite the external attributions that Mellie struggles with to remain in the profession, she explained that these two critical incidents have increased the desire to depart from the profession.

### **Internal Attributions**

**Ability.** Mellie also added that differentiation is a challenge that she constantly struggles with in daily instruction. She has a classroom of students with a variety of learning needs, including students who are academically gifted to students who are currently in the special education services identification process. Although Mellie explained that classroom management is a strength of hers, she wants to make learning fun and accessible for everyone. With an administrator who places emphasis on achievement scores on achievement testing, Mellie described that she feels substantial stress with ensuring that every student is performing up to their academic potential.

### **Actions and Resolutions**

Mellie switched schools in her career and enjoys the benefits of the current school, such as, closer proximity between work and home, parent support, diversity in the student and staff population, and working in a school with a great work climate among her colleagues; however, she is unsure if it is enough to keep her in the profession. When asked what other jobs she would consider if she left the profession, Mellie responded, “It does not matter, as long as it was respectable, legal, and making more money...it does not matter.” Mellie is highly likely to leave the profession soon.

### **Maya's Story**

Maya is the most experienced teacher who participated in the current study. She is a 16-year veteran teacher who spent all 16 years in North Carolina public and private schools. Although she prefers year-round public schools, she spent a few years teaching third grade and kindergarten in private school and charter school settings. Maya's external attributions for wanting to depart from the profession are salary, relationships with parents, and workload demands. Maya's internal attributions are her ability to differentiate and how to cope with stress. Thinking back through the 16 years of her career, Maya does not attribute one critical situation to her decision to depart from the classroom; instead, it has been a combination of smaller factors that has lead her to a professional crossroads. The following narrative will retell the story of the many factors that have lead Maya to where she is now.

**School demographics.** Maya has been educating young children for 16 years. She spent the first year of her career teaching third grade at a private Christian school with all African American educators. Her administrator, also called Dean of students, was African American too, and he was one of the pastors of the church. After spending her first year at a private school, she transferred to a charter school for two additional years. At this particular school, Maya was under the leadership of an African American female administrator. The student population was somewhat diverse, with the majority being Blacks and Hispanic students with a few Caucasian students. She taught with a fairly diverse staff with a higher proportion of African American teachers. After leaving the charter school, she taught in a

Title I pre-kindergarten at a public school. She taught mostly African American and Hispanic pre-kindergarten students in the Title I program for four years.

Shortly after, Maya's family relocated and she began teaching kindergarten at her current school, a public, year-round elementary school. She has been teaching at the current school for eight years with an African American administrator and a Caucasian male assistant principal. She prefers the year-round schedule over all of her previous places of employment. She stated that the 9 week teaching schedule with three week breaks are preferable, as it gives the students and teachers a mental break. She also explained that she believes that students do not lose as much information during a three-week track-out as compared to a two-month long summer vacation.

She teaches with mainly Caucasian teachers, being only one of six African American educators, with a staff of about 40 teachers. However she is one of three African Americans on her kindergarten team, which has seven educators. She gets along well with her teammates, stating, "I mean, you know, I feel that we all get along...as a team and even as a family. Um, when things happen personally...we all come together as a family." She especially gets along well with her track mate, who also happens to be an African American veteran teacher. Although she gets along well with her track mate, she would like to see more Black teachers employed at her school. She explained, "... I don't know if we are always, you know, given the opportunity to show ourselves sometimes as you know we would like to feel...um given that chance."

### **External Attributions**

**Task Difficulty.** Maya's main concern for wanting to leave the profession was her professional workload. Maya reported being stressed out by state guidelines and demands, along with demands from her administration. She stated that she feels that as a result of the Common Core standards, she is not allowed to be the creative kindergarten teacher that she once was. She further explained:

“You know, um, sometimes that stresses you as well because you are doing all that you need to do...but you know now with Common Core and just other things that are put in place, it's still teach then assess, teach then assess...and sometimes you feel that your creativity as a teacher [is] just taken away because you know you've got to teach this objective and that objective. You got to teach it by a certain time; you've got to assess it, then you got to teach it...”

She also added:

“...you just feel like you are just being robbed of being more creative. You know or being able to say: Hey this is a teachable moment, I want to be able to teach this right now [as] opposed to teaching standard, K.O., K.O.8.1, or whatever.”

Later in the interview, she clarified her frustrations with saying that she understands the importance of curriculum pacing, but also wants to be able to create teachable moments for her students.

In addition, Maya also discussed that she feels burned out with the demands that are placed on her by school administration. At Maya's school, the administrator has a school-wide goal of every grade level teacher having a minimum proficiency level of 80% in each classroom. Maya explained that she becomes very frustrated when she gives a lot of effort and data doesn't reflect it.

She stated:

“...and yet if your kids aren't where they should be with that 80%, then you're looked at as if you failed in some kind of way. When you're like I gave it my all, I did all of what I needed to do...but then yet because of what a number says or what the data says...and I know that data is true, but I mean it still doesn't say, I didn't do what I needed to do as a teacher. So I think just kind of with all of those things that are put on us sometimes you know with that...with the state mandates and with what sometimes, you know, is just put upon you. Sometimes it just becomes so stressful...you know, sometimes you just want to walk away from it because it's like you can be who you want to be for the children sometimes so...”

She is also frustrated with state policymakers because she feels that they are creating laws for teachers without experiencing the classroom on a daily basis.

**Salary.** Another main stressor for Maya was salary. Like many teachers in North Carolina, Maya's workday doesn't end at eight hours. As a kindergarten teacher, she brings

home work on the weeknights and weekends. She also added that teachers arrive to school in the early hours of the morning and work late at night. Maya also explained that she is constantly seeking more professional development, as she researches many strategies on the Internet and in books, trying to become a better educator for her students.

