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A Qualitative Case Study Examining the Perceptions of Elementary Principals in the Retention of Female Versus Male Students in Rural Areas

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Concordia University–Portland
College of Education
Doctorate of Education Program

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A Qualitative Case Study Examining the Perceptions of Elementary Principals
in the Retention of Female Versus Male Students in Rural Areas

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in

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Abstract

Retention continues to be an ongoing issue discussed among educators. Current research indicates that males are more likely to repeat a grade than females, and consistent findings indicate that retention rates are higher for minority students. The research question explored the perception of eight elementary principals as it relates to the retention of female versus male students in rural areas. Interviews and focus group sessions were used in this study to allow triangulation of data. Data collected was analyzed, and a total of seven major themes emerged: (a) early intervention/retention; (b) policies and procedures; (c) gender bias; (d) students' academic ability; (e) level of maturity/age; (f) parental support and involvement; and (g) teacher to student relationships. A number of implications for policy change are recommended to strengthen and improve current educational programs and practices. Recommendations are that further research is conducted on how relationships teachers develop with male students directly impact their academic performance, tracking of male retention candidates to determine their educational success, the impact of non-traditional family dynamics and the influence it has on students' education, and the success rate of single-gender programs.

Keywords: disadvantaged students, grade retention, parental involvement, rural social promotion

Dedication

This study is dedicated to several special people who were so very instrumental during this process. First, my late father, Mr. George Nesbit, Jr. who passed away a year after I began my work in the program. He did not hesitate to share with his 12 children how important it was to “get your education.” He encouraged us to accomplish what he was unable to do. My Dad and I graduated from 6th grade at the same time; he completed night school and me from elementary school. Never once did he hesitate to let us know that was enough formal learning for him at age 41. I aspire to be the intellectual, wise, and gentle giant he was to so many, especially his family.

I also dedicate this study to my brother, Henry O. Nesbit, Sr., the best brother anyone could have who supported me in everything I ever attempted to do. He also passed away during a critical time for me a week before I defended my proposal. My Dad taught him well, for he too was so proud of every level of success his family experienced. For the times Henry never hesitated to provide me with whatever I needed, thanks.

Moreover, last, but not least, I dedicate this study to my husband of 32 years, De Andre Lewis Brabham, Sr. who never failed to remind me of the work that needed to be done even when I felt I had nothing left to give. Not only was he my biggest cheerleader, but he also got my three children, Dione, De Andre Jr. (DJ), and Dargen on board. His sacrifices did not go unnoticed for the past four years. Thanks for the continued encouragement, support, love, and uplift provided during this tedious journey.

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What a journey this has been! I would never have imagined the commitment and dedication this program required when I agreed to this work. Not to mention, the amount of time that would be needed for the completion of this project. This journey was not traveled alone, for there were many people that encouraged me along the way.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Within every grade level or classroom, there is typically an extensive range of ability in student academic achievement. In many school systems across the nation, retention is one response or intervention for primary age students who are struggling academically or socially. Retention is when struggling, or at-risk students continue a second year in a grade level, in hopes of providing them the “gift of time” or to “catch up” with the intent of increasing readiness to understand the academic curriculum (Range, Pijanowski, Holt, & Young, 2012). This qualitative case study seeks to examine the perceptions of elementary school principals as it relates to the retention of female versus male students who attend school in rural areas.

Whether it involves social promotion or retention, gaining an understanding of why such a disparity exists between the percentage of male and female retention candidates, regardless of the factors that impact these decisions is the primary purpose of this study. Findings from a plethora of research conducted on retention indicate a disproportionate and grave difference in the number of females versus males that are retained each year (Gottfried, 2012; Hamlin, 2013; Hughes, Kwok, & Im, 2013; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Moore, 2017; Range et al., 2012; Tingle, Schoeneberger, & Algozzine, 2012). Tingle et al. (2012) confirm that males are about twice as likely to repeat a grade as females, and consistent findings indicate that retention rates are higher for minority students, particularly Black and Hispanic students. Retention recommendations rest in the hands of administrators who contribute to these major decisions that impact students’ lives forever. Understanding the perceptions of the participants in the study could assist in determining the rationale for how and why female students are less likely to be retained than their male counterparts.

Multiple theorists (Chen, Hughes, & Kwok, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Range et al., 2012) argue that retention is harmful academically and emotionally for students in any grade and notes that social promotion does not benefit struggling students. Further, they share that early intervention is the best option for struggling students. Continuous discussion centers around the notion of how the nation can build prisons based on the reading and comprehension level of students by the completion of their third-grade year in elementary school. There has been much discussion among educators relating the ability level of students that are not reading on grade level by the time they have completed third grade and correlates this to the number persons that may end up in prison.

Chen et al. (2014), brings light to the typical educational practice in the U.S. schools of retention, despite empirical evidence that offers limited proof that repeating a grade improves the academic achievement of low-achieving students. Along with this notion, states are continuing to recommend retention of students based on their third-grade reading level and their ability to pass the state-required reading assessment (Schwerdt, West, & Winters, 2017). Schwerdt et al. (2017) argue that being retained in third grade due to missing promotion standards increases students' grade point averages and leads them to take fewer remedial courses in high school, but has no effect on their probability of graduating.

Current research reveals that the majority of the retention candidates are male. In a study done by Tingle et al. (2012), data from one academic year showed that males (64.0%) were more likely to be retained than females (36.0%). Students are not losing ground in third grade but often began to lose ground long before they enter third grade. Based on their research, Schwerdt et al. (2017) proposed that if retention in early grades is more beneficial to students than in later grades, test-based promotion policies that target early grades could benefit students by retaining

them as early as possible. Findings from the literature reveal factors such as positive relationships, poverty levels, parental involvement, educational level of the parent, a sense of belonging with teachers and classmates, and a lack of early interventions contribute to students' ability to achieve in school (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Holloway and Parka (2017) shed light on the topic of parents' involvement in children's education and the long-standing belief that it promotes a range of academic outcomes, including higher achievement, greater engagement in schoolwork, and lower dropout rates.

The results were similar to the United States in a study conducted in Colombia and Macao-China, whereby male students and students from families of the lowest socio-economic status were more likely to be retained than female students and students from families of highest socioeconomic status (Wong & Zhou, 2017). Disadvantaged students are 1.5 times more likely to repeat a grade than an advantaged student who performs at the same level (Organization for Economic Development [OECD], 2014). Results also indicate that grade repetition is not only ineffective in assisting low achieving students to overcome their difficulties but may also reinforce socioeconomic inequalities (OECD, 2014). Educators must seek ways to adapt the teaching to reach students with learning difficulties and those with behavioral issues. Some countries that have used grade retention extensively have resorted to more intensive early support for struggling students (OECD, 2014). For the retained students, clear benefits have not been evident for these students or school systems.

Context & History

Hughes, Moser, and West (2012) site the long history of studies on the effects of grade retention dating back to the early 20th century and note a limitation of current research in treating grade retention as a fixed, one-time intervention. Retention has been a practice

exercised by many countries for decades as a form of remediation and intervention. Various practices are in implementation in neighboring school districts, adjacent to where the study was conducted on how they choose to handle underachieving students. These practices include push in and pull out of small groups during the school day and extended day programs. According to the OECD (2014), nearly one in eight students have repeated a grade at least once before they reach the age of 15.

Theoretical Framework for the Problem

The theoretical framework for this study stems from retention research done by Shane Jimerson, which began nearly 20 years ago (Jimerson, 1999). Jimerson views retention as unjustifiable and concludes that retained students are harmed academically and socio-emotionally (Range et al., 2012). Jimerson's research points out that there are little to no advantages of grade retention. Regardless of when retention is recommended, gender is not a factor in the outcome of the decision to retain student (Froiland & Davison, 2014). Meador (2018) addresses the question of when students are retained and state the rule of thumb for retention is the younger, the better. Although there are always exceptions, Meador (2018) strongly feels retention needs to be primarily limited to early elementary school. Since there are so many factors that teachers need to consider in a retention process, it is not an easy decision.

Early intervention implemented schoolwide and classroom-based are alternatives to retention. Strategies, such as these need to take place before decisions of retention and social promotion are discussed and or recommended. Researchers concur that the most influential factors contributing to retention link directly to students' academic performance, early intervention, and parental involvement (Ferrara, 2015; Froiland & Davison, 2014; Gottfried, 2012). Ferrara (2015) believes that parents' involvement in school and their attitude towards

their child's education plays a significant role in determining whether retention of a student will occur. Froiland and Davison (2014) confirm through the results from their study that parent expectations are related to adolescents' performance and behavior at school.

Regardless of the students' gender, "teachers and principals believe that students should be retained because of academic performance and perceived parental involvement as the most promising intervention to deter the use of grade retention" (Froiland & Davison, 2014, p. 1). Teachers and principals perceived a benefit to students is self-awareness when retained in the primary grades (Range et al., 2012). Though there was no initial adverse effect on academic self-concept in their awareness, the results became more harmful when considered long-term, leading to a substantial decline in the achievement of students that are retained (Lamote, Pinxten, Den Noortgate, & Van Damme, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

There is a retention problem in rural U.S. schools. Hughes et al. (2012) write that despite the efforts of educators to encourage students to achieve, retention continues to be an ongoing issue which has garnered many discussions among educators for years. Grade retention has a negative impact on educational outcomes, whereby these students are more inclined to be high school dropouts (Evans, 2012). Andrew (2014) provides evidence that suggests the scarring primary-grade retention has on high school completion. Reckdahl (2018) states that most high schools in Louisiana report only a small percentage of overage students in their graduating class, because most drop out before graduation. Information provided in the state where the study was conducted reveals an increase in the percentage of high school dropouts in the most recent report. The annual dropout report for South Carolina of 2016–2017 indicated 5,351 student dropouts, with the majority of them dropping out by their sophomore year, at 52.0%. Based on findings

from Tingle et al. (2012) study, males are more likely to repeat a grade than females (64 % vs. 36%), and consistent findings indicate that retention rates are higher for minority students, particularly for African American and Hispanic students; slightly higher for African Americans at 3.6% and Hispanics at 2.9%.

Qualitative studies on topics such as this allow investigators to focus on a “case” and retain a holistic and real-world perspective, particularly as it relates to behaviors, processes, and changes (Yin, 2014). If we begin to understand why male students are being retained more readily than female students in rural areas, perhaps measures can be taken to change the perceptions and actions of school administrators. Understanding the reasons behind these decisions could be the solution to improving the outcome of the disparity. While there have been several quantitative studies on the impact of retention (Garcia-Perez et al., 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Martinez-Hicks, 2012; Range et al., 2012; Smith & Herzog, 2014), these studies have been specific to socioeconomic status and race of students and how it impacts retention. However, there is a scarcity of research conducted that has examined the perceptions of elementary school principals as it relates to the retention of female versus male students who attend school in rural areas. An extensive review of the literature available on the topic of retention in rural areas provided limited documentation to support the rationale of why a difference exists in the percentage of females versus male candidates retained each year.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory case study is to examine the perceptions of elementary principals as it relates to the retention of female versus male students in rural areas. Since the passing of ESSA, there has been a continued focus on preparing students post-high school graduation towards college or successful career opportunities. In many situations, case studies

are often used to contribute to the knowledge on a topic and arise out of the need and desire to understand a complex social dilemma such as this (Yin, 2014). Edwards (2014) references many factors that contribute to the decisions made by retention committees when making recommendations. These factors may include students' socioeconomic status, race, parental involvement, and gender. However, there is very little research that relates to why females are not retained as often as males (Hamlin, 2013; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Tingle et al., 2012).

In many instances, when reviewing discipline data, a majority of the discipline referrals are generated by male students (Hamlin, 2013). When students spend a considerable amount of time outside of the classroom, they miss out on critical instructional time. Tingle et al. (2012) reported that retained students demonstrated negative social adjustment and attitudes toward school, had poor attendance and demonstrated more problem behaviors than their peers. Froiland and Davison (2014) support Jimerson's theory (1999) that students with classroom behavior issues and low grades are more likely to be retained and reportedly have more achievement problems than socially promoted students. Loss of instructional time leads to students lagging in their academic performance and prohibits their ability to excel. The results of this study will not only disclose the perceptions of administrators that make retention recommendations but perhaps will seek to provide a better understanding as it relates to the retention of rural female versus male students. This study addresses the following **research question**: What are the perceptions of elementary school principals as it relates to the retention of female versus male students who attend school in rural areas?

Rational, Relevance, and Significance of the Study

The significance of this study includes practical contributions from related research on the topic of retention, practice in the field, definition of policy, and suggestions for positive

social change. Based on the literature review, there continues to be an ongoing concern of the retention of males at such alarming numbers compared to the retention of females. Continued research and more qualitative exploration are needed to gain a more accurate understanding of this phenomenon. Based on the literature review, qualitative and quantitative research conducted on this topic gives limited information on why the disparity exists between male and female retention. Although these studies are valuable to the topic of retention, a gap in the literature exists as few studies have been conducted that investigate the rationale for the disparity that exists.

Moore (2017) conducted a study, observing various rural characteristics and their potential effects on student retention. However, the focus of the research was only on retention rates of kindergarten and first-grade students. Furthermore, data collected was specifically on predictive factors, which included overall perceptions of grade retention, perceived pros and cons, and alternative interventions utilized when working with at-risk students. All of these factors have substantial implications on the perceptions administrators have regarding academic retention but does not address the research question presented.

This study contributes to the field of practice by exploring the perceptions of administrators regarding retention of females in rural areas compared to males, whereby it may open the door for further discussions as to why the disparity exists. In relation to positive social change in education, this study may be significant in understanding and uncovering perceptions of administrators and factors that impact their decisions when determining whether or not to retain female or male students. Additionally, this study may promote collaborative conversations between fellow educators as it relates to their roles and responsibilities in the retention identification and recommendation process.

Definition of Terms

Disadvantaged students. Disadvantaged students may consist of many variables to include those considered at risk; students that are products of single-parent households, and students that have very low parental involvement and expectations (Froiland & Davison, 2014).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Signed by President Obama in December 2015; the ESSA requires states and districts to ensure that all students, including children with disabilities, English learners, and other historically underserved groups graduate high school ready for college or career (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Grade retention. Ensuring that a student has mastered grade-level material through repetition before promotion to the next grade (Andrew, 2014).

Parental involvement. Parents' role in educating their children at home and school (Holloway & Parka, 2017).

Read to Succeed Act 284. Read to succeed legislation was created to address literacy performance in South Carolina and put in place a comprehensive system of support to ensure South Carolina students graduate on time with the literacy skills they need to be successful in college, careers, and citizenship. Act 284 provides for a strong assessment and intervention system for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade with a goal of all students becoming proficient readers by the end of third grade (Edwards, 2014).

Rural. The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as any population, housing, or territory, not in an urban area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Struggling student. A struggling student has difficulty keeping up with classmates of the same age in a developmentally appropriate learning environment (OECD, 2014).

Social promotion. The practice of promoting a student from one grade level to the next by age rather than academic achievement (Edwards, 2014).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Several assumptions formulate the basis for this study. First, I assumed that the participants would respond with honesty and trustworthiness during their interviews and focus group session. Second, because the participants contribute to the retention data in the district of study, it is assumed their perceptions are relative to the research question that guides this study. Finally, it was assumed that principals with three or more years of experience are knowledgeable about factors that influence retention recommendations.

Limitations

All researches have a certain degree of limitations. One was the limited perceptions of the participants due to the questionnaires available during the data collection. All participants in this study were administrators from different schools within one district. There was no attempt to seek participation from administrators in larger or surrounding districts. While this population may provide insightful information related to their experiences with student retention, administrators in more significant or surrounding districts may offer additional viewpoints or different degrees of experiences.

Another limitation of this study lies within the focus group. During the focus group session, the participants may not feel comfortable openly expressing their feelings in a group setting or among peers because this method eliminates confidentiality and anonymity. Morgan (2013) noted that the level of involvement that some participants may have in a focus group could be minimal. Focus groups can get off-topic, may have introverts and extroverts, not

allowing all voices to be heard (Morgan, 2013). Although the disadvantages of focus groups were considered, there was no effort to gain additional participants for a second focus group session, assuming that the administrators selected would provide sufficient information. Whereas a second focused group would employ more responses as a result of some participants not interacting as much within the focus group, conducting more focus group sessions could provide a more extensive number of perceptions as it relates to student retention. Unfortunately, the sample size of eight participants can limit the scope of information that this research may offer.

Delimitations

The scope of a study involves the boundaries of the research. The scope of this study includes principals who have served as the primary decision-maker in retention recommendations. Participants were accessible because of easy access to the school district in which the study was conducted. The time allotted, resources, and location narrowed the scope in relation to the participants selected. All participants work in the same district and have access to the same resources.

Regarding the participants, this study included only persons that are elementary school administrators. Concerning time, once permission was granted, the study was limited to the 2018-2019 school year, allowing for minimal flexibility in conducting interviews and focus group sessions.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the study by including background information involving historical perspectives on retention. This chapter also included the problem statement for this study, the purpose of the study, the research question, the methodology of the study, assumptions, limitations, and the significance of the study. Attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of

principals will be explored in this study as it relates to retention recommendations of female versus male students in rural areas.

Included in this study are relevant literature and methodology regarding retention practices. The remainder of the study includes four additional chapters. Chapter 2 outlines the literature review and the theoretical framework and lays out the relevance of this study, assisting in understanding the theory behind retention. Chapter 3 discusses the research design, explaining the justification for the qualitative method approach, and details of the data collection process. Chapter 4 presents the results of the research findings, and Chapter 5 discusses the results, a summary of the findings, and provides implications for future practice and recommendations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to examine the perceptions of administrators as it relates to the retention of female versus male students who attend school in rural areas. The literature review begins with a historical overview of theories on why student retention exists and statistical data on the number of students retained across the globe. Examining the impact of their level of success in completing high school for these students will also be discussed. Although much of the research conducted includes reasons for retention, there is minimal information available specifically regarding why female students are less likely to be retained than male students.

Throughout this chapter, a review of the literature will provide various sources from researchers who concur that retention does little to help students to catch up to their age-appropriate level of performance. This literature review will attempt to show how past and current research provides documentation and reasons why retention is skewed towards males, confirming that there is a definite gap in previous research studies. The dropout rate of males is higher than females, and this mirrors the same as those who are retained each year.

Grade level retention continues to be a regular practice in public schools across the nation and is overtly the number one form of intervention for struggling students (Moore, 2017). As important as the role of the administrator is in the decision of retention, little information is readily available on how principals influence in the retention process (Evans, 2012). Undoubtedly, teachers, principals, and other school personnel directly influence the decision to promote or retain students (Phillips, 2015).

Students' geographic location, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and parents' educational background or involvement are not markers of their ability to learn. However, these factors

contribute to the overarching concept that females underperform compared to male classmates (Range et al., 2012). Factors such as these contribute to the low performance of students but are totally outside of the teachers' control. Notions linked to these factors lead to the idea or concept that female students in poverty are less equipped to achieve at a higher level and do not attend college following high school graduation at the rate that males do.

