Quitting: A Phenomenological Study on the Factors Contributing to Mississippi Teacher Exits During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic

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QUITTING:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO
MISSISSIPPI TEACHER EXITS DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A Dissertation
presented in fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Teacher Education
The University of Mississippi

by
KRYSRALL R. CORMACK
August 2023
This transcendental phenomenological study focused on determining the factors contributing to teacher exits from Mississippi schools during and since the global COVID-19 pandemic. Developing a more robust understanding of the teacher labor market and teacher exits is vital to ensuring that students can access a high-quality education. Participants identified the COVID-19–related factors that influenced their decision to exit the classroom and factors unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants felt the COVID-19 pandemic worsened their teaching experience and created additional work. One educator exited due to complications from long COVID disease. Three major findings unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as factors contributing to teachers’ exits from the Mississippi classroom, including inadequate support in the teaching role, negative relationships or experiences with administrators, and the demanding workload. The participants also shared which factors they believed would support their future reentry into the classroom. Before they would consider a return, school and system leaders would need to operate differently and obtain better training. The participants also suggested they would return to the classroom if the education system underwent a systematic overhaul. Other factors mentioned were less prevalent, such as better salaries, more autonomy over the curriculum, and families and parents showing teachers more support. The findings of this study indicate the need for administrators and principals to address those factors within their control, such as ensuring that teachers have a positive experience with their principal, a balanced workload, and the support they need to remain in their roles.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my children: Kennedy, Madison, and Maxwell. My desire to add to the field of education and ensure equitable access to learning for all children begins with my hope that I have made it a better place for each of you. You all are my inspiration. I hope I have made you proud. Never let anyone tell you who you are. You already know who you are. Believe in who you are.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-five years after enacting the Critical Teacher Shortage Act of 1998, Mississippi continues to experience significant challenges in finding teachers for classrooms (James, 2022). Mississippi was one of the first states to pass focused legislation to address a persistent teacher shortage, yet it continues to have one of the worst teacher shortages in the nation (Murdock, 2022). After the legislation’s initial positive impact, Mississippi’s critical teacher shortage has become six times worse (Betz & Wright, 2019). In 2019, Mississippi saw some of the largest gains in the nation on the National Association of Education Progress exams (Kaufman, 2022). An examination of the trends in teacher attrition is necessary for Mississippi to remain on an upward educational trajectory. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded the existing teacher shortage, bringing disruptions to labor markets around the world. At the end of the 2022 school year, James (2022) noted that nearly 20% of teachers in Mississippi left their roles, according to Mississippi Department of Education data. The data did not clarify whether teachers left the profession entirely, or changed districts. This data also failed to attribute whether pandemic-related factors caused the exits of these teachers, or if they were driven to leave for other reasons. This study was an attempt to unpack the qualitative factors teachers ascribe to their classroom exits during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ability to attract, recruit, successfully onboard, and retain educators is essential to facilitate an education leading youth to freedom and opportunity (Espinoza et al., 2018; Loeb & Reininger, 2004). It is necessary to attract people into the profession where they are most needed
and who believe all children can and must learn. Successfully onboarding new teachers into schools and systems enables them to acclimate more quickly and experience success and belonging. The cost of turnover is high for districts, schools, and children, who lack adults with whom they can build meaningful relationships (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; García & Weiss, 2019a, 2019b). Thus, there is a need to retain exceptional teachers.

Teacher talent pipelines are among the most pressing issues impacting P–12 education. Schools cannot achieve ambitious student outcomes without highly skilled teachers. Great teacher talent in U.S. schools shifts curriculum implementation, classroom management, and, most importantly, student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1999; Sorensen & Ladd, 2016).

**Background of the Study**

The presence of a national teacher shortage is well-understood (Berger, 2022; García & Weiss, 2019a, 2019b; Jotkoff, 2022), and there is awareness of the persistent teacher shortage facing many Mississippi school districts (James, 2022; Shelton, 2019; Wright et al., 2019; Betz & Wright, 2019). Increased awareness will come from collecting school data and teachers’ stories about Mississippi’s teacher shortage, specifically in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic created massive disruption to people and labor markets worldwide. The pandemic initiated what Klotz deemed the Great Resignation, with many workers in the labor market leaving their jobs. Postpandemic, U.S. workers who had remained in their jobs during the pandemic resigned in waves (Clark, 2022).

The National Education Association’s (2022) annual survey showed that an alarming number of educators experienced burnout during and after the pandemic. According to Jotkoff
“After persevering through the hardest school years in memory, America’s educators are exhausted and increasingly burned out” (p. 2). Nearly half of American teachers said they would leave education sooner than planned due to the lack of mental health support students need and the strain of filling in for colleagues who were out sick due to COVID. Rainey (2022) found that staffing shortages in American schools worsened during the pandemic. Drawing on federal data, Rainey identified nearly a half million fewer educators than before the pandemic.

Klotz discussed the “unexpected freedom that millions experienced when the pandemic forced them to work at home. Autonomy is a fundamental human need, and when people get a taste of it for months on end, they do not cede it easily” (Clark, 2022, para. 8). In many communities, the unexpected freedom teachers experienced while working from home abruptly ended when students returned to in-person learning.

Before the emotional, social, and financial toll of COVID-19 impacted students and teachers, Garcia and Weiss (2019a) reported the national teacher shortage was “real, large and growing, and worse than we thought” (p. 1). After the height of the pandemic, James (2022) noted that nearly 17% of all teachers in Mississippi left the profession or their district. However, Mississippi Department of Education data did not distinguish whether these teachers changed districts or exited the classroom entirely. Thus, there is a need to learn more about the nature of teacher departures and whether they indicate a more extensive teacher talent crisis than anticipated.

**Significance of the Study**

Garcia and Weiss (2019a, 2019b) outlined the consequences of the teacher shortage in schools. The shortage of teachers impacts the diversity of curriculum offerings, the reputation of teaching as a profession, and school budgets because of the high cost of recruiting and
onboarding new teachers. García and Weiss (2019a) highlighted an adverse effect of inadequate teacher talent on student learning and achievement.

The adverse effects of the national critical teacher shortage are more acute for students in Mississippi, especially students of color. Sutcher et al. (2016) showed that teacher shortages disproportionately impact students of color and students in low-income communities, who are likelier to attend schools with more vacancies. Anthony et al. (2017) found that rural and highly urban communities were most disadvantaged by the difficulty of finding qualified teachers. Similarly, Abram and Burk (2021) noted that despite Mississippi’s recent student achievement outcomes, significant work remains to achieve equity for students of color. Access to teachers is one area Abram and Burk identified.

Schools, districts, and state education agencies must collaborate with state legislatures to enact comprehensive, fully funded human capital strategies that strengthen schools’ ability to attract, recruit, and retain top teacher talent. Curtis and Wurtzel (2010) suggested that using human capital strategy in education could help to retain talent and make education a compelling career where teachers believed themselves to be “the critical factor in determining their students’ achievement” (p. 194). Producing well-educated children is a human capital strategy for U.S. democracy. This study contributes to the professional mission of ensuring that children in Mississippi and the United States obtain the education they need and deserve.

Personal Background

In July 2004, I moved from Chicago, Illinois, to Clarksdale, Mississippi, to teach fourth grade in Jonestown, a rural, all-Black community. I joined nearly 120 first- and second-year Teach For America teachers and a few program alumni who had stayed beyond their initial commitment. The Mississippi Delta’s ongoing critical teacher shortage 6 years after the passage
of the Mississippi Critical Teacher Shortage Act of 1998, facilitated our entry into the state and the program. At Jonestown Elementary School, I was one of four new first-year teachers that year. Two new teachers (another Teach For America corps member and me) were from out of state; two had deep connections and ties to the community but were new to the profession, having recently graduated from local alternate route teacher preparation programs. During my 4 years at Jonestown Elementary School, I saw many teachers come and go from the small school, some quitting midyear due to their inability to meet the role’s demands.

Professional Background

I joined Teach For America’s regional staff several years after leaving my initial placement classroom. My work entailed supporting second-year corps members and alumni with their professional and personal leadership trajectories, focusing on keeping the human capital in Mississippi and Arkansas to the greatest extent possible. A colleague and I drove to school districts in Mississippi Delta communities to meet with principals and superintendents about their current Teach For America corps members and the possibility of placing incoming members in their schools. I noticed an almost universal interest in placing new teachers, but we had minimal conversations about encouraging current teachers to stay. This finding spurred my interest in teacher talent, human capital, and deep exploration into what we believed to be a regional teacher shortage.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of teachers who exited the classroom or profession during or after the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study was an exploration of the factors teachers ascribed to their
decision to exit the classroom between 2019 and 2023 in Mississippi. The findings also indicated the factors teachers believed would support their return to the classroom or profession.

**Positionality**

This section presents the positionality and reflexivity of the researcher regarding teacher resignations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. I identified with Miled’s (2019) statement, “Reflexivity is to dig deep into who/what we are… reflexivity is a process that brings the researcher’s self to the central stage and makes her/him visible” (p. 5). The author stated that reflexivity must be central to the ethnography research process. I would argue that researcher reflexivity must also take a central role in phenomenological research. Miled asked the following questions, many of them addressed in this section:

1. How do we reflect upon and evaluate our own purpose, intentions, and frames of analysis as researchers?
2. How do we predict consequences or evaluate our own potential to do harm?
3. How do we create and maintain a dialogue of collaboration in our research projects between ourselves and others?
4. How is the specificity of the local story relevant to the broader meanings and operations of the human condition?
5. How—in what location or through what intervention—will our work make the greatest contribution to equity, freedom and justice? (p. 6)

My purpose, intentions, and frames of analysis are informed by my entry and exit from the classroom. I entered the teaching profession via an alternate route and served in a critical-shortage school district each year I worked inside schools. I am not a native Mississippian, although I have lived in the state for 20 years and raised my children here, which causes me to
feel like both an insider and an outsider. The sense of purpose I derive from my research interest comes from wanting to improve the state that I and my children call home. However, I acknowledge the possibility that I can be viewed, rightly, as an outsider who wants to improve Mississippi from a place of elitism or paternalism.

I acknowledge the difficulty around my exit from the classroom. I exited after a shorter period than I envisioned because being in the classroom was no longer the best option. I decided to leave the classroom in the context of a growing family, the rising costs of childcare, and the opportunity to work from home. I understand educators’ struggles in considering whether teaching is their best option, and I appreciate their concerns.

I acknowledge and struggle with this study’s potential to do harm. I attempt to mitigate this possibility through some of the limitations and methodological choices. It is also possible that the findings might influence teachers who are considering resigning, which could harm students and schools. Teachers may feel justified based on the findings of other teachers’ experiences.

I intend to keep a dialogue of collaboration by asking about and listening to participants’ lived experiences without judgment. I will disregard my experiences, choices, decisions, and opinions, such as those about mid–school year resignations. I will also accept the limitations of my experience as a former classroom teacher. I have empathy for the experiences of teachers who taught during a global pandemic, although I did not work in the classroom then.

This research serves as a form of activism. My role as a semi-insider influenced my perspective on the experience of teaching in critical-shortage districts. I shared some of my identity and experiences with the participants, which led to more acceptance (see Dwyer &
Buckle, 2009). I benefitted from the participants’ willingness to share information, providing a greater depth and understanding of the phenomenon of study.

**Research Questions**

The research questions for this study were:

1. How do Mississippi teachers describe the ways the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their decision to exit the classroom or profession?

2. What non–COVID-19 factors do former teachers cite as leading to their decision to depart from the classroom?

3. Which factors do teachers ascribe to supporting their reentry into the profession?

**Delimitations/Limitations**

The study focused on teachers who resigned, quit, or did not renew their classroom teacher roles. Excluding teachers about to quit, resign, or choose not to return to the classroom was a limitation of the study. I choose not to accidentally risk validating a teacher’s decision to quit by interviewing them about the topic.

This study was delimited to convenience and snowball sampling to recruit educators who have left teaching. Participation was voluntary; thus, the sample was limited to teachers who chose to participate. The participants who volunteered could have had strong opinions they were more likely to express.

A third delimitation was the study’s focus on Mississippi schools and districts. I wanted the findings to be especially applicable and easily translatable into action steps and strategies for stemming attrition in the state. Research driven by conditions and realities in Mississippi will have additional credibility with the education leaders and legislators responsible for enacting the findings.
Significance of the Study

The proposed study was a means to help the educational field understand the teacher shortage problem more deeply by illuminating the experiences of teachers who have exited the classroom. I was specifically interested in the present moment, after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, amid the national panic about the teacher shortage. There have been wide-sweeping public policy, funding, and practice shifts. I hope this study’s findings allow school and district administrators to equalize opportunity for students in low-income and rural communities. A critical lever would be changing practices related to human capital and teacher talent in P–12 education.

Summary

Curtis and Wurtzel (2010) wrote about the promise of human capital strategy in education:

They [human capital efforts] have the potential to make teaching a dynamic and compelling career that draws and retains top talent. Teachers would feel respected, supported, and accountable, and know that they are the critical factor in determining their students’ achievement. (p. 194)

Educating children well is a human capital strategy for American democracy. The use of critical pedagogy in this research was appropriate to help disrupt the status quo. Shudak (2014) stated,

Because critical pedagogy in the theoretical sense views schools in terms of transformation and hope and possibility, there is a complimentary default position. This position is the belief that schools actually exist as sites in which the conditions of humans and the human condition can be greatly improved. It is a commitment to Dewey’s
position that through the school, “we shall have the deepest and best guaranty of a larger society which is worthy, lovely and harmonious. (p. 993)

Chapter II will provide an overview of the historical context of the critical teacher shortage nationally and in Mississippi. Chapter III will present the methodology, research design, and procedures approaches.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A myriad of studies shed light on the nature and history of the teacher shortage. Chapter II provides insight into the conceptual framework undergirding this study. The chapter includes syntheses of the research and relevant data on the teacher shortage nationally and in Mississippi. The chapter provides information about the workforce broadly and the teacher workforce specifically before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, there will be a discussion of gaps in the existing literature and the need for the proposed study.

National and Local Teacher Shortage

Articles and headlines about the critical nationwide teacher shortage abound. Government and education leaders in various states pursued multiple solutions to obtain enough personnel to meet the demand for teachers in classrooms. The Washington Post reported that schools in Texas would consider switching to 4 days per week to accommodate the personnel shortage (Natanson, 2022). In Mississippi, there was typical coverage lamenting a need for more public school teachers, as is standard for the start of a new school year. The contexts for these headlines were as follows. First, at the beginning of the 2022–2023 school year, Mississippi legislators provided teachers a base salary increase that was one of the largest the state’s teacher workforce had seen in recent years. The effort was an attempt to attract and retain state educators and combat inflation for these professionals (Pender, 2022). Second, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about the Great resignation, as workers across all sectors quit their jobs in record numbers, searching for more meaning, joy, and wages. Finally, teachers nationwide experienced
high levels of burnout and began quitting in record numbers. In Mississippi, more than 5,800 teachers left their district at the end of the 2020–2021 school year (James, 2022). This complicated context led to the present, as educators try to help students recover from the emotional toll and academic setback caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is a shortage of the teacher talent needed to accomplish this overwhelming task.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study came from the labor market theory in macroeconomics, specifically supply and demand. Economic labor market theory incorporates the principles of supply and demand, applied, for this study, to the teacher workforce. This study had several guiding concepts borrowed from Guarino et al. (2006) and Nguyen (2020). I leveraged relevant labor market theory factors impacting the teacher shortage.

**Teacher Labor Markets**

Nguyen (2020) stated that equilibrium in the teacher labor market exists when labor supply is matched with or equal to labor demand. Applying the principles of economics to the teacher labor market suggests that demand is the number of teaching positions offered at any point. Driving demand are student enrollment, birth rates, class size targets as defined by school systems, teaching load norms in the profession, and budgetary constraints.

