

Influential Factors of Employment and Retention for Female Educators  
in Rural South Georgia

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## ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study examined the influential factors in the decision-making process of public-school female teachers in rural South Georgia as they decided to accept and to remain in teaching positions. The vast majority of prior research focused on factors influencing teachers to leave teaching positions or the profession, yet few studies explored the factors influencing them to accept and to remain in teaching positions. Using an explanatory sequential design, 220 female teachers in seven rural South Georgia county school systems completed an online survey focused on the reasons they accepted their teaching position and the reasons they decided to remain in the position. Two follow-up focus groups with three and four participants, respectively, added greater insight to the findings. Results showed that returning to their home area in the rural setting is attractive in deciding to accept a teaching position. A school's positive image, a good reputation, and a safe environment are influential in the decision-making process. Economically beneficial factors positively influence the decision to remain in teaching positions for female teachers in rural South Georgia. Recruitment efforts should focus on teacher preparation programs attended by natives of the rural counties. Rural South Georgia teachers identify with the rural lifestyle and are content in their teaching positions with plans to remain in the position.

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## DEDICATION

In loving memory of my daughter, Megan. I love you!

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction to the Study**

This researcher has lived and worked in southern Georgia all her life and taught at the college level for seventeen (17) years, most recently in the Rural Studies department of an agricultural college. Along with personal experiences in higher education, family and friends have and continue to serve as educators within the public schools in rural southern Georgia. Georgia defined “rural” as a county with a population of 50,000 people or less (Tanner, 2021). As of 2020, most of Georgia’s landmass was rural, but less than a quarter of the population lived in rural areas (Fennessy & Mador, 2021). Thirty-nine (39) of Georgia’s 159 counties were urban, and 120 were rural: the urban counties accounted for 79% of Georgia’s population, while the rural counties accounted for 21% (Tanner, 2021). Nineteen-point-four percent (19.4%) of rural Georgians lived in poverty compared to twelve-point-four (12.4%) of its urban counterparts, and 1 in 4 children in rural Georgia lived in poverty (Georgia Department of Education, 2022).

The journey of female educators was always appealing with respect to my upbringing as a female in rural southern Georgia and the lives lived by females in the rural south, how they experienced life, and how they found themselves as educators. Growing up in a conservative household in a family of farmers dominated by the male of the household, teaching or working in the school system was viewed as an appropriate and desirable career choice for females working outside the home.

This researcher attended a private Christian school from the age of three (3) until sixteen (16) and, due to the school’s closure, transferred to a public school to complete the junior and

senior years. In reflection, most teachers were female, with fewer than ten (10) male teachers in the classroom.

My Daddy often shared memories of his school experiences in the local community school where he was taught by his aunt and other ladies of the community until eighth (8<sup>th</sup>) grade when the students from Mt. Pleasant School were bused to Bainbridge High School, located in the nearest town. My Daddy's sister and her husband were teachers in the rural town of Americus, Georgia, along with other extended female family members who also taught in our rural community. My mother retired from the Decatur County Board of Education as a payroll accountant, and a long-term friend of mine taught seventh-grade math in the Decatur County School System.

This researcher taught Dual Enrollment classes for three (3) years in the Decatur County School System in conjunction with teaching at Bainbridge State College. Later, as an Interim Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, the responsibilities included supervision of Dual Enrollment teachers within the Department. The researcher also worked closely with the various high schools within the geographical instructional area to meet their dual enrollment needs. Coming from a family of educators and working in education, I was piqued by my interest in female teachers.

This dissertation study served as the synergy that brought the constant areas of my life together through the exploration of the experiences of female teachers and the factors that influenced them to become and remain educators in rural South Georgia schools. It was often said of a female teacher, "She retired after 30 years of teaching," and that seemed to be the summation of her career when there was so much more to her story. It is hoped that this

dissertation study was a venue through which teachers identified why they chose to teach in a rural South Georgia school and what factors influenced them to stay.

Although every county in Georgia had some form of organized education by 1874, the journey to becoming a teacher and the experiences of being a teacher had evolved exponentially, especially for females (Miller & Endo, 2005). Developing and maintaining a stable workforce has been a central concern for policymakers, researchers, and education leaders since the standardization of schools in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Today, the high number of teachers leaving their positions and the profession completely significantly contributes to staffing shortages, which are further exacerbated by the decreasing number of teacher applicants available to fill positions, coupled with retention difficulties (Garcia & Weiss, 2020).

Previous research exploring the teacher shortage and attrition focused on what was lacking in particular schools, including financial resources and human capital, and this focus was subsidized by the media's attention to the problems and the deficits of rural communities (Biddle & Hall, 2017). This negative approach to researching the experiences of teachers in rural America coincided with the difficulty of recruiting and retaining educators to live and work in rural areas (Tieken & Williams, 2021).

Teacher attrition was a national concern with a specific bearing on rural schools, as one-third of teachers in the United States exited the profession within the first three years of teaching and one-half within five years (Ingersoll, 2001). In the early 2020's, school leaders were diligently working to deter staffing shortages as the next crisis. Teacher turnover, which usually averaged about 16% nationwide, could see a spike anywhere from 25% to 54% of educators considering leaving the profession (Examining school-level teacher turnover trends, 2025).

Georgia's state school superintendent, Richard Woods, stated, "The most important thing you can provide in the classroom if you want students to be successful, is an excellent teacher" (Woods, 2022, p. 1). In November 2015, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission released a status report, *The 2015 Georgia Public P-12 Teacher Workforce*, identifying the distressing statistic of the statewide cumulative attrition of new teacher hires from 2008-2015 was 44% (Stephens et al., 2015). To garner teacher perspectives related to this unusually high attrition rate, State School Superintendent Woods and the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) conducted a survey of teachers across the state, with more than 53,000 teachers responding (Woods, 2022).

The number of respondents (50% of surveys administered) occurred within three (3) weeks of administration and was considered remarkably high for online surveys (Owens, 2015). The distribution of the survey was deemed evenly spread among elementary, middle, and high school teachers, with the number of responses based on years of experience and geography consistent with Georgia's workforce (Owens, 2015).

The results of the survey discovered that 66.9% of the responding teachers were "unlikely" or "very unlikely to encourage high school graduates to pursue teaching; 2.7% indicated they were "very likely" to encourage their students to go into teaching (Owens, 2015). The Georgia Professional Standard Commission (2015) reported that 44% of Georgia's public-school teachers left within the first five years of employment (Owens, 2015). According to Owens (2015), an indicator of the aforementioned survey was that two out of three teachers were "unlikely" or "very unlikely" to recommend teaching as a profession to a student. This discovery proved troublesome as a teacher's role was substantial in motivating students to pursue a job in the field (Owens, 2015). The survey determined that teachers with 21-25 years of experience

were less likely than teachers with more than 26 years of experience to recommend teaching as a career (Owens, 2015). Elementary and middle school teachers were collectively less likely than high school teachers to have offered a recommendation to the teaching profession, resulting in a need for continued research (Owens, 2015). This proposed research project intentionally shifted the focus from negative teacher retention factors to the more positive aspects of why teachers opt to remain public school educators in rural South Georgia.

This study stemmed from three specific studies in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Montana. In these studies of teacher recruitment and retention, the focus was on an asset-based framework to illuminate the influence of classroom, school, and community on rural teacher retention (Seelig & McCabe, 2021). According to Seelig and McCabe (2021), teacher retention studies often focus on why teachers leave the profession, but focusing on why teachers stay is the foundation for reform. Seelig and McCabe (2021) conducted interviews and focus groups of forty-four teachers and six administrators working in three rural Wisconsin school districts. The findings of this research project revealed four relationship categories the teachers frequently mentioned while discussing their school, community, and professional journeys (Seelig & McCabe, 2021). Seelig and McCabe (2021) saw the following four themes emerge: (1) commitment to students, (2) opportunities for leadership and collaboration, (3) connections to community, and (4) personal and professional ties. Relationships, both within the school and the community, emerged as fundamental in teachers' decisions to stay in their rural schools (Seelig & McCabe, 2021).

A survey of 162 small rural schools in Montana was conducted in 1981. This survey identified educational finance and few incentives as the primary educational problems faced by Montana's rural teachers. In 2016, John David Ulferts administered a survey to teachers employed within the twenty-four smallest Illinois school districts utilizing Likert-type scaled

items measuring recruitment, retention, and job satisfaction (Ulferts, 2016). Ulferts (2016) based the survey on Boylan's four spheres of influence for teacher recruitment and retention: (1) within-classroom activities; (2) whole school level activities; (3) community level activities; and (4) family/personal factors.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem at the basis of this study is that, according to the Governor's Office of Student Achievement, there is a high public school teacher attrition rate, and it is difficult to attract and retain teachers in rural areas (GOSA, 2025, as cited in Governor's Office of Student Achievement, n.d.).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors related to the employment and retention of female teachers in the public schools of rural South Georgia. Recent research called for an authentic and balanced representation of the advantages and challenges of working and living in rural communities as a way to honestly situate the problems of teacher employment and retention (Gallo, 2020).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions listed below guided this study:

Research Question 1: What factors influence female teachers to choose to teach in rural South Georgia?

Research Question 2: What factors influence female teachers to continue teaching in rural South Georgia?

Research Question 3: How well do the factors identified by the participants in this study match the "Spheres of Influence" theoretical framework by previous research?

## **Theoretical Framework of the Study**

A conceptual framework is composed of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories (Maxwell, 2013). This research project pivoted on my experiences and knowledge in conjunction with associated theory and research. Seelig and McCabe (2021) address this call by illuminating the myriad and deep connections between rural schools and communities and the influence of these relationships on sustaining a quality, committed rural teacher workforce. The forerunner study to the Wisconsin, Illinois, and Montana studies was conducted by Boylan et al. (1993) with a sample of 1,100 rural teachers in New South Wales, Australia. This study led to the creation of a rural teacher retention model that identified the following four “Spheres of Influence” - family/personnel, within the classroom, whole school, and community (Boylan et al., 1993).

The following two decades saw Davis (2002) and Ulferts (2016) develop surveys that incorporated Boylan et al.’s (1993) Spheres of Influence to study teacher recruitment and retention in rural Montana and Illinois schools. These studies mirrored Boylan et al.’s (1993) findings, indicating that “community” and “within classroom” spheres were most influential in the decision of teachers to remain as teachers in their rural schools. These previous studies indicated that bringing together the Spheres of Influence conceptual framing and the attention to rural complexity in teacher pipeline research suggested a need for closer examination of the relationship between rural schools and the community to explore why teachers stayed in rural schools (Seelig & McCabe, 2021).

## **Significance of the Study**

The educational journey for female educators in rural, South Georgia in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries was as diverse as the individuals involved. Understanding their journey and

experiences in education illuminated the stories of their lives and provided insight into the impact of societal events.

A highly effective teacher is the single most important school-related determinant of student achievement (Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2004). According to Ulferts (2016), rural schools have a clear interest in their most valuable resource: their teaching staff. Not only do rural schools need to attract highly qualified teachers, but rural schools must also ensure that effective teachers are retained (Ulferts, 2016). Research has also demonstrated that teacher job satisfaction, highly correlated with teacher retention, has positive implications for both student achievement and school quality (Huysman, 2008). Ulferts (2016) offers that the factors contributing to rural teacher job satisfaction can be identified; recruitment efforts may attract better-qualified teachers and reduce teacher attrition, resulting in increased student achievement and economic savings for rural districts.

Student achievement and growth were negatively impacted by high teacher attrition rates in rural schools (Huling, 1998). The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2007) warned of the effects of high teacher turnover on rural schools, resulting in their staffing with under-prepared, inexperienced teachers. Inexperienced teachers, like the ones found all too often in rural schools, are less effective than those with some experience under their belts (Rice & Urban Institute, 2010). Rural districts invest substantial time and resources in the professional development of new staff. The high turnover rate of teachers has a definite impact on the financial efficiency of a district as well as student achievement (Eberhard et al., 2000).

Rural superintendents cite recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff as their number one concern (Natkin & Mooney, 2003). Kim and Loadman (1994) suggest that if administrators better understood the job satisfaction of their teachers, then there may be an

opportunity to intervene in those cases where job satisfaction is marginal or low, or where it is high, and this may be a way to maintain it at a high level. Ulferts (2016) contends that rural educational leaders must improve their understanding of the recruitment and retention factors influencing teachers to accept and continue teaching. Once this greater understanding is accomplished, rural leaders could have a positive impact on teacher recruitment and retention, reduce professional development costs, and increase student achievement (Ulferts, 2016). Ulferts (2016) further offers that a strong comprehension of the factors influencing teacher recruitment and retention could result in a nurturing of the teaching staff, reduction in the negative cost of teacher attrition, and acceleration of student achievement opportunities.

### **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

#### ***Assumptions***

The researcher assumed that female teachers would be willing to participate in this project and would respond truthfully to the questions. To support their willingness to speak without reservation, the researcher offered assurances of confidentiality.

#### ***Delimitations***

This research project did not investigate the impact of teacher preparation programs on future teachers in rural South Georgia. The recruitment of teachers to rural South Georgia schools was not included in this study. Factors impacting the retention of male teachers, as well as those affecting teacher attrition in rural South Georgia schools, were not part of this research project.

#### ***Limitations***

The researcher limited the study's geographical scope to rural South Georgia. The study was delineated into two core concepts regarding female educators in rural Southern Georgia:

what factors influenced female teachers to choose to teach in rural South Georgia, and what factors influenced female teachers to remain educators in rural South Georgia. The study relied on personal perceptual data, limiting the generalizability of its results. The researcher's personal biases affected the interpretation of the data, although steps were taken to mitigate this limitation.

### **Definitions**

- Attrition: the process of leaving the teaching profession for other career endeavors (Borman & Dowling, 2017)
- Attrition Rate: the number of teachers leaving expressed as a percentage of the total number of teachers in a year (Devers et al., 2024)
- Christian School: a course of educational studies centered on the beliefs of Christianity (Maitanmi, 2019)
- Community: a unified body of individuals (Merriam-Webster, 2025)
- Conceptualize: the process in which researchers identify key concepts used in research and provide a unified explanation of those concepts (Kahveci & Bacanak, 2024)
- Conservative: a term identifying individuals adverse to change and who hold traditional values (Zalta, 2025)
- Dual Enrollment Classes: college-level classes offered to high school students (10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades) for both college and high school credit (Dual Enrollment and Articulation, 2025)
- Poverty: according to the 2023 poverty guidelines, a family of four (4) with a household income below \$30,000 is considered to live in poverty (LegUp Health, n.d.)
- Rural Georgia: a Georgia county with a population of 50,000 people or less (DePadro, 2023)

- Spheres of Influence: a rural teacher retention model identifying four spheres of influence - family/personal, within the classroom, whole school, and community (Seelig & McCabe, 2021)
- Urban Georgia: relating to a city or town (Georgia Humanities, n.d.)