She also discussed her frustrations with the recent salary increase in North Carolina:

“You know because even a raise was given, but you still feel like your teachers who have been teaching for a long time, it was almost like they were being penalized because you’ve been teaching for so long. But you don’t get the higher pay.”

Maya was referring to a statewide salary increase that was given to all North Carolina teachers in 2014. Although all teachers were given a salary increase, the veteran teachers received the smallest percentage of salary increase while beginning teachers enjoyed a generous salary increase.

**Relationships with parents.** In addition to the professional work demands and low salary, relationships with parents are also a stressor for Maya. Maya stated that she has a wonderful relationship with the parents of her current students, but it has not always been this way. In her 16 years of teaching, there were a few parents who were unhappy with her instruction. She elaborated:

“...sometimes it’s not always the students, because you know the children respect you as the teacher. You know if you earn that respect from them. And they know that

you love them, but I feel like sometimes the parents, they don't always feel like it's good enough [her instruction]. They still...[want to know] what more can you do [for their child].”

In the past, some parents felt like Maya did not challenge their children and that became a contributing factor to burnout.

### **Internal Attributions**

**Ability.** When asked about her strengths, Maya explained that one of her strengths was student engagement and the ability to reach all students. Although Maya stated that one of her strengths was reaching students who have academic difficulty, she struggles to differentiate for everyone. She admitted that if one child does not understand a concept, she emotionally struggles with not reaching all children. She explained:

“...You know being able to have those different activities available and those different teaching strategies to really meet everybody's needs [is challenging]. Um, and like I said, even though it's a weakness, I'm not saying I don't do it. I just want to become better at it.”

Maya also explained that she currently has a class of diverse learners. She stated she tries to meet all of their needs by building on their strengths, identifying their weaknesses, and using different strategies to provide enrichment. She also explained that she tries to “flex group” where she pairs students according to their strengths and weaknesses in hopes that



they can lean from one another. Ultimately, she added, “Sometimes it’s a little hard. It’s a little challenging because you are trying to meet all of their needs. You know, and with 23 students...however as much as I can, I do the best that I can.”

### **Actions and Resolution**

Over the 16 years of her career, Maya has transferred schools, switched grade levels, and relocated to different counties as a result of feeling burned out along with other personal reasons. She also recently completed her Master’s degree in hopes of switching roles within the education profession. She clearly stated that she does not want to depart from the profession, as she feels that she’s almost “locked in”. She still desires to have a role where she continues to work with children on a daily basis. In the future, she desires to start her own business, such as opening a daycare or starting a tutoring program. Maya made it very clear that she doesn’t want her 16 years of experience in the field of education to go to waste. She has even considered opening up her own preschool or going back to school to become an assistant principal. In conclusion, she added that although teaching is a stressful job, she could not just give up on education.

### **Sally’s Story**

Sally is 37-year-old teacher with nine years of experience. Sally was the last participant that I interviewed. Although Sally has been teaching for a total of nine years, she has only taught in North Carolina for one year. The past seven years of Sally’s career were

spent in public school classrooms in the state of California, while the past two years have relocated her to the state of North Carolina. She was a teacher assistant for one year at a public school in North Carolina, but is currently a second grade teacher. Although Sally loves “the art of teaching”, she explained that she feels disrespected as an educator and parent expectations have contributed toward her strong desire to leave the profession. The following passages explore Sally’s journey to North Carolina and her reasons for wanting to leave the profession.

**School demographics.** Sally spent the first year of her teaching career teaching a fourth/fifth grade combination class at a year-round, public elementary school in California. After teaching a combination class, she continued to teach fourth grade for four additional years. Then, she taught kindergarten for three years before relocating to North Carolina. She prefers the year-round setting as she enjoys having breaks in the off-season, while a majority of other employed adults are still working. The staff demographics at her first school were about 50% Caucasian, about 25% Asian, less than 25% Hispanic, and a very small percentage of African American educators. The administration at her former school was under the leadership of an African American female principal and a Hispanic, female assistant principal. She shared a close relationship with the staff at her former school, as she was a former substitute teacher before she was offered a teaching job.

After working in California for eight years, her family relocated to North Carolina. She spent her first year in North Carolina working as a teaching assistant at a traditional

elementary school. Currently, she has spent the past year as a second grade teacher at a year-round elementary school under the leadership of an African American, female principal, a Caucasian male assistant principal, and a Caucasian female administrative intern. Although she is the only African American on her second grade team, the rest of the staff is somewhat diverse. There are six other African American educators and she shares fairly close relationships with two of them, as they teach a few common students. When asked about her relationships with other Black teachers, she described that she has not made a big effort toward friendships as she has been negatively affected by a few professional relationships at her former school.

### **External Attributions**

**Salary.** Throughout the interview, Sally compared her current salary to her former salary that she received in California. She explained that she experienced a significant salary decrease when she accepted her current teaching job in North Carolina, suffering almost a 50% annual salary deficit. She also expressed that she was almost forced to take a job because of her financial responsibilities. She stated:

“Yeah I took a huge decrease, but I needed the job. Um, but it’s really hard to continue to deal with the type of stress that I deal with because it’s a little different than what I was dealing with before [in California]. Um, and know, that I have a paycheck that’s going straight to childcare...and nothing left for me.”

She further explained how unions in California created a backdrop for a better salary, “Um, when I was in California, we had unions. That was a big part of why we had better pay.” Sally also believes that teacher salary is a long-term stressor. She explained that she thought that salary is a huge stressor because it’s not going to change.