Retention may reinforce a false doctrine about achievement, considering that primary grade educators do not follow students after they have been retained nor follow them academically for the duration of their school career (Range et al., 2012). Martinez-Hicks (2012) conclude that varying policies between schools that retain students based on their academic achievement while others retain considering social and emotional maturity. This practice creates a dilemma for principals and teachers when making retention decisions.

Retained students tend to be stigmatized socially due to parents and the community having lower expectations of these students. Lower expectations of students' families support the belief that female will be less productive and not graduate or excel compared to their male counterparts (Hughes et al. 2013). Thus, they may not receive the unilateral support needed to prevent the underlining causes for the long-term outcome of an increased dropout rate, even though retention never took place. The phenomenon of retention is not new, and the debate continues among educators (Andrews, 2014; Evans, 2012; Jimerson, 1999). Leaders from multiple states agree that retention does little to assist students in their quest towards an equitable education in line with their peers.

Many states have implemented retention policies, including Florida, North Carolina, and South Carolina; some of these are examined in this study and explored as to how effective these policies are in helping students to excel. Researchers believe that retention impacts more

disadvantaged students than their counterparts, due in part to the lack of academic preparation (Hernandez-Tutop, 2012). Variables that impact these decisions vary depending on environmental factors.

The literature review includes gaps that are part of the summary. There is minimal research that provides information on attitudes and beliefs that contribute to principals in school buildings that are making decisions which ultimately impact students for the rest of their lives. For this study, the use of periodical journal articles, dissertations, surveys, and various documents that relate to the topic of retention are included. Limited data exist on the retention of females and why administrators are less likely to retain them versus retaining boys. Concordia University search engines, including EBSCOhost and ERIC, were utilized. Web-based searches using Google Scholar were used to investigate the following keywords: *academic achievement and grade retention, retention of females, retention of rural schools, female retention, and factors in retention of females, social promotion, withholding female students in elementary school, and the success of retained females.*

Historical Perspective

Retention has been a practice exercised by many countries for decades as a form of remediation and intervention in Chile, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Peru, Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Costa Rica, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, Tunisia and Uruguay, China, and the United States (OECD, 2014). Various methods are currently in place by school district administrators on how they choose to handle underachieving students. One program capitalizes on out-of-school time as an opportunity for children to develop skills and attitudes that may foster social and academic growth (Cid, 2014). It is estimated that one in eight students across countries that are part of the Organization for Economic Development (OECD) has repeated a

grade at least once before they reach the age of 15 (OECD, 2014). Students retained annually in the United States range from 7% to 15% and vary by student population, school, and community factors (Tingle et al., 2012). Retention, based on students not able to master the curriculum content of their current grade is not the sole issue due to other factors that make students more likely to be retained (Phillips, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Retention impacts male students at a higher rate than female students. Factors identified in the literature review that contribute to retention may include a lack of early intervention, low parental involvement, and the socioeconomic status of the family (Ferrara, 2015; Holloway & Parka, 2017; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Equally critical in the process are the attitudes and beliefs of administrators that agree to the retention recommendations. The theoretical framework for this study is based on retention research by Jimerson, which began nearly 20 years ago. Jimerson and Renshaw (2012) viewed retention as unjustifiable and concludes that retained students are harmed academically and socio-emotionally. Jimerson's research also points out that there are little to no advantages of grade retention, regardless of when students are retained, and gender is not a factor in the outcome.

“The guiding technical principle of grade retention is ensuring that a student has mastered grade-level material through repetition before promotion to the next grade” (Andrew, 2014, p. 653). Early intervention strategies that are implemented with consistency and schoolwide classroom-based instruction to include ability grouping, tutors during the day, and after school programs are alternatives to retention. These early intervention strategies should be applied before decisions of retention, and social promotion is discussed and or recommended. Many researchers are convinced that the most influential factors contributing to retention are directly

linked to a student's academic performance, early intervention, and parental involvement. Regardless of the students' gender, "Teachers and principals believe that students should be retained because of academic performance and perceived parental involvement as the most promising intervention to deter the use of grade retention" (Froiland & Davison, 2014, p. 1). Teachers and principals both perceived a benefit to students is becoming more aware of themselves when students are retained in the primary grades (Range et al., 2012). In some instances, little to no consideration is directed towards students' high absenteeism, resulting in them missing a considerable amount of instruction, leading to academic gaps.

Research conducted for decades has focused and documented claims on the adverse effects of retention and the impact that it has on society (Edwards, 2014; Garcia-Perez et al., 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Moore, 2017). Several theorists have argued that retention is harmful academically and emotionally, social promotion does not benefit students, and early intervention is the best option for struggling students (Edwards, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Critics of retention argue that this practice does not lead to an improvement in school achievement and, instead, harms those low-achieving students who are most at risk of failure (Garcia-Perez et al., 2014; Smith & Herzog, 2014). Students with behavior issues also spend a great deal of time out of the classroom, missing out on instruction leading to reduced academic achievement. Although there is no way of predicting who will or will not benefit from retention, Jimerson, and Renshaw (2012) point out that there is no empirical evidence revealing any advantages to grade retention whether it occurs in early grades versus at a later point in a student's academic career.

Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature

Is retention the answer? “The guiding technical principle of grade retention is ensuring that a student has mastered grade-level material through repetition before promotion to the next grade level” (Andrew, 2014, p. 654). In the district of study, students who do not master grade-level materials by the conclusion of their first semester, which is halfway through the school year drives the district’s Response to Intervention (RTI) team practices. Even before the end of the 90 day period, which is the number of days in a semester, apparent gaps in a child’s abilities are visible as the teacher begins implementation of intervention strategies to support these identified students. Once the RTI team receives a recommendation, the committee collectively suggests strategies to assist with helping students to get caught up on grade-level standards. There are times when strategies that are in place fails to increase the students’ academic performance, which ultimately leads to a retention recommendation.

District practices also require administrators to conduct meetings with members of the retention committee during the spring of the year, comprised of teachers, and other school personnel to make decisions on recommendations for retention. Decisions made are based on factors that contribute to the students’ ability to master the curriculum, and may also include the students’ level of maturity (Phillips, 2015; Wong & Zhou, 2017; Workman, 2016). Parents are invited to participate in these meetings, but often have little to no impact on the final decision. Decisions are made based on whether students will be successful if promoted are usually determined by the school staff and are generally governed by district and state guidelines. Retention may not be the answer for all students that have not achieved mastery. However, when considering other factors, retention may be what is appropriate for individual students. Jimerson and Renshaw (2012) do agree that some students that have poor attendance and

experiencing difficulty in school due to a lack of learning opportunities, rather than ability may benefit from retention.

Since the unveiling of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, replaced in 2015 with Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), there has been a significant focus and documented claims on the undesirable effects of student retention (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Not only does extensive quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods methodology studies concur that retention does little to catch students up, it also stresses the high cost associated with retaining students. Much of the results center on the retention of males in urban and suburban areas, but limited data was provided on females. Reckdahl (2018) commented on the fact that males tend to lag behind females academically in their studies. A study conducted by Smith and Herzog (2014) provided a different result when comparing the retention of female to that of males. In this study, there were 22 participants, but unlike other studies researched, there were more females; 13 of the 22 participants were female. In a quantitative study conducted by Garcia-Perez et al. (2014), the proportion of repeaters were higher among males at 41% versus females at 31.9%. However, females achieved lower test scores than males. Additional data available from the study included gender, race, and information related to the specific grade each participant was retained.

More than half of the participants had a positive attitude about their retention experiences and shared information about the challenges they faced, which included divorce, death, mobility, and poverty. Over half of the students in this study received special education services, but they did not allow this to deter them from setting higher academic expectations for themselves (Smith & Herzog, 2014). Hamlin (2013) reported a pattern of students most likely to be retained were proportionately high for males at 62%, ethnic minorities at 51.4%, and the younger students also

showed a high percentage of 55.3%. Administrators have a vested interest in their students and take seriously the task of having the final recommendation on whether students should be retained or promoted. Often struggling with making the right decision, administrators realize these decisions ultimately determine the course of students' future and for many, their level of success as high school graduates and their intent to pursue post-secondary education (Evans, 2012).

After an exhaustive review of the literature, it appears that there is limited documentation to support the rationale of why the difference in the percentage of females versus male candidates retained each year exists. The literature reviewed for this study focused on data collected on retention of students, but minimal research was available on administrators' perceptions on retention as it relates to female versus male students in rural areas. Furthermore, there is a definitive gap in the research for this topic. Females and males are faced with the same factors of low socioeconomics, low parental involvement, and academic ability, but are being impacted differently.

Extensive research addresses factors that include the poverty rate of students retained, amount of parental involvement and their level of expectations on their students' performance, and the part that stakeholders contribute to students' level of success (Cid, 2014; Garcia-Perez et al., 2014; Gottfried, 2012; Meador, 2018; OECD, 2014). Cid (2014) conducted a study in Uruguay, and findings revealed that parent type might affect children's outcomes using cultural transmission. Parental identity directly affects their interactions with their children and their commitment to their child's education (Cid, 2014).

Phillips (2015) cites information from other sources that credit the parent's level of participation and their attitude towards school, contributing to an essential role in the academic

progress of students. When students received support from home as well as school, they performed better in school. In a study that compared nine interventions deterring grade retention, parental involvement was rated as a highly effective intervention by primary grade teachers and principals (Range et al., 2012).

The attempt to keep teachers employed from year to year was also a factor that contributed to students' increased level of achievement (Orr, 2013). High teacher turnover has a significant impact on the culture of the classroom, student expectations, and student achievement (Lewis, 2013). When teachers are not fully committed, have poor attendance, and low expectations for themselves, this lack of enthusiasm is evident in their student performance data (Wong & Zhou, 2017). Expectations begin at the top level with the administration and are funneled down to others in the building. The attitude and perception of building administrators have a significant influence on the students' ability and retention (DelConte, 2011). Attitudes of the administration's perception and beliefs towards retention are visible in the dealings with parents, teachers, and students. These decisions made regarding retention of females have a direct impact on students' success as they matriculate through school. Based on persons making recommendations, females are not expected to achieve at the level of their male counterparts and are often expected to take on traditional roles at an early age.

Are There Benefits to Social Promotion?

The topic of social promotion has been debated for many years. Though confusing and controversial when confronted on the subject of retention, educators have shared in the same thought process of others,

many principals felt that retention was detrimental and harmful to students, especially those that were older than students on their grade level. This perception forced education

to move in a completely different direction, and instead of focusing on the student's academic achievement level, schools placed more emphasis on the social and emotional well-being of the students. (Martinez-Hicks, 2012, p. 12)

As a result, social promotion was viewed as a way to keep students of the same age group together, and hinged their rationale for the practice as a form of remediation, believing that if students were with their same age group, over time, they would make gains in their level of performance and ability (Edwards, 2014).

Although numerous research studies conclude that retention does not benefit students in the long run (Garcia-Perez et al., 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Martinez-Hicks, 2012; Range et al., 2012), social promotion should not be the alternative because this practice equally damages students. Social promotion, as defined by the U.S. Department of Education, is the practice of allowing students to be promoted to the next grade even though they have failed to meet performance standards and academic requirements (Edwards, 2014). President Clinton was not in favor of social promotion and asked that it cease during his tenure, which led to educational leaders viewing this as permission to retain low achieving students (Hernandez-Tutop, 2012). Before this call to action, students had been passed on to the next level based on their age or social maturity versus their academic ability. Practices such as this do little to prepare students to be college-ready or promote their ability to become gainfully employed and responsible citizens.

Many see only two options when dealing with students that are underperforming: retention or social promotion. While some schools base retention decisions solely on standardized test scores, others may consider factors such as emotional maturity, creating dilemmas for principals in making their recommendations (Martinez-Hicks, 2012). Under

President Reagan's administration, the release of the national report, *A Nation at Risk*, began to direct attention to social promotion and to create policies that ended such practices, requiring students to meet specific criteria before being eligible for promotion (Phillips, 2015). For many years, researchers have delved into finding whether the best solution for our students is social promotion or grade retention (Hernandez-Tutop, 2012). There remains a great divide, and a tug of war continues regarding what is best for students.

As a nation, high academic achievement must be the goal for all children. Since ESSA was passed in 2015 by the Obama administration, the focus not only continues in raising the bar for all students, it also requires states and districts to ensure that all students, including children with disabilities, English learners, and other historically underserved groups, graduate high school ready for college or a career (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2015). Traditionally, socially promoted students tend to drop out of school equally as much as retention candidates. Both groups of students, over the long haul, end up lagging behind their classmates. ESSA has forced school districts to make more significant efforts to ensure that all students are attaining minimum competency levels. In response to this comprehensive legislation, states and school districts have created and implemented different promotion and retention policies based on the needs of the population served (Martinez-Hicks, 2012).

Early Intervention Best Option

When students begin school during their formative years, as early as age four, the advantages of providing early intervention, especially to disadvantaged students, are clear. Implementation of programs for struggling students can aid in lowering the number of retention candidates. "The most promising practice to decrease grade retention rates is early identification of low performing students, followed by intense, formative interventions" (Range et al., 2012, p.

3). Master scheduling during the school day may include an intervention block, tutoring during the school day, and after-school tutoring. One strategy that has worked for some schools is a push in the model, where math and ELA interventionist go into the classrooms and conduct small group sessions, often co-teaching versus the traditional pull out practice. Flexible scheduling allows for more reading instruction, and the use of personalized learning plans are other options (Range et al., 2012). Formative interventions such as those mentioned are less costly than grade retention.

While some districts have created policies to assist struggling students with early intervention, these practices are doing little to decrease the number of retention candidates annually. In the district that the researcher conducted the study, there were approximately 20 Title One schools. Over 75% of these schools have students that are not meeting state academic targeted requirements. Based on the district's recently adopted policies, many students currently in third grade are on the retention list. Support systems must continue to assist underperforming students that are identified if districts expect to see a change. A youth development study reported that 93% of the growth in reading and 76% of the growth in math between kindergarten and fifth grade takes place by the end of third grade (Hughes et al., 2012).

Between 1994 and 2015, higher percentages of boys were more likely to repeat a grade than girls, and consistent findings indicate that retention rates are higher for minority students, mainly black and Hispanic students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). In a study done in Macao, the results were similar to that in the United States; male students and students from families of the lowest socio-economic status were more likely to be retained than female students and students from families of the highest socioeconomic status (Wong & Zhou, 2017). Not only relative to specific cultures but across the board, female students tend to fit the stereotype of being

compliant and submissive, adding to the rationale for why males are more likely to be retained (Wong & Zhou, 2017). Wong and Zhou (2017) shares that as a result of teachers' views of students of different classes and genders, male and disadvantaged students would be more likely to be retained because of their poor conduct or academic performances.

Child Trends Databank (2018) revealed that children in families who live in poverty are more likely to repeat a grade in primary school and children whose parents have at least a bachelor's degree were also less likely to repeat a grade than children whose parents have less education. Retained students have poorer long-term outcomes and drop out more frequently than their matched low achieving, but socially promoted peers. However, these factors do not contribute to the overarching concept that females underperform compared to their male counterparts.

There is a false idea or concept that female students in poverty are less equipped to achieve at a higher level and do not attend college after high school graduation at the rate that males do. Retention reinforces a false doctrine about achievement. Parents and the community tend to have lower expectations of students after retention which catalyzes to support the belief that female students will not be productive, and therefore may not graduate or excel compared to their male counterparts. Hence, they may not receive the support needed to prevent the underlining causes for the long-term outcome of increased dropout rates, even though retention did not take place. Hughes et al. (2013) report that parents' short-term expectations for their children's academic performance are also related concurrently to their children's academic achievement.

Based on the literature review, a pattern emerged of numerous factors common on the topic of retention: parental expectation or family support, socioeconomic level of the family,

gender, community involvement, and teacher commitment. Parents with higher expectations for their children's educational performance engage in more behaviors that promote achievement than do parents with lower expectations. In a longitudinal study conducted by Hughes et al. (2013), the researchers sent a questionnaire to parents of children who had been retained and asked what they thought would be the highest level of education their child would complete. Parents see their retained children as a failure and in response, tend to make a downward adjustment in their child's educational expectations. The study concluded that further research is needed to determine if retention has a similar negative impact on parental expectations at different points in a child's progression.

Financial resources of families have a direct impact on students' ability to achieve. Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are 1.5 times more likely to repeat a grade than advantaged students who perform at the same level (Smith & Herzog, 2014). Based on the article, some individuals assume families on federal assistance do not have to worry about food or shelter. However, based on the researcher's experience in dealing with families of poverty, these families that depend on federal assistance are provided housing allowances based on their household income. Limited resources in the household create emotional stress for students, which directly impacts their academic performance.

Impact Retention has on Students

Retention decisions often impact whether or not students pursue post-secondary education or seek to further their education in any capacity. Results from various studies reveal that males are about twice as likely to repeat a grade as females, and consistent findings indicate that retention rates are higher for minority students, mainly black and Hispanic students (Andrew, 2014; Evans, 2012; Froiland & Davison, 2014). Specific reasons were not noted for

the significant disparity among the high numbers of males retained versus females, though other factors were observed, such as parental involvement and socioeconomic status (OECD, 2014). Data reveals that much of the behavior issues involve male students. It is difficult for students to gain knowledge of the content teachers are instructing if they are not in the classroom receiving instruction due to behavior concerns. Students with classroom behavior issues and low grades are more likely to be retained and reportedly have more achievement problems than socially promoted students (Froiland & Davison, 2014).

Hamlin (2013) shared that suspension in an elementary school setting is rare, and further states that retained students are almost eight times as likely to be suspended as non-retained students. Suspensions in elementary schools depends on the expectations that have been set by the staff and its culture through extended day programs, schools provide extra instructional time for students who fall behind, adapting teaching to their needs so that they can catch up with their peers; targeting efforts where needed to support students with learning difficulties or behavioral problems (OECD, 2014).

Factors Contributing to Retention

Many factors contribute to the retention recommendations of students. The spotlight shines brightly on students that are labeled disadvantaged. Students labeled as disadvantaged may have several reasons they are considered at risk; such students that are products of single-parent households and students that have very low parental involvement and expectations. Jimerson strongly believed that parent involvement with the school is a strong predictor of non-retention (Froiland & Davison, 2014). Additional factors include the ethnic and economic status of the family. “The critics of retention argue that it does not lead to improvements in school achievement and, instead, harms those low-achieving students who are most at risk of failure”

(Garcia-Perez et al., 2014, p. 1374). Not only do critics claim that retention harms students, but there is also a high cost associated with retention because it takes students longer to pass through the educational system.

Considering factors stated by teachers when making retention decisions include a student's maturity level, ability, and their academic performance (Phillips, 2015), many educators feel that females tend to mature at a rate faster than their male peers, identifying another reason why boys may be retained, due to their immaturity. Disadvantaged students, defined in the previous paragraph, often arrive at school late and have a higher rate of absenteeism; situations that lead to missing classroom instruction. Students recognized for high achievement are often the ones that are at school consistently and noted for having perfect attendance.