The supply of teachers in the teacher labor market is the number of qualified individuals willing to teach at a given level of fixed compensation at any given time. According to Guarino et al. (2006) and Nguyen (2020), various elements impact teacher supply in the labor market. Overall compensation is a significant factor, including salaries, bonuses, other forms of monetary compensation, benefits, and job-derived rewards. Salaries contribute strongly to overall choice-making about teaching. Jacob (2007) noted, “People are more likely to enter teaching when
starting teacher salaries are high relative to salaries in other occupations. And they are more likely to leave teaching when outside wage options are higher” (p. 139). Other job-derived rewards include amenities in the geographic location near the school community, school facilities, and other factors that boost the perceived value of the role. Guarino et al. (2006) suggested that “individuals will become or remain teachers if teaching represents the most attractive activity to pursue among all activities available to them” (p. 175). Researchers have suggested that policymakers manipulate desirability and other supply factors to keep supply aligned with demand. Nguyen (2020) noted that the teacher labor market is situated inside of and continuously influenced by the broader labor market, which includes the market for other occupations requiring similar skills and levels of education.

**Why People Become Teachers**

Fray and Gore (2018) reported, “The flexibility offered by a teaching career and its apparent fit with family demands” and served as a positive motivator for those choosing the teaching profession. Olsen (2008) found that prospective educators perceived a career in teaching to be compatible with their anticipated role as a mother. However, in the current labor climate, working parents have flexible options such as working from home. Teaching may no longer be the most attractive activity among job-seekers’ options. This study included an exploration of teachers’ reasons for pursuing the profession.

**Understanding Gen Z and Millennial Workers**

There is a significant misalignment between young talent entering the workforce, such as Gen Z and Millennial workers, and the current reality of school and school district operations, practices, and values. Generational workplace trends indicate job seekers are most attracted to careers with flexibility. In many cases, schools and school systems have not adapted to meet the
values and motivations of Millennials and Gen Z workers, such as flexibility (Alegis Group, 2018).

Alegis Group (2018) outlined several challenges and opportunities companies face in acquiring Millennial and Gen Z talent. These motivations and values include the opportunity to work independently; working for a company that owns its brand and brand identity; a willingness to hear team members’ ideas and act on them; opportunities for advancement; flexible schedules and structure (e.g., the ability to gig, freelance, or work part-time); creative perks, such as childcare and fertility services; a diverse, inclusive, and equitable workplace environment; optimized administrative processes; and stretch assignments.

Millennials comprise the largest generation at work in the United States, forcing employers to adapt to their workplace values and preferences, (Alegis Group, 2018). The motivations and preferences of Millennial and Gen Z talent seem disconnected from the current reality of most school districts in the United States. School districts may struggle to attract Millennial and Gen Z talent without adapting to address this disconnect.

**Labor Shortages in the Workforce**

Supply and demand shift depending on the value assigned to the role under the “conditions of fixed compensation” (Nguyen, 2020, p. 2). Nguyen (2020) further points out that when workers view positions as having low value, there will be a labor shortfall because fewer workers will enter the field. Fewer laborers enter the teaching field (fewer college students seeking education degrees). The value of teacher fluctuates, depending on a variety of factors and characteristics (e.g., salary, workplace conditions, geographic location, flexibility), creating labor shortages concentrated in certain types of schools and communities.
A significant contributing factor to the reduced teacher supply is the decline in interest in becoming a teacher. The Phi Delta Kappa (2018) annual poll on Americans’ attitudes toward teaching showed that, for the first time, a majority of American parents preferred that their children not become public school teachers. Parents’ perspectives and opinions influence the decisions of their job-seeking children. Parents’ disapproval may drive prospective teachers from selecting the profession.

Further impacting supply are preferences to teach in communities with amenities, which creates a disadvantage for schools in rural and urban communities where such amenities do not exist. According to Howard (2003),

The alarming reality of the teacher shortage results in simple supply and demand principles being played out in classrooms throughout the United States. Unfortunately, the supply side works in favor of nonurban school districts at a time when urban schools can least afford to suffer sacrifices in teacher quality. (p. 154)

Teacher supply issues disadvantage urban schools, rural schools, and schools with predominantly low-income students. Teacher candidates frequently prefer small-town and suburban settings, but these districts offer fewer teaching openings (Howard, 2003). Teachers may express a willingness to get started in less-preferred schools or districts but transfer at the first opportunity to take a role in what they view as a more desirable school. Howard (2003) stated, “Teacher candidates who have no desire to be in urban schools reluctantly go to such schools simply because positions are available” (p. 152). When the opportunity presents itself, these teachers depart for what they believe to be greener pastures. Anthony et al. (2017) reported, “Ingersoll attributes approximately half of all teacher turnover to what he calls cross-school migration, meaning teachers leave one teaching job for another” (p. 25). Thus, schools with
students of color and schools in rural communities frequently get talent who do not want to remain long-term and may leave their positions at the first chance.

**Understanding the Critical Teacher Shortage**

The critical teacher shortage, a term with national and state-specific meaning, is not distributed equally across all schools. Frequently, students in low-income communities, students of color, and students in rural communities receive what Howard (2003) termed the “short end of the shortage” (p. 142). Because of the teacher shortage’s disproportionate impact, it was necessary to examine teacher workforce shortages through the lenses of economic theory coupled with critical theory. The shortage does not equally impact schools and students; therefore, solutions to address the shortage must consider the factors that impact the shortage.

Howard stated, “On a larger scale, one could point to a particularly sobering reason for educators’ reluctance to teach in urban schools, namely the deep-seated attitudes many individuals have toward people of color and individuals from low-income backgrounds” (p. 151). Exploring this possibility required a critical perspective in addition to an economic one.

**Leveraging a Critical Perspective**

This study exercised a critical lens to understand the political, social, and labor market factors impacting the teacher shortage. As noted by Howard (2003), “Urban schools have been and will continue to be, among those most severely hampered by a teacher shortage” (p. 144). Howard questioned whether the teacher shortage reflects how many people, specifically teachers, feel about teaching low-income students and students of color.

Critical theory suggests considering political, racial, social, and economic factors in designing solutions. Shudak (2014) stated, “A pedagogy that is critical leaves no stone unturned in its search for truths, understanding, and meaning, and is also quite cognizant of why it is
overturning stones in the first place” (p. 991). Mack (2010) highlighted that the critical paradigm was most appropriate for “the researcher who seeks to change and challenge social phenomenon” (p. 5). Mack posited that “the critical educational researcher aims not only to understand or give an account of behaviors in societies but to change these behaviors” (p. 5). This study followed the critical tradition to create change and challenge the status quo, especially where the status quo consistently underserves youth of color.

This study was an attempt to understand the factors surrounding the teacher shortage and contribute to a comprehensive vision for human capital in teaching that could change the current reality. Human capital strategy in education will remain inequitable unless scholars illuminate the issues through credible research. Practitioners may be able to apply this research and determine effective solutions for pressing statewide talent challenges. Howard (2003) argued, The entire education community must begin to explore potential interventions for reversing the teacher shortage. The nation’s schools will begin to feel relief from this crisis only when school leaders from affected and unaffected schools recognize that the problem is one that threatens the very nature of teaching and learning for all students. (p. 160)

The philosophical underpinning of this research is to change the status quo, dismantle inequity, and reposition low-income and youth of color as change-makers in their own communities.

A Brief History of the Mississippi Teacher Shortage

*The Mississippi Education Reform Act*

William Winter was elected Mississippi governor in 1979 after running on a statewide education reform agenda. The regular legislative sessions during 1981 and 1982 brought failed attempts to enact that reform agenda due to reluctant legislators. Winter’s team and wife
undertook a massive public engagement campaign strategy in collaboration with journalists at the Jackson-Clarion Ledger. These combined efforts resulted in the passage of the Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982 during a special legislative session (Meacham, 2017).

The Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982 created compulsory school attendance law, offered state-funded kindergarten, increased teacher pay, and developed funding for teacher assistants and truant officers. The law also produced statewide testing and performance-based accreditation systems for school districts (Meacham, 2017). These priorities seemed timely. According to Anthony et al. (2017), the 1980s brought increasing student enrollment, expanded employment opportunities for women outside the classroom, and high numbers of teachers exiting the profession nationally.

Released in 1983, A Nation at Risk warned that American democracy was in danger without immediate action to correct the course of education outcomes in the United States. Mississippi had already addressed some of the most critical barriers to an educated citizenry and seemed on track to combat the issues. Despite these advances, Mississippi lagged other states in education funding, teacher pay, and student academic outcomes.

By 1988, the national teacher labor market had begun shifting toward shortage from the previous workforce surplus (Haggstrom et al., 1988). The researchers questioned whether current data systems could capture the complexity of the new teacher labor market. Haggstrom et al. (1988) stated, “Demographic and social changes are converging to produce extraordinary volatility in the structure of the teaching profession and the character of the teaching force” (p. 2). The researchers stressed the need to develop new systems for tracking enrollments in teacher preparation programs, teacher vacancies across the country, and teacher mobility across districts.
Embracing the Mississippi Adequate Education Program

The next few years in Mississippi saw pushes for equitable funding of schools across the state and an emphasis on leveling the field between wealthy and poor districts. In 1997, the legislature enacted the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP), the state’s education funding mechanism. With MAEP, legislative personnel hoped to avert family and school district lawsuits over unequal funding between wealthier and poorer districts. Another purpose was to equalize funding between the lowest-funded districts and those in wealthier areas of the state. Finally, the legislature sought to address the low achievement of state schools, as Mississippi remained outpaced by other states in student performance (Dreher, 2015; Parents’ Campaign, 2022). MAEP’s passage followed 2 years of careful study and over a gubernatorial veto. The MAEP program has rarely been fully funded by the state legislature (Harrison, 2023).

The Introduction of the Mississippi Critical Teacher Shortage Act

In 1998, Mississippi’s legislature continued to advance an education-focused agenda. After a 2-year study, legislators passed the Mississippi Critical Teacher Shortage Act, which provided financial support and incentives for individuals willing to teach in communities designated as critical geographic shortage areas or critical teacher shortage areas. The incentives included reimbursement for moving expenses and forgivable loans to make a down payment on a home in a critical shortage area. Programs like Teach For America and the Mississippi Teacher Corps recruited, trained, and supported groups of recent college students to serve in difficult to staff school districts across the state.

Mississippi defines a critical shortage area as a district with 60 or more teaching positions with 10% or more of their teaching staff not appropriately licensed or districts with fewer than 60 teaching positions with 15% or more of their teaching staff not appropriately licensed.
Inappropriately licensed teachers teach outside their field of expertise, teach without a license, or serve in teaching positions as long-term substitute teachers (Betz, 2021; Mississippi Critical Shortage Act, 1997). Mississippi’s school districts used MAEP and Critical Teacher Shortage Act funding and resources to maximize their ability to fully staff schools. Critical-shortage districts relied on programs such as Teach For America and the Mississippi Teacher Corps, and tapped unlicensed teacher talent to fill remaining vacancies. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) shifted the national focus from teacher quantity to teacher quality.

No Child Left Behind and a Highly Qualified Teacher Focus

NCLB is federal legislation created during the George W. Bush administration. The act was a means to improve American schools’ performance and create federal accountability oversight structures. NCLB also strongly influenced the federal role in creating teacher quality requirements, introducing the concept of a “highly qualified teacher.” According to Adamson and Darling-Hammond (2012),

Congress included a provision in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 that states should ensure that all students have access to “highly qualified teachers,” defined as teachers with full certification and demonstrated competence in the subject matter field(s) they teach. (p. 4)

NCLB created pressure for schools and school systems to put highly qualified teachers in front of every student, with accountability measures for schools that failed to do so. With the rush to find experienced and properly licensed teacher talent, difficult-to-staff schools became even more disadvantaged. The national emphasis on teacher quality continued despite significant labor market shortages for certain schools in certain communities. Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) noted this obstacle:
These factors, together with other labor market conditions, have meant that some schools traditionally have been “hard to staff.” The hardest-hit schools chiefly serve poor, minority and low-achieving children—the same children whose learning must increase significantly if the central NCLB goal of closing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils is to be accomplished. (p. 2)

Labor market issues continued to impact schools nationwide until they peaked just before the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Before the onset of the historic COVID-19 pandemic, various sources in the teacher labor market research arena identified another oncoming crisis: a critical teacher shortage unlike previously witnessed. The U.S. Department of Education reported that teacher preparation program enrollments fell by nearly 35% (Sutcher et al., 2016). Although this data point is a single indicator of interest in entering the teaching profession, it is an important factor. An influx of newly prepared teachers is a significant aspect of the complex teacher labor market. As veteran teachers retire and natural attrition shifts a small portion of teachers out of the workforce each year, having a ready supply of teachers is crucial. The value proposition of a degree in traditional teacher education may be diminishing for job seekers. These factors result in a shrinking interest in teaching and a dwindling supply of traditionally prepared teachers.

The Phi Delta Kappa (2018) poll measured national attitudes about teaching, finding that “even as most Americans continue to say they have high trust and confidence in teachers, a majority also say they don’t want their own children to become teachers” (p. 3). The report suggested that “public school teaching as a career path has lost much of its allure” (p. 7).
In March 2019, as the COVID-19 pandemic was fortifying, the Learning Policy Institute identified trends in teacher supply and demand impacting the teacher workforce (García & Weiss, 2019a, 2019b). García and Weiss (2019a) identified an increased demand for teachers while describing the workforce as a “leaky bucket,” with many departures due to teacher attrition not accounted for by retirement. The researchers noted “a variety of indicators of the shortage, including state-by-state subject area vacancies, personal testimonials and data from state and school district officials, and declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs” (p. 2) and established the importance of these indicators as crucial markers of shifts in the teacher labor market. García and Weiss (2019a) stated, “these indicators are critical signals. They help analysts detect when there are not enough qualified teachers to fill staffing needs in a labor market that does not operate like other labor markets” (p. 2). These and other researchers deemed the teacher shortage was much worse than previously believed, especially when factoring in quality factors, such as credentials.

Anthony et al. (2017) discussed how the teacher shortage impacted certain Mississippi school districts, especially those in the Delta:

In Mississippi, there are forty-seven districts with critical teacher shortages (as of 2014). Mississippi defines a critical shortage district as “those with sixty or more teaching positions that have ten percent of their teaching staff not properly licensed for the subject they are teaching. (p. 25)

These authors noted the impact of race, social class, and poverty on a school district’s ability to recruit and retain teachers.

If a district is in or near the Yazoo-Mississippi River Delta region, it may experience a teacher shortage, and the odds of facing a shortage are four times more likely if the
district has a percentage of black students significantly higher than an adjacent school district. (p. 28)

In a second report about the teacher shortage, García and Weiss (2019b) suggested, Unfilled vacancies happen for any number of reasons, including reduced attractiveness of teaching as a profession, increases in school enrollment, reductions in class sizes, and an excessive number of teachers leaving their schools. The teacher shortage constitutes a crisis because of its negative effects on students, teachers, and the education system at large. (p. 2)

Researchers in Mississippi believed the cause of the local shortage to have much more complex origins, and that many of the solutions are place-based and require societal solutions.

As the pandemic spread, schools closed worldwide, and teachers and families grappled with virtual learning. When schools returned to in-person learning, teachers and students struggled with the impact of unprocessed grief from the pandemic, mental health issues such as anxiety, and increased pressure to make up for lost learning time. Although the Great Resignation had not spread among schoolteachers by February 2022, Camacho (2021) noted, “Coronavirus is just the latest crack in a system badly in need of an overhaul. Teachers were already burning out amid ever-increasing demands to do more, with little support and with stagnating salary increases” (p. 2). The researcher continued that “failing to modernize the teaching profession could make it even harder to attract a new generation of talented individuals into the classroom” (p. 3). Ideas about how to modernize the teaching profession would be of interest to collect during this research.

In 2020, Governor Tate Reeves called for the Southern Regional Education Board and education stakeholders across the state to study Mississippi’s persistent teacher shortage. The
task force devised several innovative strategies to address the shortage, including an updated policy framework, improved state data systems, and strategic marketing to attract young people to the profession (Mississippi Governor’s Education Human Capital Task Force, 2021).