**Task Difficulty.** Sally also stated that she feels that her job demands are not equivalent to the annual pay. Specifically, she described her frustrations with parent expectations and work demands. Sally explained that the parent expectations at her current school are significantly higher as compared to the schools that she was formerly employed at, which makes her job challenging. She added:

“And the parents in this particular school are way more involved than what I’m used to, and it’s a catch 21 because I’m not used to that...but I welcome it. Um however, sometimes it can be too much...I’ve had a lot of parents say in meetings that we’ve had with the principal or whatever, there’s an issue. They will say she doesn’t communicate enough. And I’m like first off, if there’s an issue, we’ve communicated a lot. I’ve emailed you, I’ve called you, I’ve written you letters. We’ve had exchanges. This is not the first one; but apparently, I’m learning that it’s not me, it’s the parents. They’re a bit needy.”

She further explained that the communication requests, such as, numerous e-mails and telephone calls interfere with her day-to-day responsibilities with the children. Sally stated that teaching her students should be her first priority, not answering emails.

Communicating with parents on a more frequent basis has been a big challenge given the responsibilities Sally has as a teacher. She explained that dealing with the expectations of parents was a learning curve for her at the beginning because of the increased parental involvement at her current school. She also attributed the parental involvement to the social status of the families that attend the school. She explained,

“And the thing about the difference between the [current] school and the other school that I worked at is that I worked in an area, community, where we had some affluent students and families. But we also had a large group of students who were impoverished. They were, you know, living in the projects...we had kids that were homeless. Um, and we didn't have as much parental involvement. Um, I feel at this particular school that I'm at now, because there is so much parental involvement, it's almost an unwritten rule...that it's like, you're a salesperson and they're the customers; and the customers are always right. And that is a huge part of my frustration with the particular position that I'm in right now, in addition to just getting used to everything, the standards, the curriculum. I don't, it doesn't mesh with my personality. I don't have problems answering questions, but I'm not going to be made to feel like I'm never doing enough for you when I know I am.”

A huge part of her frustrations can be attributed to how Sally feels like the expectations of a teacher are high and unrealistic. She stated that she believes that she is being pulled in too many directions and barely has time for her family. She explained that

when she was in California, this would have never happened because of the unions that they had in place. She hasn't been made to cover recess duty or lunch duty during her break, which has been something that has frustrated her about working for the state of North Carolina. She also added that it has created an emotional strain for her family. She stated:

“In a work day, in a work week, to be required to teach and do all of these other things without a real lunch break, without coverage at recess...like this is the other part about why I'm not as happy as I was before. I'm also a mom to two very young children, so my time away from them need to be used, you know, carefully because when I get home sometimes, they feel my stress. I feel the stress. I can't be the mom or the wife that I want to be if I feel like I'm constantly being asked to do more, more, more.”

Although Sally expressed that she currently feels frustrated with parent expectations and work demands, she is also uncomfortable with the lack of support that she receives from administration.

**Lack of support.** Sally also feels a lack of support from her current administrative team. She was hired for her current position a few months after the school year started, creating many challenges from her. She stated that she receives a lot of support from the other teachers on her team, but not from her administrator. It was difficult for Sally coming in from another state to someone else's classroom in the middle of the school year. She explained that she did not receive proper preparation; she felt like the administrator just

assumed if she hired someone with experience and desired qualities, that she would not have to provide as much professional support.

She also explained that this is the first year that she has received a letter threatening her job security because she has failed to meet teaching standards. She attributed the failure of meeting teaching standards to the lack of formal training and support at the current school. She also stated that she has never experienced an evaluation system like the current system for North Carolina educators. She explains her frustration in the following statement:

“Like it would have been nice if I would have gotten some type of formal training on certain things that are obviously brand-new to me, but that never really happened. Um, but I’m still expected to meet these standards. I’m supposed to meet them somehow on my own. With you [administrator] coming in five minutes, once a week, I’m supposed to figure it out. And I think that’s, um, not a realistic expectation. It’s not fair to any teacher if you know that you are not given the support you need.”

### **Internal Attributions**

**Mood.** Although Sally believes that her co-workers have been very welcoming, she does not feel like she has the freedom of speaking up about issues that she encounters or her unhappiness. She stated that she does not know if she feels this way because she’s one of the few African American teachers there or because she’s the “new kid on the block” . She

explained that sometimes when she asks a question, nobody responds, and she doesn't know how to take that. She feels like she's being judged harshly, which contributes to her desire to leave the classroom. She explained:

“...but I think I happen to be working with a group of people that is more compliant...like they're committed to their kids, just like I am, which is not necessarily a negative thing, but that's just not how I operate. So again, I'm having to sit on my hands or I feel like I should because if I say the wrong thing, or I say it in the wrong way, then I feel like I'm being judged harshly... so I have to really be careful, you know. Like I choose my battles because it's not like we are going to get into an argument, but I feel like it goes nowhere. It's like falling on deaf ears, so what's the point?”

She also experienced this at her former school as one of her co-workers once told her that she shouldn't push the envelope or question administration. As a result, she explained that she has been very self-conscious about what she says or asks. Therefore, she is hesitant to ask questions or speak up in fear of judgment from colleagues. She is frustrated because what she believes she portrays as passion for her job is often perceived as anger by others. She described a critical incident when a colleague at her former school suggested to her that she should take a more cautious approach when speaking at work. Sally stated:

“And again, I've learned...you know...to curtail that a little bit. Um, I still speak up when I feel that it's really important, but where I was at before I was more



comfortable I think. I spoke up a lot more but I felt like I wasn't getting backed up. And I was like actually being told, by certain people, that you know, especially in my first year, you really shouldn't be speaking up that much.. And I was told by a Caucasian woman, um that I ate lunch with everyday. She thought she was trying to help me out... so that kind of changed how I looked at things when I would go to a meeting and I would pay attention to how people were responding more. Where[as] before, naturally I'm not that type of person that cares as much that especially if I know my point is legitimate and true and backed up by facts, I don't care. Um, but it made me feel self-conscious. And I found out actually at the other school, from a friend, that she overheard some Asian teachers comparing me to another African American teacher that basically got kicked out of the district because...he had some anger issues and he was not compliant. You know, he was always trying to push the envelope and do what he wanted to do. Um, so that again [that] made me feel really uncomfortable. I was really hurt and upset by the fact that they were saying that. And that's when I first started working. They didn't even really know me. Um but apparently my passion...when I spoke up, they took it as me being angry.”