Inequalities abound for disadvantaged students; depriving them of opportunities to learn as a result of their socioeconomic background (OECD, 2014). In many schools with a high percentage of poverty, hiring, and maintaining quality teachers to commit to this population of students remains a significant challenge (Orr, 2013). Disadvantaged students are 1.5 times more likely to repeat a grade than advantaged students at the same level, and they may not have equal access to early support and more effective remedial opportunities (OECD, 2014).

Review of Methodological Issues

In reviewing the literature, there was disagreement among theorists regarding whether there were benefits to the retention of students regardless of when they were retained. Garcia-Perez et al. (2014) report that students who repeated a grade during their primary education suffered more than those who repeated a grade in secondary school. Jimerson and Renshaw (2012) reveal in their research that neither grade retention nor social promotion is effective

strategies for improving students' academic or behavioral success. Many factors are a part of the equation and give support to arguments for or against retention. Sources selected for the literature review consisted mostly of quantitative, longitudinal studies, some qualitative, and a few that were mixed methods. Some limitations included the practice of only evaluating a population of students within a single district, possibly resulting in different interpretations. Although studies that followed students over a period were able to provide data on the percentage of successful students, variables that impact students individually are not disclosed.

While many research studies emphasize the adverse effects of grade retention on students, some studies offer positive benefits from student retention (Phillips, 2015). Phillips (2015) shared an analysis that compared 109 first through third grade retained students to their matched promoted peers. Results from the study revealed that students retained in first and second grade outperformed their promoted peers in reading and mathematics following the year of retention (Phillips, 2015).

Interestingly, principals' views about retention are similar to teachers' in that they report "low academic performance and maturity as reasons to retain students and feel retention should occur in kindergarten as opposed to first or second grade" (Range et al., 2012, p. 4). In a study conducted by Martinez-Hicks (2012), the vast majority of participants, 20 out of 22, believed early retention in grades kindergarten, first, or second grade was the most beneficial time to retain a student. Principals mentioned maturity, social awareness, and building the foundational skills for learning as reasons for retention in the earlier grades compared to later grades. Additionally, principals identified the support of parents as a vital component to students that were prime candidates for retention.

Martinez-Hicks (2012) conducted a constructivist grounded theory study which included 22 elementary principals, gathering their perspective on how they approached the student retention decision process. Results from the study done by Martinez-Hicks (2012) indicated that elementary principals' beliefs and experiences dictate how they approach retention decisions. Further, principals had strong beliefs about when student retention should take place, how often, the implementation of early intervention instructional strategies, and the impact that parental involvement had in the process. Ferrara (2015) believes that parents' involvement in school and their attitude towards their child's education plays a significant role in determining whether a student will be retained.

Range et al. (2012), reported that teachers and principals were asked to select one factor they considered most important when deciding to retain students. Teachers chose academic performance as the most critical factor to consider, and ability level and emotional maturity was a strong second. Interestingly, principals selected academic achievement as the most critical factor, followed by ability level and emotional maturity. Factors chose by both teachers and principals less often were self-esteem, effort, and age. The intervention referenced as most effective by primary grade teachers and principals was parental involvement (Range et al., 2012).

Synthesis of Research Findings

A synthesis of the findings in this research study shows that many barriers contribute to students' lack of performance. According to Gottfried (2012), approximately 10% of all students in the United States are retained, with the rate climbing to 16% for African American students and 20% for high poverty students. Students retained, regardless of race, continuously lag behind their peers in achievement and the gap continues to rise. Evidence of student retention in low socioeconomic environments had a decrease in reading performance

and little to no improvement in math (Gottfried, 2012).

Studies focused on same-age analysis, with minimal attention in the literature regarding gender. The likelihood of students gaining academic achievement by repeating a grade is not logical because instruction is not taking place on a higher level. In fact, students are being taught on the level of the students in their current classes (Stone, 2015). To compare students in a same-age analysis is not a fair comparison.

Review of the literature sources includes studies conducted by students on all grade levels ranging from early childhood to high school. Data collected included various demographic information inclusive of race, free and reduced lunch, special education students served, and behavior records. Research conducted for this study consistently brought into focus the dropout rates of students retained before high school, making generalizations and ignore the mechanisms of the effect of primary-grade retention (Andrew, 2014).

In Andrew's (2014) longitudinal study, focusing on the scarring effect of retention on primary students, demographic and socioeconomic background variables were considered such as race, gender, the mothers' and students' birth cohort, students' birth month and more. Over 12,600 students were a part of the random sample, with only 2,922 female students, less than 25% of total students. Findings concluded that the scarring effect did have an impact on high school completion and was more abundant in magnitude than a student's gender (Andrew, 2014). Again, little to no evidence exist on gender, comparing males to female participants. Andrew (2014) further concluded that retaining students in the early primary grades increases the odds of high school completion by about 60%. Information provided from South Carolina's annual dropout report of 2016–2017 indicated 5,351 student dropouts, with the majority of them dropping out by their sophomore year, at 52.0%. Literature sources consistently support the

theory that retention impacts the dropout rate (Andrew, 2014).

Critique of Previous Research

A careful review of the literature on the topic of retention and the effects it has on students and their academic success indicates that the vast majority of the sources used were quantitative. Very few qualitative research studies are disclosed in the literature review. Although sources provided data that included females that are retained, there remained theoretical research that focused explicitly on the retention of males and reasons why there is such a disparity among the number of males retained versus females. Studies regarding the topic show males overpopulating the data, regardless of socioeconomic status or ethnicity (Froiland & Davison, 2014; Tingle et al., 2012). Froiland and Davison (2014) reported that adolescent females developed reading achievement at a higher rate across the U.S. and reported less aggressive behaviors than males, not only in the U.S. but around the world.

Few studies document the demographics of grade retention or the relationship between it and academic achievement, although grade retention is one of the most well-known and common forms of intervention for many students across the United States (Moore, 2017). Retention practices continue under scrutiny with researchers who tend to focus on the lack of early intervention provided to struggling students. The idea that early intervention may be taking place, but not successful with the targeted group of students due to a lack of evidence. This lack of evidence does not mean, however, that there is no intervention taking place. Effective teachers have a significant impact on the achievement level of all students, while students who had ineffective teachers do not make adequate academic progress (Phillips, 2015).

Gottfried (2012) cites other researchers that refer to grade retention as a means of remediating academic failure and references the growing emphasis on standards and

accountability. With the increased level of educational responsibility, there has been an increased focus on the preparation of students in primary grades. The most recent report showed only 14 of 50 states in the United States that require mandatory kindergarten attendance (Workman, 2016). Despite the negative references to retention, recent studies report that the number of students considered for retention is on the rise, especially in urban areas. The retention rate continues to increase in high poverty areas and also among the African American population due to teachers' educational expectations being lower for African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American youth (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Reed, & Farmer, 2016).

As previously referenced, attracting and retaining qualified teachers in high poverty areas also has a direct impact on student achievement. When inadequate or non-highly qualified teachers provide altered instruction, the likelihood of high achieving students starts to decline. One source examines the relationship between the classroom context and the number of retained students. For example, programs to assist struggling students may include an extended day, with study programs occurring after school and also summer programs to extend the school year.

The literature reviewed continues to document that retained students lag behind their peers of the same age. What needs to be noted is that students that are a grade lower receive instruction on the lower grade level, and attempting to catch up students that are retained is nearly impossible. The curriculum level at which students are taught does not equate to that of their promoted peers. When reviewing the same age students, the retained students will lag in achievement compared to their classmates (Gottfried, 2012).

An informative study conducted by Smith and Herzog (2014) used a qualitative approach, inclusive of 22 high school seniors shed light on their perceptions of the impact that retention had on their lives. Personal stories were provided, sharing reasons they were successful

rather than negative aspects of being held back. Researchers that focus solely on the achievement of retained students over time have found more benefits of retention than those who continue to compare retained students to students that were promoted (Smith & Herzog, 2014). Students selected for the study were not only recommended by their principal or school counselor, nonetheless were asked if they wanted to participate in the study. The methodology of this magnitude is very different from a random sampling of students. Data revealed that students who had supportive parents were more likely to be academically successful and less likely to be retained (Smith & Herzog, 2014).

As noted by researchers, even though there were certain benefits to the qualitative approach, limitations were also noted. Smith and Herzog (2014) note that there were times when the participants did not know or could not recall parts of their social histories. Time constraints during the search for participants was also an issue. Lastly, the researchers cite bias as another limitation, often the case in qualitative studies.

Longitudinal data also revealed that the developmental reading skills of retained students were very similar, regardless of whether retention occurred in early childhood or elementary grades. A limitation in longitudinal studies takes into account attrition which may impact the data. In schools with high poverty indexes, the student population is often very mobile. Hence, students that were in the study for the first year may not be present in the second year. Data provided in one study included a retention rate of 64% for males compared to 36% for females. However, no specific rationale is available for the 28% difference. Less frequent in later grades, the question continues as to the value of retention at any level. Even though retention practices have been questioned for years, it continues today across the globe.

Retention rates differ across gender, ethnic, and other demographic groups. Males are about twice as likely to repeat a grade, and consistent findings indicate higher retention for minority students (Tingle et al., 2012). If the answer sought is in the altering of the achievement gap between retained students and their peers, perhaps researchers should continue to delve into factors that contribute to why students are struggling at such an early age. One problem that many high poverty schools face is that parents often do not allow children to begin school before five-year-old kindergarten. Even when services are available at no cost to families, many choose not to send their children to pre-kindergarten. Students that do not begin school with their peers start behind, and the gap continues to widen. These students are not equipped to handle the instruction provided, creating an opportunity for the achievement gap to begin at an early stage in their academic career. Tingle et al. (2012) did not report positive effects for retained students when compared to similarly achieving promoted peers.

Hughes et al. (2012) conducted a quantitative, longitudinal study which lasted for two years and included students from three school districts, with 784 students participating in the study. Ethnic backgrounds of the students were noted, but gender was not available for all students, only those retained and 54% were male students. Jimerson is noted for extensive work on the practice of retaining students, and much of his research supports the belief that grade retention hurts later academic achievement. On the other hand, some educators feel strongly that retention in early grades is beneficial to students. Furthermore, studies that examined the effect of students retained in first through third grade indicated that students made significant gains (Hernandez-Tutop, 2012). Students that realize these significant gains are ones that are being taught by teachers that recognize areas where students need support and are consistent with early interventions in aiding struggling students.

Summary

A review of the literature identified several themes, trends, and patterns that support the need for this study. In addition to the findings, there were gaps and a lack of information to support the research question stated in the introduction. Much data has been collected and analyzed on retention across the globe (Garcia-Perez et al., 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; OECD, 2014; Range et al., 2012), and reasons critics are not in support of the practice, but little research document the perceptions of principals as it relates to the retention of female versus male students in rural areas. Based on the review of the literature, there is sufficient reasoning for conducting this exploratory case study.

The practice of promoting students that are underachieving merely to allow them to keep up with their classmates does not assist with closing the achievement gap. However, of the two practices, many prefer social promotion. Students who are socially promoted often continue to struggle throughout their academic careers. Social promotion is also referenced as another significant contributor to increased dropout rates (Edwards, 2014; Hernandez-Tutop, 2012). Early grade retention contributes to this phenomenon. Garcia-Perez et al. (2014) reported students who were held back during their primary education suffered a more significant impact on their educational outcomes compared with those who repeated during secondary school.

After continuous exploration, limited information is available on perceptions of administrators; supporting the need for further research in this area. Minimal research focuses on the part that administrators provide in this process. Retention of students should not be made haphazardly and is a decision that should involve all stakeholders, including the administrators, teachers, parents, and students when appropriate. Several pieces of data should be used to assist in the decision-making process.

Because of the limited information disclosed regarding the retention of females, there is justification in the need for additional research to examine the attitude and perception of principals regarding female retention. Additional research on this topic may assist administrators that struggle with retention decisions and are searching for understanding their roles and responsibilities. Further study on factors that shape perceptions of principals as it relates to the retention of female students who attend school in rural areas may shed light on why the disparity exists and dispel myths associated with the previous findings. While the results from these studies contribute to the body of literature on the topic of retention, it fails to examine perceptions of administrators as it relates to the retention of female versus male students in rural areas.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The research methodology selected for this study is an exploratory case study. The methods, as mentioned above, maybe most suited in providing a deeper understanding of elementary school principals' perceptions related to the retention of female versus male students in rural schools. This chapter explains how my professional background and experience provides a foundation for an interest in the topic for this study. Case studies allow researchers to focus on a case and gain a real-world perspective on behaviors and processes, changes, and performances (Yin, 2014). A case study provides an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon or process (Creswell, 2013). Details of the research methods used to gain the information needed to answer the question for this study is provided. Procedures and methodologies used to collect the data, and specific guidelines are shared.

Steps used in the data collection process, how it was analyzed and validated are included in this chapter. Instruments used, participants, and a description of how data were reported and analyzed is provided. This chapter discusses the purpose of the study, the population and sampling method, data collection, and analysis procedures. Limitations of the study are presented, along with conceivable ethical issues, and the expected findings of the study. This exploratory case study fills some of the gaps in previous research by exploring the perceptions of elementary principals concerning retention recommendations of female versus male students in rural areas.

Extensive research exists on factors that contribute to retaining students, and sources provide data that show males are retained in more significant numbers than females (Garcia-Perez et al., 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Range et al., 2012). Factors mentioned occur among male and female students include socioeconomics, parental involvement, behavior issues,

and a lack of early intervention are common in the literature reviewed. Case studies are used in many situations, often contributing to our knowledge of individuals, groups, and arise out of the need and desire to understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 2014).

Research Question

The following research question guided this study: What are the perceptions of elementary school principals as it relates to the retention of female versus male students who attend school in rural areas?

Design of the Study

Several implications are noted for the decision to choose a qualitative exploratory case study approach. First, the primary gatherer of data collection is the researcher. Second, the information provided was first hand and not based on prior data collection. Creswell (2013) shares that qualitative research tends to answer additional questions and leads to a deeper understanding of the topic being researched. Qualitative researchers mostly focus on the construction of meaning and tend to use up and coming research designs to help explore and develop their ideas (Creswell, 2013). Information gathered from qualitative research is current and not from previous research done in the past due to the researcher being the prime gatherer of the data.

All participants were interviewed with a series of in-depth, open-ended questions to gauge their understanding of factors that contribute to their perceptions as it relates to the retention of female versus male students in rural areas. The study also used focus groups, allowing for collaboration among the participants. If a participant in the focus group was not comfortable answering the questions aloud, they had the option to complete the focus group questions through the channel of a questionnaire. The purpose of this study was not to obtain

quantitative statistics but to gain an understanding of the perceptions of principals and the factors they consider in their decision making.

The researcher was interested in this topic because of her role and contributions to the recommendations of students and repeated questioning of whether the right decision is being made regarding retention. From personal experience, at the three schools in which the researcher has served on retention committees, males have been recommended and retained each year three times more than females. Based on information shared by the participants in the study, females are not necessarily smarter than males. However, males tend to have a more substantial number of discipline referrals. Because of the high level of behavior issues that often lead to suspension, boys spend less time in the instructional environment than females. Regardless of gender, a student with classroom behavior issues and low grades are more likely to be retained and reportedly have more achievement problems than socially promoted students (Froiland & Davison, 2014).

There was a strong desire to understand the rationale regarding why a vast difference in the percentage of males that are retained versus females in rural areas exists. Personal interactions with administrators provided the researcher with an opportunity to ask questions to deepen the level of knowledge about the phenomena. The exploratory case study consisted of three methods to include face to face live interviews, transcribing, and analyzing. A total of eight participants were invited to participate in this study.

Description of the Sample and Research Population

Setting

This study was conducted in a nationally accredited school district, one of the largest school districts in the southern part of the United States, with over 24,000 students, representing

over 55 countries and 25 different spoken languages. There are over 50 schools and specialized centers in the district. The district stretches over 400 square miles and encompasses urban, suburban and rural communities with students in pre-K through 12th grades and more than 4,500 employees. Of the 4,500 employees, approximately 2,100 are certified teachers, and over 10% are national board certified. There are more than 25 elementary sites, accounting for over 50% of the district's students, along with nine middle schools and seven high schools. Seven other specialized centers and charter schools account for roughly 400 students. Student demographics include approximately 75% African American, 17% Caucasian, and 8% other, with more than 70% receiving free or reduced lunch (district website, 2018). To protect the district in which all participants are employed, the district will be identified as the East Coast District throughout the study.

Invitation to Participate

Permission to conduct the study was submitted through a research proposal application to the district's research and evaluation office to interview the voluntary participants for the study. The district was purposefully selected as the research site for several reasons. First being accessibility, as the researcher has easy access to employees of the district; secondly, the district's strategic plan, which is aimed at closing the achievement gap between African American males and other students in the district, and thirdly, the researcher's interest in understanding factors that affect the recommendations for retention. Once approval was granted by AARE and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Concordia University-Portland, a letter of invitation was sent to 14 potential participants. All participants received a consent form explaining the purpose of the study, criteria for participation, the significance of the study, and contact information.

The invitational letter was sent to potential participants by email, assuring them that their privacy and personal identity would not be disclosed. The researcher's contact information, including email address, phone contact, place of employment, and cell number was provided in case the participants had questions. A total of eight participants were selected to participate in the study.

Selection of Participants

Participants were not randomly selected. The sampling of this study was purposeful. In this case study, eight school administrators were selected to participate. Participants consisted of four female and four male principals that have or are presently serving in a rural public school setting. All participants are currently serving as principals in elementary schools, but some are not currently in a rural school environment. Participation in this study involved a list of open-ended questions to participants via interviews and focus group sessions on determining their views and perceptions in regards to retention of female students compared to male students. Administrators selected currently work in elementary schools and are currently serving on retention committees, and have a minimum of three years of experience.

Crossman (2018) notes the reasons for purposive sampling include the fact that participants are selected because of their personal experience or knowledge of the topic under study. Small numbers in a case study also allow for a more intense study, and the selection is driven by the theoretical framework (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014). All participants selected to serve in the same school district and have experience serving in a public school setting. Some of the participants have doctoral degrees, and all have at least a masters plus 30 hours.

Data Collection Instruments

For this study, data was collected from three sources: an initial interview, a focus group session, and a follow-up interview. The data collection procedures for each source are explained below. Due to the availability of participants, two focus group sessions were conducted. Participants in the study were all building-level principals. Focus group sessions, as well as all interview sessions, were scheduled around a time and place that was convenient for the participants. A conflict in the schedule for several of the participants created a need to conduct two focus group sessions.

Initial Interview

For data accuracy and record-keeping, with permission from participants, interviews were audiotaped. Participants were scheduled for interviews based on their availability. After gathering scheduling information from the participants, an interview schedule was developed. An email reminder was sent to participants three days before the scheduled interview time to confirm their appointments. Interview questions were sent to participants before the interviews (see Appendix B). These interviews were conducted individually with each participant. The location of these initial interviews varied, based on a location that was convenient for each participant. The semi-structured interviews may or may not be audio recorded, based upon the response on the participant's consent forms that were collected. Before beginning the interview, the researcher explained in detail the purpose of the study, which is to examine the perception of administrators as it relates to the retention of females in rural areas.