By the end of the 2021–2022 school year, the problem of teachers quitting had reached a critical point nationally and in the state. The Mississippi Department of Education reported nearly 3,000 teacher vacancies and noted that nearly 20% of teachers in the state left their positions (James, 2022). Teachers cited low salaries, high debt loads, a lack of support and respect from administrators, and burnout as reasons for exiting. The labor force is experiencing a period of unusually high resignations, worsened by the pandemic (Berger, 2022; Rainey, 2022). In a 2022 survey report, the National Education Association suggested that schools should anticipate massive staff shortages, with “an alarming 55% of educators now indicating that they are ready to leave the profession they love earlier than planned” (Jotkoff, 2022, p. 1). Perhaps responsively, the Mississippi legislature provided a 2022-2023 base salary increase for teachers, largest the state’s teacher workforce had seen in recent years. Policy makers sought to attract young people into the profession and retain those already teaching, (Pender, 2022).

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many challenges and tragedies, including losing loved ones and exacerbating health disparities. The pandemic also caused many in the workforce to prioritize their happiness in response to what they lost during the shutdowns. Professionals across various sectors quit their jobs in record numbers, seeking meaning and hoping to be valued. Workers also sought incomes that could keep up with rising inflation. Teachers began quitting in record numbers, seeking roles that allowed them to work from home and earn more money and pursuing the work–life balance many found lacking in traditional teaching positions.
(Morrison, 2021). Whereas getting children back into classrooms was the biggest challenge of 2021, “The challenge for 2022 is keeping teachers there” (para. 5). This study enabled an understanding of the reasons for the Great Resignation and ways to maintain teacher talent.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study focused on determining the factors contributing to teacher exits from Mississippi schools and school districts during and since the global COVID-19 pandemic. There was an exploration of what factors Mississippi teachers ascribed to their decision to exit the classroom between 2019 and 2023. The literature shows that before and around 2019, experts became highly concerned about the volatility of the teacher labor market (Christensen et al., 2019; García & Weiss, 2019a, 2019b; Partelow, 2019). Developing a more robust understanding of the teacher labor market and teacher exits from the profession in Mississippi is vital to ensuring that students can access a high-quality education.

Recent research on the Mississippi teacher labor market suggests that more than 15% of teachers left their positions at the end of the 2021–2022 school year (Betz, 2021; James, 2021, 2022). It is unknown if these teachers left their role to assume teaching positions in other schools or districts or whether they left the profession. National sources support the teacher attrition trend found in Mississippi, noting alarming teacher shortages nationally (Berger, 2022; Quilantan, 2022; Rainey, 2022). National data suggests that nearly 55% of teachers considered leaving the profession earlier than they anticipated due to burnout caused by the pandemic, (Quilantan, 2022). Teachers across various states leveraged social media sites like Tik Tok to share their stories of quitting, and to share resources on how to transition out of teaching and into other sectors, (Berger, 2022). There will be an even more significant problem for the future of the teacher labor market if the field does not undertake swift action.
This study had a transcendental phenomenological design to describe the experiences of teachers who exited the classroom or profession during or after the COVID-19 pandemic. This research was an attempt to uncover the factors these teachers believed would support their possible return to the classroom or profession. The findings may contribute to the profession, identifying the factors contributing to teacher exits and illuminating factors supporting reentry.

This chapter presents the research methodology and rationale for its selection. There will be a discussion of the research design, data collection, and ethical considerations.

**Research Questions**

The research questions for this study were:

1. How do Mississippi teachers describe the ways the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their decision to exit the classroom or profession?
2. What non–COVID-19 factors do former teachers cite as leading to their decision to depart from the classroom?
3. Which factors do teachers ascribe to supporting their reentry into the profession?

The study was a means to understand the phenomenon of teachers quitting in Mississippi in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicate several teachers’ shared experiences with the phenomenon of quitting to allow the field to develop a deeper understanding of teachers’ articulations of the factors pushing them out of the field.

**Research Methodology**

The selected methodology for this study was qualitative. This method was appropriate to better understand individuals and their shared experiences with the phenomenon of leaving teaching. The participants’ detailed responses provided a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to teacher quitting. The findings could lead to modifications to current human
capital practices in education. Qualitative research was appropriate based on careful decisions related to researcher alignment with the underlying assumptions of this method. According to Yilmaz (2013), “Qualitative research is based on the epistemological assumption that social phenomena are so complex and interwoven that they cannot be reduced to isolated variables” (p. 311). Teacher factors related to exiting teaching are complex and interwoven.

**Research Design**

A phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to engage more deeply in the experiences of participating teachers who exited the classroom during this period. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “A phenomenological approach is well-suited to studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences” (p. 28). In phenomenological studies, the researcher focuses on the lived experiences the participants share and synthesizes the experiences through horizontalization. Through this method, all teachers’ experiences with quitting receive equal treatment and importance. From the study’s findings, legislators and educators could learn more about the experiences of teachers who have exited the profession.

Other qualitative designs underwent consideration. Ethnography is most appropriate when attempting to study the culture of a group’s beliefs, values, and attitudes through embedded, deep engagement with the group. An ethnographic approach would be impractical because the study’s subjects (teachers who quit) were not embedded in a group. The participants were no longer in the cultural group of teachers, as they had already exited the classroom teaching role. Narrative inquiry focuses on the human story from beginning to end and ensures subjects feel seen and heard as a result of their participation. Although the researcher ensured that former teachers felt seen and heard, the primary motivation for the study was to synthesize the common experiences. The synthesis of experiences will yield the most potential for the field.
Case study researchers seek meaning and understanding through rich and descriptive investigation of single cases. A case study design was not suitable for this study to understand trends and similar experiences across multiple cases bound by the common experience of quitting during this period.

The selected design for this study was phenomenology. Phenomenology was the most appropriate because of its emphasis on the “common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Using a phenomenological design allowed collecting data from teachers who left the field during or after the COVID-19 pandemic and constructing a synthesized description of multiple teachers’ shared experiences.

This study had primary data sources in the form of interviews with teachers who were actively teaching before the COVID-19 pandemic or began teaching during the pandemic and subsequently quit. The teachers engaged in structured interviews (see Appendix A), each answering the same questions in the same order. The structured approach elicited information about how teachers felt about teaching before they quit. The former teachers also described what happened when they decided to quit. The last questions pertained to factors that might facilitate a potential return to the classroom in the future.

**Positionality**

I made methodological choices informed by my identity as an educator who values the stories and experiences of other educators, particularly teachers. I believe knowledge is subject to interpretation; thus, a qualitative method and phenomenological design were appropriate. The stories and the distillation of educator experiences through the phenomenological research process will contribute to the literature on teacher exits and the Great Resignation. Participant
interviews allowed educators to characterize their experiences and was a data collection approach informed by my experience as a marginalized person. Using teachers’ words and experiences was a deliberate choice informed by a subjectivist ontological perspective.

**Population and Sample Selection**

The population for the study was former teachers in Mississippi who quit teaching between 2019 and 2022 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participation was open to former teachers who quit any time during the school year and those who left teaching after the school year ended (i.e., they did not breach their teaching contract but opted not to return). Teachers who retired as a form of quitting could participate if they indicated retiring earlier than they had planned. Both purposeful and snowball sampling were used to select participants. According to Maxwell (2012), “Purposeful sampling…is a strategy in which particular settings, persons or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 235). Purposeful sampling was best suited to capture the experiences of teachers from various areas of the state with varying levels of teaching experience and quit in different ways (i.e., mid–school year, end of the year, or retirement). Snowball sampling was leveraged as well. The researcher asked each participant to refer other potential participants who they knew of who had also exited teaching. The researcher then applied purposeful sampling to determine whether those prospective participants met the criterion.

Although the desired sample size was 10 to 15, nine former teachers participated in the study. This sample size enabled capturing the experiences of teachers who quit their teaching jobs, thus having a shared experience with the phenomenon while describing the experiences of teachers from various areas of the state, school community types, and levels of experience. Recruitment occurred via e-mail to Teach For America alumni distribution lists and in the
Mississippi First newsletter. Recruitment also occurred through several contacts with various school districts, including ReImagine Public Charter School, Clarksdale Collegiate Public Charter School, and Jackson Public School District. The researcher also conducted recruitment via Facebook and LinkedIn social media networks. At the end of each interview, the researcher asked the participant to recommend other prospective participants.

The initial outreach included a quick survey (see Appendix B) to ensure the prospective participants met the outlined criteria. After individuals completed the initial outreach survey, the researcher contacted each via email to confirm whether they met the research requirements. Qualified participants received an invitation to schedule an interview using an electronic scheduling link.

**Procedures**

The researcher performed outreach and collected responses while conducting interviews. The researcher obtained consent forms electronically and conducted in-depth one-on-one recorded interviews via Zoom, using an electronic service to transcribe the recordings. The rename feature on Zoom ensured participant confidentiality, and the recordings did not contain identifying information. Virtual interviews occurred to reduce travel time across the state and aid in the ease of recording and transcription. The researcher will delete all Zoom recordings in accordance with institutional practices of destroying raw research data at the conclusion of the research.

**Sources of Data**

The researcher developed the interview instrument (see Appendix A) and created a structured interview protocol. The researcher developed the questions to allow participants to consider, reflect on, and share their experiences with exiting teaching. The interview questions
directly aligned with the research questions. In applying the interview instrument, the researcher asked former teachers to reflect on their reasons for entering the profession and provided several opportunities to reflect on the factors that contributed to quitting. The questions about quitting aligned with existing research about reasons teachers leave the profession (García & Weiss, 2019; James, 2022; Jotkoff, 2022).

**Participants**

Nine participants were interviewed as part of this research. Descriptions of each follow, including general information they shared about where they taught, grade level, content area, entry pathway into teaching. These descriptions will detail the factors that contributed to exits for each participant, as well as re-entry notes the participant shared during the interview. Six of the nine participants became teachers via the alternate route, which is reflective of the most recent educator preparation data for Mississippi. According to the Mississippi Department of Education’s 2022 Annual Educator Preparation Program Performance Report, 60% of Mississippi’s teacher candidates were admitted into alternate route certification programs, reflecting a majority of teacher candidates being alternately prepared, (Mississippi Department of Education Division of Educator Preparation, 2022). The proportion of alternate route prepared teachers who participated in this study is aligned with the general population of recently admitted teacher candidates.

Monique is a first-year high school teacher who transitioned into the profession from a career in health care. She described teaching as a life goal of hers. Monique completed a master’s degree in special education through an online provider. She obtained a teaching license through a special process which allows districts to request credentials for individuals who may not meet current requirements. This process is frequently exercised by districts that are impacted by the
state’s teacher shortage. Monique was assigned to teach tenth grade Special Education Inclusion in a small school district in the north Mississippi Delta. Monique noted that her education preparation program did not teach her how to complete lesson plans, Individualized Education Plans, or other functions of a Special Education teacher. She relied on the administrators in her district to provide the knowledge and support needed for her role. When the support provided in the building proved to be inadequate to the demands of the role, Monique exited teaching. She returned to her previous role in the healthcare sector. Monique shared that she would consider returning to the teaching profession if she were able to obtain adequate training for the role. However, she expressed a reluctance to teach in a Special Education setting due to her negative experience.

Carey is a first-year elementary educator who transitioned into teaching from other non-teaching roles within education, where she had decades of experience. She obtained her teaching license through the Performance-Based Licensure program. This program allowed prospective educators to demonstrate effectiveness through rubric-aligned teacher actions rather than proficiency on standardized teacher entry exams. Carey described being overwhelmed by the workload of teaching special education inclusion. She described providing inclusion services while also supporting students whose behaviors were deemed as disruptive to the regular setting. She also noted the difficulty with the many requirements of the school district’s central office of Special Education and the school building principal. Carey served in a larger sized district in the central part of the state. The school district from which she exited is designated as a critical needs district. At the end of her first year of teaching, Carey officially retired from teaching by exercising her years of experience in the Mississippi educator retirement system. She supplemented her retirement income with part-time work, while pursuing additional degrees in
education. Carey desires to support schools in the future but refuses to return to schools as a teacher. She noted that she would consider working as an educational consultant.

Natasha is a K-12 behavior support teacher who returned to teaching after her initial exit from the profession during the COVID-19 pandemic. She exited the larger sized critical needs school district where she worked to serve as a team leader of a non-profit organization where she could make more money. She felt urged to exit because she had not received a raise in many years in her role and she worried about her ability to provide for her son, who was headed to college. Natasha noted that during the time of her exit, she was also negatively impacted by grief due to having lost her mother. While she was out of the classroom, she pursued counseling services to provide her with additional tools for her emotional well-being. Natasha returned to her role after having exited because her school district provided a raise for educators in her role, and her son was able to obtain a college scholarship, which lessened her financial needs to contribute to his education. Natasha is a veteran traditional route educator with a doctorate (non-teaching) degree, as well as counseling and administrator licenses.

Jasmine, a high school science teacher, left the teaching profession to serve in education policy at the state level after nearly a decade in the classroom. Jasmine is a traditional route teacher who holds multiple education degrees and at the time of the interview was completing her doctorate in education policy. Jasmine described multiple frustrating experiences with her teaching role, including being passed over for promotions because of what she believed to be gender discrimination. She felt frustrated by organizational inefficiency and administrators shifting work onto teachers. Jasmine also noted being exasperated by post-pandemic student behavior, as well as a lack of administrator support with managing challenging student behavior. She now works at a research organization focused on the teacher pipeline in Arkansas while
completing her dissertation. Her school district was a mid-sized school district which was not impacted by a critical teacher shortage.

Brandy began her teaching career as an alternate route educator through Teach For America in elementary school art. She served in a small sized school district located in the Mississippi Delta. During her decade of teaching experience, Brandy transitioned from elementary art to third grade literacy, which is a high stake tested grade level. She also enrolled in a local university to obtain an advanced degree in education through a partnership program offered through Teach For America. Brandy exited teaching to start a non-profit organization in her local community, where they focus on play, gardening, and social-emotional wellness of children. She left because she felt frustrated by the demands placed on students and teachers without adequate support. Brandy would be willing to return to teaching if schools would lessen their emphasis on standardized testing and focus on the ‘whole child.’

Lori Ann began her career in teaching through Teach For America alternate route program and remained in education, later earning a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction, as well as an education specialist degree in administration and leadership. She exited teaching from a small, rural, critical teacher shortage school district in the central part of Mississippi. She left teaching after negative experiences with her administrator during her fifth year in the classroom as a teacher. Lori Ann serves as an education policy director at a non-profit organization in Mississippi. She explained that she would be willing to return to the classroom if teachers had more autonomy in the curriculum and administrators had better management skills.

Denise is a traditional route educator with at least five years of teaching experience in multiple states. She exited teaching mid school-year during the pandemic while she was serving as an elementary school math educator. She taught in a school district that was not impacted by
the critical teacher shortage in the north part of Mississippi. Denise exited teaching to work on staff at a nearby university in the education department. She attributed her exit from teaching to a lack of administrator support and a demanding workload. She would consider returning to the teaching profession in the future. However, she finds working in a different role more compatible with her life and parenting responsibilities.

Faith left teaching after her third year in the classroom as a Teach For America alumnus. She had been serving as a middle school Science teacher in the Mississippi Delta in a critical teacher shortage school district. Faith exited from the classroom after suffering from complications of long COVID-19 disease, including brain fog and excessive fatigue. She left to work remotely in an education research non-profit organization that is less physically demanding than teaching. She is reluctant to return to teaching because she believed that it would not be possible for her to meet the requirements of the role as she recovers.

Audrey is a Teach For America Louisiana alumna who exited teaching after almost a decade of teaching in Mississippi and Louisiana. When she left teaching, she had been working in a medium-sized district in the southern part of Mississippi in a critical shortage district. The elementary math teacher quit because of challenges working with her administrators. She noted that she loved teaching and would love to return at some point if principals and superintendents were better leaders, and teachers were able to have more of a voice in the running of schools. She remained in education, and currently works in education policy.

Data Analysis

The recorded interviews took place virtually, with subsequent transcription by an automated transcription service. The researcher took focused notes during the interviews to
capture key phrases and terms of interest and synthesize participant responses. The transcripts underwent editing to ensure accuracy and cross-check the automated service.