### **Actions and Resolution**

After eight years in the state of California, Sally moved to North Carolina with her immediate family. During her first year as a North Carolina resident, she took some time off from teaching and accepted a position as a teacher assistant.

Throughout her years in California, she also switched from teaching fourth grade for a number of years to teaching kindergarten. She is also currently looking to transfer to a new school in North Carolina that aligns more with her teaching philosophy.

When asked about what other positions she would consider, she mentioned various possibilities, all within the educational field. She mentioned coaching, training and development with adults, online teaching, as well as returning back to being a teacher assistant. Her reasons for these were mainly due to the fact that the online teaching would offer different hours, therefore she would be able to spend more time with her family and work at her own pace. Although Sally is feeling burned out in her current position, she places emphasis on her love of teaching with the following statement:

“I love teaching. I love the art of teaching. I love to interact with kids every day. I love...you’ve probably heard this before, but if they would just leave me on an island with those babies and...let us be our little family for 6 hours a day and I’ll report back to you...not all of this other stuff.”

### **Race and Teacher Burnout**

In addition to the stressful nature of their profession, it does not go without notice that the participants in the current study were dealing with race-related issues as well. In a predominately White female profession where White female teachers filled up nearly 82% of

the nation's classrooms in 2012, African American teachers are outnumbered (National Center for Education Statistics). Six out of seven participants in the present study currently worked at schools where White teachers were the majority of the staff population. Mellie was the only participant to work at a school where African American teachers made up nearly 75% of the staff. Being one of the only few members of your racial group creates additional issues and stress.

Several of the participants mentioned a sense of belonging as one of the factors that contributed to burnout. Not only do African American teachers deal with stress-related factors that White teachers cope with, such as low salary, task difficulty, and lack of support; but in addition to those factors, African American teachers deal with issues related to being one of few African American teachers on staff. Having relationships with other African American teachers is imperative to a sense of belonging. Mellie described the relationships with her co-workers where the majority is African American as being comfortable. She explained,

“I mean I would consider these people more than just my co-workers, I consider them as my friends...I feel like I have support, that people understand where I'm coming from and my life outside of work, how I feel about work. Um, it's just a really comfortable feeling. I can really be myself. I feel in a sense that in a professional setting, I can really be my true self.. and if I say something that might not be

politically correct, they don't look at me funny. And I don't feel like... uh, you know. It's a really comfortable, comfortable feeling. It's a really good feeling."

Mellie stands out from the other participants when she called her co-workers her family. All the other participants expressed a need for a sense of belonging among their colleagues. Abby explained that at her previous school, she felt like she couldn't trust anyone and felt isolated. Olivia also echoed the same feelings of loneliness and isolation at a former school where she was one of few African American staff members. Although Maya stated that the staff at her school come together as a family, she still wished that more African American teachers worked at her school and were given the opportunity to shine as the great educators they are. Quinn also mentioned that having more African Americans would be beneficial at her school for the students as the student population is fairly diverse. Scholars also support the notion of African American teachers providing a high-quality schooling experience for diverse students (Marshall, 2002).

**Critical Racial Incidents.** Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a backdrop to address critical racial incidents that some of the participants shared during the interview process. The underlying theoretical framework of CRT acknowledges that racism exists and is deeply rooted in historical and societal contexts of the United States (Tate, 1997). CRT addresses the normality of racism in the U.S. and how it feels natural to the American people (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT argues that "Whites are the primary beneficiaries" of racism and narratives provide the essential notion of understanding the voices of marginalized

people, like African American teachers, that is often muted (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT has six components, one of which addresses supports racial narratives that challenge narratives fostered by the dominate White, hegemonic society (Campbell, 2014).

During Mellie's interview, she shared a critical racial incident that took place during a staff meeting at her current school. Mellie explained that her former White female assistant principal shared a presentation on school to prison pipeline PowerPoint that she had created. The presentation contained offensive music, with the song "Ticking Timebomb" as background music, as well as offensive pictures of current students' portraits being portrayed as mugshots. Mellie explained that she felt compelled to say something as she found the material to be racially offensive. She also shared that she felt as if the administrator was placing stereotypes on the students. Mellie shared her frustrations with the assistant principal during the staff meeting. She explained,

"It was and I, you know spoke out at the staff meeting because, you know, it was wrong. And you know those are people's children. And she said, in front of the staff, that she would not apologize for showing the slideshow...that it is the reality of our school. Yeah, I wanted to quit that day."

Mellie's experience with the critical racial incident is an example of how African American teachers have to deal with so much more than the typical White teacher. In addition to the external attributions such as, low salary, task difficulty, and lack of resources, Mellie also experienced racism in her workplace. The assistant principal used the staff

meeting as a platform to further promote racial stereotypes about African American students. Mellie's supportive voice for the images of the students in the racially-charged presentation constructed a platform that challenged the ideologies of the dominant society, which further promotes a space for social justice (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

In addition to Mellie, another participant, Sally, also experienced a critical racial incident at a former school that she was employed at. Over a lunch conversation, a White female colleague had disclosed to Sally that she thought that she should not be speaking up as much. The colleague warned her that others thought she was pushing the envelope too much. She also mentioned how others related her passionate nature to an angry individual, a stereotype that mainstream society has associated with passionate African American individuals, particularly Black women.