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter introduced the historical journey of female educators in rural settings, especially as related to the experience of the researcher. The historical exploration of rural communities provided a context for what was identified as rural. This chapter provided the perspective of the researcher's experiences growing up in a rural community and being exposed to the lifestyle and culture embodied within that community. Research projects explored within this chapter assessed the experiences of female educators in rural communities through the lens of why they left their school system or the profession altogether. The problem of rural teacher retention was documented, as was the lack of understanding of the factors that positively influence rural female teachers to remain in their teaching positions. Explanation was provided as to the focus and lens through which this project explored why female educators chose to teach in a rural setting and why they remained.

## **Outline of the Study**

This dissertation comprises Chapters 2 through 5, with specific components identified in this section of chapter one. Chapter 2, Review of Literature, discussed related research previously conducted, which addressed the phenomena of this research. Chapter 3, Research Methodology and Analysis, provided a detailed description of the research methodology and analysis of the data used in the study. Detailed descriptions of the research design, population, and sample were provided, along with data collection procedures. Chapter 4 revisited the

problem and purpose of the study, the research questions, and the findings. Chapter 5 comprised the conclusions, the researcher's observations, recommendations, and the study's contributions to the literature.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

“Something must be done; education is in a major crisis,” stated a Franklin County Middle School teacher with over 20 years of experience (Owens, 2015, p. 2). Few other occupations in the United States were as large or as important as the teaching profession (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). A quick perusal of the open positions listed on public school systems’ websites showed an alarming number of teaching positions available. Many have questioned the reasons for the increase in vacancies over the past 50 years or so. Research predominantly focused on why teachers leave the teaching profession. This research project takes a different approach and focused on why teachers in rural settings remain in the teaching profession. Centered on the positive aspects of teachers remaining in their profession, this research proposed to examine the perceived factors that influence teachers’ retention in Georgia’s public school system, emphasizing rural communities, particularly in rural South Georgia.

The U.S. Census Bureau did not define rural but identified what rural is not. Rural areas in the United States were identified as those areas that were not urban (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). The research on rural education was found to lack a standard definition of the term rural. Various descriptions of rural communities ranged from research-developed language to classifications extended by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the U.S. Census Bureau (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020). Kreitlow (1954) identified rural places as not in the number of people or population that defined the rural place, but in the “the relationships between people and between people and the land” (page 3). Further, research conducted in the past portrayed rural

people as outside the norm, one-dimensional, always lacking in one way or another, and resistant to change. Instead of honoring the complex existence of people living in rural communities and schools, educational research often worked to cement a static perception and stereotypes (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020).

According to the 2020 U.S. Census Bureau, 20% of the population lived in rural areas, a slight increase from 19.3% in 2010 (United States Census Bureau, 2022). Rural communities were home to almost 60 million people (Robson et al., 2020). The Census Bureau identified 2,612 rural areas in 2020 as opposed to the 3,573 in 2010, a 2.4% decrease in rural land area in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2024). The rural population increased by 11.4% between 2010 and 2020, while the overall U.S. population grew 6.4% (United States Census Bureau, 2024). Twenty-eight percent of the nation's public schools were in rural communities and enrolled approximately 9.7 million PreK-12 students (Robson et al., 2020). Rural schools and students existed in all 50 states; however, Texas and North Carolina led the nation in absolute rural student enrolment. Georgia ranked number three in the country with approximately 499,000 students enrolled in rural schools (Robson et al., 2020).

## **Historical Education Issues**

### ***General Education Issues***

In the 1960's the teaching profession was characterized as a "semi-profession", and this characterization remained a decade later (Lortie, 1975). Teachers were once heroes and villains, saints, and scapegoats (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). During the mid to late 1960s, the teaching profession underwent a major transition with the rise of industrial-style unionism, changing demographics due to the women's rights and civil rights movements, and the implementation of court-ordered school desegregation plans (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). The 1970s served as a natural

inflection point for studying the modern teaching profession. During this time, local control and funding gave way to the district consolidation movement, with states beginning to play an expanded role in funding public education and regulating its practices (Kirst, 1995).

The teaching profession declined in the 1970s and early 1980s in part due to the changing labor market opportunities for women and people of color, a declining population of public school students in the post-baby-boom era, and rapid inflation that reduced real wages and led to large-scale teacher layoffs (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). In 1983, Sykes described society's view of teachers by stating, "Our social history reveals attitudes persistently equivocal towards teachers and a set of decidedly mixed messages about the status and value of this occupation "(p.98). These views resulted in efforts to elevate instructional quality by controlling teacher practices with top-down management and standardization. These attempts significantly reduced teacher autonomy and diminished regard for their expertise (Mehta, 2013).

In 1986, The Carnegie Foundation encouraged the nation to address the declining supply of teachers and to increase the number of minority educators. Recommendations were to strengthen educational preparation programs, restructure salaries, and utilize lead teachers. Restructuring salaries provided fair and comparable compensation in line with corporate employees enjoyed (Evans-Dobbs, 2018). Lead teachers were to support developing teachers and mobilize minority students for future teaching careers (Kraft & Lyon, 2024).

The teaching profession experienced significant challenges in part due to its size, history, and nature. Programs preparing students to become educators were restricted in their ability to employ highly selective admission practices as they were charged with meeting the vast need for teachers across the nation (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). Each year, K-12 schools sought to fill over 200,000 vacant positions. This large-scale demand limited the ability of most educator

preparation programs and schools to be highly selective about whom they admitted and employed without major increases in student interest and labor supply (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). In the United States, the number of public-school teachers increased by 23% between 1995 and 2008 (Bailey & Hussar, 2018); however, during the 2008 economic recession, an estimated 300,000 teaching positions were lost primarily through layoffs (Council of Economic Advisors et al., 2012). The cuts made between 2008 and 2010, according to the Council of Economic Advisors, et al. (2012), resulted in an average student-teacher ratio that increased by 4.6%, reversing nearly a decade of gains since 2000. The National Council of Teachers of English (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014) found that public schools nationally employed 250,000 fewer people than before the recession of 2008-09; however, enrollment increased by 800,000, and class sizes in many schools experienced record highs. Interest in teaching declined 50% since the 1990s and 38% since 2010, the lowest level recorded in the past 50 years (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). Stagnant teacher wages, the increased cost of college, limited teacher autonomy, the perceived loss of job security due to accountability reforms, and the decreased influence of unions were the influential trends in the 2010s (Kraft & Lyon, 2024).

The 2012-13 Teacher Follow-Up Questionnaire (TFS) revealed the annual attrition rate for teachers nationwide as 13.8% (8.1% movers; 7.7% leavers), with a total of 531,300 who moved to another school or district or left the profession altogether (Goldring et al., 2014). History continually characterized teachers as both the problem and the solution to the perceived shortcomings of public education (Pawlewicz, 2020). In 2015, according to Schwab, the world emerged from the worst economic and financial crisis experienced in the past 80 years.

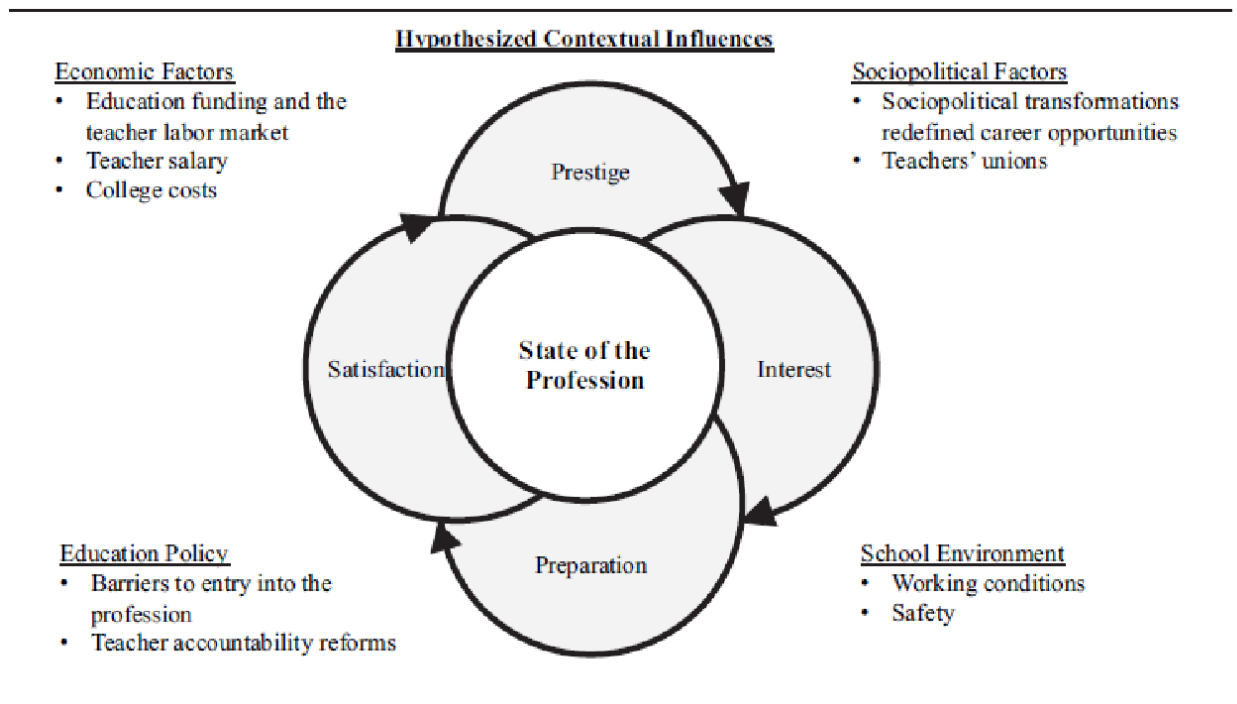
Kraft and Lyons (2024) research indicated the presence of four significant periods of change in the status of the teaching profession throughout the past 50 years. Their research

indicated a rapid decline in the 1970s, a rise began in the early to mid-1980s and lasted through the mid-1990s. The teaching profession's status remained steady for the following 15 years and began to decline around 2010 (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). Kraft and Lyon (2024) delved deeper into the causation of these four periods of change and discovered the declines of the 1970s and early 1980s may have been attributed to changes in the labor market for women and people of color, a decline in the public school student population in the post-baby-boom era, and rapid inflation that reduced real wages and led to large-scale teacher layoffs. The swift recovery experienced in the 1980s and 1990s appeared related to the growing demand for teachers due to rebounding student enrollment and increased real wages (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). Although the decline that began around 2010 may be attributed to the Great Recession of 2008-2009, which resulted in large-scale teacher layoffs, this cannot fully explain the decline (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). Stagnant teacher wages, the rising cost of college, limits to teacher autonomy, the perceived loss of job security due to accountability reforms, and the decreased influence of unions influenced the declining trend of the 2010s (Kraft & Lyon, 2024).

Kraft and Lyons (2024) conceptualized the state of the teaching profession as a set of overlapping constructs represented by mutually reinforcing stages in the generational cycle of the teaching career. Figure 1 shows the interconnection of these mutually reinforcing stages. Public perception of the teaching profession informed students' career interests. Students decided whether to pursue formal preparation for the field and ultimately experienced the rewards and challenges of the profession. The loop was closed as these educators shared their experiences with family and friends and influenced the next generation's career choices (Jacinto & Gershenson, 2021).

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Model: Hypothesized Contextual Influences*



***Interest***

Career interests formed early in students' academic careers and formal decisions to pursue a teaching career were made as early as their senior year in high school (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). Kraft and Lyon (2024) found that more than half of all public-school teachers earned their public school teaching credentials as part of a 4-year bachelor's degree major in education. Public perceptions of the teaching profession informed students' career interests, then they decided whether to pursue formal preparation for entry into the teaching field (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). The cycle came full circle as millions of educators shared their teaching experiences with families and friends, shaped students' perceptions, and influenced the next generation's career choices (Jacinto & Gershenson, 2021). Interest in the teaching profession among high school seniors and college freshmen fell 48% since the 1990s, and 40% since 2010, reaching the lowest

level in the past 50 years (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). Kraft and Lyon (2024) stated the number of prospective teachers earning a teaching license each year fell by over 100,000 between 2006 and 2021.

### ***Preparation***

Once an interest in the teaching profession was identified by the student, a decision was then made and acted upon to pursue formal preparation (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). The student then experienced the rewards and challenges enjoyed within the profession. A sufficient supply of qualified teachers to staff every classroom was a long-standing national concern. Fears of teacher shortages had ebbed and flowed throughout the last century, with early peaks during World War I and II (Pawlewicz, 2020). Although precise requirements differed by state and changed over time, public school teachers across the United States generally completed a certification program, passed the required examinations, and obtained a state-issued teaching license. Most teachers followed a “traditional” certification pathway that included teaching-specific coursework at the bachelor’s or master’s level (Kraft & Lyon, 2024).

Research demonstrated that only three out of every four teachers who earned a teaching credential ended up employed as public school teachers (Goldhaber et al., 2022). Data on teacher preparation advised three specific aspects of the state of the teaching profession. First, the number of individuals preparing to enter the profession was a leading indicator of the profession’s overall attractiveness. Second, with fewer individuals prepared to enter the profession, schools had fewer candidates from which to select; thereby, the quality of teacher-school matches diminished (James et al., 2023). Third, a diminished supply of potential teachers directly affected schools’ ability to fill vacant teaching positions. Although the United States had historically produced more teacher education graduates than demanded (Cowan et al., 2016), the

decline in supply increased shortages due to misaligned localized teacher demand and job candidates' preferences across school locations, working conditions, grade levels, and subject areas (Kraft & Lyon, 2024).

### ***Satisfaction***

Job satisfaction captured teachers' overall professional experiences with the structure and context of their work and the degree to which they found it rewarding and enjoyable (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). The research examined teachers' satisfaction with their work and illustrated how teacher satisfaction was shaped by a range of factors that included the degree of respect they received in society, the salaries they earned, the autonomy they enjoyed, and the conditions in which they worked (Banerjee et al., 2017; Grissom, 2011; Lopes & Oliveira, 2020).