Data analysis followed Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) steps to analyze responsive interviews: (a) transcribe and summarize every interview; (b) define, find, and mark in the text excerpts that have relevant concepts or themes (preliminary coding); (c) find the excerpts marked with the same code, sort them into a single data file, then summarize each file; (d) sort and resort the materials in each file, comparing the excerpts and summarizing the results of each sorting; and (e) integrate the different descriptions from different interviewees to create a complete picture. In addition, the researcher created a notable quotations file to store noteworthy responses that articulated the emerging themes from the interviews.

The first round of coding focused on finding and marking excerpts with relevant concepts or themes. The researcher created an initial set of preliminary codes in the margins of the transcribed interviews. During this “preliminary jotting,” the researcher kept the research question visible to help focus the coding process (see Saldaña, 2013). The preliminary notes’ organization enabled combining and rereading excerpts marked with the same preliminary theme. The second round of coding ensured the researcher did not miss any important elements and appropriately captured the preliminary themes. This process allowed an additional opportunity for researcher reflection and synthesis, ensuring the initial codes captured the essence of teachers’ experiences with quitting. An additional round of coding allowed for integrating those excerpts into a distilled essence of the experience.

The selected data analysis method allowed the researcher to distill the structures of the shared experience (i.e., quitting teaching) across teachers’ descriptions of having experienced this phenomenon. Per Patton’s (2015) approach to phenomenology, the data analysis process
deemphasized the individual experiences in favor of the shared experience of many. The analysis ensured phenomenological reduction, which entails researchers bracketing their experiences and personal knowledge of the phenomenon to focus on the essence emerging from the coding. The integration of the descriptions concluded with the former teachers’ shared experiences quitting between 2019 and 2022.

**Validity**

Establishing internal validity in this study required addressing history, subject selection, and experimental mortality. The mental and physical changes teachers experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic may account for their perspectives. For example, a teacher who experienced long COVID disease could find teaching much more challenging after the pandemic, unaware of the lasting physical impact of contracting COVID disease (history). There was also a possibility of bias in the selection of subjects. The researcher recruited and selected participants from various areas in the state and teachers who had varying levels of interest in sharing their experiences. Teachers who were eager to share their stories may have skewed the results because they felt strongly about the subject. It was important to capture the stories and experiences of a variety of teachers.

**Ethical Considerations**

The researcher sought and obtained University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before engaging participants. Participant recruitment adhered to IRB guidelines and informed consent procedures. The researcher protected participants’ identities and confidentiality, using pseudonyms instead of names and removing all identifying details from the data. The researcher acted to prevent coercion and protect participant well-being.
Summary

The researcher sought to create a space where teachers could share their experiences, stories, and ideas about what could bring them back to the profession. Learning from teachers’ lived experiences could allow practitioners to apply this study’s findings and shift the status quo. This study was an attempt to disrupt Mississippi’s leaky education pipelines, which disproportionately impact students in the Delta region, students living in poverty, and students of color (Anthony et al., 2017; García & Weiss, 2019; Howard, 2003).

Data collection occurred via qualitative structured interviews. The nine participants had served in various districts across the state. Eight of the teachers had left and remained exited from teaching at the time of the interview; one had returned to her role but described her experience exiting during the COVID-19 pandemic. The recorded interviews underwent transcription using Otter.ai, which uses artificial intelligence to develop speech-to-text transcriptions. The initial review involved the researcher listening to the audio recording alongside the transcript, making corrections when needed, and ensuring the transcripts reflected the participants’ statements as accurately as possible. This zero coding was appropriate to address any misinterpretations of the artificial intelligence service. The researcher then summarized the contents of each interview to capture a high-level overview of the answers to the research questions for each interview in an analytic memo.

During the first coding cycle, the researcher organized the transcribed interview data into tabs on a spreadsheet, labeling each according to the participant number. This cycle involved breaking the data into segments and organizing them on the spreadsheet, allowing the researcher to segment lengthy responses into manageable data for later coding. This splitting helped to organize codes later during the coding process. Preliminary first-round coding entailed collecting
text excerpts, some of which would become tentative codes. In vivo coding produced more than 40 initial codes.

In the second round of coding, the researcher began to generate provisional codes based on the preliminary code notes. These initial codes were added to a third column called “Codes,” next to preliminary codes and the raw data/transcribed data. An additional coding cycle led to the consolidation, organization, and restructuring of smaller codes into broader categories. For example, the initial codes *positive about teaching*, *positive impact in role*, and *rewarded in teaching role* were consolidated into *positive about teaching and impact*. A final cycle of coding occurred to identify categories, themes, and theories from the codes.

The interview questions were means to gauge the former teachers’ lived experiences and answer the following research questions:

1. How do Mississippi teachers describe the ways the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their decision to exit the classroom or profession?
2. What non–COVID-19 factors do former teachers cite as leading to their decision to depart from the classroom?
3. Which factors do teachers ascribe to supporting their reentry into the profession?
Table 1.1

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Self-identified demographics</th>
<th>Professional details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>First-year alternate route teacher</td>
<td>High school, 10th-grade Special Education Inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carey</td>
<td>First-year alternate route teacher</td>
<td>Elementary, Special Education Inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natasha</td>
<td>Veteran teacher, traditional route</td>
<td>PreK–12, behavior support teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Veteran teacher, traditional route</td>
<td>High school, Secondary Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandy</td>
<td>Veteran teacher, alternate route</td>
<td>Elementary, Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lori Ann</td>
<td>Veteran teacher, alternate route</td>
<td>Elementary, English/Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>Veteran teacher, traditional route</td>
<td>Elementary, Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>Early career, alternate route</td>
<td>Middle School, Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audrey</td>
<td>Veteran teacher, alternate route</td>
<td>Elementary, Math</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Nine former teachers participated in structured interviews to answer the following questions:

1. How do Mississippi teachers describe the ways the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their decision to exit the classroom or profession?
2. What non–COVID-19 factors do former teachers cite as leading to their decision to depart from the classroom?
3. Which factors do teachers ascribe to supporting their re-entry into the profession?

This study was a means to understand the factors that contributed to teacher exits due to the combined crises of the teacher shortage, the Great Resignation, and the unequal impact of the teacher shortage on students of color and students in low-income communities. Seven of the nine participants in this study exited teaching from schools classified within critical shortage districts. Understanding these teachers’ experiences holds important implications for the teacher labor market.

Overview of Findings

The participants identified the COVID-19–related factors that influenced their decision to exit the classroom or profession and factors unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the purposes of this study, a factor was a cause or reason the participants identified as contributing to their exit from teaching. The interviewees highlighted the aspects of teaching they believed were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but those were not isolated to health, disease, or
wellness factors. The participants felt the COVID-19 pandemic worsened their teaching experience and created additional work. Educators suggested that student behavior became worse after the COVID-19 pandemic. One educator exited due to complications from long COVID disease. Three major findings unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as factors contributing to teachers’ exits from the Mississippi classroom, including inadequate support in the teaching role, negative relationships or experiences with administrators, and the demanding workload.

The participants shared which factors they believed would support their future reentry into the classroom as a teacher. Reentry factors are causes or reasons the participants identified that would contribute to their return to the classroom. Before they would consider a return to teaching, school and system leaders would need to operate differently and obtain better training. The participants also suggested they would return to the classroom if the teaching profession and education system underwent a systematic overhaul. Other factors mentioned were less prevalent, such as better salaries, more autonomy over the curriculum, and families and parents showing teachers more support. The factors receive discussion in the order of prominence in the data.

**Teaching Experience Made Worse by COVID-19 Pandemic**

Several participants in this study noted that they believed that the COVID-19 pandemic worsened their teaching experience and identified factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic that contributed to their exit from teaching. Participants believed the COVID-19 pandemic created additional work and made student behavior more challenging. Although these COVID-19 pandemic factors exasperated the participants and frustrated them, they did not identify these factors as influencing their decision to exit. One participant experienced complications of long
COVID-19 disease, which precipitated her exit from teaching. She was the only participant in the study who left teaching due to factors directly related to COVID-19.

*The Pandemic Created More Work*

The study participants identified factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic that created more work for them. Experiences were coded as “created more work” if the participant described additions to their workload as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Factors that were vague or not specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic were not included in the code.

Carey, an elementary inclusion teacher, reported that the required special education procedures were more challenging and complex due to the pandemic and created more work for her. Her school shifted to virtual meetings because of the pandemic, and she had a more difficult time trying to get people to join meetings virtually than before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. She also noted that conducting IEP meetings virtually during the pandemic required completing additional forms that she needed to manage, further adding to her workload.

Faith, a secondary science teacher, reflected that many teachers left her school after the initial year of the pandemic. She believed working with newer, inexperienced teachers increased her workload as a returning team member. She attributed the challenges to teacher turnover resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic:

A new wave of teachers came in. And I think that the group that came in, you know, first-year teachers, new teachers, often it takes a while for them to get up to speed about expectations in terms of like monitoring students…the additional duties that come with teaching, whether it be like morning duty or game duty, after school duty, just the little things that pile up. I think being in that group with those teachers and kind of having to bear the brunt of that is definitely something that contributed to the decision to leave.
Teacher turnover, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, created a ripple effect for the remaining staff, resulting in a greater workload. Faith felt burdened by being surrounded by newer, inexperienced teachers.

Another participant, Monique, said her workload increased in the form of spending more time encouraging and reminding students to wear their masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. She mentioned the energy she devoted to frequently cleaning desks with Clorox wipes and Lysol spray during and after school. The increased workload contributed to her overall feeling of stress in her role as a special education teacher.

Denise described feeling like she was wearing a “lot of hats” while trying to manage the complexity of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. She reported an increased workload compounded by a lack of timely communication:

The in-person teaching and virtual teaching at the same time was very difficult…At the drop of a hat, it kind of seemed we would get notified that a student tested positive for COVID or a family member did and all of a sudden, they’re out for however many days…And it was really difficult to try and you know, within sometimes 10 or 20 minutes, have to change your lesson to make it accessible for your kids on Zoom and also your kids in the classroom when you’re only one person.

Denise perceived an increase in her workload from trying to adapt lessons to accommodate students who needed to join class via Zoom.

The participants in this study experienced a variety of increases to their workload during teaching. Some teachers encountered additional challenges to fulfill requirements, such as ensuring families participated in Zoom IEP meetings. Others needed to do more work to support
new colleagues or make sure that students adhered to safety procedures. This additional workload frustrated teachers but did not drive their exits from the profession.

**Student Behavior Made More Challenging**

Several educators expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic made student behavior more challenging. Participants’ experiences were coded within this theme if they ascribed behavior issues to the period during and after the COVID-19 pandemic as opposed to those that existed prior to the pandemic. Comments such as “I didn’t have classroom management experience” were excluded, and comments like “student behavior once they came back after having been out so long” were included in the criteria for this factor.

Jasmine, Denise, and Faith reported that student behavior became worse after they returned to school following the COVID-19 shutdowns. Jasmine felt like student behaviors were more personal and more difficult to manage:

> I honestly think some of the things did get a little more personal. There was a lot more in the media and online about you know, the image of teachers or community feelings about teachers and kids picked up on that. By the end it was I cannot keep working in these conditions. With the behaviors of the students that I’m seeing, I can’t not take it personally anymore.

Denise similarly believed that families and the broader community lost their support for teachers, which made managing student behavior more challenging during and after the pandemic. She said,

> There just seemed to be a lack of discipline. There seem to be only so much we could do as teachers before admin would step in. …But I think what it really came down to with behavior and discipline was the lack of parents’ support in behavior and discipline.
Students, you know, having this constant certain behavior and you’re reaching out to parents and you’re trying to help and either you have parents who just seem like they don’t care. They don’t want to be bothered. Or you have the parents who are like, “Oh, no, my kid would never do that. My kid would never act like that.”

Faith shared the experiences of some of her colleagues in believing that student behavior worsened after the postshutdown return to school:

I would say that, for me, the biggest fallout from the pandemic was student behavior once they came back to the classroom after being out so long…the level of misbehavior was definitely apparent when they came back after being at home for so long.

Brandy believed students and families became apathetic when they returned to school after experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, which she found challenging. She expressed significant frustration that her students were expected to take and pass the state’s Third Grade Literacy Assessment, even though they had missed having a normal first and second grade school year due to the pandemic. She found it tremendously unfair. Students were unprepared to pass the test because they needed more time in school, a resource she could not give them. She believed the pressure to perform precipitated the apathy she witnessed, saying, “There was an exponential … amount of pressure put on us and put on the kids without anything to support that pressure. And so, kids gave up...they couldn’t deal with it.” Her desire to ensure students received the resources they needed led her to leave teaching to start a nonprofit organization in her community.

Brandy, Faith, Denise, and Jasmine all experienced changes with student behavior during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, creating frustration and distress in their role as teachers. Most often, they described student behavior as worsening classroom management issues as
students returned to school. Brandy expressed a slight variation from her colleagues, feeling that students became apathetic and gave up because they lacked resources to address the pressure they faced.

**Complications of Long COVID Disease**

Faith had COVID-19 during the winter of 2021 and shared that she lost the “good momentum” she had built during the first semester. She described what it was like trying to teach while suffering lingering symptoms of long COVID:

I had some long COVID symptoms, where I was just very fatigued for you know. I just got tired very easily, even if I slept a full night [of] sleep. And coming back into the classroom, and having those symptoms just made it a lot more difficult to get everything done that I needed to and that was being asked of me…I think it just felt a little bit unsustainable with the fatigue that I had, having to teach all day and stay after school and grade papers and conduct parent [contact] and then wake up early the next morning and you know, have morning duty at like 7 am. It felt a little bit untenable, especially thinking about how, you know, it would be pretty easy to get a different job where I could sit down and not have to talk all day, and not have to walk around all day. So, I actually was planning on staying in the field before that happened, before I got those symptoms.

Faith was the only participant in the study who identified the COVID-19 virus as a direct contributing factor to her exit from teaching.

**Summary**

The participants in this study expressed two main COVID-19–related factors that influenced their exits from teaching: feeling like the pandemic created more work for teachers and believing that student behavior changed or worsened because of the pandemic. Although the
factors connected to the COVID-19 pandemic exasperated and frustrated the participants, they did not identify the factors as tipping points in their decision to exit most often. Only one educator left teaching because of the physical symptoms of long COVID disease.

**Which Non-COVID Factors Contributed to Teacher Exits?**

The teacher participants identified factors not directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic that contributed to their decision to leave. Participants felt that they did not receive adequate support in their teaching role. They identified challenging relationships and experiences with administrators as significant factors contributing to their exits. Finally, the teachers identified the demanding workload as influencing their exits from the profession. Most participants who exited teaching did so because of non-COVID factors.

**Inadequate Support in Teaching**

Inadequate support in the teaching role was a prominent factor identified as contributing to teacher exits that was not specifically COVID-19 related. Most of the teachers reported experiencing a lack of support, defined in this study as a feeling, experience, or perception that the teacher needed resources, information, training, and additional personnel to successfully accomplish the task of teaching.

**Support With Preparation.** Monique expressed her frustration with the lack of preparation and support for her role as a first-year special education teacher. Monique came into the profession via alternate route through an online degree program in Special Education. She didn’t know basic aspects of her work, like how to write lesson plans, or how to create or revise Individualized Education Plans. She described feeling unsupported by the various people she asked for help, which contributed to her decision to exit teaching during her first year in the classroom. She said,
I feel like I was put in a position, and I didn’t have a lot of training…And I was getting frustrated, and I was like, “You know what? I can’t do this anymore,” because nobody has really just sat down with me. Me personally, I’m a one-on-one person. So you know, I’m saying I’m a one-on-one person, but you’re telling me this, telling me that. I’m not understanding it, and then the other teachers are saying different things.

She described receiving contradicting information from her co-teachers, the school principal, and the director of special education. Monique highlighted her desire to do her job well and understood the importance of doing so, given her role serving students with disabilities. She stated,

I feel like if I’m going to do something…I want to do it decent and in order. I wouldn’t want nobody teaching my child, especially in SpEd [Special Education] inclusion, and they’re not getting what they’re needing, and I’m asking for the resources and information, but nobody’s giving it to me.