The interviews were scheduled during non-contractual school hours, in a setting and location agreed upon by the participant and the researcher. Each interview was expected to last between 60 and 90 minutes in length. After each interview, the researcher thanked the participant

and scheduled the focus group session. The participants were informed that they would receive an email three days before the follow-up interview to confirm the time, date, and location of the session. A total of eight administrators were included in the study, to include four males and four females. At the end of each interview, participants were provided an opportunity to share feelings and ask clarifying questions.

Focus Group Session

After the initial interview, each participant was invited to participate in a focus group session to take place during non-contractual hours on a day convenient for all participants. The location of the focus group session was at a location convenient to the participants inside or outside of the school. The researcher served as the facilitator, assuring that all participants were engaged in the discussion. Questions were presented in a way that the focus group would be in conversation without the full participation of the researcher. Questions for the focus group were provided to the participants in advance so that they were familiar with the questions (see Appendix D).

The participants were advised that the session would be recorded and consent was obtained from all participants before the beginning of the focus group session. Participation in the focus group was voluntary, and all eight participants were included. Participants were given a copy of the focus group questions in advance, providing them with an opportunity to view questions to determine their level of comfort. If they chose not to participate in the focus group, they were presented with an opportunity to respond to questions in writing. The sessions took approximately 60-75 minutes. After the focus group session, the participants were sent thank you cards, thanking them for their time and advised that the transcripts would be made available to them to ensure that their views and statements were accurately transcribed. After the focus

group sessions, the researcher confirmed the final date and time for the follow-up interview with each participant.

Follow up Interview

Follow up interviews took place after the focus group session with all participants. Further clarification of transcribed information was addressed, in addition to possible secondary questions that added to the clarification of data collected. Participants were again scheduled to meet via email at a date, time, and place that was convenient for them.

The purpose of the follow-up interview was to gain further information not covered in the initial interview or focus group discussion. The follow-up interview with each participant lasted approximately 30 minutes. A different set of questions were asked in the follow-up interview (see Appendix C). Participants were reminded of the researcher's desire to record the sessions, and permission was gained before recording. Time was included for participants to ask clarifying questions.

Data Collection Procedures

Interview Protocol

For case study research, the researcher is often the sole person responsible for data collection and for the design of the instrument that is used to collect the data according to Yin (2014). There were two sources of data collection for this study—interviews and focus group sessions. Two interview components included an initial interview and a follow-up interview following the focus group session. The interview questions that the researcher designed was based on the research question and related to the theoretical framework and review of the research literature for this study.

Questions for the follow-up interview allowed the participants to share additional information and discuss any changes regarding their perceptions concerning retention. The techniques and protocol for both the initial and follow-up interviews are described in detail in the following sections. The researcher interviewed participants individually, outside of contracted work hours, at a location that was convenient for each participant. Time slots assigned for each session allowed for completion of all questions, time for collaboration, and clarification as needed.

Initial Interview

Participants were scheduled for interviews based upon their availability. After gathering scheduling information from the participants, an interview schedule was developed. The researcher sent participants an email reminder three days before the scheduled interview time to confirm their appointments since these initial interviews were conducted individually. The location of the meetings varied, depending upon the location that was convenient for the participant. Meetings took place at the principal's site and at various locations in the district after scheduled evening and weekend events. Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, based upon approval from the participant's consent form. Each interview was expected to last between 60 to 90 minutes in length. Before beginning the interviews with the participants, the purpose of this study was shared. After the interview, the researcher thanked the participant and shared plans for the focus group session, after which, the follow-up interview was scheduled. The participants were also informed that they would receive an email three days prior to the focus group session and follow up interviews confirming the time, date, and location of each session.

Focus Group

Focus groups are a useful method for collecting qualitative data. Cleary et al. (2014), give a reason for focus groups, stating the potential for synergistic “sparking-off” between group members, which cannot occur in one-on-one interviews. Given that the primary determinant of the quality of qualitative research is the skills and characteristics of the interviewer and the interviewee, this is even more crucial for a focus group (Cleary et al., 2014). During the focus group session, participants were invited to participate and encouraged to share insight based on questions that were provided before the session for review. The format of the focus group sessions was conducted in a Socratic style manner. Socratic seminars are used in formal or informal settings where open-ended questions are discussed. During the context of the discussions, participants listened to the comments of others and articulated their thoughts and their responses.

All participants were respectful of the opinion and input of others. There were five steps to this process: (a) topic for discussion is given in advance; (b) Allow time to prepare for discussion; (c) Norms are developed; (d) Seminar discussion begins with leader, in this case, the researcher; and (e) Reflection and evaluate the process (Keegan, 2013). The researcher directly served as the facilitator, ensuring that all voices were heard and asked the questions that the focus groups discussed without actually participating in the discussion.

After the initial interview, the participants were invited to participate in the focus group session, which took place during non-contractual hours on a day that was convenient for all participants. The location for the focus group sessions was at a place that was convenient for the participants inside or outside of their perspective schools. Participation in the focus group was voluntary. Of the 14 principals invited to participate, eight participants committed and completed

the study. Several potential dates were provided to pinpoint a date and time that was convenient for all who participated.

All participants were given a copy of the focus group questions in the event that a participant was not comfortable answering questions orally. They were given the option to complete the focus group questions as an open-ended questionnaire. Sessions took 60-75 minutes depending on the depth of the discussion. Participants were thanked for their time at the end of the session and advised that the transcripts would be made available to them to ensure that their views and statements are accurately transcribed.

Follow Up Interview

Follow up interviews occurred after the focus group session took place. Participants were scheduled at a time and place after the focus group session that was convenient. An email was sent confirming the details and possible alternative dates in case the session needed to be rescheduled. The interviews began with a review of the research protocols. Participants were reminded in each session that they had the option not to be audio recorded. If the participant did not grant permission to be recorded, the researcher took notes during the interview. The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to provide more depth and understanding about a concept, a theme, an event, or an issue suggested by the interviewees that are relevant to the research concerns (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Follow up interviews were expected to last approximately 30 minutes.

Questions were shared with each participant before each session. Four-digit identification numbers were assigned to each participant to maintain their autonomy. Guidelines were shared with the participants at the beginning of the research process.

Identification of Attributes

Yin (2014) shares that studies tend to take on different attributes depending on the research questions being posed, the degree and level of influence the researcher has over the behaviors, and the emphasis on either past or present phenomena. Explanatory cases address inquiries that examine the how or why of an issue over time, start with a rationale, defines the research question, and ultimately develops a framework for further research (Yin, 2014). The primary attribute defining this study were the perceptions shared by participants that guide their retention decisions every year. Defining terminology used in this study, such as rural, retention, and disadvantaged, allows for commonality among participants.

Data Analysis Procedures

Once the information was collected through interviews and focus group sessions, data were analyzed to eliminate repetitive information and clustered into themes and stored for further use. Data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews with each participant in individual sessions and two focus group sessions. Sessions were semi-structured with open-ended questions, which were recorded through notes, audio-taped, and later transcribed. Interviews were carried out in English. Each participant received a four-digit number for identification purposes. After transcribing the data, each participant received a copy of their responses for validation purposes and to clarify any responses as needed.

A software program was used for coding to develop categories from data collected to assist with the development of themes (Morse & Richards, 2013). The researcher generated new queries that aligned with the theoretical framework of this study to ensure that the voices of the participants were heard and documented regarding the topic that was researched. Information

was transcribed and analyzed, listing non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements. Once the themes from the analysis of the data collected were disclosed, findings were recorded.

After analyzation of the raw data for open codes, the codes were then analyzed to create axial codes, derived by interpreting and deductively synthesizing meaning from the descriptive open codes (Merriam-Webster, 2009). The axial code process was done electronically using NVivo 12. Color-coded charts were used to assist in the data analysis to prepare the raw data and open codes and the axial codes. Axial coding was performed, considering one category at a time.

Limitations of the Research Design

Just as all research designs have advantages, all have a certain degree of limitations. One limitation presented in this study was the limited perceptions of the participants due to the questions that were used in the interviews, considering a different set of questions could reveal different factors or themes. The geographic area of the participants generated a particular response; participants selected were all employed in the same district, though they have served on retention committees in other districts. The researcher had less control over the data produced in this qualitative study versus data collected in quantitative studies. Data collection spanned over a short period, less than two months, not allowing for much reflection from the participants on their responses.

During the focus group sessions, the participants may not feel comfortable expressing their feelings in a focused group setting among peers because this method eliminates confidentiality and anonymity. Having only one group may create a problem given that it may be impossible to tell when the discussion reflects either the composition of the group or the dynamics of the participants (Morgan, 2013). The time allowed may not be upheld due to the

researcher using open-ended questions and must provide time for feedback for data collection from participants. Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, and Mukherjee (2017) discusses the open nature of focus group research and the need for the researcher to allow participants to talk to each other, ask questions and express doubts and opinions. Finally, the sample size of eight participants limits the scope of transferability that this research can offer.

Delimitations of the Study

There are several delimitations to this study. Namely, participants were purposively selected and have served as a principal for at least three years. Random selection may have garnered different results. Participants selected were from various schools with diverse populations of students. The research question had a specific focus on what the researcher intends to study. Methodology for the study has been identified as interviews and a focus group. Population for the study was from one school district, and participants were able to be reached with a minimum length of travel time. Interaction among the group allowed for validation from other experts in the field, confirming their views on the topic of study (Nyumba et al., 2017). Participants had an opportunity to work collaboratively and were able to develop a level of trust as they explored the topic of study. Focus groups allowed participants to be actively involved in research, empowering them to be a catalyst for change (Nyumba et al., 2017).

Validation

Multiple methods and triangulation of data sources in this qualitative study were used to develop a robust understanding of the phenomenon of grade-level retention. Research that involves various methods of collecting data via interviews, focus groups, and recordings support the validity and reliability as well as provides a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Gruba, 1985). For this exploratory case study, data were triangulated from the initial

interviews, follow-up interviews, and focus groups to gain a more in-depth understanding as it relates to the perceptions of elementary school principals in the retention recommendations of female versus male students who attend school in a rural area.

Credibility

Member Checking

Credibility parallels “internal validity in qualitative research” (Lincoln & Gruba, 1985, p. 105). Lincoln and Gruba (1985) also noted that credibility could be assessed by determining whether or not the research findings are plausible, and if the findings are an accurate representation of the participant’s responses. According to Lincoln and Gruba (1985), when conducting qualitative research, the member checking process is a critical strategy to establish credibility. Additionally, member checking strengthens the data findings because of the researcher and participants examine the data from different perspectives (Sim & Sharp, 1998). During the member checking process, participants were asked to review the tentative findings of this study to determine their plausibility. Through a secure email, the researcher sent each participant a summary of the tentative findings of the research and asked each to comment on the plausibility or reliability of these findings.

The findings of the study were adjusted to reflect their comments as a result of the final interview, and time was provided for them to reflect on the answers provided. Within a week of receiving the interview transcript, participants were emailed their information and asked to review the transcription of the initial interview and the follow-up interview to assure all responses were captured, and no misinterpretations noted. Additionally, participants were afforded the opportunity to listen to their audio-recorded interviews while reviewing the transcription if they were interested in doing so. After each participant reviewed the transcribed

interviews and focus group transcription, they signed a form indicating that to the best of their knowledge, the data were transcribed accurately.

Triangulation

Another strategy that was used to enhance the validity of this study was a triangulation of multiple data sources. For this study, triangulation using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross-checking data collected through multiple interviews and a focus group from different people with different perceptions as to why elementary females are less likely to be retained than their male counterparts. By using data from the initial and follow-up interviews, and a focus group, data triangulation provided different viewpoints from different individuals that related to the phenomenon of retention (Barbour, 1998).

Transferability

Merriam-Webster (2009) defines transferability as being concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations. Several strategies were used to enhance the possibility that the results of a study are transferable to another setting used. Another strategy that was used to enhance transferability was to carefully select the study sample so that maximum variation was provided as the individuals who participated in this study had different characteristics as it relates to race, gender, age, and years of administrative experience.

Dependability

For this study, the researcher used triangulation of multiple sources of data as described earlier in this section to include interviews and a focus group session. The researcher also maintained an audit trail, which described how the data were collected, how categories were coded and categorized, and how decisions were made throughout the study. When discussing reliability, it is essential to be specific about the term of reliability in qualitative research.

Lincoln and Gruba (1985) use the term dependability, whereas others use the term consistency (Petty, Brinol, Loersch, & McCaslin, 2009). As a result of the researcher's role and the nature of the data collection and the potential for research bias, the researcher must be sensitive to the subjectivity that could affect the interpretation of the findings (Hernon & Schwartz, 2009). In order for the researcher to construct the audit trail, a reflective journal was created to document the research process, which was described earlier in this chapter.

According to Hatch (2002), journaling "represents personal, honest, and reflective accounts of the human experiences of studying other people" (p. 88). Ortlipp (2008) also noted that reflective journaling allows the researcher not only to understand their role in the research process but also allows the researcher to document any non-verbal feedback that may appear to contradict the participant responses during their interviews and focus group participation. During the interviews and focus group, the researcher included observations and thoughts about the interviews and focus group. The reflective journal also included a description of the participant's behaviors during the interview process, documenting any non-verbal feedback that appeared contradictory to the participant's responses to the interview questions

Expected Findings

Once the exploratory qualitative case study was conducted, expected findings from the data collected exposed significant factors that contribute to the perceptions and beliefs of administrators when recommending retention of females versus male students in rural areas. Factors that impact the decision to retain rural female students differ from that used to retain their male counterparts were disclosed. Data collected from participants did not reveal a perception that females are more academically, socially, and emotionally more mature than males. Case studies are meaningful communications devices that raise awareness, provide

insight, or merely suggest solutions to a given situation or phenomenon (Yin, 2014). Collected data confirmed theories noted in the literature review in support of factors that contribute to the disparity that exists in the retention rates of females versus male students.

Ethical Issues in the Study

Conflict of Interest Assessment

Participants were purposively selected, and all chosen participants have three or more years of experience and have worked in a rural environment. In this current study, the researcher does not serve in a supervisory or leadership position to any of the participants. There is no potential financial gain for the participants or the researcher. Participation is strictly voluntary, and through a letter of solicitation, they were made aware of their ability to withdraw at any time without the threat of retaliation or harm to their current job security.

Researcher's Position

In this study, the researcher does not serve in a supervisory or leadership position to any of the participants. The participants in this study have a professional role similar to the researcher, who has had a professional relationship with this institution previously. There is no potential financial gain for the participants or the researcher. Participation is strictly voluntary, and through a letter of solicitation, they will be made aware of their ability to withdraw at any time without the threat of retaliation or to their current job security. The researcher currently serves as an elementary school principal and has worked in a rural and urban setting. As an administrator that is responsible for retention recommendations, the researcher can relate to the perceptions of the participants.

As a researcher, it is critical that an ethical approach is taken when conducting the study. Kar (2011) defines ethics as the rules for distinguishing between what is right and wrong and

cites seven principles of public life outlined by the Nolan Committee in 1995. They include selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership. Other vital principles relevant for research are carefulness, respect for intellectual property, confidentiality, responsible publication, responsible mentoring, respect for colleagues, social responsibility, non-discrimination, competence, legality, animal care and human subjects' protection (Shamoo & Resnik, 2009). The researcher asked the same pre-determined interview questions to all of the participants.

Ethical Issues

In conducting a risk assessment of the study, it was determined that participation in this study posed minimal risk to participants from an ethical standpoint. For this study, approval was sought from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Concordia University in order to conduct this study. Once permission was granted, all identifiable information such as the name of the school district and the names of the participants were replaced. Each participant was given a four-digit identification number at the beginning of the study. To protect the district in which all participants are employed, the district was identified as the East Coast District throughout the study. Before conducting the research, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form, which included the following information: a brief description of the study and procedures, risk and benefits of the study, confidentiality issues, and the researcher's contact information.

The participants' involvement in this study did not pose risks to others or the community. Participants were asked to indicate on the consent form whether or not they permit the sessions to be audio recorded. Participants were also be informed that the study was voluntary, and at any time, they were allowed not to continue in the research study. Data is stored and protected on a

flash drive as well as stored on a password-protected laptop that only the researcher can access. Data are in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's home office and will be stored for five years.

Summary

The researcher invited a group of elementary principals that participated in two interviews and a focus group session with open-ended questions. A detailed description is provided of the design of this exploratory case study, which is qualitative. Included in this chapter is a description of the sample population, how the data was collected, and the instruments and methods used to conduct this exploratory case study. Sources included: an initial face to face interview with each participant, a focus group to include all participants, and a follow-up interview. Fourteen administrators were invited to participate, but only eight were able to, consisting of four males and four females. Selection of participants from different ethnicities was intentional, including Caucasian and African Americans to diversify the results of the study. All participants had a minimum of three years of administrative experience and served in a rural area.

This chapter shared procedures and methodology that were used to obtain answers to the research question for the study. Chapter 4 includes descriptions, actual findings, and results from data collected and analyzed using these methods. Themes that are developed from triangulating the data from all participants are shared and documented.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

The intent of Chapter 4 is to review the results of this study including a summary of the purpose of the study, a review of the research question, and the significant findings from the interviews and focus group sessions. With growing concern over the disparity of males versus female retention in rural areas (Irvin et al., 2016; Phillips, 2015; Smith & Herzog, 2014), it is essential to understand the perceptions of those individuals who are ultimately responsible for the decision whether or not to retain students in primary grade levels. Chapter 4 reports the results capturing the perceptions of eight elementary administrators that currently work or have worked in rural school districts.

As stated in Chapter 3, participants were purposely selected from the district in which the researcher is employed. Chapter 2 reviewed extensive sources of literature on the topic of retention, and a historical perspective was shared on students affected. Based on the theoretical framework, male students are retained at a higher rate than female students. Factors identified that contribute to student retention included low levels of parental involvement, the lack of early intervention, and the socioeconomic status of the family. Historically, although these factors impacted females and males equally, research revealed a significant disparity between the percentages of females versus males being retained each year (Gottfried, 2012; Hamlin, 2013; Hughes, Kwok, & Im, 2013; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Moore, 2017; Range et al., 2012; Tingle, Schoeneberger, & Algozzine, 2012). Tingle et al. (2012). Elementary principals that currently serve in rural areas or have served this population of students with a minimum of three years were invited to participate in interviews and a focus group on the topic of student retention.

Through reflection on my experience as an elementary school administrator for the past 15 years, at least 75% of the retention recommendations to the committee have been male

students. Interest in this topic stems from my observations of personal practices and colleagues. My past experiences have included serving in an affluent school of 18% free and reduced meals, as well as high poverty schools with as much as 98% free and reduced meals. Regardless of the population, the percentage of males to female retention candidates mirrored each other. Although schools served have been diverse in student population, retention candidates remain males largely.

In this chapter, I present the key findings discussed during face-to-face in-depth interviews with participants. Rich, focused group discussions conducted in a Socratic seminar-style are also shared in this chapter. These research findings answer the following overarching research question: What are the perceptions of elementary principals as it relates to the retention recommendations of female versus male students in rural areas?