The perception of beginning teachers was an essential indicator of higher attrition rates. Early career teachers did not feel important at the time of entry into education and ultimately planned to seek careers in which they imagined higher self-satisfaction and fulfillment (Teaching and Learning International Survey, 2013). Kraft and Lyon (2024) indicated that teachers, satisfied or not, shared this with their families, friends, and students, closing the loop of students' interest, preparation, and satisfaction within the teaching profession. Teachers' job satisfaction reached the lowest level in five decades in 2022, having declined by 26% between 2012 and 2022, with recent attention focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic made teachers' work more challenging (Kraft & Lyon, 2024).

### ***Prestige***

Prestige was defined as the respect and social standing a profession held in society and was sometimes used interchangeably with the term *professionalism* and *professionalization* (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). Kraft and Lyon (2024) characterized professionalization by advanced

degrees, a well-developed knowledge base, restrictions on entry into the profession, common norms and standards of practice, a large degree of autonomy over one's work, and relatively high compensation. Ingersoll et al. (2018) found that while schools shared some characteristics of professionalized workplaces, teachers' work fell short on many characteristics. The researchers documented teachers in public schools had a greater degree of professionalization than teachers in private schools, i.e., higher salaries, licensure rates, and professional support (Ingersoll et al., 2018). While informative, prestige was best viewed as a measure of external perceptions as opposed to a direct measure of the degree of authority, expertise, and autonomy enjoyed by an occupation (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). Although teachers played a central role in society, they struggled to maintain a status of prestige (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013) found that two-thirds (66%) of beginning teachers perceived teaching as not valued as a status career. According to Kraft and Lyon (2024), the prestige of the teaching profession declined 20-47% over the past 10 years, the lowest levels recorded over the past 50 years.

### ***Rural Education Issues***

Rural communities have undergone significant changes in the past several decades that require special attention (Hodges & MacTavish, 2009). Edmondson (2003) referred to rural areas in the United States as "The Rural American Ghetto:"

Rather than realizing economic independence and prospering, rural residents too often find their main streets boarded up and corporate interests consuming their family farms, while federal policies increasingly work to serve the interests of large communities, large schools, large-scale farms, and agribusiness. (p. 23)

The 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed cycles of intergenerational poverty in the Black Belt region or cotton counties of Georgia as the “new south” encompassed prosperous urban areas such as Atlanta, Dallas, and Houston and the urban areas lagged behind socially, politically, economically, and educationally (Hodges & MacTavish, 2009). The Black Belt was recognized as a rural area with a high African American population and was often ignored and understudied in spite of a drastically high dropout rate and exceptionally high teacher attrition (Hodges & MacTavish, 2009).

Educational scholarship primarily focused on urban educational experiences (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020). Rural communities and rural education endured vague definitions and conceptualization. These were often mapped, stereotyped, and forgotten (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020) as stated here:

Too much public education is devoted to unfitting children for community life. About rural life, this has been accomplished by disseminating the message that physical labor is demeaning, and rural people are essentially unworthy of respect. (Oehlschlaeger, 2011, p. 52)

In the mid-to-late years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rural schools were viewed as undeserving of attention and the home of second-tier education. Teachers in these rural schools were mainly paid less, enjoyed diminished prestige, and were restricted in their ability to relocate to suburban or urban schools to change their plight. Both students and teachers were stigmatized by these variations between rural and urban schools (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020). One teacher offered a frequent feeling of shame in being from a rural place---as if she had a deficit. Residents belonging to the rural community were represented as poverty-stricken and lacking in education (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020). However, residents of rural America viewed themselves

differently. They knew of the social movements, racial justice collectives, animal-rights farm communities, and labor-rights cooperatives born out of rural issues and residents' passions. Rural educators identified with these spaces and desired to work within their home regions (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020).

The retention of educators was a problem in all districts and was especially problematic in rural areas (Leech et al., 2022). Rural schools educated nearly 20% of all public PreK-12 students nationwide (Johnson et al., 2020). The loss of teachers has proven to have a profound impact on schools, students, and fellow teachers as the school lost institutional knowledge, the students lost a trusted person, and the teachers left behind were forced to fill in the gaps (Barnum, 2023). In 2015, Chetty et al. (2013) found that students with an effective teacher were likely to make more money over the length of their career, graduate from college, save for retirement, live in better neighborhoods, and not become pregnant as teens.

Alabama experienced educational challenges in the Black Belt region, one of the largest rural areas in the United States. In the 1820s and 30s, the Black Belt identified a strip of rich, dark, cotton-growing dirt that drew immigrants primarily from Georgia and the Carolinas in the epidemic "Alabama Fever" (Tullos, 2004). Tullos (2004) identified seventeen Alabama counties as members of the traditional Black Belt. These counties included Greene, Sumter, Choctaw, Hale, Marengo, Perry, Dallas, Wilcox, Lowndes, Butler, Crenshaw, Montgomery, Pike, Bullock, Macon, Barbour, and Russell. The soil found in these counties was unusually fertile due to an exposed limestone base referred to as Selma Chalk (Tullos, 2004).

Flush times along the Alabama, Black Warrior, and Tombigbee Rivers transformed the towns of Montgomery, Selma, Demopolis, and Tuscaloosa as the Gulf Coast port of Mobile grew (Tullos, 2004). African-Americans voted for the first time in 1867 and held local, state, and

national political offices; however, white rule was restored in the mid-1870s, and for one hundred years, the Black Belt dominated state politics, and big landowners dominated the Black Belt (Tullos, 2004). The Alabama constitution etched out by the rich and powerful in 1901 fastened Alabama at the bottom of all states in property taxes, public services, and quality of life throughout the twentieth century (Tullos, 2004).

Archibald (2020) stated public schools in Alabama's Black Belt have been hemorrhaging students over the past two decades, "Enrollment decline in the Black Belt is symptomatic of deeper challenges facing rural America. The loss of residents is hurting rural economies and prompting them to seek opportunities elsewhere. In the long-term, schools---and the students who stay---are left hanging." (pg. 2). Black Belt public school enrollment dropped nearly 24% from 140,000 students in the 1995-1996 school year to just under 107,000 in the 2019-2020 school year. Enrollment in the remaining Alabama counties increased by approximately 4% in the same time frame (Archibald, 2020). This decline resulted in school closures and loss of community identity in many small Black Belt towns, according to Archibald (2020).

Macon County Alabama native and graduate of Macon County Schools, Jacqueline Brooks, was serving as her alma mater's Superintendent when interviewed about the declining school enrollment. Brooks stated around 2000 and peaking in 2010, a significant migration of students from the rural school districts into city and suburban school districts occurred. Surveys administered to parents indicated healthcare, job opportunities, and high utility rates as primary reasons for their migration from Macon County and similar trends existed throughout the Black Belt (Tullos, 2004). The lack of economic opportunity in the area meant parents were often forced to work outside of the county, and often eventually moved (Archibald, 2020). The lack of a hospital and even something as simple as a Walmart, according to Brooks, contributed to the

decline in school enrollment and the general population in the fast-shrinking Black Belt (Archibald, 2020). Archibald (2020) added six counties of Alabama's ten counties without a hospital resided in the Black Belt.

These economic concerns played directly into school enrollment and the health of the school system. Most of these rural school systems were heavily funded by sales tax, and with no available shopping choices, such as Walmart, residents drove to neighboring counties for shopping, and their home county lost the tax revenue. The lack of students coupled with the lack of funding meant schools were forced to offer reduced curricula, and in turn, more people left (Archibald, 2020). Brooks returned to her hometown of Tuskegee in the late 1990s as a middle school principal at a school of approximately 850 students. That particular school suffered a loss of 500 since that time (Archibald, 2020). Overall, Macon County school district shrank from nearly 4,300 students in 1995-1996 to slightly more than 1,800 in 2019-2020 (Archibald, 2020).

Commonly, rural areas faced a lack of economic development, resulting in high unemployment, slow population growth, and the perpetuation of poverty (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020). Schools in rural America faced funding disparities that specifically impacted transportation and cost-effective, reliable technology (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020). According to Johnson et al. (2020), rural schools were highly diverse and complex due to factors such as poverty, race, and language. Educators in rural schools were challenged with limited resources, isolation, unexpected changes, interactions with colleagues and administrators, social problems, community acceptance, and differing values between educators and community members (Adams & Woods, 2015). Economic underdevelopment frequently resulted in high unemployment, slow population growth, and the perpetuation of poverty (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020).

## **Current Education Issues**

### *General Education Issues*

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) of 1965 with the goal of encouraging “that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state assessments” (Klein, 2015). The NCLB was enacted to close the achievement gaps in mathematics and literacy by demanding that students be taught by highly qualified teachers with bachelor’s degrees, state certification, and demonstrated mastery of the subject. President Obama’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) gave states the authority and flexibility to identify solutions to the problems with their schools. Black (2001) argued that the morale of students, teachers, and staff can be built by focusing on the root problems and not just the outcomes.

America’s views on teaching were altered in March 2020 as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Professional Association of Georgia Educators, 2022). Parents and guardians of America’s school children were thrust into the role of teacher almost overnight (Professional Association of Georgia Educators, 2022). Faced with homeschooling their children of diverse ages simultaneously, parents and guardians developed a deep appreciation for America’s teachers. This newfound appreciation waned as the public blamed teachers’ unions for the prolonged closure of public schools (Professional Association of Georgia Educators, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the teaching profession differently, according to Labaree (2000), in that, unlike most other professions, the public had ample exposure to what teachers did, and their knowledge was not perceived as exclusive. The pandemic evoked growing

dissatisfaction, burnout, and turnover among America's teachers (Barnum, 2023). Teachers were also faced with new state laws restricting discourse on racism and sexuality in schools (Professional Association of Georgia Educators, 2022). As a result of these changes governing public school teachers, many began to question who in the next generation would choose to teach (Kraft & Lyon, 2024).

In fall 2022, 49.6 million students and 3.2 million full-time equivalent teachers were in public elementary and secondary schools (U.S. Department of Education). More than 5.4 million Americans taught in K-12 schools, approximately 8% of the college-educated labor force (Schaeffer, 2024). Teachers had long been the most significant school resource with a profound impact on students' academic, socio-emotional, and life outcomes. Teachers had shaped the democratic ideas, social cohesion, and economic competitiveness of the nation (Schaeffer, 2024).

Teachers, primarily beginning teachers, left public education in record numbers (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2007). These teachers were in the top 20% of the most effective teachers related to student achievement. The cost of this exodus to the nation was an estimated \$7.3 billion, with the most significant loss to students (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2007). According to Barnum (2023), teacher morale plummeted and was accompanied by steeply increased job-related stress and identification of the 2021-22 school year as the worst in their career.

### *Rural Education Issues*

The term "rural" was often used to describe particular geographies, although there was no universally agreed-upon definition of a rural community. The following diverse definitions were reported by Johnson et al., (2020):

- the Census Bureau defined “rural” as encompassing all populations, housing, and territory not included in an urbanized area (populations of 50,000 or more) or an urban cluster (population of at least 2,500 and no more than 50,000). (pg. 5)
- the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) used an “urban-centric” classification system with four major locale categories: city, suburban, town, and rural. Rural was divided into three sub-categories (pg. 5).
- the Office of Management and Budget designated counties as metropolitan, micropolitan, or neither. Counties not designated as metropolitan were considered rural.

Data analysis and information pertaining to rural communities were complicated by the existence of diverse definitions of rural (Johnson et al., 2020). Variations among rural communities were also prevalent, as some rural communities were resource-rich with a strong tax base and plentiful jobs due to tourism. Other rural communities were poverty-stricken due to devastating economic changes (Johnson et al., 2020). Johnson et al. (2020) clearly emphasized that rural communities were not a monolith.

Financing, facilities, and transportation tended to be more acute in rural communities, and, because they depended on state funding structures, rural schools received less per-pupil funding than urban schools (Johnson et al., 2020). Facility availability was a challenge in rural areas as there existed a scarcity of unused and repurposed buildings, as were often found in urban areas. Higher transportation costs existed in rural areas due to the sparse population of students (Johnson et al., 2020).

In 2020-21, a higher percentage of rural schools than urban schools experienced extreme difficulty in securing teachers in some fields (U.S. Department of Education). For example, 57%

of rural schools found it difficult or impossible to fill foreign language teaching positions, compared with 37% of suburban schools and 36% of urban schools (U.S. Department of Education).

According to a survey administered by Leech et al. (2022) in a western state, rural and non-rural teachers indicated the importance of a positive school environment with supportive administrators and good working conditions as paramount in their decisions to teach in rural areas. The results of this study indicated key factors in making teaching a sustainable career and the predominant career challenges teachers faced as more similar than different across rural and non-rural settings (Leech et al., 2022). Factors that made teaching a sustainable career and their challenges will be discussed in the forthcoming sections.

### **Recruitment**

Rural schools attracted teachers for many reasons, with the most often reported as personal or family considerations (Davis, 2002). Davis (2002) further noted that the rural lifestyle and proximity to family were additional reasons for teachers to accept positions in rural schools. Additionally, teachers often cited a draw to the position's challenge as well as a sense of safety afforded by the school environment (Davis, 2002). COVID-19 further exacerbated the challenges of recruitment and retention of public-school educators (Kraft & Lyon, 2024).

Macon County Alabama schools once employed two Spanish teachers and one French teacher; however, daily attendance prevented the continuation of teachers and forced their movement to virtual learning (Archibald, 2020). The types of classes offered and the presence of teachers for those classes has become increasingly limited (Archibald, 2020). Recruiting teachers was a challenge for schools with Alabama's Black Belt; however, retention has joined as a challenge, according to Brooks (Archibald, 2020).

## **Attrition**

Since the 1970s, the considerable expansion of the teaching workforce has been accompanied by increased beginning teacher turnover for reasons such as low salaries, marital status (married women were more likely to leave than single women, and men were more likely to receive promotions into leadership than women), educational attainment level, and professional isolation (Borman & Dowling, 2017). More than 44% of new teachers left the workforce within the first five years, with the highest rates of teacher turnover in rural schools and urban schools considered high-poverty and high-minority (Ingersoll, 2001). Attrition is costly to well-funded, populous school districts where it is less problematic to attract qualified teachers (Evans-Dobbs, 2018). Rural communities faced more demanding challenges related to attrition as they struggled to compete with larger districts for salary, preferential job placement (based on teachers' preference), and high student achievement. (Evans-Dobbs, 2018). Rural school districts experienced teacher attrition due to the difficulty of attracting, training, and retaining highly qualified teachers (Leech et al., 2022). Research conducted by Adams and Woods (2015) in remote Alaskan K-12 schools found teacher retention and their sense of efficacy directly connected to their being prepared with realistic expectations and relevant experiences, community and colleague relationships, professionalism, including collaboration, tapping outside resources, creativity in teaching, and being student-oriented. Additionally, teachers in remote Alaska identified prioritizing student-teacher relationships and adapting instruction to meet student needs as essential to their sense of efficacy and retention (Adams & Woods, 2015).