Stereotypes and racism create additional stress-related factors for African American teachers. Differential racialization, another concept of CRT, explains that a racialized lens fostered by the dominant group assigns meanings to specific behaviors and language of ethnic minority groups (Campbell, 2014). These assigned meanings create stereotypes that place members of racial and ethnic minority groups in a category of "otherness" (Campbell, 2014). Sally expressed her feelings of not belonging, as the comments from her former colleague has since encouraged her to pay more attention to what others think about her actions. The participant also admitted to curtailing her voice at work in fear of being judged by others, which has added to her frustrations.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, the researcher presented findings for each coding category using a narrative analysis approach, describing each participant's experience with burnout in the classroom. Responses elicited from participants were explained and reported in an authentic manner. Direct quotes and summaries from the interview raw data were utilized in this section. In the following section, the researcher will continue the discussion and present implications for further research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The final chapter of the current study encompasses a general discussion of the findings, implications for future research and practice, as well as concluding statements about the burnout phenomenon among African American educators in North Carolina. The discussion revisits and answers the current study's research questions. The research questions that guided the current study were: (1) Using Attribution theory, what factors contribute to African American educators who wish to depart from the profession?; and (2) Using Critical Racial Incidents, what race-related issues in addition to stress-related issues contribute to African American educators who wish to depart from the profession?

To answer the research question, the researcher recruited seven, eligible participants for the current study. To be eligible for the study, participants needed to be an African American educator in the state of North Carolina, who was currently experiencing burnout and had a desire to depart from the profession. The researcher set up one-on-one interviews, both phone and in-person, with each of the seven participants. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and manually coded by hand. Coding themes were grouped based on an Attribution theory interpretive lens. Attribution theory themes were categorized by External and Internal attributions. External attributions that contributed to African American teacher burnout were lack of respect, lack of support, politics, salary, task difficulty, lack of resources, critical incidents and relationships with parents. Internal attributions included ability, teacher preparation, classroom management, and mood. A discussion of the overall findings and concluding statement of the research can be found in the following section.



## Discussion

The goal of narrative analysis is to understand an individual's lived experience with reflections of narrative fragments (Claudinin & Connelly, 2000). Therefore, the aim of this research is to simply share the stories of seven African American educators to understand the factors which contributed to their desire to depart from the profession. Narrative analysis was chosen because of the importance of several factors in a narrative, environment, experiences, and resolutions. An Attribution theory lens was used as a focal point of the study.

In the subsequent segments, a brief discussion of the findings with connections to a review of the literature and Attribution theory is discussed. Limitations of the study, along with implications for research and practice can be found shortly after the discussion. In conclusion, the reality of African American teacher burnout is shared.

### Links to the Literature

The literature review on teacher burnout and African American teacher shortage focuses on burnout, emotional exhaustion and stress, low salary, and work conditions. The following sections will discuss findings in connection with the literature, and highlight contrasts between the two.

**Burnout.** Burnout is a term that was originally created by Christina Maslach, as a word to describe feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal

accomplishment among depleted human service workers in the 1970's. Defined as a "loss of energy and enthusiasm to teach", emotional exhaustion was present in all participants with the exception of Quinn, who has taught for less than a year (Cedoline, 1982). Emotional exhaustion is the stress component of Maslach's burnout where teachers feel overextended. Several teachers reported feeling overextended in the classroom with various job demands, including high-stakes testing, paperwork, grading, and attending weekly meetings. However, one participant, Quinn, did not express feelings of exhaustion, which could be attributed to the fact that the current school year is her first year of teaching.

Depersonalization, which is irritability and negative attitudes towards students, was not mentioned in the one-on-one interviews as the teachers expressed feelings of joy when talking about their students. Reduced personal accomplishment was expressed by Maya, who expressed that she felt that Common Core had stifled her ability to be creative in teaching. She explained that she feels like she has been 'robbed' of teaching.

When asked if a particular incident or several day-to-day events lead to burnout, the majority of interviewees explained that several day-to-day events lead to a desire of wanting to depart from the classroom. The notion of several day-to-day events align with Friedman's (1995) argument that burnout occurs over a period of time. However, I argue that the cause of burnout varies on individual teaching experiences. The current study supports that burnout can be caused by both, day-to-day events and critical incidents. Burnout is not a "one-size fits-all" issue, as three participants included in the current study experienced an immediacy

of wanting to leave the profession as a result of critical incidents, involving life changes, administrators, parents, and teacher evaluations.

**Stress.** The stress component in Maslach's (1999) multidimensional model of burnout is emotional exhaustion. All participants described teaching as being "stressful", "frustrating", and one educator even described it as a "strain" on her. These feelings support Redew (1999)'s description of teacher stress as negative emotions that are reflective of aversive demands. When elaborating on day-to-day stressors, reported emotions were frustration, anger, anxiety, fear, and frustration, which line up with the most frequently reported negative emotion by educators (Chang, 2009; Day & Qing, 2009; Rudew, 1999). No participants reported having feelings of depression, disappointment, or rage as reported in previous research (Chang, 2009; Day & Qing, 2009; Rudew, 1999). Although these feelings were not expressed by interviewees verbatim, it can be concluded that two participants, both Abby and Mellie, experienced disappointment and rage during critical incidents.