Description of the Sample

All eight participants in the study currently serve as building administrators in their perspective schools and are employed in a public school system. As outlined in Chapter 3, the participants have served a minimum of three years in an administrative role and have served as the primary decision-maker on the school's retention committee. Participants were purposively sampled to include four males and four females, with varying academic degrees, from a master's plus 30 to doctoral degrees. There were three Caucasian participants (38%) and five African American participants (62%). Though participants selected have served in levels of elementary and middle schools, they all currently serve as elementary school administrators in the same public school district, and their educational experiences range from 13 to 26 years (see Table 1).

Participants were provided with a letter of solicitation and consent forms which explained the process. This encouraged them an opportunity to ask questions regarding their participation

prior to taking part in the study. To protect the identity of the participants, a pseudonym system was assigned within the study. Each participant was assigned a number (i.e., participant #0001), and these numbers were issued in no particular order. All participants were able to contribute in the initial and final interviews as well as a focus group session.

The interviews and focus group sessions occurred at a time and place that was convenient for the participants. However, due to conflicting schedules, two focus groups were necessary. None of the participants attended both sessions. All participants served in the same capacity in their perspective schools and attended meetings regularly throughout the year. As a result, participants were comfortable sharing and collaborating during the focus group sessions. Table 1 and gives detailed information regarding the participants selected for the study.

Table 1

Description of the Sample

Identification #	Participant Race	Reside in District	Gender
0001	Black	Yes	Male
0002	White	No	Male
0003	White	No	Male
0004	White	Yes	Male
0005	Black	No	Female
0006	Black	Yes	Female
0007	Black	No	Female
0008	Black	No	Female

Each participant had a minimum of three years as an administrator and has served as chair of retention committees at their perspective school (see Table 2). Of the eight participants,

three (38%) hold doctorate degrees; three (38%) hold masters plus 30 degrees; one (13%) holds an educational specialist degree, and one (13%) is a doctoral student.

Table 2

Participants' Demographic Information

Identification #	Size of School	Degree Level	Years as an administrator	Years in Education
0001	326	Ed.D.	8	18
0002	157	Masters plus 30	7	21
0003	789	Doctoral Candidate	14	21
0004	263	Masters plus 30	7	13
0005	405	Masters plus 30	14	23
0006	521	Ed.D.	5	17
0007	383	Ed.D.	9	26
0008	405	Ed. S	7	23

Research Methodology and Analysis

For this exploratory case study approach, I was the primary gatherer of the data. All information gathered was first-hand and was not based on prior data collection, which leads to a deeper understanding of the topic (Creswell, 2013). Information gathered helped to explore and develop themes and ideas. As the researcher, I took notes during the interviews and focus group sessions, even though all sessions were recorded to ensure processing in a reliable and credible manner. Computer assistance was used in the retrieval, storage, and analysis of the data collected through notes and audio-taped sessions.

The in-depth interviews and focus group sessions all occurred at the participant's school or at a district facility during a time that was convenient for the participants. Interviews were recorded during each session and later transcribed verbatim to ensure the thoughts of each participant were accurately captured. During the initial interview, I explained the research process to the participant, to ensure they were aware of what to expect, and I discussed the organization of the study. I also gave some background information as to why the specific topic was chosen and what I wanted to accomplish. Using prior knowledge of serving on retention recommendation teams, I developed a series of questions for interviewing the participants that were reviewed by experts in the field. Because it was difficult to conduct a focus group to include all participants in one session, two focus group sessions had to be conducted.

First, the initial interviews were conducted, followed by focus groups, then final interviews were held for clarification and reflection. Interviews and focus groups were analyzed using the same steps for continuity. Once interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and uploaded into NVivo 12, a running list of codes was derived. In some cases, responses may have overlapped, hence resulting in a combined theme. Analytical coding was used to develop categories from the data collected and assisted with the development of themes. All transcribed materials were inserted into software, and themes were disclosed. Keywords turned into codes for entries from the transcripts and were stored to compile a running list of top themes disclosed. I extracted the data and themes identified and compared them with the factors revealed in the literature review. New queries that align with the theoretical framework were generated.

Documentation from each participant was kept in a folder with the participant's identification number. All signed consent forms, interview notes, transcriptions, and emails were

included in the files. Their documents are stored in a locked file cabinet, and all electronic data is stored on a thumb drive that is password-protected with the documents in a locked file cabinet.

As the researcher, I spent the first few minutes of the interview asking the participants clarifying questions regarding their educational path to include the size of their school, number of years in the field, number of years in administration, their degree status, and if they reside within the district of study. At the initial session, I also reviewed the consent form, answered any questions the participants had, and confirmed the amount of time that would be expected to complete this process. It was vital for me to explain that the information obtained would be kept secure, and their confidentiality would be protected. I then explained the next step would involve analyzing their interview and focus group responses to determine any themes on the topic of study.

After analyzation of the raw data for open codes, the codes were then analyzed to create axial codes, derived by interpreting and deductively synthesizing meaning from the descriptive open codes (Merriam-Webster, 2009). The axial code process was done electronically using NVivo 12. Color-coded charts were used to assist in the data analysis to prepare the raw data and open codes and the axial codes. Once analyzed, the data from the analysis process was completed and used in the summary of the research findings that will be in shared in Chapter 5.

Summary of the Findings

This study was qualitative in design and methodology. Information gathered stemmed from one initial research question. The qualitative data obtained from the research participants, via interviews and focus group sessions, are presented and organized based on factors they perceived as having a direct impact on retention recommendations. Factors identified in Chapter

2's literature review include lack of early intervention, geographical location, ethnicity, socioeconomics of the family, low parental involvement, and parents' educational background.

After analyzing and coding of the data, some factors cited in the literature review were confirmed, but additional ones emerged. The initial interview session consisted of a number of factors. Factors that were noted with minimal repetition emerged during the interviews and focus group sessions, which included learning styles, attendance records, solid instruction, and socioeconomics. Through an in-depth analysis of the participants' responses, major themes that emerged after the coding process was conducted are listed in Tables 3 and 4 that are below.

Table 3

Major Themes

Themes	Coding of Frequency
Early Intervention/Retention	25
Policies and Procedures	24
Gender Bias	21
Academic Ability	20
Level of Maturity/Age	19
Parental Support	12
Teacher/Student Relationships	11

Note: Frequency of themes during data collection.

Table 4

Data Triangulation

Initial Interview Themes	Follow- Up Interview Themes	Focus Group Themes
Academic Ability	Gender Bias	Academic Ability
Policies and Procedures	Early Intervention/Retention	Gender Bias
Gender Bias		Level of Maturity/Age
Level of Maturity/Age		Parental
Parental		Support/Involvement
Support/Involvement		Early Intervention
Early		/Retention
Intervention/Retention		Teacher/Student
Teacher/Student		Relationships
Relationships		

Presentation of the Data and Results

All questions from face-to-face interviews and focus group sessions are shared in Appendix B, C, and D. Participants cited a number of factors that they felt contributed to student retention which included students’ academic ability, policies and procedures, gender bias, level of maturity/age, parents support and involvement, early intervention/retention procedures, and the presence of teacher and student relationships. Not only does the school have a major role in this process, but they view all stakeholders as an instrumental part of the equation to include the administration, parents, teachers, and students. Administrators felt the teacher’s educational

capacity, the experience students bring to the table, the amount of parental support, academic ability, and level of maturity.

The data triangulating method was implemented to collect data from initial interviews, focus group sessions, and follow up interviews. By triangulating the data and through the development of themes, credibility, and accuracy of results were achievable. The findings of the study answered the research question: What are the perceptions of elementary school principals as it relates to the retention of female versus male students who attend school in rural areas?

From the findings, seven major themes emerged with frequency that participants indicated impacted their retention recommendations of all students; in order of highest to lowest frequency they are: early intervention/retention practices (25), policies and procedures put in place by the district (24), gender bias (21), academic ability of students (20), level of maturity and age of students (19), lack of parental support (12), and teacher/student relationships (11).

Theme One: Academic Ability

Academic ability is one of the themes participants shared that had a significant influence on their retention recommendation. If students cannot perform at their current grade level, indicating they have mastered the skills that are taught, promotion to the next grade level will not take place. Children from poverty often enter school with weaker language skills due to a lack of exposure to higher vocabulary and limited access to books and reading the material in the home, creating a negative impact on a child's emotional, academic, and social development (Sasser Thomas, 2018). As noted in the findings, the academic ability was highlighted with much frequency by the participants. Students that struggle academically that are promoted to the next grade level continue to struggle, and the gap continues to broaden. Participants in the initial interview and focus group cited academic ability as a factor that they felt contributed to student

retention. Not only does the school have a significant role in this process, but they view all stakeholders as having an instrumental part of the equation to include the administration, parents, teachers, and students. The participants felt the teacher's educational capacity, and the experience students bring to the table, along with their academic ability, contributed to student retention recommendations.

Information shared in the initial interview by participants included Participant 0002 stating “I think a big factor that contributes to student retention deals with the home environment and what the student comes into school already knowing, and that is not just academically, but also from a social aspect.”

Participant 0003 stated,

Immediately my mind goes to academics, whether or not the child has met a particular expectation in terms of their reading, mathematics skills. I oftentimes will consider the reading skills more profoundly than perhaps the math skills when determining retention. I also think socio-emotional, and maturity aspects feed into the factors of retention, as do oftentimes perceived behavior, but I do think that the major factor is related to the ability to manipulate texts and read fluently.

In addition, Participant 0005 felt there is never any guarantee that retaining a student is the ideal decision, regardless of the students' ability or level of maturity. Information shared regarding the students' academic ability were also shared in focus group sessions. Participant 0002 shared, “I think one factor that needs to be considered needs to be the age and maturity level of the student.”

Participant 0003 shared thoughts on the importance of a student's academic ability:

Of course, it's important that we also, I mean it's obvious, but we have to look at the academic ability of the child. Sometimes that may or may not be the most significant factor in consideration of retention. But it's probably the most common; the first one talked about when we talk about retention is where the reading skills are, maybe math as well.

When talking about early childhood students, reading seems to be the focus, the first emphasis on whether a child ready to matriculate. Participant 0006 shared “major factors that I have seen were in the areas of academics, especially in the reading area.” Schools are noted as being structured to sort and select students for different trajectories aligned with their varied orientations and capacities (Gamoran, 2009). Regrouping students for specific subjects rather than on their ability alone, these ability grouping had positive effects for students at all achievement levels. This outcome leads to the idea that Instructional differences reflect not only what teachers do in classrooms, but also how students respond (Gamoran, 2009).

Participant 0005 shared “I also think in looking at the academic if you really pay attention to what interventions have been tried, to see if in the duration of those interventions what's been working, and what's not working.” Before recommending a student for retention, it is important to make sure that we've done everything we can for the child in the current position and place before we go to that decision, especially discussing what interventions have been implemented.

Theme Two: Policies and Procedures

The district in which the research study was conducted has specified the non- negotiable use of policies and procedures that are supported throughout the retention process. All of the administrators identified district policies and procedures in place to make retention-based

decisions. One hundred percent of the administrators indicated they utilize some type of committee when making decisions regarding student retention. Committees primarily consist of the grade-level teacher, administrator, psychologist, school counselor, and the parent. If there are concerns a student might have a need for special education services in the future, the special education teacher, the counselor is invited to the meeting.

Nearly all of the participants references the MTSS/RTI process, which guides the district's practice on identifying students needing additional interventions.

Participant 0003 referenced the clarity of district practices:

The school district has a relatively clear process of which there is a guided timeline and checklist that is to be followed on any student that is perceived as a possible retention.

That process works through over a minimum of 18 weeks, and those policies and practices are documented in what is referred to as a retention folder, and all of that documentation is kept on file.

Although parents are a part of the recommendation committee, they do have the right to appeal the decision to retain. The final decision is made at the district level. A file containing all documentation compiled throughout the process is provided to district personnel to assist with the appeal process.

Participant 0004 gave similar information regarding policies and procedures the district follows:

The MTSS, the multi-tiered systems, and support, of course within that is considering the behavior side of things as well as the academic which is I think one of the major factors when you are looking at retention. So you know, we have that process that we go through of course, whenever we retain.

Participant 0005 gave more information into the process stating,

We use a lot with interventions and so one of the things is providing differentiated instruction, small group instruction, making sure that we operate on different tiers on what support is needed for the student, but then also looking heavily at the data points about the student.

Whether it be the actual assessments data or anecdotal records, including observation notes that the teacher has been taking, these are all things that have to be in place before someone is even considered for retention, assessing where the student is academically.

Participant 0006 echoed the consistency of district procedures,

We definitely follow the district guidelines to a T, but the MTSS or the RTI process, the first nine weeks or so is too soon to make recommendations. Between the first interim report and the first nine weeks, the teachers are progress monitoring assessing, and providing intervention.

At the end of the first nine weeks, the teachers begin completing paperwork for the MTSS and the RTI meeting so that they can provide the chair what is needed to schedule parent conferences, while teachers are also conferencing with parents, and additional interventions are taking place.

Participants stated that extensive training is offered to administrators regarding the process, providing everyone with an understanding of the district's expectations.

Participant 0007 shared,

the district asks first that the teachers use interventions within the classroom to address various deficiencies that students have. Then if that does not work, with the use of data that they've collected over periods of time, they ask that they have an MTSS meeting where a team comes together, could be like an MTSS Chair, a special need's chair, the

teachers, and also the parents to devise a plan so that the child is successful, and continue meeting in intervals of either four to six weeks to revisit that plan to see if it's successful, or if other strategies need to put in place. Then if not, continue with that actually on a continuum so that you can increase services sometimes up to special education.

Based on responses from the participants, there was no question among responses that the district had clear policies and procedures in place that guide the process of student retention. Regardless of the school, years of experience of the administrator, or the size of the school, six of the eight administrators referenced the Multi-tiered Support System (MTSS) or the Response to Intervention (RTI) process that governs how schools should proceed and document retention candidates. The only candidate, 0002, felt that practices varied from school to school and depended on practices of the principal.

Participant 0002 stated,

As far as specific criteria, from what I have seen, it really differs depending on the school. Over the years that I've been in this district, I have seen students retained and students not retained in very similar positions. It really depends on the school and especially the principal in the school.

The overall consensus from the administrators was that policies were in place, and the process involved all stakeholders, to include parents, administration, and teachers. Participants confirmed that the district did not waiver on the procedures that governed the retention policies.

Theme Three: Gender Bias

Participants openly admitted bias in how students are taught and the many preconceptions that educators bring into the classroom. Teachers bring to the table their own biases about boys versus girls and how they learn, ignoring certain behaviors, or showing favoritism to one gender

over another. Administrators agree that they often allow their personal experiences to guide their decision-making practices. Personal experiences that impact decisions may stem from career experiences and personal school experiences, regardless of the gender or ethnic background of the educator.

Participant 0001 shared,

Yes, I think there is a disparity among males being retained versus females, and a lot of this goes back to some brain research. In my opinion, I think young males are held at a much higher standard than females, so I think all of this is based on how do we formulate or build relationships with young males to make them feel a part of the learning environment? For example, some males can probably do some of the same things that females do, but they are held to a much higher standard than the female, and they are reprimanded or disciplined in a much stringent manner than the females. And I know that is talking about discipline, but it kind of goes back to making the connection between the two. I think everything is based on how we develop meaningful relationships with males.

Participant 0002 also agreed that there is a disparity sharing,

I think there is a disparity between males and females, and I think one factor is, looking at the elementary level, I think maturity. I think males come in, in many cases, not at the same maturity level, and females mature at a much faster rate, especially on the elementary level. I also think another factor goes back to the home again. I think that there is a behavioral expectation for females and males that come out of the house and many times are very different from the standpoint of females to be able to sit and be quiet and learn. And I do think males, on average, males do have a lot more energy and need to be a lot more mobile, and again on average, have more difficulty being able to pay

attention for longer spans of time. But I think those are things that can be addressed in the classroom, but I think when you have that mentality from home, it seems to be, I'm not going to say condoned more, but it really seems like it's more okay for a male to not be successful in school than it is for a female.

Participant 00002 added, "it really seems like it's more okay for a male to not be successful in school than it is for a female." Participant 0004 shared, "I do feel like our males mature slower, that is a scientific process that has just been proven. They just seem to mature at a later date."

Participant 0007 expressed that:

I think that more males are retained than females are retained probably because of cultural awareness, a lack of cultural awareness. Whereas in males who may not act in a way that certain cultures expect for them to act, are perceived as . . . I mean, quote, unquote, bad. They, of course, get suspended and sent to ISS more than girls, so that contributes to them missing out on instruction. Therefore they are going to be retained more. Then we have this tendency to be more lenient on girls sometimes, as in giving them second chances where they will do more, but we consider the behavior of males when we make the decision, as in he just will not do, so he needs to do it over again.

Participant 00005 agreed with other participants that we lack the skills necessary to teach male students, and there could possibly be some fear, especially when working with the upper grades. Students should not be expected to sit in a desk and not be allowed any type of movement. Female students are often allowed to get away with behaviors are not allowed with the male classmates. There must be a balance and a genuine interest in learning how to respond appropriately to males and their learning styles.

Participant 0006 shared, “And that gets transitioned into behavior. If a child doesn't know how to behave in the classroom when really they could be bored.”

Participant 0001 brought to the discussion the question of discipline versus compliance.

I was thinking, it kind of goes with what you're saying, the both of you, teachers having a real deep understanding, is either compliance, or is it discipline? And it's probably the compliance piece because we all want children to do certain things, but run back to you how females and males are treated, is all about compliance. I want you to do what I expect of you, not looking at how males learn versus females. I think as even as adults, that is something to consider, although it's about retention, even as adults, we all learn differently from a male versus a female.

Participant 0005 was adamant in stating that female students are allowed to get away with behaviors that males don't get away with, and the focus is more on behaviors with males than we do not with females. Even as adults, we sometimes show bias. Participant 0001 added, “I think as even as adults, that is something to consider, although it's about retention, but even as adults we all learn differently from a male versus a female.”

Participant 0002 agreed with colleagues that biases do exist when dealing with female versus male students as it relates to the students' behaviors.

I agree, and I also see, I know it's a little stereotypical for me to say this, when there are lots of times when females that are off grade level, they're quiet, and you get the compliance, but when you get the males that are of grade level, that's when you see more of the physical or the misbehavior's that comes into it.

Participant 0003 shared that teachers tend to be more lenient on female students compared to males.

So it's interesting you said that I was going to follow up to what he was saying with the exact same thing, is that they get the attention and although I know this is completely wrong, and I challenge this. I have heard educators say, I know she's a little behind, but she is so sweet, and I think she'll be okay.

Participant 0001 adds “I think as even as adults, that is something to consider, although it's about retention, but even as adults, we all learn differently from a male versus a female.” Participant 0003 made a strong point, “you walk into a kindergarten classroom; most of the time, the busy ones are the males. And so they get that attention, I think it's a little bit of a double standard there. I think you're right.”