Schools in rural areas experienced teacher attrition primarily due to the difficulties in attracting, training, and retaining highly qualified teachers (Leech et al., 2022). Howard McLean,

superintendent of Anson County schools located in a high-poverty rural community just outside Charlotte, North Carolina, faced considerable difficulty filling classrooms in the 2023-2024 school year (Barnum, 2023). McLean referenced the COVID-19 pandemic as having enhanced the challenges faced by his school district as schools were destabilized and teachers demoralized, resulting in more teachers leaving and fewer teachers applying (Barnum, 2023).

### **Retention**

A significant sector of the American workforce, known as *Baby Boomers*, comprised 50% of the nation's educators and were reaching retirement, making the issue of teacher retention more crucial (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Adams and Woods (2015) determined that mid-career teachers' sense of efficacy contributed to their retention. This perception was based upon realistic expectations, relevant experiences, community and college relationships, collaboration with outside resource utilization, and student focus. Concise responses identifying why they remained at their rural school included the quality of relationships with students, familial support, the community, environmental safety, and the enjoyment of rural life (Davis, 2002).

School staffing challenges were not limited to the number of qualified teachers but were primarily affected by lower teacher retention (Leech et al., 2022). The high teacher turnover rates and job dissatisfaction were strongly related to limited support and decision-making, student discipline problems, and low salaries (Ingersoll, 2001).

### *Scarcity of Research*

Due to the large number of rural schools in the United States and the number of children attending these schools, further research was deemed necessary to understand rural teachers, their experiences, why they accepted positions, and why they remained at these rural schools

(Leech et al., 2022). Much of the research provided a macro-level overview in support of the fewer studies at the micro-level (Kraft & Lyon, 2024).

Scholars recognized the lack of research related to teacher shortages in rural areas and specifically noted the lack of recommendations to address the unique barriers experienced in rural areas (McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019). Scholars recently began to acknowledge the lack of research focusing on teacher shortages in rural areas and the difficulties in making general recommendations applicable based on barriers indigenous to rural areas (McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019). Arnold et al. (2005) found very little research conducted on rural teachers, resulting in a lack of understanding of why they chose to teach in rural schools and why they remained in rural schools.

Little research existed on the lesser-known reasons for the attrition of teachers who changed from one subject to another early in their career and those who changed to a different career within the educational field, i.e., changed from teaching to an administrative position (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020). Little research existed related to the perception of early career teachers' perceptions of attrition in rural communities and its impact on students, peers, and the school district. It was important that a voice was given to students and teachers of rural communities to advocate for resources and to share their experiences (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020).

The literature reviewed for this project focused primarily on why teachers did not choose to join a rural school or why they did not opt to remain at a rural school. This research project added to the research in this field by exploring why those teachers employed by a rural school chose that school initially and why they have elected to remain.

## **Chapter Summary**

The state of the teaching profession was explored both historically and currently as it reacts to the influence of the prestige of the profession, the interest of future students, and their preparation for the profession, and finally, the overall satisfaction of teachers, as this directly impacts the next generation. Examining the historical experiences of teachers over the past half-decade lends integrity to the challenges and rewards of the more recent teachers. The literature review provides a strong foundation for the exploration of reasons teachers choose to teach in rural schools and why they choose to remain. Gaps in the literature were evident as a significant portion of the literature focuses on why teachers leave and the negative components of the rural school system. This research project attempted to focus on the factors associated with rural communities and their school systems, along with the experiences of female teachers influencing their decision to join the school system and remain in the school system.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

This chapter discusses how the study was conducted, how the data was gathered and analyzed, and how this research project will benefit the K-12 public school system in rural, South Georgia. Specific considerations were given in describing the variables perceived to have influenced teachers' decisions to teach in rural South Georgia and to remain teachers in rural Southern Georgia. The focused-upon population was identified in conjunction with an analysis of how the sample population was selected. The researcher further described the research design, analytical method, and survey instrument in detail. The research questions below were addressed utilizing the research methods identified in this chapter:

1. What factors influenced female teachers to choose to teach in rural Southern Georgia?
2. What factors influenced female teachers to continue teaching in rural Southern Georgia?
3. How well do the factors identified by the participants in this study match the "Spheres of Influence" theoretical framework identified by previous research?

### **Research Design**

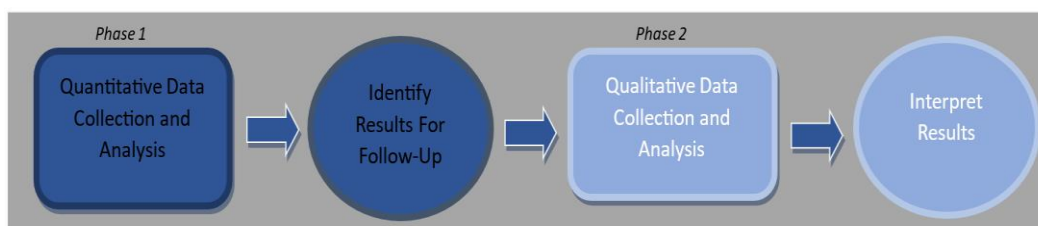
This study was descriptive in nature, relying on quantitative perceptual rating survey data and qualitative narrative data. These data sets generated the study's results, answered the research questions, and served as the basis for the study's conclusions and recommendations for school administrators and for further research. The research design for this project was an

explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, in which the experiences of female educators in rural South Georgia were explored. This design involved collecting quantitative data first, followed by the explanation of the quantitative data with in-depth qualitative data (Creswell, 2014). Data collected in the quantitative phase of the project influenced the development of questions in the subsequent qualitative phase (Ary et al., 2014). The quantitative phase was conducted via an online Qualtrics survey emailed to potential participants in the seven rural South Georgia school systems. Upon receipt and analysis of the quantitative data, which revealed common themes and patterns, a more detailed and thorough qualitative questionnaire was designed to explore participants' experiences. A smaller subset of the initial larger group of participants was identified and invited to participate in focus groups. Open-ended questions were employed in the focus groups.

Figure 2 illustrates the explanatory sequential model (Creswell, 2014).

**Figure 2**

*Explanatory Sequential Model*



The researcher identified the counties currently hosting K-12 public school systems in rural, South Georgia deemed desirable for participation in the project. Seven counties in rural South Georgia were identified for participation in the project: Brooks, Colquitt, Early, Irwin, Thomas, Tift, and Ware.

### ***Population and Sample***

The population for the research project were the faculty of K-12 public school systems in rural, South Georgia. The sample was constructed of female faculty of K-12 public schools in Brooks, Colquitt, Early, Irwin, Thomas, Tift, and Ware counties in rural, South Georgia. The student included faculty from seven different counties so the sample population identifiers and data collected were maintained separately allowing for discrete and aggregate analysis of county data.

### ***Data Collection***

The researcher submitted to the Dissertation Committee and subsequently Valdosta State University's (VSU) Internal Research Board (IRB) the Research Proposal, including the solicitation email for the superintendents, the solicitation email for the potential participants, and the Qualtrics Survey. Following approval of the Research Proposal by the Committee and the IRB (Appendix A), the researcher commenced data collection procedures.

The researcher contacted the superintendent of each county's public school system, providing the information needed to grant access to each female teacher currently employed in the relevant school district via their school email. (Appendix B). Superintendents were asked to encourage female faculty members to participate in the survey.

Once the superintendents granted access to the faculty, the researcher collected the school email address of each female faculty member. These email addresses were maintained in an Excel spreadsheet, with the county, school name, and school designation (e.g., elementary, middle, or high school) identified for each female faculty member.

Once the potential participants' contact data were compiled in an Excel spreadsheet, the researcher sent an introductory, informative email to each female faculty member in the K-12

public school district of each of the three counties (Appendix C). The introductory email was informative and yet brief enough not to overwhelm the potential participant. After reading the introductory email and electing to voluntarily participate, they were directed to select an embedded link to the Qualtrics survey (Appendix D).

After distribution of the survey via email to potential female participants in each of the seven school districts, the researcher notified the superintendent or designated school official in each district's school system of the distribution and the time frame for completing the survey.

### ***Instrumentation***

The data collection instrument utilized in this research project was a survey instrument comprised of four sections as follows:

- Section One: factors that influenced the participant's decision to accept their present teaching position aimed at answering Research Question 1.
- Section Two: explored the participants' opinions related to effective teacher retention strategies aimed at answering Research Question 2.
- Section Three: addressed questions about the participants' satisfaction with teaching aimed at providing insight into two of Boylan's spheres of influence: within-classroom activities and whole school level activities and helping to answer Research Question 3.

Following the demographic information, questions followed in which the teacher was prompted to rate and identify factors important specifically to them as they made career decisions, both in accepting and continuing employment in rural, Southern Georgia.

The data collection instrument was pilot-tested through a study involving faculty at a rural College in the same geographic area as the seven counties featured in this study. The pilot participants were asked for feedback on ease of use, ambiguous wording, and any other

challenges encountered while completing the survey via Qualtrics. Suggestions gleaned from the pilot participants will be incorporated into the survey revisions to make the instrument as user friendly as possible.

Examples of questions included in the phase two qualitative focus groups are:

1. Results from the study showed “a connection with the community” as an important factor in female teacher retention. Do you agree, and if so, could you provide examples?
2. The study indicated the “enjoyment of the rural lifestyle” as influential in the decision-making process, as female teachers accepted and remained in rural school systems. Was this influential in your decision, and if so, could you elaborate?
3. Results from the study provided a number of suggestions for the recruitment and retention of teachers. Will you share your suggestions and elaborate upon how they benefit from the recruitment and retention of teachers?

These questions, and additional questions like them, were presented via the pilot study to faculty within a rural College and education majors of this same College to strengthen the validity of the focus group questions and provide feedback on focus group technique. The pilot study results informed the researcher about ambiguous questions and other challenges experienced by the participants.

### ***Recording and Reporting Data Sets***

All data collected was maintained as confidential and anonymous, with no identifying factors in any reports assembled from the findings. Coding was used solely for follow-up.

Quantitative data gleaned from this study was reported using charts, tables, and/or diagrams.

### ***Data Gathering Procedure***

This study identified the factors influential in female educators' acceptance of teaching positions in rural South Georgia public school systems and their decision to remain. The study began with an online survey of female teachers employed in seven rural South Georgia counties. The survey gathered data from female educators employed in a rural South Georgia public school system regarding the influential factors that affected their acceptance of a teaching position and their decision to remain. Data from the survey provided quantitative information, which was analyzed to identify patterns and trends. Data analysis identified specific factors influencing female educators' employment decisions. Subsequently, the data will inform the development of the focus group instrument for the successive qualitative phase, ensuring the questions posed are both relevant and meaningful to the participants (Creswell, 2014).

To expand on the quantitative data, two focus groups were conducted with a smaller sample of participants. These focus groups described in more detail the influential factors and their impact on the decision-making process of the female teachers who accepted and remained in their teaching positions. Teachers offered recommendations for changes in the identified factors influencing female teachers in rural South Georgia public systems. Ethical protocols, including informed consent and participant anonymity, were adhered to throughout the study.

The researcher employed triangulation, ensuring the study's findings were vigorous and thorough. The method combined insights from both the online survey and the focus groups (Creswell, 2014). A detailed exploration of the factors influential in the decision to accept employment and to remain in the employment of public-school systems in rural South Georgia emerged from this study.

### ***Survey***

An email to the superintendent of the seven counties, Brooks, Colquitt, Early, Irwin, Thomas, Tift, and Ware, Appendix B, was sent requesting permission to contact via email the female educators employed within their public school system. The survey was comprised of questions focusing on influential factors related to accepting their current teaching position, factors that were not influential in their decision, factors that teachers found encouraging to remain in their teaching positions in rural school systems, and demographic information. The survey questions consisted of multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions and generated quantitative data. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify prevalent trends and significant patterns related to the influential factors affecting female teachers in seven rural South Georgia public school systems. Content analysis was performed for the open-ended questions. This wide-ranging survey was conducive to comprehension of the factors influential in the participants' decision-making process related to accepting and remaining in teaching positions. Open-ended questions allowed participants to share their experiences and perceptions in narrative form, providing insight not usually gleaned from quantitative assessments. Qualitative data provided a more personal insight into the impact of the influential factors identified in the quantitative assessment.

### ***Focus Groups***

Results from the collected quantitative and qualitative data facilitated the design of the qualitative focus group questions. The insights from both data sets informed the creation of targeted, relevant, and comprehensive focus group questions (Creswell, 2014). The goal of the two focus groups was to segue into a deeper, richer exploration of the impact of influential

factors on the employment decisions and retention of rural teachers. This two-phase process provided the foundation for constructing meaningful focus groups (Creswell, 2014).

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Recognizing the possibility that personal experiences can influence qualitative research, the researcher engaged in reflexivity sessions and assessed how personal perspectives influenced the research. Documentation in the reflexive journal will allow the researcher to identify and mitigate biases discovered during the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This practice ensured the study remained grounded in participants' experiences and was not influenced by the researcher's perspectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Instrument Description**

#### ***Online Survey***

The online questionnaire (Appendix D) identified influential factors in female teachers' decisions to accept and remain in teaching positions in rural South Georgia public school systems. Sections of the survey asked for rating and/or written response information about the factors that influenced their decision-making, as well as those that did not. The online questionnaire inquired about their individual demographics and recommendations for potential encouraging factors. The online questionnaire was administered via Qualtrics and sent to their school email. Questions were adapted from *Teaching in Montana's Small Rural Schools Survey* (Davis, 2002).

#### ***Focus Group Interviews***

Focus groups, based on data from the quantitative analysis component of the study, provided a venue for a small sample of the population to expand on the impact of these factors. Individual participants in the online survey indicated their willingness to participate in a focus

group with the researcher. The researcher collected the names and contact information of those who indicated an interest in the focus groups and emailed them at their school address. Dates and times for two focus groups were established. In focus groups, the interviewer reads the questions to the participant face-to-face and records their responses (Ary et al., 2014).

Female teachers employed in Brooks, Colquitt, Early, Irwin, Thomas, Tift, and Ware Counties in Georgia were interviewed using focus groups. This format allows for a balance between structured guidance and flexibility (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009). As Creswell and Guetterman (2019) noted, the focus group will ensure depth through clarifying probes and elaborations. The interviewer greeted the participants and shared an outline of the study's purpose, research questions, and the main focus group questions. Provisions for follow-up questions, observations, and reflective notes will be incorporated (Clandinin et al., 2000).