MacDougall (2000) explained burnout as a four-phase process that begins with warning signs, which all of the current participants experienced. Fatigue, which is considered a warning sign, was experienced by all participants with the exception of the first-year teacher, Quinn. Instead it has been concluded that Quinn has been experiencing another warning sign, boredom, which can be attributed to her curiosity of a variety of other careers that she could pursue given her young age (MacDougall, 2000). The next two phases in MacDougall's (2000) four-phase burnout phase are mild and entrenched symptoms. Two

participants, both Abby and Sally, experienced entrenched symptoms as the stresses of their jobs began to affect the lives of their families. Although all participants mentioned a desire to leave the classroom, none of these desires were characterized by MacDougall's last phase, debilitating symptoms.

The four-phase burnout process is concluded with the inability to continue working in the same field. The researcher found this conclusion to be invalid for the current study as all participants mentioned wanting different roles within the educational field, excluding classroom teacher. When asked about what other jobs participants would consider having if they departed from the profession, six out of seven participants expressed a desire for a role within the educational field. Mellie, the participant who expressed a desire for a role outside of teaching, did not specify what other jobs she considered having; she simply stated that "as long as it was legal and respectable", she would take it.

### **Links to Attribution theory**

Attribution theory was utilized as a guiding framework for the current study. A majority of the participants stated external attributions as reasons for the desire to leave the profession. External attributions that were included were lack of support, relationships with parents, lack of resources; in addition to task difficulty and salary, being the primary reasons why African American educators wished to depart from the profession. The external attributions were described as being both rigid and flexible, mainly rigid. Participants who believed that external attributions were rigid, such as salary, reported a more urgent desire to

leave the profession. Participants who expressed external attributions as being flexible were more inclined to desire other professions within the educational field, such as curriculum coaches and administrators. Other participants who believed external attributions were flexible were motivated to elicit change within the profession, citing educational policymaker as a desired position.

Internal attributions such as mood and ability were reported as being flexible and controllable. Teachers cited the importance of professional development to assist with Common Core standard demands. African American educators seemed to have a positive mindset, in terms of internal attributions. Although ability was a contributing factor to burnout, actions were taken to improve their ability levels. Some participants, like Olivia, Abby, and Jake were both full-time educators and graduate students, searching for strategies to help them cope with the revolutionizing standards within education. Other participants were seeking jobs at other schools or had already earned Master's degrees.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As with all research, there are limitations within the current study. Although appropriate for narrative analysis, the sample size of the participants was seven. The challenge with a small sample size is that it provides a limited scope of the realities of many African American educators who have experienced burnout. Despite the researcher's attempt to recruit African American teachers who teach at various levels, it was not successful. Out of the seven participants, only two of the participants taught at the secondary level, which

could potentially create a distorted view of the factors contributing to African American teacher burnout.

Another limitation of the study was the nature of the interviews. Although the researchers attempted to schedule all face-to-face interviews, with the exception of one, all were phone interviews. Phone interviews were utilized for scheduling logistics, but ideally, face-to-face interviews was the preferred method. Phone interviews take away the essence of a face-to-face interview and the opportunity to observe body language, which sometimes tell a different story than the narrative. In addition, participants may have felt compelled to give a response that they perceived to be desired by the researcher. In hindsight, using a more updated form of technology that allows for the nature of a face-to-face interview while the participant is not physically present would have been ideal. Skype or some other type digital application could have provided me with the essence of an in-person interview, while providing the participants with the comfort of being in their own space.

An additional limitation of the current study was the tension between the theory and methods. Initially, attribution theory was the primary theoretical framework for the current study. However as I began to collect data and conduct interviews, I quickly realized that the reductionist approach that attribution theory takes was not going to capture teacher burnout in the holistic approach that the data needed (Martinko, 1995). Although the factors that the participants listed as contributing toward burnout “fit” into external and internal attributions that I chose to utilize, it did not account for all of the reasons the participants mentioned why

they were feeling burned out. It is also important to note that I only used three causal dimensions of Attribution theory; using more components of Attribution theory may have contributed to a different understanding of African American teacher burnout.

Understanding the social contexts of whom the participants worked with and where they worked was key to capturing the participants and their experiences with burnout in a holistic manner. I accounted for this gap in Attribution theory by utilizing a Narrative Analysis approach, in addition to the Attribution theory theoretical framework. Narrative Analysis provided the holistic view of each participant coupled with the influence of the educational context in which they worked had on their experiences with burnout. However utilizing both approaches created tension within the study in that I had to account for the holistic view of the participant and their experiences, which Attribution theory did not provide.

Manual coding was a further limitation as it provides space for human error. Although I avoided misinterpretations, manual coding created an opportunity for further errors. When I transcribed interview data, some parts of the interview were unclear. In an attempt to be as precise as possible, I contacted the interviewee for clarification. However it is possible that interviewees could have given a slightly different response. In addition, Attribution theory was used as the interpretive lens; therefore not all responses were needed. Attribution theory provides a framework for attributions and if responses did not fit within the categories of external and internal attributions, it was not utilized in the current study.

Instead I share those experiences in a discussion for further research and implications for the field.

### **Implications for Research**

Qualitative research often presents implications for further studies and the current study is no different. Teacher burnout is a phenomenon that has been studied for years, as ratio of students to teachers increases annually. More specifically, the amount of African American teachers who decide to depart from the profession is alarming. Although research has been done on African American teacher shortage and teacher burnout, I was unable to find studies with a narrative analysis approach that explored the factors contributing to African American teacher burnout, specifically with links to Attribution theory.