Participant 0003 agreed and pointed out:

If the little girl is sitting there at a certain academic level, and the little boy is, but the little boy cuts up, the teacher has that disposition like she's such a good girl, I'd hate to do that to her. Whereas it's like, no I'm holding him back. That's really interesting; I guess as I sit here and think about it, I think that maybe that behavioral bias might really play into that conversation or the recommendation from a teacher to an administrator.

Participant 0008 added to how teachers view the behavior of males versus females,

I guess maybe because the male student is probably more active, teachers tend to think they are not focused on their learning. Sometimes they tend to think they are not focusing on what we are talking about, or they might not have an interest in what we are teaching, so we have to almost tap into their interest. Sometimes female students are a little bit more timid or shy. They might fall through the cracks because, even though they still

might be on that same level, sometimes they are very quiet and we don't tend to pick that up. My boys just seem to be kind of more outgoing, more active; but I don't know why.

Participant 0007 points out that gender plays a role in how students are addressed,

I think also as educators; there is a difference in how we address girls and how we address boys. I think there is a great lack when it comes to understanding how you truly address a male because, just you like you said, they're active. You do have sometimes where there is a lack of understanding where active means this is how I learn, and we don't do things to actively engage boys. We coddle girls where we are a little more nurturing to girls, and we are a little more tolerant of what they do, sometimes we even get to the point where we ignore their behavior; but if a boy does the same thing, it is perceived as being disruptive, or disrespectful, or defiant. Sometimes you also have a cultural difference where you perceive boys as, little black boys; they are just bad. We don't consider how you teach a boy. How do you get a boy involved? And especially if you have factors like boys of poverty, it is different. So because of that, they're likely to be suspended more meaning they are going to be missing out on instruction. So that is going to contribute them falling behind when it comes to the achievement compared to girls.

Participant 0007 shared,

You know some teachers who have their own boys at home, they don't necessarily see their behavior as being disruptive. Like I'm a girl parent, we only have girls. I grew up in a house with five sisters, so we only had girls. But for myself, as a confession, I tolerate more from boys than I do girls. I have different expectations for the girls because I think I project how I was raised onto the girls. My mom had really high standards. I don't know

what standards they had for boys because there was not a boy in our home. I think we sometimes use our personal experiences and that's how we address our kids. So our expectations are different.”

Participant 0008 added,

I agree with that. I grew up, also, in a house full of girls, so my dad was the only male in the house. So, you're right. I felt like they had high standards for us; but now as a parent of two boys, I guess they are typical boys. Well, I don't know. They're like rough house and all that stuff so, I guess, I just think my tolerance level for them was just high.”

Participants admitted that there were biases that played a significant role in their decision-making process. They commented that males tend to be more active while girls are quieter and do not call attention to themselves. Males are seen as more outgoing and tend to be more behavior problems and less mature than females.

Participant 0001 stated,

I guess maybe because the male student is probably more active. Sometimes they tend to; we think they are not focusing on what we are talking about, or they might not have an interest in what is teaching, so we have to almost tap into their interest. Sometimes female students are a little bit more timid or shy. They might fall through the cracks because, even though they still might be on that same level, sometimes they are very quiet and we do not tend to pick them up. My boys just seem to be kind of more outgoing, more active; but I do not know why.

Participant 0003 admitted to witnessing disparities in the way students are treated,

I see, unfortunately, pretty dramatic disparities in terms of you know the way that black males are treated, quite frankly, and my wife and I have spent quite a bit of time trying to

figure out ways in our own profession to avoid this school to prison pipeline concept. And that may actually impact me because I think I push back more when teachers are trying to retain black males. And sometimes they may be good retentions, and I still give the teacher a hard time about it, and because if it doesn't change somewhere, it has to start somewhere, and so I think that perception that I have, and I know there's debate over whether that exists or not, but I don't know why. I think that might jade my approach to things. I think I may push harder against black male retention as opposed to someone else, because I know that I feel like they have been overly identified, overly identified as ADHD, overly retained throughout history.”

Participant 0001 stated, “Yes, after our discussion, I actually looked at all report cards and skewed in on the report cards of our male students to see how they are being graded. That says a lot about how they are being taught. I will be having further discussions with teachers on how they are delivering instruction to our males.” Participant 0002 shared a couple of things – know all information on a student and be aware of your own biases.” Participant 0003 stated, “We talked about how biases play in. There have been times when I should have retained a child but did not. I did not want to see another black male retained. I liked the idea of drawing on people that know students and not just about data numbers, but going back to trusting the committee.”

Participant 0006 gave insight on reflecting on their practices and shared,

Yes, I have. I thought a lot about our discussion of boys versus girls being retained. I went back and looked at that. I also looked at the district’s discipline data and not only my school's data, but specific teachers’ data of male and female students. You are right,

and we may need to look at those things more. I never really thought about it. Most of our behavior problems come from the boys.

At least six of the participants shared that they had never really focused on the number of males versus females that they have recommended for retention each year and admitted that at least 75% of the candidates were male students.

Theme Four: Level of Maturity and age of the Student

There is research that supports the theory that males mature at a rate slower than females. Students' age and level of maturity often prohibit students from being mentally or emotionally prepared to process the basic information being delivered. When considering grade-level retention as a form of intervention, (Moore, 2017) administrators identified retention as a valid behavioral intervention for students who needed the "gift of time," allowing them additional time to develop the behavioral or maturational skills necessary to be successful in the formal classroom setting.

Vantieghe and Van Houtte (2018) report that not only do females mature at a faster level than males, but there are also differences in study motivation between males and females, creating an educational gender gap, with females displaying higher levels of autonomous motivation. In cases where students have been retained, still finding it challenging to master the materials being taught, regardless of a student's level of maturity, they are socially promoted because of their age. Participants felt that age, attendance, nor academic achievement should be independent factors that solely used to determine retention recommendations. Age is a factor and should be considered, especially if the child has been retained in prior years. A student who is excelling, but has missed many days should not be punished. If they are having attendance

issues, but continue to perform academically, retention should not be an automatic recommendation.

Participant 0001 stated, "Lack of engagement on the part of the student and teacher. A lack of age-appropriate skills. Looking at the curriculum, it is not aged appropriately for grade levels if they do not have a foundation. Also a lack of ability to perform on grade level."

Participant 0005 responded,

That is a hard one because my internal belief is that sometimes we may be introducing things too early developmentally to people and I think that is something that we need to work out. That is why I kind of a really big fan of Montessori because I like the way they introduce things to students, and that is developmentally appropriate and build upon that. I know everybody cannot handle that system, and that is not a style or a learning style for everyone. I cannot really say that there is a specific appropriate time.

Participant 0004 favored retention in the younger grades,

I mean, I always think that retention is better in the younger grades to catch it early. But then I also struggle on the other side of, what if they're just a late bloomer? Then they are in a grade level that's a year behind and so now, are they ever going to be promoted back? I mean, to get a kid to accelerate their grade, it takes so much to move them back. I think one of the issues is that I just do not know. I feel like the more appropriate time is early, but I think you also have to take into consideration that child's developmental level.

Participant 0003 gave a similar response:

I think there is a disparity. I think we retain, in education, many more males than females, or at least based on my experience. I can honestly say that I may not have spent much time considering that disparity, but as I consider it now, perhaps the factors contributing

are related to maturity, behavior, and socioemotional maturity. That is an interesting question, one that I'm going to reflect on after this interview.

Participant 004 shared, "I do feel like our males mature slower, that is a scientific process that has just been proven. They just seem to mature at a later date." Participant 0001 stated, "As far as age, that is probably going to be a controversial piece. I think at some point, age is important." Participant 0004 stated, "I do not believe that a child should be retained based on age unless age correlates with some type of developmental delay, or perhaps age correlates with a particular socioemotional maturity level. That can play a factor, but I do not think age in and of itself should play a factor."

Participant 0007 was adamant students should not be retained on their level of maturity:

Solely academic achievement. Age, I do not think that has anything to do with retention. Attendance, depending on the age of the child, you cannot necessarily retain them. So, when you do retention, it is to address academic needs, even though attendance will contribute to students who are struggling academically, but that is not a reason to retain them. You retain them because they have not grasped or mastered specific skills that they need in order to go to the next grade.

Participant 0008 shared "Age, you know, sometimes we talk about how that child is a young five or a young six, or whatever, but I do not really believe age plays a part in it for me."

Participant 0004 added,

When we railroad students into a grade because of their age and when they were born, which they didn't choose themselves, that was something that was chosen for them, I feel like when we railroad these kids into this grade level, and they either have to stay in this grade level or the next grade level or the before grade level, it gets tricky, and it doesn't

work for everybody. Not everybody fits into that bell curve of average or above-average or just below average. I mean there are definitely your extremes. I can see both of them as a negative.

Participant 0002 shared, “I think one factor that needs to be considered needs to be the age and maturity level of the student.”

Participant 0007 shed light on ability level of students versus academic performance:

Of course, I believe that we should consider their academic performance, which means their class grades, their performance in a district administered assessments to see how they're doing; but then also other factors such as their age, whether they've been retained before and how far they are behind. What is the possibility of them progressing if they are promoted; and any kind of detrimental effect that could possibly occur if they are retained? What people don't understand is the brain's development; your brain does not process literature fully until you turn nine. So if you're in third grade and you are nine, and now this decision is being made whether the child is going to be retained. People don't understand that when you get in the fourth grade, and you go to fifth grade, your brain grows rapidly. So if you retain them in third grade, and their brain isn't processing this yet, are we doing what's good for them? We pour on all these interventions and everything we're going to do to save you; but why isn't that done early on with language development because when kids enter school, their vocabulary is limited at four years old. We need to do more in preschool programs, kindergarten, first, and second grade, so when third grade comes, you don't have this astronomical amount of kids that are the retention list.

Theme Five: Parental Support

The amount of support students receive from those in the home plays a huge role in how students perform academically and significantly impacts how they perceive their academic school experience. All participants in the study identified the importance of having parents involved in the decision-making process.

Participant 0002 shared insight on the impact of the home:

I think a big factor that contributes to student retention deals with the home environment and what the student comes into school already knowing, and that is not just academically, but also from a social aspect. When you look at motivation, perseverance, drive, role models that are successful in the home, I think a lot of that plays a big part. Other factors that I think play a major role deals with the socioeconomic, especially when you look at, back to when I said role models in the home, I think when parents may not have completed their education, I think that plays a major factor with the students as well. Learning styles and possible learning disabilities come into play a factor. And then going back with the home again, but attendance is a key thing as well.

Participant 0005 referenced the importance of the experiences students bring to the table,

I think one of the major factors is, of course, experience before school. I think some of the experiences that they have had at home in reference to being introduced to what school is, reading books, and things like that, I think that has a lot to do student retention of the amount of support. I also think there are some factors about the parent relationship with the school as to how far they will be involved in their child's education because that home support is key.” Participant, 0008 added “Sometimes an unstable home life changes with schools. Parents might not see education as important. So I think those are

some major factors that contribute.” Participant 0004 shared, “Honestly, I think the most successful student intervention that we have is getting the parent on board. I don't know if that qualifies as a research-based intervention, but I just know it seems nothing can replace an engaged parent. So when that parent is engaged, that's the best thing for a student. I think the most successful intervention that we can do is when we engage that parent and empower that parent for moving forward.”

Participant 0002 discussed the importance of parental involvement;

I also think another factor goes back to the home again. I think that there is a behavioral expectation for females and males that come out of the house and many times are very different from the standpoint of females to be able to sit and be quiet and learn. And I do think males, on average, males do have a lot more energy and need to be a lot more mobile, and again on average, have more difficulty being able to pay attention for longer spans of time. But I think those are things that can be addressed in the classroom, but I think when you have that mentality from home, it seems to be, I'm not going to say condoned more, but it really seems like it's more okay for a male to not be successful in school than it is for a female.

Participants agreed that although they welcome parents input, there are times when the parent's input does not contribute to what is best for the child. Participant 0004 questioned the importance of engaging parents:

I think the conversation has changed with parents who go back to one of my earlier answers about just that importance of engaging that parent. When I can show parents something that looks very official with Act 284 and says this is not me. This isn't coming from the district. This is coming from the state department. This is coming from the

governor that if your child's not reading on a certain level by the end of third grade, they will repeat third grade. I think in some ways just that conversation has helped us out.

Participant 0003 shared:

I mean it factors in, retention has to be a conversation for it to be an effective intervention, I guess we'd all agree it's an intervention. You have to try to get that parental buy-in. Because we all know it takes to wrap around, you know to really intervene for a kid. The challenge is when you know the parent won't open their mind to the idea. That, can be, and of course, you know they'll go to your ED and appeal, but that's to some degree, the group of well trained professional educators genuinely believe that this could make a change in this child's life. I wish it was easier to get parents to kind of buy-in because I think it's important. I would say that in my opinion, the parent's position does get considered, but we can't certainly let it be the majority when it comes to decision making.

Participant 0008 invites parents to be involved, even though there are times they lack the understanding needed to support their child:

I think we always want parents' input even though sometimes it's not taken into consideration. Sometimes I have parents that come in and say, 'Just retain 'em. Just keep 'em back.' I'm like, but why? So you really have to kind of listen to them and say they're not making an educated decision. Let's sit down and let's really talk about. You know we didn't come to the table to talk about retaining the child. So we listen to them; but we also kind of put in place, "I don't think that would be the best for the child. So this is what we're proposing that we're going to do.

As administrators, it is totally appropriate to have the final say with what the final recommendation should be regardless of the parents' position.

Participant 0007 reminded colleagues that we are the experts:

When you're an administrator, you have to understand that is your area of expertise. So even the parents are saying that sometimes I think they just get frustrated because they're trying to help their kids at home and they don't know how to get to them to get them to do what they need them to do. It sometimes takes follow-up meetings before they actually say something like, 'Well, I was in those special classes.' Sometimes it's hereditary; then I explain to them everybody don't learn at the same pace, and everybody doesn't learn the same way. Special education is a whole other conversation. We consider what the parents say and then weigh all of that, and then you still have to say, "What is best for this baby?" You do want the parents to have an active role in it.

Theme Six: Early Intervention and Retention

Providing early interventions while establishing a foundation in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade can often prevent the retention of students. Retention in the early grades is also referred to as a form of retention. The theoretical framework for this study was based on retention research of Shane Jimerson. Jimerson's research points out that there is little to no advantages of grade retention, regardless of whether the students are retained in early childhood or elementary grades. Meador (2018) addressed the question of when students should be retained and state the rule of thumb for retention is the younger, the better and feels it should be primarily limited to early elementary school. Participant 0005 felt that our culture of learning tends to introduce students to concepts that they are not developmentally prepared for and prepare a more non-traditional style of learning. She ended her thoughts leading to the same

position as the others, “if you're going to do it early is best versus later. I think that if you're going to retain a student, it is best to do it in their early years, maybe now, I know you do not do it in Pre-K, but Kindergarten or first.”

Ninety percent of the participants agreed that early retention is best for students, namely in kindergarten and first grade, noting that there are exceptions that may apply, depending on the child. Lenard and Peña (2018) reference the sizable and pervasive academic achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students in the United States; particularly boys are more likely to enroll in school one year after they become eligible. Consequently, non-minority students are, on average, more mature than minority students, especially when they take standardized tests. Retaining older students can damage them emotionally, have minimal effect, and possibly lead to an even higher dropout rate. Participant 0005 felt there is never any guarantee that retaining a student is the ideal decision, regardless of the students’ ability or level of maturity. Participant 0001 shared, “I think the idea of retention should start as early as possible. And in this case, I would think that it would be best to retain a child in kindergarten because that is the foundational piece for the child to progress through the other grade levels.” Participant 0002 agreed that retention should be done as early as possible:

My personal opinion is the older the student gets, the less effective that retention becomes. And I feel that way because looking at, for example, third and fourth graders that are a couple of years off grade level academically. If you are a fourth grader and functioning on the first-grade level and you are retained in the fourth grade, you are not getting what you need because what you need is that first grade level of instruction and the first-grade skills.

Participant 0003 shared, “I believe that retention should occur as early as possible if it is used at all. I think in kindergarten, and potentially first grade are the times when we should consider retention because that is when true foundational skills are being developed.”

Participant 0006 agreed that early retention is more beneficial to students,

Well, my view on that differs a little bit from a lot of the research out there. I feel like retaining them in the earlier grades is more beneficial to them, so if you retain them in kindergarten, first grade, I feel like that is more beneficial than retaining them in the upper grades like the fourth and fifth. And I only say that because in kindergarten, first grade, the students are not really aware of the fact that they are being retained and that their classmates have left them, whereas when they get older, they can understand that concept. So it plays to the self-esteem part.

Participant 0007 stated, “In my opinion, the appropriate time and grade level is as early as possible when there is a need noticed. There may be times when the child has deficiencies later in life, and they possibly could be retained, but I think that can offset on early grades, grades actually before third grade.”

Participant 0008 felt that the educational system is expecting too much from students before they are emotionally ready.

I guess, if we look at it, and we start to think about it, I feel like early childhood is kind of early, like kindergarten is kind of early, because sometimes that is their first experience with the educational system, but usually around first or second grade, we can kind of see where those gaps are. So I can see why the state went with the third grade, but I would think maybe around second or so, around in there is when grave differences start to appear.

In terms of early intervention, Participant 0003 shared,

In terms of successful interventions, I've seen in reading a really good response rate. In my school, in the last three years, the increases have ranged from 76% to 82% response rate with leveled literacy intervention, the LLI kits, as they are referred to. That's been an effective intervention. I also feel like Wilson Reading has been an effective intervention at my school. Both of those related to reading. In mathematics, I can't quote a program, but I can say that working with students and strategy groups and pulling students with various splinter skills to fill in those holes, has been successful in terms of when the earlier, the better. So after the universal screening, that's part of our MTSS process. As soon as universal screening has ended, intervention begins. So typically that is within the first four weeks of school.

Participant 0006 gave credit to interventions that have worked with students when the teacher implements it with fidelity.

The small group interventions I feel have been very successful. For me, it's the teachers that are delivering that instruction, so from what I have seen, I've had some very dedicated interventions and when they bring you their data it is like in a portfolio, they can tell you every student that they worked with, how much the student grew, what areas of students still having weaknesses in, what areas the students had their strengths in, and they can just really tell you about the students that they are working within small groups.

Participant 0002 shared, regarding retention practices,

I think on the flip side of that, it is one thing that needs to be considered when you are looking at retention is not just if you retain them in kindergarten, but you are also looking at first grade on those levels, and looking at those children as they get older and possible

issues that they may face being older, especially when they hit maturity on a high school level. I think it's another thing to consider.

Participant 0003 shared “even early childhood retention has the potential to make a big impact ten years down the road because I think that would not be appropriate, but that's just how I feel, I'm curious to know how you guys feel.”

Participant 0006 gives a rationale for retention in early childhood.

Much of my experience is from early childhood. I look at the fact that at that age, the student is not really comprehending that they are being retained, that they have to do this again. It's just like that mindset or how they're perceiving what is going on. They are more open to going back in the classroom and trying again, whereas when you wait until the older grades when they know that their friends are leaving them.