This research project utilized TEAMS to conduct the focus groups, providing flexibility and allowing the recording of the focus groups (Ary et al., 2014). The focus groups provided insight into participants' personal stories, giving the researcher a richer, more in-depth understanding of their experiences. Focus groups were conducted in a private, safe space, recorded with the participant's consent, and employed a semi-structured format (Creswell, 2014). After transcription, the video recordings were deleted to ensure confidentiality.

### ***Pilot Testing of Instruments***

Females employed as teachers at a rural South Georgia College or enrolled in the educational classes at a rural South Georgia College served as participants for the pilot study. The pilot study participants were recruited utilizing existing professional relationships between the participants and the researcher. This method of participant recruitment ensured the testing was comprehensive and practical. Participants received an email via their college email, and

students enrolled in the educational classes received an email via their student email. The pilot study strengthened the validity of the research instruments.

This pilot test served multiple purposes:

1. Evaluated the survey and focus group protocols for their effectiveness in gathering accurate and meaningful data (Creswell, 2014).
2. Tested the practical aspects of data collection, such as the time required to complete the survey or focus group and the user-friendliness of the electronic platform used for the survey (Creswell, 2014).
3. Assessed the clarity of expression of the questions to ensure they were uniformly understood by all participants (Creswell, 2014).

The survey portion of the pilot test assessed the readability, understandability, and clarity of the questionnaire wording (Creswell, 2014). Participants were asked to provide feedback on the survey's structure, question format, and response options (Creswell, 2014). Participants were asked to comment on questions they found confusing, irrelevant, or sensitive, and this information was used to refine the questionnaire (Creswell, 2014). Following survey data collection and analysis, a second pilot study was conducted to assess the focus group questions, ensuring their relevance and effectiveness. As with the former pilot study, this study evaluated the quality of the focus groups' protocol, comprehensibility, and effectiveness in capturing the experiences and perspectives of the target population (Creswell, 2014). Following the same procedure as the survey, participants were asked about the flow of the focus group, the appropriateness of the language used, and whether they felt any discomfort or hesitation in responding to the questions (Creswell, 2014). Feedback from the pilot test was analyzed and integrated into the final versions of the survey and focus group protocols. Any changes made to

the instruments were clearly documented to maintain transparency in the research process (Creswell, 2014).

The pilot test results were not included in the final analysis but served as an iterative step in refining the research tools (Creswell, 2014). This approach enhanced the validity of the research instruments and addressed ethical considerations by ensuring participant comfort and improving data quality (Creswell, 2014).

## **Data Analysis**

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, following an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. This design began with quantitative data establishing a foundation and followed by the collection of qualitative data for a richer exploration of the initial findings and the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2014).

### ***Quantitative Data Analysis***

After administering the surveys and receiving participants' responses, the data were analyzed following extraction from Qualtrics. Specific metrics such as frequencies, percentages, and means were derived to provide a clear picture of the distribution and central tendencies of the responses. The trends and patterns revealed guided the development of the focus group questions. Additionally, themes, patterns, and insights emerged following the content analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions. Coding responses, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting data provided a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences.

A descriptive quantitative analysis of the online survey data provided initial results that served as the foundation for the construction of the focus group questions (Creswell, 2014). Further into the study, comparative references were assessed utilizing the qualitative data, yielding a comprehensive analysis (Creswell, 2014).

### ***Qualitative Data Analysis***

Focus groups served as a vital tool for collecting rich narratives (Clandinin et al., 2000). The informal conversations enabled the researcher to capture a broad view of the participants' information, thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Clandinin et al., 2000).

Following analysis of the survey data and the findings of the focus groups, the qualitative data analysis was conducted, emphasizing the impact of identified influential factors on the decision of female teachers in rural South Georgia to both accept and remain in their teaching role. Thematic content analysis was applied to the focus group data (Creswell, 2014).

### ***Transcribing***

The researcher transcribed the focus group information. This approach was crucial for making the data more manageable for analysis and allowed for a closer examination of content (Creswell, 2014). The transcription process played a key role in identifying and emerging themes, as it transformed the spoken words of the focus groups into written text, facilitating a more thorough and nuanced understanding of participants' narratives (Creswell, 2014).

### ***Coding***

Thematic coding is the close examination of focus group content, with recurring ideas, emotions, or concepts assigned specific codes (Creswell, 2014). This approach allowed for data to be organized into meaningful themes that reflected the impact of influential factors on female teachers' decisions, through a detailed, structured analysis. A color-coding strategy was used, assigning specialized colors to themes that emerged during the initial coding phase. The diverse colors provide a visual differentiation of the data. This strategy enriched the analysis by providing a clear, visual representation of the thematic structure of the data, ultimately leading to more informed conclusions (Creswell, 2014).

### ***Constructing Narratives***

As themes emerged from the shared experiences of participants, they were organized sequentially to construct comprehensive narratives (Creswell, 2014). The narratives were reviewed by the researcher and subsequently shared with the participants to provide an opportunity to review individual sections, ensuring an accurate and faithful representation (Creswell, 2014).

### ***Triangulation***

Utilizing the online questionnaire supplemented by second-phase focus groups ensured the incorporation of two or more sources of information, and this is known as triangulation (Ary et al., 2014). Combining two or more sources of information that lead to the same conclusion provides a stronger case; however, if discrepancies are noted, then the researcher learns from the research and may develop new questions in the exploration of the discrepancies (Ary et al., 2014). This approach exemplifies a quantitative-to-qualitative mixed-method study, seamlessly integrating quantitative insights from online surveys with deeper qualitative understanding through focus groups (Creswell, 2014). This integration not only enriches the analysis but also facilitates data triangulation, enhancing the validity of the findings by comparing different data sources and perspectives (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The explanatory sequential design entails an initial quantitative phase using an online survey to collect data, which will subsequently guide the qualitative data focus group phase (Creswell, 2014). Implementing the mixed-methods approach allows for data from diverse sources to be compared and contrasted, significantly enhancing the reliability and validity of the conclusions (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Specifically, data triangulation enabled a detailed analysis of the impact of the spheres of influence on female teachers' decision-making process as they accepted teaching positions in rural school districts

and remained in these positions. Analyzing these impacts from diverse perspectives provided a more complete understanding of how they influenced female teachers' decision-making processes.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlined a mixed-methods research methodology that explored the impact of influential factors on teachers' decisions to accept and remain in teaching positions in seven rural South Georgia public school systems. The study focused on identifying the influential factors and their impact on the decision. To achieve this comprehension, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed, beginning with a quantitative online survey followed by two qualitative focus groups. This approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of both broad trends through the survey and in-depth personal experiences via focus groups.

The online survey, composed of multiple-choice, scaled, and open-ended questions, was administered to female teachers employed in the public-school systems of seven rural South Georgia counties. Two focus groups were conducted with a subset of the population to generate a deeper, richer understanding of teachers' experiences and recommendations.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors influencing employment and retention for female educators in rural South Georgia. Past studies on the employment of female educators focused primarily on the reasons they left their current school system or the profession as a whole. The researcher sought an alternative approach to understanding why teachers chose their school system and why they remained in it. Using both qualitative and quantitative data, the researcher aimed to provide insights that may inform public school system leaders on how to create supportive environments for female teachers.

The findings presented in this chapter are the results of data analysis designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors influence female teachers to choose to teach in rural South Georgia?
2. What factors influence female teachers to continue teaching in rural South Georgia?
3. How well do the factors identified by the participants in this study match the “Spheres of Influence” theoretical framework by previous research?

This chapter begins with a review of the procedures outlined in Chapter 3 to provide context for data collection methods. This section summarizes the quantitative survey findings and the qualitative interview insights.

#### **Procedures and Participants**

Data collection began in September 2025 and concluded in November 2025. The process began with the quantitative data gathering phase. In this phase, a confidential, anonymous online survey was administered to collect the lived experiences of female teachers in rural South

Georgia. The survey titled, *Influential Factors of Employment and Retention for Female Educators in Rural South Georgia* was sent. The survey comprised four sections: Factors Influencing Accepting Teaching Position in Rural South Georgia; Your Opinion About Effective Retention Strategies; Your Satisfaction with Teaching; and Volunteering to Participate in a Focus Group.

Prior to the start of data collection in September 2025, the researcher identified three similar demographic counties in rural South Georgia. An email was sent to the superintendent of each of the three counties requesting permission to contact the female teachers in their respective counties to invite them to participate in the survey. The superintendent for one county responded positively within two days. The superintendents for two counties did not respond, and a follow-up phone call was made one week after the email was sent. An additional email and phone call were employed one week later, with no response.

Two additional counties were then included in the research pool. The superintendent of the first county responded favorably the same day the email was sent; however, no response was received from the second county, despite follow-up phone calls and emails. These additional two counties together generated 44 survey responses, and one teacher was interested in participating in the focus group.

Seventeen more similar counties in rural South Georgia were added to the research pool. While no superintendent responded adversely, five counties responded favorably, resulting in a total of seven counties participating in the survey. Of the seventeen counties, a total of 220 female teachers from seven counties participated in the survey.

During the data collection period from September 2025 to November 2025, 220 female teachers in rural South Georgia participated in the survey. Of the 220 respondents to the survey,

20 (9%) female teachers from seven counties expressed an interest in participating in a focus group.

The focus group questions were developed from the themes that emerged from the Qualtrics survey responses. The nine questions, as presented in Appendix E, comprised four questions about participants' decisions to accept their teaching positions and four about their decisions to remain in their teaching positions. One question addressed their decision to accept and remain in their teaching position. From the survey respondents, seven individuals who volunteered were selected for the qualitative data-gathering phase to provide deeper insights into their experiences. This subset of participants provided deeper, more nuanced insights into their personal experiences. Pseudonyms were used to provide anonymity to the focus group participants.

### **Findings and Analysis**

This section presents the key findings from both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study. A comprehensive overview of the lived experiences of female teachers in rural South Georgia is presented. The quantitative data gleaned from the confidential, anonymous survey were analyzed through descriptive statistics. The qualitative data was collected through focus groups guided by open-ended questions.

This section integrates qualitative and quantitative findings to develop a comprehension of the factors influencing female teachers in rural South Georgia in their acceptance of teaching positions and their decisions to remain in those positions. The quantitative findings provided a broad overview of teachers' lived experiences, whereas the qualitative focus groups yielded deeper and more personal contextual data. The qualitative findings, derived from two focus groups with a total of seven participants, explored the personal experiences of female teachers as

they accepted and remained in those teaching positions in rural South Georgia. The quantitative data are presented first to explore the survey’s statistical findings, followed by the qualitative data to elaborate on the identified trends.

***Survey Findings***

The quantitative data-gathering phase of the study provided invaluable insight into the factors influencing female teachers’ decision-making process for accepting and remaining in teaching positions in rural South Georgia. Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the data collected via a confidential, anonymous survey.

**Table 1**

*Frequencies and Percentages of the Most Influential Factors to Accept Teaching Positions*

	<b>Very Large-Good Deal of Influence</b>
Family and/or Home Close By	169/76.8%
Safe Environment	139/63.2%
Good Reputation of the School	130/59.1%
Best or Only Job Offer	123/56%
Satisfaction with Salary & Benefits	108/49.1%
Enjoy the Rural Lifestyle	107/48.6%
School Facility	86/39.1%
Materials and Resources Available	69/31.4%
Small Class Size	59/26.9%
Challenge of the Teaching Position	59/26.8%
Spouse/Partner Employment	55/25%
Professional Development Opportunities	55/25%
Opportunity to Practice Multiage Teaching	27/12.3%
Access to Recreational Activities	26/11.8%
Schools’ Recruitment Program	16/7.2%

The survey assessed the factors influencing rural South Georgia teachers’ decisions to accept their current teaching positions. Participants were asked to rate the influential factors, and the results revealed the three most influential factors as “Family and/or Home Close By” (169/76.8%), “Safe Environment” (139/63.2%), and “Good Reputation of the School”

(130/59.1%) as having very large or a good deal of influence in their decision to accept their teaching position (see Table 1). Participants indicated the three factors with little or no influence, as shown in Table 2: “School’s Recruitment Program” (178/80.9%), “Access to Recreational Activities” (153/69.6%), and “Opportunity to Practice Multiage Teaching” (158/71.8%).

**Table 2**

*Frequencies and Percentages of the Least Influential Factors to Accept Teaching Positions*

<b>Little/No Influence</b>	
School’s Recruitment Program	178/80.9%
Opportunity to Practice Multiage Teaching	158/71.8%
Access to Recreational Activities	153/69.6%
Spouse/Partner Employment	141/64.1%
Professional Development Opportunities	121/55%
Small Class Size	115/52.3%
Materials and Resources Available	103/46.8%
Challenge of the Teaching Position	91/41.4%
Enjoy the Rural Lifestyle	78/35.5%
School Facility	71/32.2%
Best or Only Job offer	70/31.8%
Good Reputation of the School	48/21.9%
Satisfaction with Salary & Benefits	44/20%
Safe Environment	38/17.3%
Family and/or Home Close By	29/13.2%

The survey included open-ended questions that elaborated on the quantitative questions, inquiring into other factors influencing participants’ decisions to accept and remain in their current teaching positions. Ninety-nine (45%) of the 220 survey participants responded to these open-ended questions. The responses were coded into the following six categories: family, discipline, administrative support, available position, culture, and connection to the school/town. One participant stated, “A work schedule that allows for time off to be with family for holidays and summer,” as an influential factor in her decision. “Actual consequences for student misbehavior” influenced another participant. “I knew the principal and knew it would be great to

work under her leadership” was influential for one participant. Another participant indicated “Lack of opportunity for female athletics coaches” as influential in her decision to accept the position. “I went to school in this district, and I have been here all of my life,” influenced one participant. These six categories guided the formation of questions for the focus groups. The survey participants’ responses were grouped by commonality. Once the six factors were identified, responses were then categorized accordingly. As noted in Table 3, school culture (29%), administrative support (27%), and family proximity (23%) accounted for 79% of the factors influencing participants’ decision to accept their current teaching positions.

**Table 3**

*Other Factors Influencing Teachers’ Decisions to Accept Their Current Teaching Position*

<b>Family</b>	<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Administrative Support</b>	<b>Available Position</b>	<b>Culture</b>	<b>Connection to School/Town</b>
30/23%	2/2%	15/27%	10/10%	34/29%	8/9%

Female teachers participating in the survey indicated the most influential factors in their decision to accept their current positions as the proximity of family (76.8%), the school’s safe environment (63.2%), the school’s good reputation (59.1%), and the best or only job offer (56%). Each of these four factors was rated higher than 50% by the survey participants. Satisfaction with salary and benefits, along with enjoyment of the rural lifestyle, were rated at 49.1% and 48.6%, respectively. When responding to the open-ended question, female teachers identified the culture (29%), administrative support (27%), and family (23%) as the three most influential factors.