The current study provides an opportunity for discussion on the factors affecting African American educators and their decision to leave their roles as classroom teachers. Similarly to previous work that has been done, salary, lack of support, and professional demands have also contributed to teacher burnout among African American educators. However, researchers need to take a deeper look at what is taking place among their colleagues. Unlike previous studies, the current study revealed that some African American educators are not feeling a sense of community among colleagues.

Six out of seven participants in the current study mentioned being one of only a few African American educators at their workplace. In addition to work demands, task difficulty,



low salary, lack of support and resources, and other stress-related factors, African American teachers carry the burden of stereotypes, critical racial incidents and other race-related factors influencing their teaching careers. White teachers do not experience these critical racial incidents as they are a part of the dominant culture. However, as many of the participants expressed, sometimes these situations leave African American teachers with an increased sense of burnout. In some cases, it made African American teachers, like Mellie, want to quit at that very moment. While there is an extensive amount of research on the emotional labor that teachers endure, it is imperative that scholars take a closer look at the increased emotional labor that critical racial incidents create for African American teachers, experiences that the majority of teachers do not have to endure on a daily basis.

Findings also showed that African Americans did not feel a sense of belonging among colleagues where there were few African Americans. While reviewing the literature, African American shortage appeared to be a widely researched phenomenon (Hunter-Boykin, 1992; Ingersoll & May, 2011). However there was a gap in the literature, in relation to African Americans who are in the classrooms who are feeling slightly disconnected from other colleagues, indicating a need for additional research. The next steps for this study ideally would include focusing the scope to fill this particular gap in the literature.

### **Implications for Practice**

The outcomes of the current study reveal that North Carolina educators are feeling the pressure. At present, African American educators are emotionally exhausted from various

task demands, frustrated with low salary wages, in need of a sense of belonging among their colleagues, and disappointed at the lack of respect that is demonstrated from students, parents, administrators, and policymakers. Teachers do more than just teach on a daily basis. In fact, teaching is the part that teachers enjoy and was described as the “easy part”. As Jake mentioned, if he could just teach all day and leave out all this “extra stuff”, everything would be fine.

Instead African American teachers are overextended and “spread too thin”, as Sally described. Educators wear many hats as they are department chairs, community leaders, grade level chairs, sports coaches, club advisors, and leadership committee members; while being held accountable for students’ annual proficiency and growth. Being overextended in such a manner could create a stressful atmosphere for all individuals involved. The current study proves to be beneficial to administrators and policymakers in pinpointing why teachers are feeling emotionally exhausted and creating solutions for coping.

African American educators are also feeling disconnected from colleagues. When asked about relations with other colleagues, it is hard to ignore statements like, “Sometimes it makes you feel uncomfortable because there is no one else like you in a core subject” and “I didn’t feel like there was a community at all”. African American teachers are clearly not feeling a sense of belonging in a predominately White female profession and it is a problem. It would be beneficial for administrators and school leaders to take a look at the root causes of why African American educators are not feeling accepted by colleagues. It is clear that

there is a connection between a sense of community and teacher burnout, therefore future studies should address this issue more closely.

## **Summary**

The last component of qualitative research is a conclusion. Thomas (2009) explains that the function of the conclusion is a synthesis of what the research was mainly about, while leaving readers with an understanding of the benefits and how the current study creates a space for advancing the field. Thomas (2009) also outlines the conclusion with stating whether or not the research question has been answered, briefly summarizing the findings, acknowledge the weaknesses of the current study, and stating recommendations for policies and further research.

The initial research question was as follows:

Using Attribution theory, what factors contribute to African American educators who wish to depart from the profession?

Using Attribution theory, findings showed that external attributions such as low salary, task difficulty, lack of respect, lack of support, lack of resources, politics, relationships with parents, and critical incidents all contributed to teacher burnout among the seven African American educators included in the study. In addition to external attributions, internal attributions, such as ability, teacher preparation, classroom management, mood, student motivation, all contributed to African American teacher burnout as well.

While Attribution theory proved to be an appropriate framework for categorizing African American teachers' reasons for wanting to leave the profession, the researcher quickly noticed that several factors did not fit into the Attribution theory lens. Instead of excluding the data from the current study, the researcher viewed critical incidents as a significant part of her research. In addition to the narrative analysis approach, the researcher was able to analyze the interview data using a critical analysis approach. Using a critical incidents analysis approach, the researcher was able to expand her interests other than her initial research question. Upon realizing the gap in Attribution theory, another research question was added to address all factors contributing to African American teacher burnout. The research question was expanded to: Using Critical Racial Incidents Analysis, what race-related issues in addition to stress-related issues contribute to African American educators who wish to depart from the profession?

In addition to stress-related factors that contribute to burnout among all teachers, in particular, African American teachers experience race-related issues, or critical racial incidents, that contribute to an increased feeling of teacher burnout. Two participants, Mellie and Sally, in the current study experienced critical racial incidents that sparked feelings of anger, frustration, and fear. These feelings are a result of racially-charged situations with colleagues, administrators, and other staff members, that the mainstream White teacher does not have to endure in a dominant, hegemonic society.

Though the study had limitations, containing mainly phone interviews of a small number of participants and a lack of male teacher representation, the benefits and contributions for the field outweighed the limitations. The current study revealed that critical racial incidents contribute significantly toward an African American educator's sense of feeling burned out in addition to stress-related issues that all teachers face. In some cases, burnout was triggered as an immediate result of these race-related issues. This is where scholarly literature is lacking, failing to realize that in addition to the stress-related factors that all teachers endure, African American teachers experience race-related situations in the workplace.