Participant 0004 added, “I thought it was interesting how some view retention in lower versus upper grades. Research tends to see no benefit to retention. As administrators in this study, we all preferred retention in the lower grades.”

Theme Seven: Teacher and Student Relationships

Teachers that develop personal, meaningful relationships with their students experience a greater level of success in creating a love for learning. Hattie (2009) states that the impact of teacher relationships with students on student learning has a significant impact on the achievement of students, an effect size of .48, with .40 being at the center. The teacher, according to Hattie (2009), must respect the child bring to the classroom from home and from their culture, allowing them to share these experiences with their peers.

Participant 0002 gave a perspective on the importance of teacher and student relationships.

I know this might sound a little odd; I think one of the biggest interventions is having that trusting relationship between student and teacher. Students that feel like they are valued and that their teacher wants the best for them, a lot of times, they will live up to those expectations that the teacher provides. As far as an intervention, looking at differentiation of instruction when a teacher can identify when a student needs a specific skill or skills that they do not have that they should have picked up at a previous grade level, to be able to address those specific skills as opposed to teaching on grade level and just expecting the student to be successful. As far as a specific intervention, like a kid or something along those lines, it's the teacher that makes the difference.

Participant 0001 shared,

I was thinking, it kind of goes with what you're saying, teachers, having a real deep understanding, is either compliance, or is it discipline? And it's probably the compliance piece because we all want children to do certain things, but run back to your comment on how females and males are treated, is all about compliance. I want you to do what I expect of you, not looking at how males learn versus females. I think as even as adults, that is something to consider, although it's about retention, but even as adults, we all learn differently from a male versus a female perspective.”

In an environment where at least 80% of the educators are female, Participant 0005 saw this as a rationale as to why we allow the practices to continue.

We allow female students to get away with behaviors that we don't allow males to do, and I think we focus on those behaviors with males that we do not with females. It's like they get a pass. I just think we have not found a balance or have found ways or people

who are interested in learning how to respond appropriately to males and their learning styles, and I think that's what we're dealing with.

Participant 0001 references the treatment of males versus females:

Teachers should have a real deep understanding of their students, and be able to decipher if it is compliance or is it discipline? And it's probably the compliance piece because we all want children to do certain things, but run back to you how females and males are treated, is all about compliance. I want you to do what I expect of you, not looking at how males learn versus females. I think as even as adults, that is something to consider, although it's about retention, but even as adults, we all learn differently from a male versus a female.

Participant 0002 adds to the difference in the how female students are responded to versus male students.

I agree, and I also see, I know it's a little stereotypical for me to say this, when there is a lot of times a females that are of grade level, they are quiet, and you get the compliance, but when you get the males that are off grade level, that's when you see more of the physical, or the misbehaviors that comes into it. I think the teacher, a lot of the times will do what's best for them. They have a couple females that are off a grade level, but they're sitting there quiet, it's not that big of a deal to a lot of teachers, but you have a couple males in the back of your room that are off grade level that can change the dynamics of the class completely.

Participants talked a great deal about students being compliant versus them having behavior issues, sharing that this often goes back to the teacher and the relationships and cultures that are present in the classroom environment. Participant 0005 shared “And the teacher wants

them penalized for every single behavior, and I almost want to venture to say some of the things are petty. I really feel like that it ventures on to that level with a lot of the male students, it is those things that you know that are not really behaviors that have to be a big problem.”

Participant 0008 added “And most of our teachers are females so they probably have that relationship with the girls because they were once a girl. As a result, we tend to find, like you said, they build relationships more with girls than with our males.”

Often due to the lack of strong relationships that exists with students, Participant 0005 stated “I look at the teacher making the recommendation of the retention. And just because I know a little more background about the teacher, my perceptions and my attitudes when it comes to a decision is, who is making the recommendation? And what previous issues I have had with this teacher or things that I have seen from this teacher. You've seen the interventions, but have I seen this teacher do the interventions in a meaningful way? Were they consistent with the interventions? Have I seen this teacher work with the student before, and how did the teacher work with the student? Is this is one of my teachers that every year has six children on their retention roster, and why?” Participant 0005 stated “The biggest thing that was so insightful is that we need to do more when it comes to our males. How do we help them? As we are hiring staff that will nurture and build meaningful relationships? Where are we placing our males? We must be intentional about who we hire.”

Summary

Chapter 4 reported the qualitative findings of the study and answered the overarching research question: What are the perceptions of administrators as it relates to the retention recommendations of females versus male students in rural areas? Demographics of the sample, analyzed interviews, and focus group data were presented. All participants in the research study,

four males and four females, spoke openly, collaborated with rich discussion during focus group sessions, and reflected on ideas presented that they had not previously considered, or gave extensive thought following initial interview and focus group discussion. Additionally, the principals talked about their own challenges with the staff and how they weigh recommendations before making final decisions. At least 11 themes surfaced from the data provided with socioeconomics, learning styles, solid instructional practices, and attendance receiving limited mentions. Only seven of the eleven themes were discussed in detail due to minimal mentions of four of the themes.

The concern for parental support and lack of parental involvement were noted by participants and their efforts on an ongoing basis to involve parents in their child's education. However, participants also noted that the level of parental involvement does not vary based on gender. Participants support theorists' position that students who struggle with academics and behavior lack support from home, and efforts to involve these parents continue with intensity. After an intense review of the data provided, three of the themes sought to provide direct replies to the research question. These themes include a lack of students' early intervention and retention practices, gender bias, and teacher to student relationships.

In Chapter 5, the findings of this study in relation to the research question. Responses from open-ended questions at each stage of data collection, focus group sessions, and the theoretical framework that defines the study are provided. Additionally, recommendations for policy, practice, and future educational research in the field are discussed.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

The previous chapter presented the findings of the study, which revealed perceptions of administrators as it relates to the retention of females versus male students. This chapter presents and summarizes the findings of this research, discusses the research question, and the contribution to the study as well as the recommendations for future research. The researcher will address the factors that administrators specified. This study included participant interviews, focus group session, the researcher's field notes, and journaling throughout the process, as well as recordings of all sessions. Relationships between previous research and the findings of this study as well as make recommendations for future research, policy, and practice will also be discussed.

In Chapter 1, the researcher presented background for the topic of study, historical perspective, theoretical framework, and statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, along with the research question. In addition, Chapter 1 also presented background information on factors that can impact retention recommendations, while Chapter 2 encompasses evidence from the literature on factors that previous studies have uncovered that contribute to the retention of students. Chapter 3 included the implementation and framework for this qualitative study as well as the methodology employed to answer the research question were discussed in Chapter 3 as well as the researcher included details on the population, setting, instrument design, and data collection procedures.

Chapter 4 presented a summary of the data collected within the research study. The data gathered from in-depth, open-ended question during interviews and the focus group sessions were analyzed, resulting in themes that emerged from the review of the findings. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a summary of the research study and includes discussion of the findings from

previous research, limitations, implications of the results, as well as recommendations for future research, policy, and practice in this area, and finally the conclusion.

Summary of the Results

An exploratory case study was conducted in a large school district serving over 24,000 students. Much attention in this district of education focuses on attempting to close the achievement gap between Caucasian and African American students. This issue has been an ongoing struggle with much research done to uncover factors that contribute to this demise for many years with no resolve. Though females and males are both impacted by many of the same factors that govern retention decisions, sources from the literature review do not address why this disparity exists (Hamlin, 2013; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Tingle et al., 2012; Wong & Zhou, 2017). Instead, the sources confirm that male continues to be retained at a higher rate than females, especially among African Americans. Because the district in which the study took place is a majority-minority district, with African Americans representing over 70% of the student population, ethnicity was not a factor that was considered.

The participants in the study included elementary administrators with three or more years of experience as the primary decision-maker for retention recommendations in their respective schools. For this study, eight administrators were invited to participate, four females and four males with varying degree levels. There were three Caucasian and five African American principals that participated in the study. The data collected included the initial interview, focus group sessions, and a follow-up interview.

To reverse the disparity that continues in the high numbers of males recommended for retention each year, administrators were asked to share their perceptions that govern their

practices on retention of male versus female students. A comparison of the findings of the study and previous literature exposed some similarities.

Discussion of the Results

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative research study was to examine the perception of administrators that make recommendations for retention candidates and the factors they consider in this process. Not only is an examination of the factors that are considered under review, but are there different thought processes for females versus males as it relates to their educational pathway. The administrators that participated in this research study specified a variety of factors that positively or negatively impacted their perception. Each of the administrators that participated in this study indicated one or more factors they considered when making retention recommendations.

The lack of parent support and involvement continues to flag administrators regarding students that may not experience a higher level of achievement. Research points to students that are products of single-parent households; those with shallow parental involvement and expectations as being more likely to be retained (Cid, 2014; Froiland & Davison, 2014; Hughes et al., 2013; Phillips, 2015). Jimerson strongly believed that parent involvement with the school is a strong predictor of non-retention (Froiland & Davison, 2014). Participant 0007 stated, “If we can get parents more involved that would solve so many of our problems.” What is so alarming is that many of the parents are doing the best that they can and lack the skills necessary to provide enhanced support to their children. Many of them did not receive support as school-age children, and though the schools provide sessions on parenting, parents are hesitant to take part in the services.

Academic ability continues to be an area that maintains the divide in closing the achievement gap (Cid, 2014; Smith & Herzog, 2014; Phillips, 2015). Many of the families in rural areas do not understand the importance of foundational knowledge that is established in pre-kindergarten. For various reasons, they chose not to send their children to pre-kindergarten programs. As a result, students are not starting school until kindergarten, at age five, and for some, they are already behind their peers because of a lack of educational focus in the home. A problem that participants shared widens the gap of students that are identified as disadvantaged.

Dwan (2017) confirms the importance of joining forces and forming trusting, authentic relationships between school and home and the impact it can have on the social welfare of students. All participants voiced the need for buy-in from all stakeholders, including the community to be supporters of the needy students to begin their academic career as early as possible. Principals also shared the importance of not only establishing trusting relationships with students but also with the parents of the students that we serve.

The lack of educational focus in the home brings into play a lack of structure and maturity, due to students not being required to attend a prekindergarten program. According to Sasser Thomas (2018), the academic ability continues to be an area that maintains the divide in closing the achievement gap. Dougherty (2014) points out that many families from disadvantaged backgrounds do not understand the importance of foundational knowledge that is established in pre-kindergarten, and these students arrive at school with limited knowledge and vocabulary. For many students entering kindergarten, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, learning gaps appear early in reading and mathematics skills, oral language development, vocabulary, and general knowledge (Dougherty, 2014).

Based on the experience of participants in the study, when students do participate in five-year-old kindergarten, a very structured environment, this creates a struggle for many because they lack the preparation needed to be successful in the classroom. Unlike prekindergarten, the four-year-old program, five-year-olds do not take naps, are at school for the entire day and have a somewhat regimented schedule.

In an effort not to show bias on the topic or skew the responses, the researcher did not initially ask for factors that impacted retention of males versus females. Instead, participants shared factors that contributed to retention practices that guided decisions for all students. As the discussions ensued, the debate focused on whether the participants' retention recommendations was at a higher rate for males versus females, directly in line with what Jimerson et al. (2006) pointed out that "numerous studies have suggested that boys are about twice as likely to repeat a grade as girls.

Participants responded to the overall discussions on whether they felt a disparity existed among retention candidates of males versus females. This discussion initiated a moment of reflection for the participants, and more than 60% admitted their retention history revealed a significant disparity existed that they had not previously acknowledged. The findings of this study disclosed themes to include the lack of early intervention and retention practices for students, gender biases, and the inability of teachers to build relationships with students. These themes provided answers to the research question: What are the perceptions of elementary school administrators as it relates to the retention of female versus male students in rural areas?

The research question explored the perceptions of the administrators based on their actual experiences of having served on retention committees. The interviews and focus group questions were open-ended questions but also allowed the researcher an opportunity to ask clarifying

questions during the group session or the individual interviews as needed. The questions gave administrators the opportunity to elaborate on the aspects they saw as significant factors when recommending the retention of students. The data collected from the in-depth interview questions and focus group sessions revealed a number of themes which included the lack of early intervention and retention practices for students, policies and procedures, academic ability, gender biases, the level of maturity and age of student, parental support, and the inability of teachers to build relationships with students. Themes disclosed that were within the scope of control for administrators and teachers included early intervention and retention practices, gender biases, and teacher to student relationships. Participants felt these factors provided a direct impact on students that teachers submit retention recommendations for, with the majority of them being male students.

Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature

In relation to the sources from the literature review, the concept that females underperform compared to their male classmates is not evident in the higher number of males that are retained each year and may reinforce a false doctrine regarding achievement (Range et al., 2012). Policies that retain students based solely on any one factor, with academic achievement at the core creates a dilemma for principals that make the final decision on these recommendations. A number of factors were exposed from the sources that directly impact administrators' decisions to support retention recommendations which included low levels of parental involvement, the lack of early intervention, and the socioeconomic status of the family. However, additional factors surfaced as a result of this study, including the relationship between the teacher and the student, gender bias, age and maturity level of students, policies and procedures that govern the practices, and academic ability.

Results of Study Related to Literature Sources

Relating to the literature, researchers believe that retention impacts more disadvantaged students, but did not state why males are more likely to be retained (Hamlin, 2013; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Tingle et al., 2012; Wong & Zhou, 2017). Given this insight, factors that affect males influence female students equally as they are all reared in the same environment and households. These households are impacted by socioeconomics, low parental involvement, and low expectations. Sources from the literature confirm that males are retained at a higher rate than females, regardless of the factors mentioned.

Participants in the study noted that the majority of the students recommended for retention in any given school face some of the same factors such as low parental involvement, low socioeconomic status, low academic achievement, and low expectations from parents and their teachers. Factors common to students that are retained does not differ regardless of whether students are in a rural or urban environment, male or female. Students are all impacted equally by the same factors.

In a study conducted by Garcia-Perez et al. (2014), the proportion of repeaters were higher among males at 41% versus females at 31.9%, even though findings indicate that females achieve lower test scores than their male counterparts. The majority of the participants in the study admitted that upon reflecting on their retention recommendations during their time as principal, approximately 75% of the students retained were male. Hamlin (2013) reported a pattern of students most likely to be retained were proportionately high for males at 62%, and younger students also showed a high percentage of retention at 55.3%.

Participants all agreed that retention recommendation should be made for students as early as possible, preferably in kindergarten and first grades. Similarly, the literature review

revealed principals' view about retention were similar to teachers', reporting low academic performance and maturity as reasons to retain students and feel retention should occur in kindergarten as opposed to first or second grade (Range et al., 2012). Extensive research (Froiland & Davison, 2014; Hughes et al., 2013; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Smith & Herzog, 2014) addresses factors perceived to contribute to retention which include rate of poverty, lack of parental involvement, early intervention, level of expectation on students' performance, and contribution of stakeholders.

Similarity of Factors

Based on this research study, participants shared similar factors discussed in the literature review. Parallel to previous research findings (Edwards, 2014; Hernandez-Tutop, 2012; Martinez-Hicks, 2012; Phillips, 2015), most participants agreed that social promotion was not beneficial to students and felt this should only be an option for students that have been retained at least twice during their educational career. Researchers for years have delved into finding out whether the best solution for our students is that of social promotion or grade retention, and the tug of war continues (Hernandez-Tutop, 2012). In an attempt to provide opportunities for all students, regardless of the many barriers they face, administrators are tasked with reflecting on retention recommendations and determining why such a disparity exist among males versus female students.

As noted in the findings of this study, the academic ability was highlighted with much frequency by the participants. Students that struggle academically and are promoted to the next grade level continue to struggle, and the gap continues to broaden. In high poverty areas, parents often do not send their children to school for pre-kindergarten, contributing to the lack of opportunities for early intervention. Because students are not attending school prior to

kindergarten, the areas needing intervention are not identified until later in the student's academic career. Participants stressed the need for early intervention to assist struggling students.

Parental involvement and support, another major factor noted in the literature review is directly linked to how well students perform at school. When students do not feel their parents are in support of their education, problems continue, and the student is ultimately unsuccessful. Referenced in the literature, theorists (Hughes et al., 2013; Phillips, 2015; Wong & Zhou, 2017) contribute these factors of low parental involvement and support and a lack of early intervention to an increase in student retention. In reply to the research question, responses shared by the participants in the research study confirmed three major themes that provided insight and shed light on the perceptions of elementary administrators as it relates to female versus male retention. These themes include the lack of early intervention and retention practices for students, gender biases, and the inability of teachers to build relationships with their students.

Range et al. (2012), states that the most promising practice to decrease grade retention rates is early identification of low performing students, followed by intense interventions. All participants in the study agree that early intervention is the best option to combat the high numbers of retention candidates. When teachers administer early intervention strategies with frequency, they can expect positive results (Moore, 2017). Unfortunately, even when identified students are part of the school's RTI process, and academic plans are created, participants believed the interventions are not administered with fidelity.

Scheduling, discipline issues, teaching practices, are all barriers that get in the way of providing the level of intensity that is needed for students to master the skills needed during the intervention (Hamlin, 2013). As a result, early interventions put in place that is not administered

on a consistent basis does not produce preferred results and do little to decrease the number of student retentions. In addition to the interventions not being administered consistently, progress monitoring goes lagging, and students do not get the continuous support that is needed. Students identified with discipline issues, and are consistently being suspended or taken out of the classroom experience a loss of instructional time that is designated for intervention (Hamlin, 2013).

Results Not Found in Literature Review

Discussion of the participants during focus group sessions centered on the importance of the relationships built between the teacher and their students, a factor not revealed in the literature review. Meaningful relationships between the teacher and the student must be established before learning can occur. Stone et al. (2015) reference how collaboration and interaction with students improve overall teaching and learning. Teachers must also understand how learning occurs and the factors that influence student knowledge. Hattie (2009) states that the impact of teacher relationships with students on student learning has a significant impact on the achievement of students. For many of the students stemming from low socioeconomic households, they are reared with adult responsibilities in the home; having to care for younger siblings, while many of them function as latch key children.

Male students at the elementary level oftentimes do not enter school, knowing what is expected, nor are they being taught the expectations for the school environment once they arrive (Wong & Zhou, 2017). This transfer of emotions can generate hardship when students are expected to show respect to adults in the school building in order to be compliant in the classroom. Many male students are forced to be protectors in their home, as many are in single-parent family households. Wood and Brownhill (2018) describes this issue as an apparent

breakdown in traditional family structures, typified through a lack of parental responsibility. They find it difficult to revert to becoming childlike when they are in the classroom, often exhibiting a “fight or flight” mentality. Because some teachers find it difficult to relate to the student or don’t take the time to understand what the student is experiencing, many of the minor incidents that occur become significant issues and can result in the student being removed from the classroom environment (Hattie, 2009). When this occurs, resentment sets in and incidents of this nature does little to build a trusting relationship between the teacher and the student.