In the next part of the survey, participants responded by ranking factors that influence their decisions to remain in their teaching positions. As depicted in Table 4, survey participants considered competitive salaries and the loan forgiveness program among the most highly

influential factors, with a combined 74 percent as the most effective factors in their decision to remain in their current teaching positions. The survey did not define what assistance with student loans means. A component of the loan forgiveness program is the requirement to accept employment in high-demand/or low-supply areas, with up to \$3,000 per year for up to four years. Survey participants included an increased retirement benefit multiplier to 2% for TRS members who retire with 30 or more years of service (28.6%), state funded \$500 salary increase for all teachers (28.2%), insurance benefits (27.3%), and help with student loan payments (20%) as the top six of sixteen influential factors. The top six influential factors are economically related to the participant's and her family's financial well-being. However, the non-economic related factors, such as mentoring (15.5%), professional development (10%), and community activities (2.7%), were not frequently rated as most influential.

**Table 4**

*Frequencies and Percentages of the Most Influential Ranked Factors to Remain in Teaching Positions*

<b>Most Influential</b>	
Competitive Salaries with Other States	91/41.4%
Loan Forgiveness Program Offered to Teachers Who Accept Jobs in High Demand/Low Supply Areas---up to \$3,000 per year for Up to Four Years	71/32.3%
Increase Retirement Benefit Multiplier to 2% for TRS Members Who Retire with 30 or More Years of Service	63/28.6%
State Funded, \$500 Salary Increase for All Teachers	62/28.2%
Insurance Benefits	60/27.3%
More Flexibility with Scheduling, Including Flexible Personal Days	51/23.2%
Help with Student Loan Payments	44/20%
Financial Assistance for Advanced College or Additional Endorsements	38/17.3%
Stipend for Teachers Who Earn National Board Certification and Continue Teaching in the State	38/17.3%
Mentoring and Support Programs for New Teachers	34/15.5%

High Quality Professional Development Opportunities and Opportunities to Travel for Professional Growth	22/10%
State Funded Mentoring/Induction Program During First 5 Years of Employment	20/9.1%
Help with Finding Housing, or Help with Low-Interest Loans to Buy a House	17/7.7%
Marketing of Whatever the District Has to Offer---Location, Recreation, Cost of Living, Safe and Healthy Environment	15/6.8%
Cooperative Programs to Train People Locally. Bringing Certification Programs to Community Members Already Committed to Being Part of the Community	13/5.9%
Student Teacher Involvement in Community Activities	6/2.7%

The span for the second-most-influential factors, as ranked by female teachers, is narrower. Cooperative community programs (15.5%), insurance benefits (15%), and professional development (14.5%) were ranked among the top three, second-most influential factors by nearly 50% of participants. In contrast to the most influential factors, economically impactful factors such as competitive salaries with other states (8.6%), state-funded, \$500 salary increase for all teachers, and stipend for teachers who earn national board certification and continue teaching in the state (5.9%) were ranked the least influential (see Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Frequencies and Percentages of the Second Most Influential Ranked Factors to Remain in Teaching Positions*

<b>Second Most Influential</b>	
Cooperative Programs to Train People Locally. Bringing Certification Programs to Community Members Already Committed to Being Part of the Community	34/15.5%
Insurance Benefits	33/15%
High Quality Professional Development Opportunities and Opportunities to Travel for Professional Growth	32/14.5%
Help with Student Loan Payments	30/13.6%
Increase Retirement Benefit Multiplier to 2% for TRS Members Who Retire with 30 or More Years of Service	30/13.6%
More Flexibility with Scheduling, Including Flexible Personal Days	30/13.6%

State Funded Mentoring/Induction Program During First 5 Years of Employment	30/13.6%
Marketing of Whatever the District Has to Offer---Location, Recreation, Cost of Living, Safe and Healthy Environment	30/13.6%
Financial Assistance for Advanced College or Additional Endorsements	29/13.2%
Mentoring and Support Programs for New Teachers	27/12.3%
Student Teacher Involvement in Community Activities	25/11.4%
Loan Forgiveness Program Offered to Teachers Who Accept Jobs in High Demand/Low Supply Areas---up to \$3,000 per year for Up to Four Years	21/9.5%
Help with Finding Housing, or Help with Low-Interest Loans to Buy a House	20/9.1%
Competitive Salaries with Other States	19/8.6%
State Funded, \$500 Salary Increase for All Teachers	15/6.8%
Stipend for Teachers Who Earn National Board Certification and Continue Teaching in the State	13/5.9%

The third most influential factors ranked by female teachers in rural South Georgia were student teacher involvement in community activities (19.1%), help with finding housing or help with low-interest loans to buy a house (18.6%), help with student loan payments (14.5%), cooperative programs to train people locally (14.5%), and financial assistance for advance college or additional endorsements (14.1%). These five factors account for approximately 80% of the third-most-influential factors (see Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Frequencies and Percentages of the Third Most Influential Ranked Factors to Remain in Teaching Positions*

<b>Third Most Influential</b>	
Student Teacher Involvement in Community Activities	42/19.1%
Help with Finding Housing, or Help with Low-Interest Loans to Buy a House	41/18.6%
Help with Student Loan Payments	32/14.5%
Cooperative Programs to Train People Locally. Bringing Certification Programs to Community Members Already Committed to Being Part of the Community	32/14.5%
Financial Assistance for Advanced College or Additional Endorsements	31/14.1%

State Funded Mentoring/Induction Program During First 5 Years of Employment	28/12.7%
Mentoring and Support Programs for New Teachers	27/12.3%
High Quality Professional Development Opportunities and Opportunities to Travel for Professional Growth	27/12.3%
Marketing of Whatever the District Has to Offer---Location, Recreation, Cost of Living, Safe and Healthy Environment	26/11.8%
Stipend for Teachers Who Earn National Board Certification and Continue Teaching in the State	24/10.9%
Competitive Salaries with Other States	22/10%
More Flexibility with Scheduling, Including Flexible Personal Days	18/8.2%
State Funded, \$500 Salary Increase for All Teachers	14/6.4%
Loan Forgiveness Program Offered to Teachers Who Accept Jobs in High Demand/Low Supply Areas---up to \$3,000 per year for Up to Four Years	13/5.9%
Increase Retirement Benefit Multiplier to 2% for TRS Members Who Retire with 30 or More Years of Service	10/4.5%
Insurance Benefits	10/4.5%

Survey participants responded to the opportunity to share other influential factors not considered in the quantitative question (see Table 7). Sixty (27%) of the 220 survey participants responded to the second open-ended question. As with the open-ended question on the factors influencing the acceptance of their current teaching position, an open-ended question was posed regarding the factors influencing their decision to remain in it. The content analysis of these comments yielded the following six themes: Family, Discipline, Administrative Support, Available Position, Culture, and Connection to School/Town. One participant indicated family as an influential factor, “Having my children grow up in the same district”. The “district had a reputation for upholding behavior expectations of students” was deemed influential by one respondent. An influential factor for another participant is the “positive administrative support and improvement plans that support teachers”. “I stay because I cannot find another job with the same benefits” influences one participant to remain in her position. The culture was identified by one participant as she wrote, “school safety---the right environment to raise a family, close to a

city but not in the city”. The connection factor influenced this participant as she stated, “I choose to remain teaching here because I have a personal connection to this area---it’s where I grew up and where my family still lives. This community feels like home, and I take pride in giving back to the place that helped shape me.” The most influential factors were the proximity of the participant’s family (41%), administrative support (15%), and culture (15%). Collectively, these three factors accounted for 71% of the factors influencing female teachers’ decision to remain in their positions (see Table 7).

**Table 7**

*Other Factors Influencing Teachers’ Decisions to Remain in Their Teaching Position*

<b>Family</b>	<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Administrative Support</b>	<b>Available Position</b>	<b>Culture</b>	<b>Connection to School/Town</b>
25/41%	3/5%	9/15%	6/10%	9/15%	8/13%

Survey participants were asked to rank the most influential, second most influential, and third most influential factors for their remaining in their teaching positions. The most influential factors were economically driven, with competitive salaries (41.4%) and loan forgiveness programs (32.3%) making up 73.7%. Non-economic factors were the least influential. The open-ended question resulted in female teachers identifying family (41%), administrative support (15%), and culture (15%) as other factors influencing them to remain in their teaching positions.

The next section of the survey focused on determining participants’ teaching satisfaction and their rural identification and understanding. Participants were asked to consider how long they planned to remain in the teaching profession. Of the 220 participants, 183 answered these two questions. Over a combined two-thirds (83%) of the respondents indicated “as long as I am able” and “until I am eligible to retire”. Contrastingly, only a very small percentage (11.01%) of the participants “plan to leave teaching” or to “teach unless something better comes along” (see

Table 8). These results indicate female teachers in rural South Georgia are satisfied in their current position. More than 63% of the participants plan to remain teaching until retirement, or until they are no longer able to teach.

**Table 8**

*Frequencies and Percentages of Responses to Plan to Remain in the Teaching Profession*

As long as I am able	56/31%
I definitely plan to leave teaching	1/1%
I'll continue teaching unless something better comes along	21/11%
Until I'm eligible to retire	96/52%
Undecided	9/5%

When asked to consider if they would choose teaching as a career again, more than half of the respondents (57%) indicated they would “certainly choose teaching again” or would “probably choose teaching again” (see Table 9). A little more than one-fifth of the respondents (22%) indicated they “probably would not” choose teaching again, and a slightly smaller percentage (21%) stated the chances are about even.

**Table 9**

*Frequencies and Percentages of Respondents' Views of Choosing Teaching as a Career*

Certainly would	69/38%
Chances are about even	39/21%
Probably would	35/19%
Probably would not	40/22%

Female teachers in rural South Georgia were asked whether they considered themselves to have a rural background (see Table 10) and what that meant to them (see Table 11). More than three-quarters (88%) of the participants considered themselves to have a rural background (see Table 10), while more than half (53%) equated a small town with a rural area.

**Table 10**

*Frequencies and Percentages of Survey Respondents Identifying as Having a Rural Background*

No	22/12%
Yes	161/88%

**Table 11**

*Descriptors of How Survey Respondents Identified with Having a Rural Background*

<b>Small Town</b>	<b>Agriculture</b>	<b>Blue-Collar Work</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Rural Area</b>	<b>Slow Pace of Life</b>
73/53%	25/18%	1/.001	21/15%	15/11%	4/.03%

The data from Tables 10 and 11 indicated that female teachers in rural South Georgia were mostly satisfied with their current teaching positions. The majority of participants indicated they plan to remain in their teaching positions until retirement or until they were no longer able. These same teachers considered themselves to have a rural background (88%) and associated it with living in a small town (53%), agriculture (18%), and the country (15%).

**Summary of Quantitative Findings**

The quantitative phase of this study provided a comprehensive overview of the factors influencing female teachers in rural South Georgia. Through the examination of key areas such as factors influencing the acceptance of their current teaching position, factors influencing their remaining in their current teaching position, and their understanding of rural, the survey revealed critical patterns and trends.

Survey results indicated that many participants cited the “proximity to family,” “the school’s good reputation,” and “a safe environment” as the most influential factors in their decision to accept their teaching position. Consistently, these three influential factors were identified by 33.7% as having no influence on their decision. In contrast, the school’s

recruitment program, the opportunity to practice multiage teaching, and the employment of the spouse/partner as the least influential in their decision.

The survey continued to explore other factors influencing teachers' decisions to accept teaching positions in rural South Georgia through an open-ended question. The data gleaned from this question was coded into six categories: family, discipline, administrative support, available position, culture, and connection to the school/town. These categories emerged as common threads in the open-ended question responses. These categories were used to develop the focus group questions.

Survey data indicated that the factors influencing teachers to remain in their positions were overwhelmingly related to student loans. Although the "help with student loan payments" option was not defined, it was expressed as the "most effective," "second most effective," and "third most effective" consistently. The "loan forgiveness program offered to teachers who accept jobs in high-demand/low-supply areas" was also a highly influential factor. Consistent with the factors influencing the acceptance of their current teaching position, an open-ended question allowed participants to provide responses not previously indicated. The same six categories: family, discipline, administrative support, available position, culture, and connection to the school/town emerged. The data revealed consistent patterns across factors influencing teachers' acceptance of a teaching position in rural South Georgia and their decision to remain in that position.

The survey revealed 73% of the participants considered themselves to have a rural background. Following the survey's pattern, an open-ended question was included to elicit their definition of rural. From keywords consistently occurring in the responses, six themes emerged:

small town, agriculture, blue-collar work, country, rural area, and slow pace of life. Reference to “small town” appeared consistently in the answers (48%) and rural area and agriculture (31%).

Approximately three-fourths of the survey participants indicated they plan to remain in the teaching field as long as they are able or until retirement. In comparison, slightly less than 50% of participants indicated they would choose teaching as a career again; however, the option “undecided” was not provided. This option should have been included, as approximately 16% of survey participants did not respond to this question.

### ***Focus Groups Findings***

Building upon the quantitative survey findings, which provided a broad overview of the factors influencing the decision-making process of female teachers in rural South Georgia, this section explores the qualitative data gathered through in-depth semi-structured focus groups. The qualitative insights offer a richer, more nuanced perspective on the factors influencing the teachers’ decisions to accept and remain in their current positions. Through their personal narratives, participants elaborated on themes only briefly touched upon in the quantitative phase, revealing their deeper, more complex experiences.

Participants in the focus groups were self-selected and comprised seven Caucasian females representing seven counties. This self-selected participant pool was similar to that of these districts, with 80.42% identifying as Caucasian (Georgia Insights, 2026). Six were in the early stage of their career, while one was in the later stage. The focus groups met on a virtual platform for approximately one hour.

Analysis of the qualitative data was conducted using a systematic process of coding and categorizing the interview transcripts. Thematic coding was used to identify recurring patterns and significant themes in the participants’ narratives. This process involved a thorough review of

the transcripts from both focus groups, highlighting key phrases and concepts which were then organized into broader categories. These categories were aligned with the study's research questions and the lived experiences of the female teachers in rural South Georgia.

The themes identified in this analysis provide a comprehensive view of the participants' lived experiences. By categorizing the data into these themes, the research highlights participants' stories and shared experiences, thereby providing a clearer picture of the factors underlying their acceptance and retention in their current positions.