The need for support in the teaching role was a common theme with other participants. Like Monique, Faith described starting in the classroom without support in the form of preparation for the role. Faith was an early-career alternate route educator. She said, “I felt very unprepared going into the classroom. And I just felt like wholly unprepared. I didn’t have the content knowledge that I thought I needed. I didn’t have the management experience…I was not prepared at all.” She felt that students were unsafe in her care and that she was unequipped to deal with many of the challenges she experienced.

**Lacked Additional Personnel.** Carey had a similar experience of lacking support, noting that she requested additional help to manage her caseload. She desired to provide adequate
services to her special education students and felt she did not receive the help she needed from her school district:

    The district office [is] basically saying listen, you’re not gonna get this help this year. We’ll work on it for next year; not even promising well, you’ll get help next year. I just… came home to my husband, you know. I said, “What does it look like for me if I decided that I wanted to retire?” Because it shouldn’t be this hard to educate children.

Carey felt the lack of support caused her to pursue retirement earlier. After 1 year of teaching, Carey said she would never return to the classroom as a teacher but would consider other roles in schools where she could support teachers.

    More Responsibilities, No Extra Support. Brandy described exasperation with the growing expectations placed on her as a teacher without the accompanying resources and tools. She said,

    I also had a lot of frustration with teaching, because there’s a lot of things that are out of my control as a teacher. Because there was a lot of, I guess, bureaucracy that kind of kept kids from getting what they needed. I wasn’t really given a lot of support. I had a computer that was given to me as a teacher that they couldn’t even order power cords for because it was so old. The company had stopped making accessories for that model. So the infrastructure was lacking so drastically, but the expectations didn’t subside. In fact, they were increased. So there was an exponential … amount of pressure put on us and put on the kids without anything to support that pressure.

Through tears, Brandy explained that her needs were unmet as a teacher, and her students’ needs were largely unmet as well. She left teaching to start a nonprofit organization focused on meeting students’ needs and having an impact in her community.
Denise illuminated her experience with inadequate support at her school district, especially with managing significant changes to the curriculum during the upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic. She said,

I felt like I wore a lot of hats at all times, and not all of those hats were being supported by the necessary people, I guess other than myself. So whether that was admin or parents, instructional coaches was a big one for me in our district. So I just felt like there was a lot asked of me at all times and just not enough support to do all those things to the best of my ability, and I knew that I was a good teacher. I knew that I was capable of doing all of these things.

Denise felt that with more support, she could have met the demands of her role as a teacher. Instead, she found herself tired, working over weekends, and not having enough energy to give her family at home.

**Needed More Resources.** Faith experienced a supportive administrator but shared her frustration regarding the lack of resources and supplies to teach her subject effectively. When asked about the factors that led her to leave teaching, she noted how she regularly spent her money on supplies:

Also, the fact that I often had to spend a lot of my own money on classroom supplies was pretty frustrating. Having to buy, you know, my own printer ink, my own printer paper… supplies for science experiments. That just wasn’t able to cover all of that (referring to EEF funds). And so I think I used that up by like November, so, and after that, I was spending a few hundred dollars a month on school supplies was just, you know, it’s kind of like death by one thousand cuts.
The lack of resources and supplies precipitated Faith’s exit from teaching after spending 2 years learning the content and curriculum during the pandemic.

Of the factors identified as contributing to teacher exits, the theme of inadequate support in the role featured prominently across participants’ experiences. Monique did not know how to perform the basic functions of her role and left because she felt she never received the support she needed. Carey believed she did not have enough capacity to meet the needs of her students and the caseload assigned to her. She retired earlier than planned because of inadequate support in the form of additional personnel to meet the demands of her role. Brandy experienced inadequate infrastructure and resources to support her students and meet their needs. Lori Ann did not feel a sense of belonging and community at her school and had inadequate support, lacking a support person or mentor who could help her understand the school’s and district’s culture. Denise’s experience with inadequate support revolved around trying to meet the many expectations facing her as a teacher. Faith was frustrated by what she experienced as a lack of preparation, training, and the resources needed to properly teach the assigned subject matter. Inadequate support for these teachers precipitated their exits from the classroom. The participants identified inadequate support as the predominant reason for their exits, followed by issues with leadership and administration.

Leadership and Administration

Another major contributing factor to teacher exits during and after the COVID-19 pandemic related to negative experiences with administrators. The study participants defined administrators as leaders of varying types in the school and school district setting, such as principals, instructional coaches, school board members, and departmental directors. Challenges with administrators were widespread across the sample and included negative experiences such
as inadequate administrative support, bullying, poor management practices, or irritation implementing leadership-imposed policies or changes.

Unsupportive Administrator. Monique referred to her principal leader as “sarcastic” and felt she was bothering him when she asked him for help. She would walk away from their exchanges, frustrated and further confused about what the school expected of her. She related a troubling interaction where he questioned her intellect. She said, “‘He was like, ‘Okay, is Ms. [Monique] kind of slow? She’s not getting it, you know.’ So I’m like, ‘You know what? I’d just rather not say anything and just put my 2 weeks in and just leave.’” She had similar exchanges with the district’s director of special education as she sought clarity on issues related to lesson planning and writing IEPs for her students.

Carey described similar experiences with her principal. A special education teacher, Carey, started the school year with a principal who she believed did not understand her role, her students, or her students’ needs. She identified her relationship with the administrator as the predominant factor precipitating her exit from the classroom:

There were several things in the pandemic that pushed me toward leaving. Number one: administrators. For instance, if I had a student who was autistic and say that the autistic student was a little noisy in a gen ed [general education] setting, you know, it’s [the principal] bursting in the classroom… Oh, Miss… You need to go in; get him out of there because he’s just disrupting everything that’s going on.

Carey felt forced to remove students with special needs from general education classrooms if the administrator deemed them too noisy or disruptive. The participant was attempting to teach her most challenging students while providing inclusion services to other students. Carey said she
worked nearly the school year without many breaks, partly because her administrator prioritized keeping students with special needs quiet.

Denise described a supportive and positive relationship with her assistant principal but no relationship with her principal. She pointed out how her administrator did not offer her any support while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic:

One thing that I will never forget is that from August to when I left… she never came to my classroom to watch me teach, not once. Not an informal, not a formal, where they just popped in to see what was going on. And I thought that said a lot, you know, about her as a person or as an administrator. And again, I know COVID was throwing a lot of things at people. But, that was something that we probably needed as teachers during that time, was to get just a little pat on the back just to say, “Hey, like, you’re doing okay.” Not even, like, “You’re doing great.” Just, “You’re doing okay, and it’s gonna be fine.”

Denise felt teachers needed support even more during the challenging time of teaching during COVID-19, and she did not receive it from her principal.

Audrey admitted to “problematic relationships” with principals at each point in her teaching career, across multiple school districts in multiple states. However, she believed her most recent experiences with school and district leaders facilitated her exit from teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Audrey recounted pushing back against the district’s reopening plan by writing letters and organizing staff, an experience that accelerated her exit from the classroom earlier than planned:

That was the beginning [of the end] for me because there’s a callous disregard for my life… I remember thinking, ‘We’ve kicked up this huge fuss all over town, and not a single one of you has reached out to a single one of us.” …That’s poor leadership.
In addition to not hearing from her superintendent or school board members about the reopening plan, Audrey was frustrated by her building administrator. She described her principal as disorganized, lacking urgency, and focused more on her luxurious lifestyle than student learning.

**Administrative Inconsistency.** Although Jasmine did not identify her relationships with administrators as the primary factor contributing to her exit, she related many negative experiences with her administrators. She characterized working with multiple school administrators as frustrating due to the inconsistency of consequences for student behavior.

You never really knew which principal you were going to get. And so it was like, I could send a kid to the office. Sometimes they get for, I don’t know, cussing me out, and sometimes they would get a severe 10-day out-of-school suspension. And some days, they would be back in my class half an hour later. You just never knew what was gonna happen, and it wasn’t consistent, which was very frustrating.

Jasmine’s perception of how administrators handled student behavior issues was a significant part of her frustration with teaching during the pandemic. She believed student behavior became much worse after the post-COVID return to school.

**Administrator Bullying.** One participant returned to the classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic but quit midyear because of an antagonistic relationship with her principal. Lori Ann characterized her principal’s actions toward her as bullying. When asked what she felt pushed her toward exiting teaching, she remarked,

Adult culture, which I believe begins with administration. I was officially kind of pushed out the door. I don’t like when teachers leave midyear, and so I didn’t want to be that girl. But I will say there was some bullying that happened.
Lori Ann recounted feeling targeted by her principal about petty issues. Her principal encouraged her to resign, which she ultimately did.

**Shifting Workload.** Denise and Jasmine noted specific experiences with administrators related to shifting the workload and tasks to teachers. Jasmine recalled an instance with attendance tracking at her school. She mentioned that students would receive detention after a certain number of attendance infractions. Instead of using the attendance-monitoring system to track the infractions, the principal at her school asked teachers to keep track of them. Jasmine asked, “How am I supposed to keep track of that? Also, you have the system; just run a report. And they’re like, ‘Oh, we don’t have time to do that. So you just do it.’” She became frustrated by administrators shifting the workload to teachers when systems and automation could manage the tasks.

Denise’s district shifted to standards-based grading practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, which she felt created a burden. She said,

I love standards-based grading. But it turned into like us [teachers] basically creating everything from scratch again, so formative and summative [assessments] and all of that. And we had instructional coaches, and not that I expected instructional coaches to create all those things for us. But I felt like our instructional coach could have done more to help support the creation of this content. I feel like if they were so ready to implement that…something they should have considered was the content that needed to go along with it, rather than just assuming, “Oh, our teachers will take their own time to make these things, and then we’ll have all of it…to use for years.” So that was something that was kind of frustrating.
Denise shared that when she resigned, her instructional coach asked her to make lesson plans and copies for the new teacher to cover several weeks. She believed doing so was the responsibility of the instructional coach rather than the teacher.

**Inadequate Management.** Notably, some participants did not identify their administrators as a negative factor that contributed to their exit from teaching during or after the COVID-19 pandemic but identified other factors indirectly attributed to the administrators.

Brandy described having a positive relationship with her principal but experiencing apathy from her coworkers regarding their roles and responsibilities. She said,

There would be days where, I felt like it was once a week, that a teacher would show up 30 minutes late, and there would be a halt. The class would just be in the hall for 30 minutes, and no one would be supervising them. And like personally, I felt like that was not okay…. And there was librarians and computer lab teachers and the teachers who didn’t have a class, they didn’t have any kids. And they would never come and like, be there, you know. So I just — wow, I’m getting really emotional about that. But that was really hard to see, like, just the lack of care.

Her administrator might have effectively managed these challenges by addressing the staff attendance issue and supervising students. Relatedly, Faith described a positive and supportive relationship with her principal but frustration with having to spend her own money on supplies to teach the assigned content. Effective management of the school budget and resources, the principal’s responsibility, could have addressed the need for supplies.

The participants made many connections between exiting teaching and their experiences with administrators. The former teachers recounted interactions with district and school leaders
that contributed to their exit. Their experiences ranged from the lack of requested or needed support from administrators to outright conflict with leaders.

**Challenging or Demanding Workload**

A dominant factor identified throughout the interviews was that participating teachers exited the profession because they felt the workload was too demanding. A challenging or demanding workload is defined as the experience or perception of being asked to do more than is reasonable or expected in the teaching role. The teachers who participated in this study experienced a demanding workload. They identified organizational inefficiencies and structural issues that shifted others’ workloads to teachers already struggling to serve students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Inefficient Workload.** Several teachers believed schools did not organize work or roles efficiently or smartly. Monique, a first-year alternate route teacher, taught 10th-grade special education inclusion. She felt an assignment to 12th grade would have been better for a new teacher. The 12th-grade teachers would receive transition plans, whereas 10th-grade teachers needed to write and implement IEPs. She wondered why she had not received the less-challenging work as a new teacher. She had hoped for a scaffold into the more challenging work of writing IEPs rather than having to do so right away as a new teacher.

Carey noted that she was not allowed to make her workload more efficient by combining required meetings. She described how she felt about organizing and facilitating more than 50 meetings for her students during a single school year.

I was responsible for 25 IEPs. I had to service inclusion. I serviced resource, and I serviced self-contained with no assistant… I went from loving what I did to, you know, hate to get up in the morning and was just like, if I could just teach them, I’ll be fine. But
it was the paperwork that followed and the deadlines from the district office. I had 50 meetings, but I couldn’t teach anybody anything. I didn’t get a break during the day. I used to take work home with me, but I stopped. Because I didn’t have a life. I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t do it.

Carey felt she had two bosses—the principal in her building and the Special Education department at the district’s central office—with different deadlines and requirements. Her frustration with the workload and inefficiency in her work led her to retire.

**Teaching Too Demanding.** Other participants felt their administrators asked them to do more than they should, given their roles. Brandy received an assistant teacher to help prepare students for the Third Grade Literacy Assessment. Instead, hiring the assistant, intended to lighten her workload, created additional work for her. She said,

That person wasn’t trained in any educational field at all. It was just a person that they found, right. So she had no training. I was expected to train her as well as teach children.

With no extra planning time or salary or anything.

Brandy described being under significant pressure to ensure that students passed standardized tests but needing to onboard, train, and develop her assistant teacher.

Lori Ann described the four roles she received when she was supposed to be teaching fifth grade during the COVID-19 pandemic:

When I started, I had four jobs, really like five, for the salary of one. I was hired to be the fifth grade English teacher. But I was there in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade English interventionist [role].... And on paper, I was the media specialist/the librarian. So if we were audited, they were going to come to me, and I didn’t even know where the light
switch was in the library, if we’re being honest. And so [I had] all of these different things and responsibilities.

Lori Ann maneuvered the different schedules for the various groups of students she served. She discussed creating intervention lesson plans as well as regular lesson plans.

Jasmine shared her thoughts about the workload, echoing other participants’ experiences:

It felt like every time another issue came up, the workload was shifted to the teachers in a really inefficient way. So…it was very demoralizing. It was very frustrating. And it was like no matter what, you couldn’t win. Because then on top of it, there were all the extra behavioral issues, covering other people’s classes because there weren’t enough subs.

And it just gets to the point where you’re like, I don’t make enough.

Although initially pleased with her salary, Jasmine soon felt her workload outpaced her compensation due to the extra work.

Audrey described loving the classroom and wanting to teach for a long time initially but feeling stretched by an unbalanced workload:

I loved the kids, but … I always got three math classes instead of two. I always had way more. I think the year COVID hit, I had seventy-seven kids on my roster. I was like, I am in an elementary school. Why am I tired? Why do I have seventy-seven kids? I think it was—that was just like constantly, like overleaning on me because they didn’t want to develop other teachers… it was just like a series of unfortunate events. And I was like, I cannot take any more of this. I’ll go away. I’m leaving.

Audrey exited the classroom after 6 years of serving students in a high-need, critical-shortage school district.
Denise noted an increase in her workload directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic. She said,

The in-person teaching and virtual teaching at the same time was very difficult…At the drop of a hat, it kind of seemed we would get notified that a student tested positive for COVID or a family member did, and all of a sudden, they’re out for however many days. It was really difficult to try in sometimes 10 or 20 minutes have to change your lesson to make it accessible for your kids on Zoom. And also your kids in the classroom, when you’re only one person.

Denise said her weekends were often interrupted by students trying to meet district-imposed deadlines for submitting assignments. The district policies designed to allow students flexibility during COVID-19 if they were unable to attend school inadvertently burdened teachers with supporting students over the weekends. Denise felt that instructional coaches and administrators shifted the workload to teachers rather than helping them manage it.

**Shifting Workload to Teachers.** Jasmine shared her thoughts about the workload, echoing other participants’ experiences. She felt the administrators took liberties with:

It felt like every time another issue came up, the workload was shifted to the teachers in a really inefficient way. So…it was very demoralizing. It was very frustrating. And it was like no matter what, you couldn’t win. Because then on top of it, there were all the extra behavioral issues, covering other people’s classes because there weren’t enough subs. And it just gets to the point where you’re like, I don’t make enough.