It is imperative that the literature on African American teacher burnout continue the discussion on critical racial incidents and the long-lasting effects it has on African American educators. If new studies find that along with low salary, lack of respect, lack of support, and other stress-related factors, critical racial incidents are significant to an African American educator's desire to leave the profession, such as the current study, then significant changes need to be made to keep African American teachers in the classroom. Significant changes such as supporting African American teachers, creating spaces where African American teachers have a community of like-minded educators, and addressing critical racial incidents immediately is the start of a long road ahead for the profession.

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**APPENDICES**

Appendix A  
Recruitment Letter

Dear Educator:

My name is Brittany Frieson. I am a candidate for an M.S. degree in Curriculum and Instruction. I am conducting an examination of an extremely important phenomenon in public education: teachers who are considering leaving the profession of teaching. The study will investigate and analyze factors that contribute to teachers leaving the profession such as student dependency. This study is important because it will inform research in understanding reasons people desire to leave the education profession, and will potentially impact teachers' job satisfaction in the future based on policymakers, administrators, and teacher preparation programs putting this and similar research into practice. This, in turn, would help solve the alarming teacher shortage in North Carolina and various other states within the United States.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research project. You will be asked to participate in a short interview about your reasons for considering leaving the teaching field. The interview is expected to take 45 minutes, and no longer than 1 hour. The interviews will be conducted in a location of your choice. If an in person interview is not an option for you, I will conduct the interview over telephone or through Skype/Google Hangout video conference.

I would truly appreciate your assistance in making this research study possible. This study is to fulfill thesis requirements for graduation.

If you have any questions related to the study, please feel free to contact me directly. I can be reached via email at [blfrieso@ncsu.edu](mailto:blfrieso@ncsu.edu) or by telephone at (919)696-3048.

Sincerely,

Brittany L. Frieson

Candidate, M.S. in Curriculum and Instruction

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form  
North Carolina State University  
**INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH  
INTERVIEW**

*This form is valid from January 2015-January 2016*

Title of Study: African American Teacher Burnout

Principal Investigator: Brittany Frieson, M.S. candidate

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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 named above.

**What is the purpose of this study?--** The purpose of this study is to examine the reasons African Americans desire to leave the teaching profession.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?--** You may be asked to participate in a personal interview regarding your experiences with teaching and the reasons why you are considering quitting teaching. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The amount of time required for the interview is 30-45 minutes. The interviews will be conducted at a location of the participant's choice. The interviews will be conducted in person, or, if in person is not an option, over the telephone or via Skype or Google Hangouts video conference.

**Risks--** There are no perceived risks to you for taking part in the interview process. Questions will be specifically targeted to your consideration for leaving the teaching profession.

**Benefits**—As a participant you will gain insight into your own feelings and beliefs because of the opportunity to discuss your experiences. Teacher working conditions could be positively altered in the future due to your responses and other responses in similar studies.

**Confidentiality**--The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential and will be accessible by only the researcher. Data will be stored securely in a locked cabinet in the principal investigator's office. The audiotapes, and copies of transcripts will be destroyed after the study is complete. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Direct quotes may be used in reports about the research with your identity protected by a fake name.

**Compensation** --N/A

**What if you have questions about this study?**--If you have questions at any time about the study, you may contact the researcher, Brittany Frieson, by email at blfrieso@ncsu.edu or by phone at (919)696-3048.

**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, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (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** \_\_\_\_\_

**Consent Form**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ hereby give my permission for Brittany Frieson to interview me and quote my responses in a scholarly research paper. I understand that this research will be submitted as part of a thesis at North Carolina State University.

I understand that I waive any claim to copyright to this material should the interviewer ever publish it in a scholarly journal or in electronic format online. I understand that the author will maintain my anonymity as a part of this interview.

I hereby give my permission in the form of my signature below.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

### **African American Teacher Burnout Interview Protocol**

**Introduction:** Teachers manage stress on a day-to-day basis. As a result, some teachers decide to depart from the profession. I am interested in what factors contribute to daily and long-term stress that educators have. My goal is to determine which factors lead to African American teacher burnout which would help administrators and local policymakers retain more African American teachers.

1. Tell me about your teaching experiences so far. (Prompts: How many years have you been teaching? What subjects have you taught? What grade levels have you taught?)
2. Tell me about the past and current environments that you have taught in. (Prompts: What type of schools have you taught in? Public? Private? Charter School? Is there one that you preferred over the other and why?)
3. Tell me about the staff demographics of your previous and current workplace. (Prompt: How would you describe other teachers/administrators at your school?)
4. What feelings do you have that are associated with staff demographics at your current workplace?
5. How many other Black/African American teachers are at your school? Describe your relationships with them. What feelings do you have associated with being one of the only Black/one of many Black teachers at your school?
6. Tell me about the types of students you teach. (Prompts: What are their demographics? Would you say that your students are academically diverse? In what way?)
7. Describe your relationships with your students. (Prompts: Are you close with your students? How so? What are your feelings associated with the types of relationships that you have with your students?)
8. Tell me what it is like to work with your students.
9. Tell me about the types of stressors that you experience on a day-to-day basis in your workplace. (Prompts: Do you experience stress dealing with certain types of students? Administration? Colleagues? Educational Policies? Salary? Please tell me more about that.)
10. Tell me about the types of stressors that you perceive to be long-term. (Prompt: What types of stress have made you feel as if you could potentially depart from the profession?)
11. Have you ever had feelings about leaving the profession? Tell me about the types of factors that contributed to these feelings. (Prompt: Are there any other personal/profession reasons why you have considered leaving the profession?)
12. Is there a particular event or incident that contributed toward your feelings of wanting to leave the profession. Please describe the event(s).
13. If you did decide to leave the profession, what other jobs would you consider having?
14. On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being least likely and 10 being very likely, how likely are you to leave the profession?
15. Is there anything else you would like to add?