The focus group question categories were developed from the themes identified in the quantitative survey (see Appendix D). When discussing question one, please elaborate on how the proximity of the school influenced your decision to accept your current teaching position, two themes emerged. These themes were the desire to live and work close to family, and the desire to live and work in their home area. The predominant theme was that participants lived in their hometowns and were close to family. Respondent 1 stated she "had lived on the same patch of property my entire life" and Respondent 4 stated, "I'm teaching at the middle school I went to and I graduated from the high school". Although family was the primary theme emerging in question one, two types of family were discussed. Respondents 1, 4, and 7 referred to the family in which they grew up; however, Respondent 2 referred to the family she created by stating, "I've always followed my husband around".

Question two asked the participants to share how school safety influenced their decision to accept a teaching position in rural South Georgia. The participants discussed question four, "In what way did you incorporate the reputation of the school in your decision to accept a teaching position?" in conjunction with question two. Participants indicated that school safety and the school's reputation had less influence on their decision to accept a teaching position and to

remain in their position. While the participants considered school safety, the overarching theme was “... knowing that the school took all necessary measures to keep its students and staff safe was critical” (Respondent 7). The school’s reputation was an influential factor for several participants, as Respondent 5 stated, “If our school had a negative reputation, if they had a reputation of being a dangerous school, then I wouldn’t have taught there. I wouldn’t have picked it. I would have chosen a different place”.

Question four asked the participants to reflect on the aspects of rural life they enjoy. The following reveals the importance of community relationships, providing for a more meaningful and happy life. There is also an indication of a personal connection to nature, which is inherent in being raised in a rural setting. Respondent 2 stated, “The first thing I think about is Friday night football games. It’s so like on TV, but you’re there with your family, you see your students, your former students, their families, your kids, teachers, like the whole community being out there”. Another indicated, “It’s just that hometown feel.” The theme of “it’s all I’ve ever known” (Respondent 7) emerged. Respondent 4 referenced living on her husband’s family’s farm, about 15 minutes from her school. She enjoys walking in the fields surrounding her home.

In discussing question five, “How does your school’s handling of student behavior influence your decision to remain in your position?”, the theme of support unanimously emerged. Respondent 7 stated, “I knew I did not want to be in a place that accepted poor student behavior and questioned teacher input in regard to student behavior.” The lack of support regarding student behavior resulted in Respondent 3 leaving her first school, “It definitely influenced my decision to leave my first school. Whenever you would send them to the office, they would come back with a snack....so it created this thing of, I can get out of class, and I can get a snack.... there was no repercussions.”. Respondent 5 summed up the responses, “They go

by the handbook, so if you go by the handbook, they support you. If I didn't have the support of the administration, I'd consider moving to a different school".

Three themes emerged in the discussion of Question Six, considering the school's environment as related to remaining at their school. The three themes are aesthetics, the small teacher support groups, and shared school experiences. For some, the environment is the school's aesthetics, whereas for others, it is the small groups of people in everyday life. Respondent 2 stated, "The custodians are constantly going through keeping things clean. If a visitor walks in, I wouldn't be embarrassed. This is the place I work. Just all the little pieces that make us look good." The impact of peer teacher support groups is illustrated by Respondent 4's comment: "The people you work with are the people you're in the trenches with, and if you can't find a sense of camaraderie, then you're going to be miserable." Respondent 5 concurred with "I have my little group of people that are supportive and I'm able to bounce ideas off of." Shared experiences such as "Dress-up days, jeans days, Red Ribbon week, and other similar activities constitute the school environment. The new administration is making a big difference. They're trying to do incentives.... she believes in having fun," according to Respondent 1.

Analysis of the responses to the influence of benefits and salary competitiveness, questions seven and eight, revealed two opposing themes, one highly influential and the other not. Respondent 2 shared, "During the COVID years, the CARES Act gave teacher retention bonuses twice a year; the county is very generous in their supplements". Following suit, Respondent 3 shared, "I used to have to worry if my husband quit his job if we'd have benefits. Once I became a teacher, we put everything on my plan. Benefits are in the top reasons I stay". In contrast, Respondent 4 stated, "It wasn't that important to me. As long as they had the basics, I was good." Respondent 6 had insurance through her husband's employer. Similarly, salary

competitiveness had little influence on participants' decision-making process. Respondent 4 stated, "It had no impact on my decision. I just assumed we have the Georgia teacher pay scale." Respondent 1 agreed with "Salary wasn't a factor for me. I just wanted to get back into teaching."

In responding to Question Nine, how does administrative support and leadership impact your decision to stay in your school district, two themes emerged. The two themes were familial support, and personal growth and development. Familial support was aligned with "my children are allowed to ride the bus to my school, and they are here in about 5 minutes after school gets out. Someone gets them off the bus and brings them to me. This allows me to not have day care for my kids after school, saving me about \$1,000 a month", according to Respondent 2. For Respondent 6, "...feeling important, appreciated, needed..." impacts her decision to remain in her position. Respondent 7 states, "They push me to grow and be a better teacher....Their support is HUGE to me". Encouraging and supporting professional development for higher degrees and not micromanaging teachers, but instead checking in and having an open-door policy, were deemed important by all respondents.

### **Consensus of Findings**

This study examined the factors influencing rural South Georgia female teachers to accept and remain in their current teaching positions. By integrating quantitative survey data and qualitative focus group data, the study provided a comprehensive analysis of these influential factors. To contextualize these findings, this section is organized according to the study's research questions. Each research question is first introduced, followed by a summary of the relevant data and key conclusions.

***Research Question 1: What factors influence female teachers to choose to teach in rural South Georgia?***

Research Question 1 examined the factors influencing female teachers' decisions to accept their current teaching position in rural Southern Georgia. The quantitative and qualitative data indicated that family and community closeness, the school's good reputation, and a safe environment were most influential. In addition, the administration's support and encouragement of professional development, including the pursuit of higher degrees, were influential. One focus group respondent cited her spouse's employment in the area as a factor in her decision to accept the teaching position. Indicated as noninfluential were the school's recruitment program and the opportunity to practice multiage teaching.

The closeness of family, whether the family that raised them or their smaller, created family, was consistently identified as an influential factor for female teachers to accept a teaching position in rural South Georgia. Participants were given the opportunity to report factors not included in the survey, and the school's culture was the most influential, followed closely by administrative support.

***Research Question 2: What factors influence female teachers to continue teaching in rural South Georgia?***

Research Question 2 examined factors influencing female teachers' decisions to remain in their current teaching position in rural Southern Georgia. The quantitative data gathered from the Qualtrics survey indicated that help with student loan payments and student loan forgiveness programs were influential alongside competitive salaries. However, the qualitative data gleaned from participants in the focus groups did not identify help with student loan payments or the student loan forgiveness programs as influential.

Participants were given the opportunity to report factors not included in the survey, and family was the most influential, followed by administrative support.

***Research Question 3: How well do the factors identified by the participants in this study match the “Spheres of Influence” theoretical framework identified by previous research?***

Research Question 3 examined the extent to which the influential factors identified by participants in this study align with the “Spheres of Influence” identified in prior research.

Boylan et al. (1993) identified four spheres of influence for teacher recruitment and retention: (1) within-classroom activities; (2) whole school level activities; (3) community level activities; and (4) family/personal factors.

“Within Classroom Activities” are identified as factors relating to the sources of satisfaction and commitment to teaching expressed by participants (Boylan et al, 1993). Boylan et al. (1993) indicates that positive relationships with students and colleagues comprise a major source of satisfaction. The participants in this survey indicated that small class size was not a major factor in their decision to accept a teaching position; however, mentoring programs for teachers were moderately influential in their decision to remain in the classroom. The school’s environment, according to this study, highly influenced teachers’ decisions to remain in their position. The importance of small groups of similarly situated teachers supporting one another and exchanging ideas was also influential.

“Whole school-level activities”, according to Boylan et al. (1993), constitute a variety of activities that engage the teacher outside the classroom. Dress-up days, fun activity days with students, and Friday jeans were identified as incentives that help teachers feel valued and provide opportunities for teachers and students to interact outside the traditional classroom. Although involvement in school activities, such as football games, was acknowledged as important,

approximately 50% of survey respondents reported that access to recreational activities had no influence.

“Community level activities” encompassed a complex set of interactions that spanned parental support, the teacher’s involvement in the community, the geographical area, safety of the environment, and the rural lifestyle (Boylan et al. 1993). Teachers in the focus groups indicated that they highly value the rural lifestyle, whereas the school’s safety is less influential in their decisions to accept and remain in their teaching positions.

“Family/Personal Factors” are those that concern personal and family issues of the teacher, including home ownership, stability, the quality of life, and contentment with rural living (Boylan et al., 1993). A connection to the land, community, and school consistently influenced teachers’ decisions to accept and remain in their positions. The proximity of family was also a major influencing factor. Some teachers never considered leaving their hometowns, and others left for a short time only to discover they wanted to return home. Teachers indicated that they value the rural lifestyle and that the school’s safety is moderately important in their decision to accept and remain in their positions. Assistance with student loans and loan-forgiveness programs offered to teachers were influential in their decision to remain in their position.

## **Summary**

In summarizing Chapter 4, 220 female teachers were surveyed in seven rural, South Georgia counties. Two focus groups, comprised of three and four self-selected participants, responded to nine questions derived from the themes that emerged from the quantitative survey. The data gleaned from this study-could serve K-12 administrative leaders in rural South Georgia to develop future policy and practices to attract and retain teachers.

The Qualtrics survey and the focus groups both found that family, the safe environment, and the rural environment were influential in female teachers' decisions to accept teaching positions in rural South Georgia. Also identified in the survey as influential in the decision to accept the position were the school's reputation, the offer being the best or only offer, and salary and benefits. However, these factors were not the most influential factors in their decision to accept the position, according to the focus group participants.

The Qualtrics survey identified competitive salaries, loan-forgiveness programs, and retirement benefits as the most influential factors in teachers' decisions to remain in their positions. Economic factors were consistently influential factors in teachers' decisions to remain in their current position. However, focus group participants identified family, culture, and administrative support as the most influential in their decision to remain in their teaching position.

In the Qualtrics survey, the least influential factors in accepting their teaching position were multiage teaching, recreational activities, and the school's recruitment program. These factors were consistently not identified in the focus groups as influential in their decision to accept or remain in their position.

Looking ahead to Chapter 5, a discussion of the study's results will lead to its conclusions. Recommendations for further research needed will be offered. Finally, recommendations for future rural school district policy and practice for recruiting and retaining teachers will be made.

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors influencing the decision of female teachers in rural South Georgia to accept and remain in teaching positions. By integrating data from the quantitative survey and qualitative focus groups, the study provides insights that add to the body of knowledge.

The study evolved from a gap in the literature as to why female teachers in rural settings accepted and remained in teaching positions. Research in this area focused, for the most part, on factors that influenced why teachers left the area or the profession. This study is an attempt to fill in the gap of knowledge and bring a positive slant to the research.

An initial invitation to participate was sent to three rural counties, resulting in participation by one county. The scope of the project was then broadened to include two additional counties with one positive response. These two counties netted 44 Qualtrics survey participants and one teacher interested in participating in a focus group. Upon the recommendation of the committee, the scope was further broadened to include a total of seventeen counties invited to participate with a total of seven counties participating. From the seven counties, 220 female teachers participated in the Qualtrics survey, and seven participated in two focus groups of 3 and 4 teachers.

The data generated from the research offered some surprising insights differing between the survey data and the focus group responses. Both the survey participants and the focus group

respondents identified the proximity of family as the primary influence in their decision to accept their decision to accept their teaching position. However, in the identification of influential factors for their remaining in their teaching positions, the top six factors identified by survey participants were economic in nature, while the focus group participants identified family, administrative support, and the school culture as influential in remaining in their positions. While this diversity in the data was unexpected, it provides a direction for further investigation.

This chapter builds upon the findings presented in Chapter 4, providing a comprehensive view of the results and their implications. The chapter begins with a discussion of the findings and connecting them to existing literature. Following the discussion, the chapter explores the broader implications of the study, providing actionable recommendations for stakeholders, identifying the study's limitations, and concludes with a summary of the study's contributions and future directions for research.

## **Discussion**

This section presents a thematic discussion of the findings of the study. The discussion is organized around the themes influencing female teachers to accept and to remain in their teaching positions in rural South Georgia. The themes discussed in this chapter position the study's findings within existing literature and theoretical frameworks, providing a deeper understanding of the factors influencing female teachers in rural South Georgia to accept and remain in teaching positions.

Female teachers in rural South Georgia consider family proximity the most important factor when deciding on a teaching position. This proximity of family includes the physical land on which they grew up, as well as the location. The opportunity to teach in the school they attended provides a sense of community. The environment of the school, both the safety of the

environment, the cultural environment, and the aesthetics of the school were deemed important. If the school was not deemed safe, teachers were likely to not accept the teaching position. Teachers found the cultural environment important when choosing to remain in their position. This cultural environment included school-wide activities, such as “Jeans Friday”, as well as the small peer teacher groups within the larger school population. These small groups were beneficial in providing support and community.

Economically advantageous factors benefiting the teacher and her family were influential in her decision to remain in her teaching position. These factors included competitive salaries, student loan forgiveness programs, retirement benefits, salary increases, insurance benefits, and student loan assistance. Administrative support for programs, such as after-school assistance, also benefits the teacher and her family financially. This support provides a sense of value for the teacher. Teachers were less influenced by recruitment programs and recreational activities in their decision to accept a teaching position and in remaining in their position.

Family, administrative support, and school culture were the top three influential factors in accepting and remaining in their teaching position when responding to an open-ended question. Female teachers in rural South Georgia identify with the rural lifestyle and equate it to living in a small town. Most of the female teachers in rural South Georgia are content with their teaching position and plan to remain in it until retirement or as long as possible.

## **Conclusions**

Four conclusions emerged from the study as influential in the decision-making process for female teachers to accept a teaching position. From the data, the first conclusion is that returning to their home area and the rural setting where they were raised is attractive in deciding

to accept a teaching position. Returning to their home area provides the opportunity for them to return to the lifestyle in which they grew up and to raise their family in a similar fashion.

A second conclusion drawn from the findings is that teachers are attracted to schools that have a positive image. This conclusion is supported in that teachers identified the reputation and safe environment of the school as influential in their decision to accept a teaching position.

The third conclusion is that personally beneficial economic factors play an influential role in decisions to accept teaching positions in rural settings. This conclusion is supported by the findings that salary and benefits, financial bonuses, and student loan assistance and forgiveness program are important teachers consider accepting a position.

The fourth conclusion is that efforts made by rural schools to recruit teachers need to be reconsidered and changed. Teachers ranked the school's recruitment programs as the least most effective factor in their decision to accept a teaching position.