Although initially pleased with her salary, Jasmine soon felt her workload outpaced her compensation due to the extra work.
Summary

The participants in this study shared their experiences teaching and leaving teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers identified factors unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic as contributing to their exit from teaching more often than those directly related to the pandemic, such as inadequate support in the role, negative relationships or experiences with administrators, and a significant workload. A COVID-19–related factor contributing to teacher exits was a general sense or belief that the pandemic had worsened their experiences. Some teachers believed the workload increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic or that student behavior issues became more challenging to handle. One teacher exited the classroom because of the complications of long COVID-19 disease, such as fatigue. However, when teachers in this study shared why they left, they most often pointed to factors unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Which Factors Would Support the Reentry of Exited Teachers?

The participants answered a question about which factors would lead them to consider returning to the classroom as a teacher. One participant had already returned to teaching, so the researcher asked what factors supported their return to the classroom. Overwhelmingly, the teachers in this study wanted an improved experience with school leaders before they would consider reentry. They felt the entire system of teaching and schools would need an overhaul before they would think about returning to the classroom. Other factors that received mention but not prevalent across participants’ responses were improved teacher salaries, a decreased emphasis on testing in schools, and more parental support for teachers.
Better Administration

In considering what they would need to return to the classroom, the participants repeatedly mentioned that their experiences with school and system leaders would need to be different. The participants identified high-level ideals and tactical changes that would make a difference for them. Audrey shared her thoughts about what she would need to see from a system-level leader:

I need the superintendents to have vision. And for that vision, it doesn’t even have to align with mine. But if it could just make sense, if it just makes sense, I will go back. I would need a really transparent leader. I would need to feel like my voice was being heard.

Along with several other participants in the study, Audrey had suggestions for leaders’ training and interactions with teachers. Audrey identified the need for superintendents to provide leadership training to ensure principals know how to manage the different styles and approaches that teachers bring to schools. She asked, “What is your training schedule for your leaders looking like? What’s happening with them? I would need to see they have worked through… how to work with different personalities trainings.” Audrey was eager to work with a leader she could believe in and return to the classroom as a teacher.

Lori Ann shared similar ideas about leader training. Lori Ann said her return to teaching “would have to be some … just like teachers have to get CEUs [Continuing Education Units]. I think leadership should have some type of CEUs. Some … type of training for better quality leadership.” Lori Ann wanted the school leaders’ training to be legitimate and focused on their personal and school leadership development.
Denise said she would return to teaching but not the school district she exited. One of the things she wanted to see was administrator support. Jasmine suggested that maybe she would have had a different trajectory if she’d ever seen good school leadership and support, but she “never had that experience.” She provided details about the difference she believed a good school leader could make for teachers:

I know having a good leader can make the difference between having all those extra stupid tasks that make more work for you and aren’t efficient to begin with, student discipline and problems to actually being handled, and being better for the kids in the long run.

Jasmine, Lori Ann, Denise, and Audrey indicated a willingness to return to teaching at some point, but they desired more effective school and school system leadership. They wanted to see visionary, transparent, and effective school leadership and the ensuing support to meet the demands of the teaching role.

Systemic Change

Some of the teachers in this study said they would consider a return to teaching with a major education system overhaul. Several participants wanted to see shifts in the administrators’ perceptions of teachers and changes in schools’ focus. They stated they would only return in the context of this significant change.

Brandy left teaching because of the lack of support for her students and herself as their teacher, the absence of needed resources, and what she described as increasing pressure to ensure that students performed well on standardized tests. She reflected on what she would need to return to teaching:
I am not going to return to teaching unless teaching changes completely. I would need to see schools that legitimately and openly, and quite honestly put children before test results. I would need to see a curriculum that wasn’t test focused but instead taught content so the kids actually know something when they leave school instead of how to answer a multiple-choice question. So it has to become law [that] school has to teach kids… has to treat them like they’re real and not just a data point. And that’s a big ask, so I’m not holding my breath for it.

Faith responded similarly, indicating the need for notable transformation related to the teaching role and how the world views teachers. She considered what she would need to return to the classroom:

I think there would have to be a big sea change in terms of how society kind of views teachers, which I don’t see happening anytime soon. I think that teaching doesn’t get the prestige that it deserves and that teachers don’t get the recognition they deserve. Faith listed salary changes, shifts in how parents interact with and treat teachers, and respect from society as part of the changes required before she would consider returning to the classroom. Similarly, Audrey discussed what a system overhaul would look like:

I miss the kids. I loved teaching. Like when I could go in my room and close my door, oh, I had a blast. That part I miss every day. I would go back in a heartbeat right now. If I could just go in my room and be left alone and not have to deal with any of the sort of the chaos that comes with what goes on outside of my classroom walls.

Audrey believed that many of the experiences she encountered as a teacher who left were related to external factors rather than students and teaching. The teachers mentioned these factors less frequently than others, despite the factors’ prevalence in the research.
Other Less-Mentioned Factors

Participants in this study less frequently identified other factors that would support their reentry into the classroom. Some of these factors were improved teacher salaries, a decreased emphasis on testing in schools and more autonomy in the curriculum, and increased parental support for teachers.

Improved Salaries Would Support Reentry. Some participants said they would like to see better salaries for teachers to consider reentering the classroom. Faith said a higher salary would make her consider returning to the classroom, stating, “There would have to be a major salary increase for teachers that would make the field more competitive.” She felt a more competitive salary would address the massive teacher shortage in the state.

Monique highlighted the need for better compensation based on the personal sacrifices teachers make when they take work home after school. “Make the pay better because you have to do so much. You have to take stuff home. You’re taking away time from your own child, or if you have kids, your children.” Other participants, including Monique, connected inadequate salaries to their needs as parents supporting children. Natasha left her role as a behavior support teacher because she could not afford to buy her son a car or send him to college on her salary. She returned to her role after she purchased a vehicle for him and he obtained scholarships to pay for college. When asked why she returned to teaching, she shared,

I had fulfilled my financial needs for my son, and I just felt like there wasn’t a reason for me to stay down there. Even with the salary, there wasn’t a reason for me to stay down there… I needed to go back home per se, where I knew I could feel comfortable in what I was doing and feel more fulfilled.
She referred to resuming her role supporting students with special behavior challenges as “coming home.”

Brandy reflected on educator pay and the “unfair” sacrifices expected of teachers:

All of those kitschy little things, like you do it for the kids, not the paycheck [emphasis added]. No. Stop telling me that. Don’t tell me I’m a superhero. Don’t tell me that. I can do it all. No, I can’t. That’s not a thing that teachers can do. We’re not superheroes.

We’re not just doing it for the kids. We have our own kids that need food and clothes.

Brandy noted that as a teacher for nearly a decade, she worked much harder than her friends in corporate settings but made much less money. Brandy left the classroom to start a nonprofit organization where she did not take a salary.

**More Autonomy and Less Testing.** Several participants said that skilled teachers should have more control over what they teach to the students in their classrooms, a factor that would support their reentry into teaching. The teachers identified a desire to focus more on knowledge than test preparation, which was an emphasis in the schools they exited. Jasmine reflected on feeling like she was setting her students up for failure because the curriculum was not teaching them what they needed to know to thrive in life. Brandy identified similar gaps in what she was supposed to teach her students compared to what she felt they needed to know:

Kids don’t need to know how to answer multiple-choice questions. They need to know how the Earth moves around the sun. They need to know what that plant is. They need to know that this plant is keeping our ecosystem alive.

Brandy said she had previously taught art and enjoyed integrating skills in context and with a hands-on approach. She did not appreciate the transition to a tested subject area and the expectation to focus on skills. Lori Ann’s experience was similar in seeking more autonomy in
teaching the curriculum. She said, “I have a Master’s in Curriculum and Instruction like and letters behind my name. I’m not a robot. I’m not an actor. …That felt pretty soulless as a teacher because part of teaching is creativity.” Lori Ann described her school as “psychotic” about fidelity to the selected test preparation system from which she had no authority to deviate. The participant left teaching to work in education policy.

**More Support From Families.** A few participants highlighted parental or family support as a factor that would support their reentry into teaching. Faith reflected on her experiences in the classroom during the year she exited. She faced challenges getting families to understand her good intentions for their children. She identified family support for teachers as a factor that would help her return to the classroom:

> It has to do with how parents treat teachers, and that’s something that I saw a lot of my colleagues deal with, and that I dealt with is that teachers… They’re not really given the benefit of the doubt in situations where, you know, the parents are criticizing them or the students are criticizing them. And so I think until you’re given respect from parents and students and society in general, I don’t think it would be worth it for me to go back. It’s just, you know, [a] very demoralizing environment to be in all day.

Denise also desired the assurance of family support before reentering the classroom as a teacher. She expressed reluctance to return to teaching because of the uncertainty about whether she would receive guaranteed family support.

**Summary of Findings**

Nine educators from across Mississippi participated in this study and shared the factors influencing their decision to exit the classroom or profession during or after the COVID-19 pandemic. The factors included reasons related and unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic. The
participants said they believed the COVID-19 pandemic made some aspects of teaching worse than before its onset, and that the COVID-19 pandemic made student behavior worse. One participant exited due to the complications of long COVID disease. The three prevailing factors not connected to the pandemic were: (a) inadequate support with their teaching role, (b) problematic relationships and experiences with school leaders, and (c) finding that being in the classroom created a demanding workload.

Learning more about a pathway to reentry entailed asking teachers what factors would support their return to the classroom. The participants overwhelmingly identified needing more effective and better-equipped school and system leaders. They sought a transformation in the entire education system before considering a return. A small number of participants identified additional factors, including wanting to see teachers earn higher salaries and obtain more autonomy in content, moving away from an emphasis on testing, and expecting more support from students’ families.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

This study was a means to understand the factors contributing to Mississippi teachers’ exiting the classroom during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The global pandemic took many lives, disturbed economic labor markets, and triggered the Great Resignation, where workers across sectors quit their jobs in record numbers (Berger, 2022; Rainey, 2022). Mississippi has grappled with a teacher shortage since at least 1982, which upgraded to a critical teacher shortage around 1997 and reached a fever pitch at the height of the pandemic (James, 2022). This study was a means to understand why teachers were leaving the classroom after the pandemic in Mississippi. As legislators and education leaders advance innovative solutions regarding school funding and practices, they should apply them to one of the state’s most pressing challenges (Camacho, 2021; Morrison, 2021). This chapter presents key conclusions from the study, the implications of those conclusions, and recommendations for the field.

The first research question required Mississippi teachers to describe the COVID-19 factors influencing their decision to exit the classroom or profession. The participants’ responses showed they believed the COVID-19 pandemic made their teaching experience worse than it had been before.

Answering the second research question required teachers to identify the non–COVID-19 factors that led to their decision to depart from teaching. This study’s findings indicated that teachers left the classroom primarily due to experiencing inadequate support in their roles. Another reason the teachers left the classroom during and after the pandemic was negative
relationships or experiences with school and system leaders, primarily principals. A final major contributing factor to Mississippi teacher exits during and after the COVID-19 pandemic was that teachers struggled to manage challenging or demanding workloads.

In answering the final research, teachers highlighted the factors that would facilitate their reentry into the profession. The findings showed that participants would return to the classroom if school administrators did a better job supporting and managing them. Teachers also wanted a total overhaul of the K–12 education sector. A few factors mentioned multiple times across participant interviews were not dominant in the findings. Teachers wanted to see improved teacher salaries, more teacher autonomy in the curriculum, and more parent/family support for teachers.

**Discussion of Findings and Conclusions**

*Which COVID-19 Factors Drove Teacher Exits?*

Recent survey results of the nation’s teachers suggested that after the COVID-19 pandemic, America’s teachers would be “exhausted and increasingly burned out” (Jotkoff, 2022, para. 2). The National Education Association query found that about half of the teachers surveyed would leave the profession sooner than they intended. The literature posited that COVID-19–related factors, such as burnout, unmet mental health needs for students, and needing to fill in for colleagues, would be the driving factors pushing teachers toward the door. Although many participants in this study said that COVID-19 pandemic factors did not drive their exits from the classroom, as the literature suggested, they believed the pandemic made their teaching experience worse than it had been.

The literature also suggested that teachers would become burned out due to COVID-19 factors, such as having to substitute for colleagues who were absent due to illness or
resignations. In this study, the participants’ experiences only partially substantiated other researchers’ findings. The teachers became frustrated because of those COVID-19 factors. They identified issues such as the burden of supporting new teachers, working without breaks, and the apathy and lack of care demonstrated by burned-out colleagues. However, the participants’ reasons for exiting teaching were primarily due to factors unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Guarino et al. (2006) suggested that “individuals will become and remain teachers if teaching represents the most attractive activity to pursue among all activities available to them” (p. 175). Although a study concern was whether teachers left the profession due to the widespread availability of remote roles in the post-COVID economy, only one participant had done so, and she left teaching because she felt she could not physically meet the demands of the role while recovering from COVID-19 disease. She identified suffering from the complications of long COVID as contributing to her exit from teaching, and she found a job allowing her to work remotely. The opportunity for flexible work was a perk but not the motivator for her decision to exit teaching.

**Which Non–COVID-19 Factors Drove Teacher Exits?**

Camacho (2021) highlighted that teachers suffered from burnout, inadequate support, and growing demands to do more. James (2022) noted that when nearly 20% of Mississippi’s teachers left the classroom at the end of the 2022 school year, the factors contributing to their exits were low salaries and high student loan debt, lack of support and respect from school leaders, and burnout. Relationships and experiences with school leaders significantly impacted the study’s teachers and their decisions to exit teaching post-COVID, especially related to school leaders’ lack of support and respect. Teachers cited the lack of support and resources as the most frequent driver of their exits. This finding strongly connects to support they could have received
from administrators or via structures created by effective leaders. Teachers in this study also noted negative, unsupportive, or antagonistic relationships with principals as a reason for leaving. The participants also identified challenging or demanding workloads as a significant factor contributing to their decision to quit.

Although the participants did not always attribute the lack of support and resources or the demanding workload to administrators, they could have. Many of the significant findings reflected factors in the administrators’ ability to manage. The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (The National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) indicated the following standards and actions related to effective educational leaders:

- Effective leaders a) Recruit, hire, support, develop, and retain effective and caring teachers and other professional staff and form them into an educationally effective faculty. b) Plan for and manage staff turnover and succession, providing opportunities for effective induction and mentoring of new personnel…Strategically manage staff resources, assigning and scheduling teachers and staff to roles and responsibilities that optimize their professional capacity to address each student’s learning needs. c) Seek, acquire, and manage fiscal, physical, and other resources to support curriculum, instruction, and assessment; student learning community; professional capacity and community; and family and community engagement. d) Are responsible, ethical, and accountable stewards of the school’s monetary and nonmonetary resources, engaging in effective budgeting and accounting practices. (p. 20)

Effective educational leadership pertained to three of the four factors teachers identified as contributing to their exits from teaching: challenging or demanding workload, problematic relationships with administrators, and inadequate support in the role. Effective leaders manage
teacher workloads, assign staff duties strategically, manage the school budget, and provide teachers with a supportive school community. School system leaders are responsible for ensuring that principals execute their work well and faithfully with the district’s vision and strategic plan.

**Which Factors Would Support Teachers’ Reentry Into the Profession?**

**School and System Leaders.** The participants in this study resoundingly identified school leaders as the biggest barrier to their return to the classroom. The teachers said they desired to be managed by leaders who know how to relate to different styles and personalities. Based on this study’s findings, teachers would benefit from working with principals strongly oriented to teacher support and support structures, such as induction, mentoring, and learning communities. Teachers would also do well with principals who have a strong command over budgeting, allowing teachers to identify needed supplies and materials and obtain them without spending their own money. The teachers in this study would work well with principals who balance fidelity to a purchased curriculum with teachers’ earned curricular autonomy.