Participants view their roles as necessary in assuring a safe, nurturing environment for all students. “Building relationships with students implies respect by the teacher for what the child brings to the class (from home, culture, peers) and allowing the experiences of the child to be an integral part of the classroom” (Hattie, 2009). Teachers need to do a better job of making learning culturally relevant to all students. Teachers must not be afraid to show empathy toward their students and adapt to their differences. Developing relationships requires skill by the teacher, such as the skill of listening, understanding, caring, and having positive regard for others (Hattie, 2009).

Participants share from their perspective, teachers often fear the male students, especially in the upper grades. This fear can get in the way of developing relationships with students that descend from different cultures. When seeking to fill positions, administrators ought to be looking for people that possess substantial skills, and a knowledge and understanding about students in the early grades regardless of whether they are male or female (Mistry & Sood, 2015). For some classroom teachers, developing relationships with male students can be a lofty task because they are not willing to overlook behaviors that get in the way of building sound relationships.

In classes with strong teacher-student relationships, there is more engagement and fewer resistant behaviors. Students who do not want to come to school or those that dislike school often have shared that they dislike their teacher. Teachers must not only exhibit an attitude of caring but demonstrate that they care about the learning of each student and make this a priority. Wood and Brownhill (2018) shares that with more considerable attention being given to social and emotional issues in education the roles and skills expected of school staff members has shifted from that of ‘educator’ towards the role of the ‘educarer.’

Participants agree that teachers need to participate in more ongoing professional development opportunities that equip them to be more culturally relevant. It is critical to be able to relate to students, understanding their struggles before they can open up and show a level of vulnerability, especially when they may feel this type of behavior makes them appear fragile. Participants also felt that teachers did little to adhere to the learning styles of males. The more active the boys, the more they fit the profile of having behavior problems. Students often feel that their teachers do not respect them, and this prohibits forming stable, meaningful relationships.

Participants shared that teachers tend to focus on petty-minded behaviors, especially when it came to male students, ignoring similar actions performed by female students. Hattie's (2009) research noted that all groups, except the teachers, emphasized the importance of the relationship between the teacher and student as key to achievement. However, the teachers stated that the most influential factors to student achievement are a function of the child's attitudes and dispositions, their home, and even the working conditions of the school (Hattie, 2009).

Data collected from the participants did not reveal they felt females were more academically, socially, or emotionally more mature than males, but felt that teachers found it more challenging to establish relationships with males versus females. When relationships are not secure, academics suffer, hence resulting in lower performance. Participants shared that teachers lacking the skills necessary to develop meaningful relationships with students can do significant damage, even causing the educational level of students to go backward.

Gender biases, another factor impacting the disparity of retention numbers of males versus females, was not disclosed in the literature review but surfaced in the findings from the research study. Females students were noted as being more compliant and submissive, which added to the rationale for why males are more likely to be retained (Wong & Zhou, 2017). Regardless of the gender of the participants, they all agreed that they suffer from preconceived notions of what we think and feel about subjects we readily do not understand. Teachers bring stereotyped beliefs to the classroom, which influences the students' beliefs. As individuals, we see what we want to see, allowing our personal biases to guide retention decisions. Participants confirmed Hattie's (2009) belief that many gender differences are small, inconsistent, and socially constructed.

Discussion among the participants about their personal biases provided them with an opportunity to share their stories during the focus group discussions. Biases also play a role in teachers' expectations of students. Teachers form expectations about students and their ability, which ultimately affect student achievement. When teachers hold lower expectations, they do so for all of the students in the class. Due to the lower expectations for students of lower socioeconomics and students identified as at risk, students were not expected to perform as high academically as others from more affluent families. Participants also shared that parents'

expectations were not high for many of their students, especially if a child has been retained during their educational career. This attitude filters to the school level and contributes to lowered expectations from the teachers that serve this student (Froiland & Davison, 2014).

Participants' perceptions, based on the teacher's input, were that females were better behaved than males. Males were perceived to be more active, more heavily diagnosed with ADHD, and accounted for a vast majority of the discipline referrals. Dusek and Joseph (1983) found that student attractiveness, cumulative folder information, and their social class were related significantly and positively to teacher expectancies. In most elementary schools where participants serve as administrators, at least 80% of the teachers are females. As a result of the large female teaching staff, research confirms that attractiveness bias benefited males more than females. Teachers must stop overemphasizing ability, welcome diversity, start focusing on student progress, and have high expectations for all students. Haggis (2017) applauds teachers who work successfully with their students and feel a great deal of respect is owed to them. As educators, we owe it to all students to have the best teacher possible. This does not exclude disadvantaged students. They too need to have a teacher who believes in them and can help them succeed in school. If teachers continue to set high expectations and challenge all students; this will no doubt, increase academic achievement.

Participants also believe that educators do not know how to teach male students, and sensed some level of fear at upper grades. Expecting male students to sit in a desk for the majority of the day with minimal movement is somewhat not practical. Participants believe that teachers must seek to find a balance or seek persons who are interested in learning how to respond appropriately to males and their learning styles (Wood & Brownhill, 2018). Most

participants agree that there are teachers that undoubtedly are more effective in administering instruction and building rapport with male students.

Years ago, single-gender classrooms were being implemented throughout the state in an attempt to address some of these biases that exist. Single-gender education is not a new idea but is being explored in a new format based on new knowledge and a sense of urgency based on research related to gender differences in learning styles between male and female students (Rex & Chadwell, 2009). This study does not include information that supports whether single-gender classrooms impact the retention rate of male students. In responding to the learning styles of male students, participants questioned whether discipline issues might be linked to boredom. Teachers must identify practices that offer new alternatives for students who have been pushed out of the instructional setting because they are perceived as having rule-breaking behavior (Gregory, 2012).

Participants in the study questioned if educators have a deep understanding of the difference between non-compliant students versus a student identified as having discipline issues. It is not reasonable to expect all children to behave the same, leading some to believe that there is a degree of refusal in accepting that gender does matter. Participants perceive teachers as praising female students for making less academic progress than males because they are better behaved.

Participants reported based on their observations; there are developmental delays shown by male students as early as kindergarten. Information shared by participants during observations noted that males were more active than females and appeared to have a shorter attention span. As a result, male students command more of the teacher's attention, and teachers

see them as having behavior problems (Gregory, 2012). Participants felt this type of labeling feeds into behavioral biases, and at times push students toward a special education label.

Limitations

Limitations noted in Chapter 3 were present in the actual study except for the possibility of limited discussion in the focus group among the participants. The participants did not show any feelings of discomfort and freely expressed their opinions during the sessions. There did not appear to be concerned about the lack of confidentiality or anonymity among the groups. As a result, rich collaboration took place, and a level of trust was present.

The following limitations were present in this study:

1. The researcher had limited control over the data produced versus data collected in a quantitative study.
2. Data collection time spanned over a short period, allowing a limited amount of time for participants to reflect on responses given between interviews and focused group sessions. Data collection took place over a three weeks' time span.
3. Although data collection was done in a large district, only collecting data in one district did not allow for comparison of themes limited the scope.
4. Because the researcher is a peer of the participants, there is the possibility that some of the participants may not have been completely honest in their responses.

Implications for Practice, Policy, & Theory

Outcomes of administrator's perceptions of the factors impacting their retention recommendations within the research study indicated several implications for practice. Implications for practice, policy, and theory are designed to strengthen and improve current educational programs and practices. The findings of this exploratory case study supports these

recommendations. Jimerson (1999) has drawn attention to the fact that retention has little to no advantages regardless of when students are retained or the gender. Retention impacts male students at a higher rate than female students. In addition to factors identified in the literature review that contribute to retention which included the lack of early intervention, low parental involvement, and the socioeconomic status of the family, other themes emerged to include the relationship between the teacher and the student, gender bias, age and maturity level of students, policies and procedures that govern the practices, and academic ability.

Implications for Practice

Based on the literature and the results of this study, implications for practice are evident. Although males and females are impacted by the same factors, gender is a significant factor as males are retained at a higher rate than females (Smith & Herzog, 2014). As a result, several recommendations for administrators and their staff to assist with the disparity that exists in retention recommendations among male and female students have emerged from this study. For example, administrators need to seek funding to ensure ongoing professional development training on culturally relevant pedagogy. If teachers seek to understand their students and the experiences they bring to the classroom environment, they may find it less challenging to teach them. Developing strong, trusting relationships with their students, and understanding the experiences they bring to the classroom environment would provide a culture where students feel safe and empowered (Wood & Brownhill, 2018).

Providing teachers and staff with ongoing professional development on gender equity may help them in understanding all students and may dispel biases that exist in the schools. Wong and Zhou (2017) shared that teachers' views of students of different classes and genders have a direct impact on students' academic performance. Teacher training needs to be based on

research-proven intervention tools and strategies that directly impact student learning. Providing teachers with non-traditional strategies that engage students in their learning has an enormous effect size (Hattie, 2009) on student achievement. Teachers need to be trained on how to conduct student inventories to uncover students' learning styles to assist with differentiation of instruction (Wood & Brownhill, 2018).

Early intervention needs to be monitored regularly to ensure that teachers are consistently providing interventions to help close the gaps in student learning. Intervention plans need to be put in place for students that are identified as retention candidates as early as possible. Range et al. (2012) pointed out that the most promising practice to decrease grade retention rates is early identification of low performing students followed by intense, formative interventions. Interventions must be provided to low performing students with fidelity and progress monitored to evaluate the effect of the strategies being implemented. If the strategies put in place are not working, additional practices need to be administered.

Implications for Policy

The findings from this study suggest that all stakeholders, including the administration, teacher(s), parents, parent liaison, and other school personnel need to be required to be actively involved with teams during retention recommendations as early as possible. Results of the present study confirms the need for a district-wide policy on parental involvement and accountability. Participants in the study indicated how essential communication with parents is and how beneficial this can be for interventions such as retention to be successful. Students that are identified at-risk arrive at school late have higher absenteeism, which can lead to low achievement (Phillips, 2015). When all stakeholders are involved in the education outcome of students, their chances of success are higher. Students should not be deprived of opportunities to

learn as a result of their socioeconomic status (OECD, 2014). Policies and procedures regarding students attending school at age four need to not be an option for students at-risk.

In the state of South Carolina, students are not required to attend early childhood 4-year-old programs, nor is it mandatory for children to participate in 5-year-old kindergarten. The most recent report indicated only 14 of 50 states in the U.S. that required mandatory kindergarten attendance (Workman, 2016). As a result, parents are choosing to not enroll their children in school before the age of five, even though in rural areas, full-day programs are available at no cost. In areas where students are identified “at risk,” parents ought to be required to enroll their students in the school at the age of four years of age.

Because children are not attending school for pre-kindergarten, early intervention practices that may prevent retention cannot be implemented. Overall, the results of this study found that policies and procedures weighed heavily on the retention process. Though it is necessary to have systems in place that govern practices in districts and states, more focus should be placed on the individual student, as our overarching goal is to prepare them to be college and career ready. Recognizing that different factors impact students of different backgrounds, especially those labeled disadvantaged, policies need to be implemented to give support to these families.

Based on the results of this study, recommendations for policy considerations for schools that wish to reduce their dropout rate need to implement research, school-based interventions and must do so with the support and participation of all constituents, including but not limited to teachers, administrators, staff, students, and parents. Mandatory training ought to be required during college and university study for all education majors on culturally relevant teaching and ongoing professional development throughout their educational career. Maintaining highly

qualified teachers in each classroom enhances the quality of instruction for all students (Irvin et al., 2016). Teachers need to be required to go through some level of formal evaluation every three years to assure they are highly qualified in their area of instruction.

Implications for Theory

The implications for theory was based on the theoretical framework from retention research done by Shane Jimerson, which began nearly 20 years ago (Jimerson, 1999). According to Jimerson's (1999) research, there are little to no advantages of grade retention, yet this practice continues today. Regardless of when retention is recommended, theorists (Froiland & Davison, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012) believe gender is not a factor in the outcome of the decision to retain students. Although, gender is not a factor in the decision to retain students, Meador (2018) states retention is primarily limited to early elementary students. Because teachers consider many factors in the retention process, the decision is not an easy one to make. However, researchers concur that the most influential factors contributing to retention link directly to students' academic performance, early intervention, and parental involvement (Ferrara, 2015; Froiland & Davison, 2014; Gottfried, 2012).

Long (2018) gives attention to the racial achievement gap problem that is plaguing America's school system and references researchers like Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay in noting one of the most effective ways to reduce the achievement gap is to use culturally relevant instruction. Culturally relevant instruction includes recognizing the strengths of students' unique cultures and using those strengths to improve student achievement (Long, 2018). Understanding and appreciating what students bring to the classroom environment also strengthens the relationships teachers build with their students (Hattie, 2009.) Teachers must put

forth effort into establishing meaningful relationships with students, understanding that learning cannot occur without this important influence.

Administrators and teachers need to communicate early and often with parents regarding students' needs. This collaboration not only allows parents to understand the intervention process better but also gain exposure to options available to their children (Moore, 2017). Ultimately, parents need to be held accountable for the education of their children and be required to spend a minimum of two hours in their child's school during the academic year, one hour in the first semester, and one hour in the second semester. Holloway and Parka (2017) shed light on the topic of parents' involvement in their child's education and the long-standing belief that it promotes a range of academic outcomes, including higher achievement, greater engagement in schoolwork, and lower dropout rates. Parents need to be educated on the direct impact their involvement has on the academic performance of their child (Ferrara, 2015). Rather than having attendance laws that require students to be retained based on the number of days missed, hold parents accountable for students' high absenteeism.

Recommendations for Further Research

Results from this qualitative case study approach examining administrators' perceptions as it relates to the retention of female versus male students in rural areas leads to recommendations for further research to include (a) Further research to determine how relationships teachers develop with male students directly impact their academic performance; (b) ensure future studies using larger sample sizes, not limiting the scope (e.g., more school districts or schools); (c) employ a mixed-methods approach to compare the number of socially promoted students versus students retained for academic reasons that graduate from high school; (d) conduct additional qualitative research to include a case study design that tracks male

students retained of different racial backgrounds as they matriculate through their educational careers; (e) conduct future research on the impact of how non-traditional family dynamics influence a student's educational pathway; and (f) conduct further research on single-gender programs and their graduation rate versus that of a traditional setting to determine its effectiveness. Although this research study reflects outcomes that were not noted in the literature found, numerous factors revealed that gender does matter, as biases are evident, and formulating relationships with students is critical to student achievement. The research provided additional answers related to the disparity in the numbers of retained male retained versus female students in rural areas.

Conclusion

This qualitative study was conducted to examine the perceptions of elementary school principals as it relates to the retention of female versus male students who attend school in rural areas. Findings indicate there are factors that impact student retention that is beyond the school's control, to include socioeconomics, level of maturity and age, and parental support. Some factors that contribute to the large numbers of male retention candidates that are in the scope of human control. Students come to school with a preconceived notion of expectations. It is the teacher's responsibility to develop a safe, nurturing relationship with students so that they feel empowered to want to learn.

The educational environment must be arranged to meet the various needs of the students served, yet controlled enough to ensure students feel protected and removed from external distracting factors. Students must also have educators that are willing and capable of addressing their individual needs and differences academically. As administrators and educators, we bring

many biases to the table when providing instruction to our students long before making retention recommendations that significantly impact our educational environment.

The results from this study uncovered factors that impacted retention practices not found in the literature review such as the importance of student/teacher relationships, policies, and procedures that govern retention decisions and gender biases that educators convey during the process. Based on their experiences (DelConte, 2011), administrators were able to share their attitudes and perceptions about the factors that influenced their retention recommendations. Even though the participants served diverse populations of students, there were commonalities in their practices.

The findings from the data revealed that there is a recognizable disparity that exists among the retention of male and female candidates each year. A paradigm shift must take place in order for the disparity that exists in the number of male retentions versus female to cease. The work must begin with and involve administrators. Grade retention has often been identified as the single, most potent forecaster of students dropping out of school (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Martin, 2011; Range, Dougan, & Pijanowski, 2011). Participants in the study agreed that there are issues that require immediate attention regarding the high number of male students being retained before the school dropout rate can begin to improve.

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Appendix A: Letter of Solicitation

Dear Colleague:

I am currently enrolled as a doctoral student in the College of Education at Concordia University in Portland, Oregon.

A critical part of my program will be to complete a research study. I am very interested in your experiences as it relates to your attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs considered when recommending female students for retention.

The process will include an initial interview that will last no longer than 75–90 minutes. The initial interview will be followed by a focus group session, to include all participants, not to exceed 90 minutes in length. Finally, a follow-up interview will also be conducted, lasting no more than one hour. Information obtained for the study will be gathered through the use of face to face interviews. My interest lies in possible factors you consider that aide you in your retention recommendations.

Participation in this research is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw at any time. Your commitment to participate in no way will lead to scrutiny or any type of reprimand. An identification number will be assigned to you so that your identity will remain confidential. The number assigned to you will be used throughout the interview process.

All data collected will be coded to protect your privacy and will be stored on a USB drive that will be secured in a file box. Any information gathered will remain confidential. A consent form will be made available to you, confirming your interest to participate.

I can be reached by email at [redacted] or by cell phone [redacted] if you have questions.

Sincerely,

Dell N. Brabham, Doctoral Student

Concordia University-Portland

Appendix B: Initial Interview Questions

1. Based on your experience as a principal, what would you say are major factors that contribute to student retention?
2. What are the policies and practices used in your school district when students are being considered for retention?
3. Do you feel there is an appropriate time or grade level to retain students? If so, what would you consider an appropriate time and/or grade level?
4. What time during the school year do you feel it is appropriate for administrators and teachers to begin discussions regarding retention?
5. What have been some successful interventions in your experience and at what time of the year have these practices been implemented?
6. Do you feel the disparity exist in the percentage of males that are retained compared to females? If so, what are factors contributing to this disparity?
7. What interventions are provided to students prior to retention recommendations?
8. Do you believe that a student should be retained because of age, attendance policy, or solely on academic achievement? Please explain.
9. Do you consider social promotion a negative practice for students versus retention?
10. How have your retention practices/procedures changed since the implementation of the Read to Succeed Act? Did you experience more or fewer retentions in 2018 than in previous years?

Appendix C: Follow up Interview Questions

1. Based on your experiences of having served on retention committees, what suggestions would you give to a first-year principal?
2. Were there points, reflections from our discussion that you thought about since our last interview you would like to share?
3. Do you have any questions of clarification regarding the study for me at this time?

Appendix D: Focus Group Questions

1. What factors do you perceive should be considered when a student is being considered for retention?
2. Why do you think elementary male students are more likely to be retained than elementary female students?
3. What impact do your perceptions and attitudes have on retention decisions?
4. How much consideration is given to the parents' position in the retention recommendation process?
5. Is there anything else you could add regarding student retention that I have not addressed?

Appendix E: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously- researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does “fraudulent” mean?

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

What is “unauthorized” assistance?

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

Statement of Original Work (continued)

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University–Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources have been properly referenced and all permissions required for the use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*

Lindell N. Brabham

Digital Signature

Lindell N. Brabham

Name (Typed)

July 22, 2019

Date