Five conclusions emerged from the study as influential in the decision-making process of female teachers to remain in their teaching positions. The first conclusion is that personal economic well-being is highly valued and impacts decisions to remain in teaching positions. This conclusion is based on the findings that state and local economic incentives and benefits were the most highly rated retention factors.

Conclusion two is that life settings are important for female teacher retention. This conclusion is supported by the finding that family relationships and proximity to family are important for teachers to remain in their position. Close-knit family bonds are important to maintain and keep their position, as female teachers desire to live and work close to family.

The third conclusion is that the teachers' decision to remain in their position is positively impacted by the school's family culture. This conclusion is drawn from the finding that female

teachers identified thematic days and whole school events that bring teachers and students together as important to staying in their positions.

The fourth conclusion is that a supportive in-school environment, composed of peer teacher groups and administrators, is valuable in teachers' decision to remain in their position. Peer groups provide a sense of camaraderie within the larger school population.

A fifth conclusion is that the school district's efforts to help them become better educators have a positive impact on retention. This conclusion is supported by the findings that teachers perceived opportunities for professional growth and additional education opportunities supported by the administration as influential in their decision to remain in their teaching position.

A final conclusion is that Boylan's Spheres of Influence was a useful theoretical framework in the categorization of the data and provided a useful perspective on the factors influencing teacher recruitment and retention. Based on the findings of this study, the three spheres of "within classroom activities", "whole school level activities", and "family/personal factors" were accurate descriptors of the data. However, of the four Spheres of Influence, "community-level activities" did not play a large role in the categorization of factors that influenced either the acceptance or retention of teaching positions.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Recommendations for Further Research***

Additional research is recommended to investigate the influential role of Community-Level Activities in the decision-making process of both acceptance and retention of teaching positions by female teachers in rural South Georgia.

A research study exploring the factors influential in the decision-making process of male teachers in rural South Georgia as they accept and remain in teaching positions will offer a more inclusive insight.

Further research should be conducted to clarify the impact of economic and family related factors in the retention of female teachers in the rural setting. This recommendation is made due the different findings from the survey and focus groups regarding the most influential factors impacting retention decisions.

There should be a collaborative effort between school districts and institutions of higher education offering educational degrees to participate in Georgia Department of Education's Teach in the Peach Educator Signing Days. Students across the state of Georgia sign commitment certificates memorializing their dedication to careers in education.

### **Researcher Post-Study Reflexivity Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

The focus of teacher recruitment by school districts should prioritize local students who are becoming teachers. Efforts should be made to collaborate with teacher preparation programs to identify and recruit potential graduates from their home areas. The data is clear in the importance of returning to their hometown as they pursue teaching positions.

It is also recommended that school district recruitment information highlight the quality of the school, the safe environment, and school-wide activities. Teacher and student testimonials are recommended for inclusion in recruitment efforts.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study are geographical and gender related. This study focused on counties found in the southern part of Georgia only. An invitation to participate in the study was extended only to female teachers currently teaching in these South Georgia counties.

## **Summary of Important Outcomes**

This chapter explored the implications of the study's findings and provided insight into the factors influencing female teachers as they made the decision to accept and remain in teaching positions in rural South Georgia. While the data from the survey and that from the focus groups diverged in some areas, the importance of family was evident in the decision to accept a teaching position. However, the influential beneficial economic factors to both the teacher and her family were prominent in the decision to remain in the teaching position, according to the survey data.

Students seeking degrees in the educational field should be identified and recruited by their home school systems. Students raised in rural counties are interested in returning to their home areas and schools to serve as teachers. Teachers in rural school systems should be supported monetarily, professionally, and personally. Monetary benefits serve to increase the quality of life for both the teacher and her family, while professional and personal benefits increase the value experienced by the teacher.

In reflecting on this study, this researcher believes it has illuminated some of the most influential factors impacting the decisions of female teachers to accept and remain in teaching positions in rural South Georgia. The study affirmed that rural teachers are, for the most part, natives of the rural communities. They identify as rural residents and are generally happy within their position and plan to remain in that position. This was not a surprise for me as these findings apply to my educational and career journey.

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# Appendix A

## Institutional Review Board Approval Form

Revised 10.10.2025



### Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants

#### PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04624-2025

Responsible Researcher(s): Melissa Harrell

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Reynaldo Martinez

Dissertation Research Member: Dr. April Strevig

Project Title: *Influential Factors of Employment and Retention for Female Educators in Rural South Georgia.*

#### Institutional Review Board Determination:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that the exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator ([irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu)) before continuing your research study.

#### Comments:

- Your research study may begin at the following approved research location(s): **Thomas County Schools – Dr. Lisa Williams (09.09.2025), Tift County Schools – Natalie Gore (09.03.2025), Ware County Schools – Paige Coker (10.03.2025), Irwin County Schools – Candice Cobb (10.03.2025), Early County School System – Dr. Jennifer Brown (10.07.2025), Colquitt County School District – Dr. Allen Edwards (10.08.2025), Brooks County Schools – Dr. Cisco Diaz (10.10.2025).** Additional locations will be considered upon receipt of a letter of cooperation.
  - IRB protocol number (IRB-04624-2025) must be included at the end of consent statements, correspondence, recruitment documents, etc.
  - To ensure confidentiality, pseudonym lists must be kept in a separate secure file from corresponding names, email addresses, etc.
  - Per exempt protocol guidelines, it is permissible to record focus group sessions for the purpose of creating an accurate transcript to be utilized for documentation or analysis. Once the transcript has been constructed, recordings must be deleted from all devices, including electronic files used to store recordings. This measure is in place to uphold confidentiality and ensure that information contained in the recording is adequately protected.
  - To comply with consent guidelines, recordings must capture the researcher reading the consent statement aloud, ensuring the participant's understanding and willingness to participate. **Each transcript must document the consent process and the participants' voiced consent.** A copy of the consent statement must be provided to each participant.
  - Upon completion of the research study, all data (e.g., data, pseudonym/email lists, transcripts, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g., locked file cabinet, password-protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a **minimum of 3 years**. At the end of the required time, the collected data must be permanently destroyed.
- Proposed modifications must be submitted to the IRB Administrator at [tmwright@valdosta.edu](mailto:tmwright@valdosta.edu) for review and approval before implementation is permitted.

*Elizabeth W. Ophie*

08.08.2025

Elizabeth W. Ophie, IRB Administrator

Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) or 229-259-5045.

Revised: 06.02.19

## Appendix B:

### Email Requesting Permission to Conduct Research Study

Good morning,

I am a doctoral candidate at Valdosta State University. I am conducting a research study that will identify why female teachers accept employment and remain employed with public schools in rural Georgia. The goal of this study is to provide you with valuable information that will help inform your decisions concerning employment and retention of female teachers in your school district.

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that are related to the employment and retention of female teachers in the public schools of rural South Georgia. Recent research called for an authentic and balanced representation of the advantages and challenges of working and living in rural communities to honestly situate the problems of teacher employment and retention.

I am requesting your support of this study, which has the potential to benefit rural, public-school systems across the state of Georgia. With your permission, I will distribute a survey via email to the female teachers employed by your school district in the fall semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. Responses will be confidential. Results will be available to you, upon your request, after the research study.

I appreciate the time you have taken to consider this request. If you have questions or concerns, please contact me by phone and/or email or my dissertation adviser, Dr. Reynaldo L. Martinez, Jr. at [rlmartinez@valdosta.edu](mailto:rlmartinez@valdosta.edu).

Cordially,

Melissa Harrell  
Doctoral Candidate  
Valdosta State University  
[msharrell@valdosta.edu](mailto:msharrell@valdosta.edu)  
229-220-4417

## Appendix C:

### Email to Teachers Requesting Participation in Research Study

Good morning,

I am a doctoral candidate at Valdosta State University. I am conducting a research study to identify why female teachers accept employment and remain employed with public schools in rural Georgia. This study will give insight to the administration in recruiting and retaining female teachers in the rural school districts in Georgia. Your participation is appreciated in identifying what factors positively recruit female teachers to rural school districts and what factors subsequently cause them to remain in these districts. Responses will remain confidential. Your acceptance to voluntarily participate in this study will be evidenced by your completing and submitting the survey. Please contact me or my dissertation adviser, Dr. Reynaldo L. Martinez Jr. at [rlmartinez@valdosta.edu](mailto:rlmartinez@valdosta.edu) should you have questions or concerns about this study.

The survey link is as follows: [Influential Factors of Employment and Retention for Female Educators in Rural South Georgia.](#)

Cordially,

Melissa Harrell  
Doctoral Candidate  
Valdosta State University  
[msharrell@valdosta.edu](mailto:msharrell@valdosta.edu)  
229-220-4417

## Appendix D:

### Survey

IRB statement: In moving forward, I verify I am a female teacher currently employed by a public school K-12 district in either Decatur, Tift, or Worth counties.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes (they will move to Section 1)

\_\_\_\_\_ No (they will move to Thank You)

### Section I: Factors Influencing Decisions to Accept a Teaching Position in Rural South

#### Georgia

1. Using a scale of 1-5, where 1 means “No influence” and 5 means “A very large influence”, to what extent was your decision to **accept** a position in your present school influenced by each of the following: (Select only one number for each item.)

	No Influence	A Little Influence	Some Influence	Good Deal of Influence	Very Large Influence
Best or only job offer	1	2	3	4	5
Satisfaction with salary and benefits	1	2	3	4	5
Access to recreational activities	1	2	3	4	5
Family and/or home is close by	1	2	3	4	5
Small class size	1	2	3	4	5
Safe environment	1	2	3	4	5

Challenge of the teaching position	1	2	3	4	5
Enjoy the rural lifestyle	1	2	3	4	5
Good reputation of the school	1	2	3	4	5
Spouse/Partner employment	1	2	3	4	5
School's recruitment program	1	2	3	4	5
Opportunity to practice multiage teaching	1	2	3	4	5
Materials & resources available	1	2	3	4	5

Please list any other factors and rate their extent of influence:

a. \_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4 5

b. \_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4 5

2. Using a scale of 1-5, where 1 means “No influence and 5 means “A very large influence”, to what extent was your decision to **accept** a position in your present school influenced by each of the following: (Select only one number for each item.)

	No Influence	A Little Influence	Some Influence	Good Deal of Influence	Very Large Influence
Small class size	1	2	3	4	5
Support from supervisor	1	2	3	4	5
Support from parents & community	1	2	3	4	5
Relationships with students	1	2	3	4	5
Enjoy the rural lifestyle	1	2	3	4	5
Spouse/partner employment	1	2	3	4	5
Challenge of the teaching position	1	2	3	4	5
Professional development opportunities	1	2	3	4	5
Recognition for job well done	1	2	3	4	5
Family and/or home is close by	1	2	3	4	5

Satisfaction with salary and benefits	1	2	3	4	5
Safe environment	1	2	3	4	5
School facility	1	2	3	4	5
Materials & resources available	1	2	3	4	5

Please list any other factors and rate their extent of influence:

a. \_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4 5

b. \_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4 5

3. List any other suggestions that you have for the employment of teachers.

## Section II. Your Opinion About Effective Retention Strategies

The Georgia Department of Education in 2025 identified the percentage of teachers retained from the prior year as 90.41% for the State and 87.68% for the Southwest P-20 region.

### Code #                      Steps Schools Could Take

- 01                      Help with student loan payments
- 02                      Insurance benefits
- 03                      Financial assistance for advanced college or additional  
endorsements
- 04                      Mentoring and support programs for new teachers
- 05                      Student teacher involvement in community activities
- 06                      Help with finding housing, or help with low-interest loans to  
buy a house

- 07 Cooperative programs to train people locally. Bringing certification programs to community members already committed to being part of the community
- 08 Marketing of whatever the district has to offer----location, recreation, cost of living, safe and healthy environment
- 09 High quality professional development opportunities and opportunities to travel for professional growth
- 10 More flexibility with scheduling, including flexible personal days
- 11 State funded, \$500 salary increase for all teachers
- 12 State funded mentoring/induction program during first 5 years of employment
- 13 Loan forgiveness program offered to teacher who accept jobs in high demand/low supply areas----up to \$3,000 per year for up to four years
- 14 Increase retirement benefit multiplier to 2% for TRS members who retire with 30 or more years of service
- 15 Stipend for teachers who earn National Board Certification and continue teaching in the state
- 16 Salaries competitive with other states

3a. What would be the most effective step schools might take to encourage teachers to **remain** in teaching?

\_\_\_\_\_ (code #)                      Most effective step

3b. What would be the second most effective step?

\_\_\_\_\_ (code #)                      Second most effective step

3c. What would be the third most effect step?

\_\_\_\_\_ (code #)                      Third most effective step

3d. Please list the most influential factors not previously listed that have impacted your decision to **remain** teaching in your rural school. (long answer in Qualtrics)

### **Section III: Your Satisfaction with Teaching**

The three items (4, 5, & 6) below were used to create a satisfaction index.

4. How long do you plan to remain in teaching? (Select only one)
  - a. As long as I am able
  - b. Until I am eligible for retirement
  - c. I'll continue teaching unless something better comes along
  - d. I definitely plan to leave teaching
  - e. Undecided
  
5. If you could go back to your college days would you choose teaching as a career again?  
(Select only one)
  - a. Certainly would
  - b. Probably would
  - c. Chances are about even
  - d. Probably would not

6. As you think of your life before you began teaching, would you say that you have a “rural background”?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
7. What does “rural background” mean to you?

**Section IV: Volunteering to Participate in a Focus Group**

8. Would you consider participating in a focus group to expand upon the factors influencing your decision to accept and remain a teacher in a rural school system?

Yes

No (move to the Thank You)

If yes, please provide the following information

Name:

E-mail:

District:

Years teaching:

Grade currently teaching:

Subject currently teaching:

**Thank you taking the time to complete this questionnaire**

## **Appendix E:**

### **Focus Group Questions**

1. Please elaborate on how the proximity of your school to family influenced your decision to accept a teaching position in rural South Georgia. This may include the geographical location of family and/or children in daycare and the school system.
2. Please share how school safety influenced your decision to accept a teaching position in rural South Georgia.
3. What aspects of the rural lifestyle did you find influential in your decision-making process?
4. In what way did you incorporate the reputation of the school in your decision to accept a teaching position?
5. How does your school's handling of student behavior influence your decision to remain in your position?
6. How does your school's environment influence your decision to remain in your position?
7. Please share the impact of benefits on both your acceptance of the position and your remaining in the position. Benefits may include health insurance, student loan forgiveness programs, and teacher retirement (TRS), etc.
8. Explain your experience with salary competitiveness as an influential factor.
9. How does administrative support and leadership impact your decision to remain with your school district?