**Systemic Change.** The second most prevalent factor that would facilitate reentry into the classroom by teachers who exited was a system overhaul. This research finding was consistent with the reviewed literature. Camacho (2021) noted, “Coronavirus is just the latest crack in a system badly in need of an overhaul. Teachers were already burning out amid ever-increasing demands to do more, with little support and with stagnating salary increases” (p. 2). The teachers in this study suggested shifts such as more autonomy, a reduced focus on standardized testing, and more support and prestige for the role of teachers among students’ families and society at large. An important consideration related to this factor was how to leverage opportunities within teachers’, leaders’, and schools’ control for teachers to see the transformation of their buildings’ system. Achieving this objective could be through structures that set data-based, reasonable goals.
for growth and student proficiency on tests so that teachers feel that their goals are at the right nexus of ambitious and feasible. This finding could also mean that school administrators develop opportunities to recognize and praise teachers for their work, including parent and community appreciation events. An opportunity to tackle multiple challenges with a single strategy could include offering teachers leadership opportunities with additional compensation that allow them to support and mentor new teachers. Such a strategy would address the issues of teachers wanting higher salaries and new teachers needing and receiving support. It was promising that only a few participants in the study shared that they refused to return to the classroom. The teachers participating in this study seemed mostly open to the idea, indicating that with the right tactics, the field could address some aspects of the critical teacher shortage by recruiting former teachers who have exited.

Phenomenology in qualitative research is a means to understand the common or shared experiences of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The common experience among these participants was exiting the classroom. The nature of that shared essence with this phenomenon seemed to be that the educators experienced a gap between what they expected and reality. They expected to experience support in their role, a reasonable workload, and positive experiences with administrators. The gap between expectations and experiences led to their exit from the classroom.

**Limitations of the Study**

There are multiple limitations related to the findings and implications of this study. The small sample size limited the study’s generalizability. These findings reflected the experiences of nine educators in Mississippi. Each participant took part in only one interview. Multiple touchpoints with each participant may have yielded more or different findings. Finally, there is
the risk that participants in this study were not fully candid with their responses, perhaps fearful they would not be as anonymous as hoped. There were a limited number of traditionally-prepared teachers who participated in the study. Thus, a limitation of this study is that these findings may better reflect the experiences of alternate route teachers and less so those of traditional route educators. Since the state of Mississippi does not collect explicit data on the preparation pathway of all licensed teachers by route, we are unable to determine whether these participant percentages are generalizable to the broader teacher population in the state.

**Implications and Recommendations**

Teachers, school leaders, and system leaders perform challenging work supporting the education outcomes of students, and the cost of frequent turnover is high for both adults and children (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; García & Weiss, 2019a, 2019b). Shortages and turnover disproportionately impact students of color and in low-income communities (Howard, 2003). Thus, learning about teacher retention, particularly in areas impacted by critical shortages, is imperative, vital work. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the implications of this and other teacher retention studies are significant.

**Recommendations for School and System Leaders**

Principals have vital roles in managing their buildings’ academic and operational leadership. In addition to their core work, they must build relationships with families and the community and manage students’ and staff’s collective and individual needs. The teachers in this study reported their principals were not providing the support needed to retain them in their roles. Teachers want supportive environments, but principals are not solely responsible for teacher support. A strategic approach to teacher support could involve a few tactical shifts that develop the leadership capacity of veteran team members and compensate them for doing so.
First, principals should strengthen their understanding of what their teaching staff mean by *support*. Some teachers prefer classroom visits as a form of support. Others want administrators to support them during conflicts with families or student misbehavior. An implication of this study is that teachers want to feel supported by their principals and will leave teaching if they do not feel supported. By understanding what their teachers mean when they say they want to be supported, principals could take steps to provide that support. In addition, principals could establish support structures not requiring their direct management.

One finding from this study suggested that teachers wanted parent and family support. Principals could determine ways to shift some responsibility for teacher support to families by creating easily replicable structures that families are willing to assume. The structures could be as simple as providing water, drinks, and coffee for the teachers’ lounge or as complex as having a parent ombudsman to filter critical feedback. Additionally, aspiring teacher leaders often seek opportunities for leadership development. Meaningful teacher support structures are a way to meet multiple needs. Teacher leaders will feel supported because they are developing their leadership, and newer teachers will have their support needs met.

Principal leaders should consider ways to allow teachers to leverage the available funds in the school budget to purchase the needed supplies for their classrooms to run smoothly. Only one teacher in this study left due to inadequate pay, but others mentioned spending their own money to purchase supplies, further stretching their personal budgets. Principals should leverage the school budget, fundraising, and other resources to mitigate teachers’ personal spending for classroom supplies and student needs. Providing these resources may help teachers feel supported, have a more positive relationship with the principal, and feel their salary is adequate, which addresses multiple findings from this study.
**Recommendations for System Leaders**

Feeling supported by their principal was a significant factor that led to teacher exits; however, teachers who quit were likelier to report overall negative experiences with principals. System leaders responsible for managing principals and district teacher retention efforts should consider implementing steps to understand the experiences reported by teachers. One such strategy could be skip-level feedback, a structure (e.g., a meeting or an anonymous survey) where leaders ask their direct reports about their experience with the leaders’ management (The Management Center, 2021). For example, superintendents could ask teachers about their experiences with principals’ management, and school boards could ask principals about their experiences with system leaders’ management. Skip-level feedback could assist with understanding the teachers’ experiences with the principals and the principals’ opportunities for growth. Teachers’ experiences with principals strongly affect retention, especially whether they feel supported in their roles. System leaders must be prepared to more carefully manage principals whose staff indicate high negative interactions and low levels of feeling supported. Principal leaders who repeatedly score low on these two indicators may need additional professional development or offboarding from the principal role altogether.

**Recommendations for Education Policy**

This research included a small sample size which limits the generalizability of the findings, and thus, implications and recommendations for the field. However, there are two key recommendations for education policy in Mississippi that are influenced by the key findings of this study. The recommendations are geared toward providing leaders with additional training and coursework. Effective leaders will successfully manage teacher support, a key finding from the research. Additionally, better leader training may counteract negative experiences between
principals and teachers, another key factor contributing to Mississippi teacher exits from our study.

Education preparation programs that lead to licensure for principals and other leaders should consider a course on teacher talent, retention, and support. Such a course could help leaders understand the nature of the human capital challenges in the state of Mississippi, as well as teacher perspectives on retention in their roles. A class of this nature might help education leaders develop the needed systems and tools for teacher support and measuring school climate on an ongoing basis. Leaders could design district- or school-specific mentoring or other teacher support structures for their schools. Leaders could learn to develop and use surveys that capture teacher feedback on whether teachers feel supported in their roles, and which structures help them feel supported. Trends indicate declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs in recent years, (Garcia and Weiss, 2019a). Thus, effective education leaders will need to be aware of supply challenges and the vital role supporting teachers plays in retaining them in their roles. Education leaders in difficult to staff districts may continue to grapple with supply challenges and may need to focus on retaining and supporting the existing teacher workforce.

The Department of Education could also consider enacting an additional requirement for superintendents and principals in critical shortage districts. The state should consider requiring that districts that use special licenses for certifying teachers, such as emergency licenses and district-requested licenses to attend special trainings. These district leaders should attend training on teacher support, induction programs and mentoring. These offerings could be made available to all leaders in all districts in the state but might be required of districts using special licenses. The rationale for this policy recommendation is because teachers who have not completed a traditional or alternate route program may need additional tactics to successfully onboard and be
retained in their roles. Teachers using a special license, like Monique from our study, may lack the basic instructional and pedagogy knowledge needed. However, they might be able to learn and acquire this knowledge on the job with the proper support and training.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

A future researcher could explore two questions: What do teachers mean when they say they need a system overhaul to return to teaching? Is there a difference between a system overhaul and teachers’ perception and experiences that indicate an overhaul of the part of the system impacting them? When the COVID-19 pandemic ended, schools mostly returned to normal operations, reinstating face-to-face instruction after more than a year and a half of virtual learning. After suspending 1 or 2 years of state testing, schools reestablished standardized state testing with little deviation from pre-pandemic administration. Most teachers and school-based team members report to in-person work daily, as before the pandemic.

A future researcher could solicit educators’ ideas about what a system overhaul would entail, specifically what teachers believe it would look and feel like to them. This information is important because principals and district leaders cannot create a systemic transformation. Therefore, it will be vital to determine whether teachers seek this or need something that feels transformational locally to retain them in the profession. Another future study could be a quantitative exploration of whether feeling supported by their principal and having negative experiences predict teacher retention, and if so, to what extent.

It would also be worthwhile to replicate this study with teachers nationwide. Many teachers from other states responded to the call for participation, wanting to share their experiences with leaving the teaching profession. A future researcher could explore teachers’ experiences outside Mississippi to determine whether the teachers’ experiences in Mississippi
vary from those in other states or represent the collective experiences of teachers across the United States.

**Conclusion**

The participants in this small study identified the COVID-19 and non–COVID-19 factors that contributed to their decision to exit the classroom. They also shared what factors would facilitate their return to the classroom should they be willing to return. Although the teachers in this study said the COVID-19 pandemic worsened their experience, they did not frequently identify COVID-19–related factors as the primary driver of their exits from teaching. Instead, they attributed their exits to not feeling supported in their roles, having overly full workloads, and negative experiences with administrators. They wanted better relationships with and management from principals, a system overhaul in education, and more autonomy over the curriculum before they would consider a return to the classrooms. They mentioned better salaries and more support from students’ families, but not at the levels indicated in the literature (e.g., Camacho, 2021; James, 2022).

The teachers interviewed for this study shared their experiences over Zoom. With tears and frustration, they said, “I love the kids, but…” The factors that followed these words appear to be within practitioners’ control. The teachers overcame many of the challenges, barriers, and additional requirements created by a factor outside of anyone’s control: the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers and children have worked to overcome a global pandemic and all it brought. Administrators and principals can and should address the factors within their control, such as ensuring that teachers have a positive experience with their principal, a balanced workload, and the support they need to remain in their roles.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A: Interview Questions

WARM UP QUESTION
1. Can you describe your feelings about your role as a teacher prior to you leaving?

RESEARCH QUESTION 1
2. Were there any experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic that you feel pushed you toward leaving teaching?

RESEARCH QUESTION 2
3. Were there any experiences or things that happened that you feel pushed you toward exiting the classroom? What factors stand out in your mind?
4. Were there any experiences with your principal that you feel pushed you toward leaving teaching?
5. Were there any experiences with your salary that you feel pushed you toward exiting the classroom?
6. As you look back on the time when you left the classroom, do any other events or factors stand out in your mind?

RESEARCH QUESTION 3
7. What would it take for you to return to teaching? What would need to happen for you to return to teaching?

POSTINTERVIEW QUESTION
8. Is there anything I didn’t ask you about that you would like to share?
Appendix B: Outreach Instrument

1. First and last name

2. Personal email address

3. Are you interested in participating in a research study being conducted at the University of Mississippi about former teachers who have exited the classroom since 2019?

4. Did you exit teaching during 2019, 2020, 2021 or 2022?

5. Did you exit during the school year or at the end of the school year?

6. What school or school district did you leave?

7. What grade and subject were you teaching when you exited?
# Appendix C: Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example from interviews/Exemplar of the code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive about teaching and impact</td>
<td>Participant describes feeling positively about the work of teaching children, including passionate about the work, happiness, excitement, or joy about teaching. Participant describes feeling rewarded/fulfilled in their role as an educator</td>
<td>Like teaching has always been one of my goals to do. It was always either teach or work in the health care field. But when I got the actual teacher position. At first, I was happy. I was excited. Non-COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate support in teaching role</td>
<td>Participant describes lacking support, information, training, mentoring, or resources needed to successfully perform the role of teaching</td>
<td>A mentor would be very helpful; partner up and get a mentor, so if you need help with anything you can, you know, contact your mentor who maybe is a seasoned teacher that has been there for years so they already know the ropes. Non-COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lengthy commute</td>
<td>Participant describes their commute to and/or from work as lengthy, as a contributing factor to their exit from the classroom</td>
<td>But I’m driving an hour away, so I stay in xx County to xxx doing it every day. Non-COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate COVID safety measures/policies</td>
<td>Participant describes the school’s or district’s COVID-19 safety policies and measures were adequate and were not a factor contributing to their exit</td>
<td>We were “just wear your masks.” It’s really hard to get 9-year-olds to wear masks all the time with fidelity. So, it was a crapshoot, and the policies were ad hoc is the nicest way I can say it. COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unafraid of COVID-19</td>
<td>Participant describes feeling unafraid of COVID-19 or contracting COVID-19, and that COVID-19 was not a factor contributing to their exit</td>
<td>I wasn’t afraid of COVID like a lot of people were. I was following all of the precautions that they had set forth. I wasn’t afraid of COVID or working with the students, so no. There were no other factors. COVID</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

95
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example from interviews/ Exemplar of the code</th>
<th>COVID or non-COVID</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative impact on parenting/home life</td>
<td>Participant describes that teaching was having a negative impact on their parenting or home life/ work life balance as a contributing factor to their exit</td>
<td>But it got to a point where I felt like I was taking away from my own family to be able to do all of these things to the best of my ability or the way people wanted me to do them.</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate pay/need for increased pay</td>
<td>Participant expresses that teacher pay or salary was a contributing factor to their exit from the teaching profession or classroom</td>
<td>I knew I was not going to be able to have the funds to get my son a car. And at that time, I didn’t know that he was going to receive scholarships like he did, so I was concerned about financing his education too.</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging assignment/ workload</td>
<td>Participant describes their placement or assignment as challenging or difficult as a contributing factor to their exit from the classroom</td>
<td>I’m a new teacher. Why put me in with the 10th graders, and you know, I have to develop the IEP plan for them.</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressed in teaching role</td>
<td>Participant identifies a feeling of stress or experience with stress in their teaching role as a contributing factor to their exit from teaching</td>
<td>I was really stressed out, very. I would go home every day with headaches.</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grief/loss</td>
<td>Participant expresses challenges with grief or loss as a contributing factor to their exit from teaching</td>
<td>During the pandemic, I experienced the death of my mother. And every day was overwhelming for me, and I just didn’t feel at that time that I was even capable of working with students, especially regarding their social and emotional health, because I needed help myself at that time.</td>
<td>Both</td>
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<tr>
<td>School community/ belonging</td>
<td>Participant expresses that lacking a sense of community or belonging at</td>
<td>I felt very isolated, or my team felt very isolated. And we again were new to the</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adequate salary</td>
<td>Participant describes the pay or salary as adequate or meeting their expectations; not a factor in their exit</td>
<td>I mean, it’s unfortunate, but you kind of just know if you’re gonna go into teaching. It’s not, you know, you won’t be driving. Well, you could drive a Hummer. I was gonna say, but, you know, so I knew that I was going into a significant pay decrease by going back into the classroom, but God has always kept me, so I wasn’t worried about I had made less, so yeah.</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overemphasis on testing</td>
<td>Participant believes that the school’s current focus is too centered on testing, test preparation, or test scores</td>
<td>Right, kids don’t need to know how to answer multiple-choice questions. They need to know how the Earth moves around the sun. They need to know what that plant is. They need to know that that plant is keeping our ecosystem alive. Right then that and that if you plant this thing, right instead of this, there’s so many things that we’re suffering with in our world and in our economies is big, and people don’t know, right?</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy in teaching and curricular design</td>
<td>Participant desires more control or autonomy in teaching, designing lessons, and planning the curriculum</td>
<td>I was asking could I supplement and or like, do some stuff like do my own whatever and before I can finish the question, I see the print button we just stick to,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apathy from students, families, or colleagues</td>
<td>Participant experienced apathy related to teaching and learning from students, their families and/or colleagues as a factor contributing to their exit from the classroom</td>
<td>we just stick to read it and it’s like, I have a master’s in curriculum and instruction like and data behind my name. I’m not a robot. I’m not an actor. Like this is like, wait, you know, so that felt pretty soulless as a teacher because part of teaching is creativity</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to focus on well-being of students/whole child</td>
<td>Participant desires to focus on the well-being of children/the whole child</td>
<td>hey, there’s still a class in the hall. And there was librarians and computer lab teachers and the teacher who didn’t have a class; they didn’t have any kids. And they would never come and like, be there, you know. So I just, wow, I’m getting really emotional about that. But that was really hard to see, like, just the lack of care.</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managing student behavior</td>
<td>Participant describes challenges managing student behavior pre-COVID</td>
<td>I would love to just take my kids outside for half a day, but also not allowed. And so, during my first year, I felt very insecure. I felt like, you know, the kids were not safe in the classroom. Because I didn’t have the management experience that I needed. You know, there were fights in my classroom, there were lots of things that I didn’t feel equipped to deal with and so during that first year, I felt like the classroom wasn’t a place where I belonged. And that, you know, I needed to think</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complications of long COVID-19</td>
<td>Participant suffered or believes they suffered from complications of long COVID-19 disease, including fatigue, brain fog, and other symptoms</td>
<td>about leaving before my second year because I was having such a struggle. And I kind of feel like I lost that momentum that I had the first semester. So yeah, I think it just felt a little bit unsustainable with the fatigue that I had having to teach all day and stay after school and grade papers and conduct parents and then wake up early next morning and, you know, have morning duty at like 7 a.m. It felt a little bit untenable, especially thinking about how you know it would be pretty easy to get a different job where I could sit down and not have to talk all day and not have to walk around all day. So I actually was planning to stay in the field before that happens, before I got those symptoms, so that’s a pretty big thing that I missed, that I just thought, I’m so glad you asked that.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience worsened by COVID-19 pandemic</td>
<td>Participant expresses that the COVID-19 pandemic made their teaching experience worse or exacerbated a poor situation</td>
<td>A lot of the procedures changed where you know, we were doing more virtual meetings and things of that nature. So it’s a lot harder to get people on virtually, you would think it would be easier, but it was a lot harder to get people on virtually than it was for them to just come to your class or come to a meeting spot within the building to just meet with you. Because if they had a</td>
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<td><strong>Inadequate COVID safety measures</strong></td>
<td>Participant expresses that the school or district’s COVID-19 safety measures were inadequate in protecting them from contracting COVID-19.</td>
<td>And so I remember being very upset because I had a kid who had COVID, and she told me she had COVID. And I was like, oh, okay, and she had not been away. I think back then, we were still quarantining for 10 or 14 days. I don’t remember the exact number. And I remember thinking, Oh, you’re back, after like 3 days. And I was like, that’s not gonna work for me.</td>
<td>COVID</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fear of catching COVID or infecting family with COVID</strong></td>
<td>Participant describes a fear of catching COVID or infecting their own family with COVID-19 as a contributing factor to their exit from the classroom.</td>
<td>Maybe six of my students got COVID. They weren’t, you know, the kids weren’t wearing masks. So like, you know, I have to tell them, make sure you put your mask on make sure you put your masks on. They wouldn’t wear on the masks. I always try to get my kids before you know the bell ring to wipe your desk down Lysol wipes and everything. Some would do some wouldn’t. I will still go behind them and do it. But they still end up catching it. So when you’re in the gym, you’re not wearing a mask where you you know when it’s time to go home. They’re taking their masks out, but you know, so yeah,</td>
<td>COVID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student behavior made worse after COVID pandemic</td>
<td>Participant describes student behavior as worsened after COVID-19 pandemic</td>
<td>like six of my kids got it. So and then I have a little of child myself. So I’m kind of like, Lord, please don’t let me get COVID. So I’m home testing. I have home tests at the house. I’m home testing everybody in the house because I’m like sick, and my kids got it. I want to make sure I’m not bringing it home. So yeah, that was really scary.</td>
<td>COVID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adversarial/problematic relationships with students’ families</td>
<td>Participant describes challenges with students’ families as contributing to their exit from the classroom</td>
<td>And like I said, I honestly think some of the things did get a little more personal. There was a lot more in the media and online about, you know, the image of teachers or community feelings about teachers, and kids picked up on that. And some of them, I think, it was less like, oh, this person whose job is to teach me they’re doing this to everyone. And it got very personal for some reason.</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty adjusting to change</td>
<td>Participant describes difficulty adjusting to the changes expected during the COVID pandemic and after as a contributing factor to their exit from the classroom</td>
<td>this parent and was like, actually, you know, here’s what really happened. And at that point, the parent was like, oh, you know, I understand the situation now I see where they’re coming from. But in my head, it was like, first of all, do you like I’m a mom, you know, I’m, I love your kid. You know, I’m not gonna do anything to your kid that I wouldn’t do my own kid.</td>
<td>COVID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prioritizing self-care/well-being/mental–emotional wellness</td>
<td>Participant describes leaving teaching to focus on their well-being or self-care</td>
<td>So I’d say overall, the uncertainty of teaching during COVID is part of what I guess drove me to search for something else just because it was always changing. There was not a lot of continuity, and no one ever really knew the right way to do things or what was working best. And so it was just, you know, on top of teaching being stressful as it is. That was just another element that made it I guess even more stressful.</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infected with COVID</td>
<td>Participant describes leaving teaching because they were infected with COVID-19</td>
<td>I was receiving counseling for my mom’s death. So I had got stronger mentally and emotionally</td>
<td>COVID</td>
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<td>So now, I had some long COVID symptoms, where I was just very fatigued for, you know, I just got tired very easily even if I slept a full night sleep and coming back into the classroom, and having those symptoms just</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership/administrator relationship</td>
<td>Participant expresses that their principal or other administrator was</td>
<td>made a lot more difficult to get everything done that I needed to and that was being asked of me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>negative factor</td>
<td>adversarial or unsupportive in helping them meet the requirements of their role and were a factor in their exit from the classroom</td>
<td>So my principal, I think just a lack of appreciation is one. The lack of appreciation but also I’m being poorly managed, which I guess goes back to the COVID thing, but in other ways as well.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership/administrator relationship</td>
<td>Participant expresses a positive relationship with their administrator</td>
<td>He was super supportive. He held the students accountable, held the teachers accountable, but recognized the need to, I guess, show the teachers a little bit of grace and show appreciation toward us. So yeah, if anything, I think that I would have stayed because of the principal. He wasn’t—he didn’t contribute at all to my decision to leave.</td>
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<td>positive factor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frustration/anger with teaching</td>
<td>Participant expresses frustration or anger with their teaching experience</td>
<td>So it was just, it was very demoralizing. It was very frustrating. And it was like no matter what, you couldn’t win because then, on top of it, there were all the extra behavioral issues.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reluctant to reenter</td>
<td>Participant expresses a reluctance to reenter the classroom or teaching profession</td>
<td>I don’t think it would be worth it for me to go back. It’s a very demoralizing environment to be in all day.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative impact on parenting/home life</td>
<td>Participant expresses a refusal to reenter the classroom or teaching profession</td>
<td>I couldn’t teach anybody anything. I didn’t get a break during the day. I used to take work home with me,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Considered early retirement or retired early</td>
<td>Participant described leaving teaching via retiring earlier than anticipated</td>
<td>but I stopped. Because I didn’t have a life. I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t do it.</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desire for professional advancement</td>
<td>Participant leaves teaching because they desire additional professional roles or advancement</td>
<td>And so my husband told me that if I could kind of… I asked him if I could match my salary of what I brought home, not what I made. But if what I was bringing into the home, if I could come really close to that, and even possibly get a part-time job to make that even a little bit better. Could I retire? And he just looked at me. He was like, You okay, all right. You think you can do it? So I did</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender discrimination</td>
<td>Participant experienced gender discrimination as a factor in exiting</td>
<td>I was still trying to get outside opportunities like as a lead teacher position. I was passed over for that role, despite being the most qualified candidate. And I let the district know that I was not happy about it, and it would I let them know I was not happy about it, and I did not find it acceptable.</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
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<td>I sent a letter on legal letterhead that I believed was gender discrimination. And I realized when I sent that I was like, Okay, I’m never gonna go up here because even if I do, it’ll always be perceived as well. The only reason she got promoted is because she threatened the school basically.</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demanding role (nonteaching role)</td>
<td>Participant returned to teaching because the role they held was too demanding</td>
<td>OK, so the job was very, very demanding that I went to. It was a director role over three departments. I had 12 people, and although I did good, it proved to be too much for me.</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System overhaul/systemic reform</td>
<td>Participant describes a willingness to reenter if the system of teaching is overhauled</td>
<td>More autonomy and like teachers say when it comes to curriculum</td>
<td>Non-COVID</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
VITA

Krystal R. Cormack  
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krystresscormack@gmail.com  
https://www.linkedin.com/in/krystal-cormack/

Education

Ph.D., Teacher Education  
University of Mississippi- Oxford, MS  
Graduate Assistant, MS Teacher Corps School of Education  
(anticipated graduation 2023)

Master of Education, Elementary Education  
Delta State University- Cleveland, MS

Bachelor of Science, Communications and Broadcast Journalism  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign- Champaign, IL  
Multicultural Advocate, Alumni Association Student Ambassador, Phi Eta Sigma Honors Society, Summer Research in Media Studies

Professional Experience

Senior Manager, Tutor Success (March, 2022-Present)  
BookNook, Remote  
- Organize, research, and build systems needed to ensure tutor success  
- Develop and maintain data-driven measurement and evaluation systems for tutor effectiveness  
- Provide real-time support to tutors to ensure effective implementation  
- Work cross-functionally to solve challenges, research issues, and ensure rapid turnaround time on questions and inquires for support

Director of Leader Support and Development (Sept. 2020- Feb. 2022)  
Education Leaders of Color, Jackson, MS  
- Serve as chief architect and implementer of curriculum and leadership programming, ensuring members have support and professional development needed to be effective
• Design creative and engaging content and programming to build community and encourage action among members
• Oversee efforts to provide external coaching to members and Boulder Fund recipients
• Develop and maintain data-driven measurement and evaluation processes to assess the impact of member engagement and effectiveness of EdLoC’s leadership development programming, coaching and interventions
• Cultivate partnerships and recruit more than 120 new members; provide onboarding, connections, and support to new members
• Design, edit, and revise key communications collateral for newsletters, emails and social media messages
• Co-design, select and support grantees who received $100,000 grants in catalytic funding and coaching investments

Graduate Instructor (June- July 2021)
University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS
• Co-led course Reflections on Teaching & Field Experience to support beginning teacher competency
• Provided feedback on instruction, planning, and development of classroom materials and key educator dispositions

Bureau Director: Talent Acquisition (Feb. 2020- Sept. 2020)
Mississippi Department of Education, Jackson, MS
• Led major bureau within state education agency to ensure effective teachers in every school across state
• Managed team of recruiters to provide key information, support, and guidance to prospective teachers; managed TeachMS campaign to encourage recruitment and retention of teachers in state
• Implemented adoption of client relationship management system for the recruitment team to ensure data-driven approach to teacher recruitment; trained division on use of CRM
• Cultivated relationships with teacher alternate route programs; designed and hosted virtual recruitment events during pandemic

Bureau Director: Educator Licensure (March 2019-Feb. 2020)
Mississippi Department of Education, Jackson, MS
• Led team of projects officers, customer service representatives, and licensure analysts toward ambitious results in licensure processing
• Implemented results-oriented onboarding system for Office of Teaching and Leading
• Designed and led customer service rating system; Led team to manage average 4.7 of 5-star customer service rating
• Designed and proposed equity-focused state licensure policy revisions to streamline licensure policies and create additional licensure pathways
• Communicated licensure updates, licensure changes, and process adjustments to external constituents ranging from educators, legislators, and vendors
Director of Alumni Education Leadership (Jan. 2016- March 2019)
Teach For America Mississippi, Teach For America, Oxford, Mississippi
- Awarded and managed $110,000 in grant funds over two years for school leadership development; created Principals Impact Fellowship to provide development and programming for turnaround leaders
- Developed relationships with partner school leadership programs including Delta State University, University of Mississippi, and Columbia University; Coached more than 20 TFA alumni into school leadership pipeline programs
- Managed staff members toward key performance indicators in alumni engagement, fundraising, and other outcomes across the state

Graduate Research Assistant (Jan.-Dec. 2018)
University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS
- Supported research on role play in preparing beginning teachers to effectively manage classrooms
- Collected, coded, conducted literature review and drafted research to be submitted for publication

Chairman of the Board, Board Member (Sept. 2013-Dec. 2018)
Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board, Jackson, MS
- Wrote, edited, and revised state’s charter application; Oversaw proposal evaluations and made recommendations to board; Led the process which authorized the state’s first charter schools
- Oversaw board operations, fiscal management, and management of the Executive Director; onboarded new full-time and temporary staff
- Collaborated with legislature and staff to make recommendations on technical and substantive amendments to charter law; managed partnership with organizations to support operations
- Recruited partner organizations, new operators, and CMOs for state; conducted public meetings on behalf of agency
- Communicated with constituents, families and the press on behalf of the agency
- Supported process of applying for and managed $15 million Department of Education grant
- Represented the organization on the Mississippi Department of Education Grow Your Own Taskforce

Dean of Students (Sept. 2011-May 2012)
Barksdale Reading Institute, Crenshaw Elementary School, Crenshaw, MS
- Collaborated with principal and supported staff at CES in managing curriculum and developing systems for school-wide behavior management
- Led weekly professional development for staff; conducted daily instructional observations and provided rubric-based feedback
- Managed behavior referrals, school incentive program for 12 teachers and 160 students
- Cultivated relationships with key stakeholders, including parents, philanthropists, and community members

Managing Director of Alumni Affairs (Jan. 2010-Sept. 2011)
Teach For America, Mississippi Delta, Helena, AR
- Influenced and motivated alumni of TFA to make critical career, civic, and philanthropic decisions to help accelerate the path to organizational mission of achieving educational equity
- Served on regional leadership team to set vision and direction for entire staff of 28 employees
- Trained and managed a Director of Alumni Affairs; Collaborated with other staff members on projects and campaigns; maxed out on performance-based raises
- Served on national Alumni Affairs Diversity and Inclusiveness Advisory Board to support the Executive Vice President and her leadership team in guiding the team toward ambitious diversity goals and creating an inclusive team culture
- Piloted “Roots: A Return to the Soul of Our Movement” which was the catalyst for Teach For America’s Collective, an affinity group for African American corps members, staff and alumni; visited the location of Emmett Till’s murder and facilitated conversations about the special role of teachers and leaders of color in our student’s lives
- Managed team to ambitious fundraising, talent recruitment, alumni engagement and political leadership goals

**Director of Alumni Affairs (July, 2008- Jan. 2010)**
*Teach For America, Mississippi Delta, Helena, AR*
- Met ambitious fundraising goals annually, securing 78% or more of alumni and second year corps members donating time and/or money to TFA
- Met or surpassed human capital/talent recruitment goals for summer and full-time staffing
- Designed and implemented summer policy fellowship program securing summer roles for alumni in organizations across the state

**Elementary Teacher (2004-2008)**
*Jonestown Elementary School, Jonestown, MS*
- Served as member of highly selective national service corps of recent college graduates of all academic majors who commit two years to teach in under-resourced public schools
- Led 4th grade classes to 2 years of reading growth in a single year
- Advised afterschool enrichment/tutoring program and summer school program which provided remediation to more than 100 students in grades 2-6
- Supported new corps members as a corps member advisor during Summer Institute, Fourth Grade Team Leader, and Investment, Community and Execution Group team leader

**Publications & Presentations**
2018 Making Connections Conference, Presenter, Principals Impact Fellowship, Pitch Contest
2019 Mississippi Women Educators of Color Summit, Presenter
2020 Making Connections Conference, Presenter, Office of Teaching and Leading, Licensure Updates Tallahatchie County
2020 Delta Area Association for the Improvement of Schools, Presenter, Office of Teaching and Leading, Licensure Updates
2021 Mississippi Teacher Corps, Virtual Presenter
2022 Illinois Network of Charter Schools, Featured Presenter
Certifications

Mississippi Educator License Class AA
116/117 Elementary Education K-8
119 English 7-12
149 Journalism 7-12
192 Social Studies 7-12
Expires 2025

Skills, Interests & Community Involvement

Microsoft Office, Google Suite, Canva, Active Campaign, HubSpot, HiveBright, Slack, Zoom
Clifton Strengths Finder assessment results: Communicator, Adaptability, Learner, Winning Others Over (Woo), Developer
Board Member of Jonestown Family Center for Education and Wellness, Jonestown, MS 2012-2015
Active Member, Junior League of Jackson
Active Member, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.
Personal Interests: podcasts, teacher education, fast-pitch softball