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Barry Donavon Lentz

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“YOU DO UNDERSTAND THIS IS POTENTIALLY CAREER THREATENING?”
A STUDY OF PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS WHO HAVE GUIDED
TEACHERS TO A VOLUNTARY EXIT

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

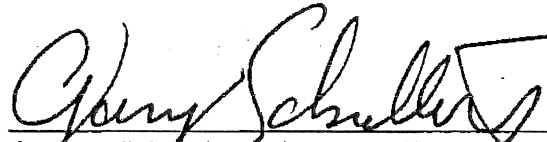
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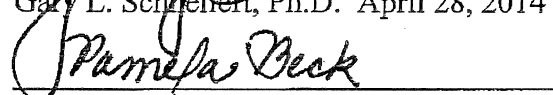
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This dissertation, submitted by Barry D. Lentz in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.



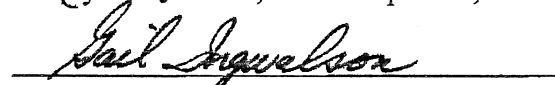
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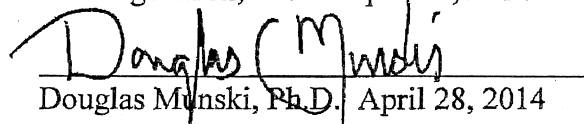
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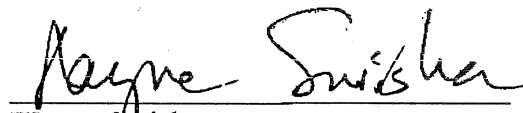


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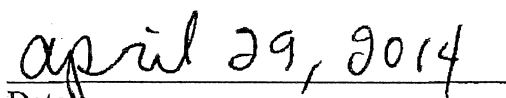


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This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.



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Degree Doctor of Philosophy

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Barry D. Lentz
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I am a life-long educator and come from a family of life-long educators. Both my parents, Bob and Pauline Lentz were a major influence in my life and my career as an educator. My mom was a physical education and home economics teacher while my dad was a social studies teacher, coach, and administrator at various levels, serving his final ten years as a superintendent before his retirement. I am forever grateful for their guidance, encouragement, love and support.

My wife Kristi is a school counselor who retired after 30 years and is now a counselor at a small nearby university. We have been blessed with three wonderful children, Eric, Mark and Laura. Our son Eric and his wife Ingrid, son Mark, and daughter Laura and fiancé Jim, all had faith in me and offered unwavering support as I moved through this journey. They always believed that I would complete this study when at times I was not sure I would. My wonderful and loving wife Kristi was there every step of the way supporting my decision to earn this degree. She took on many extra responsibilities while I was taking classes, researching, writing, and responding to

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ABSTRACT

Many people believe that teachers in public education cannot be dismissed. Teachers can be dismissed, but it is a difficult and stressful process. However, some principals are able to guide teachers to voluntarily exit a school system without going through the dismissal process. The literature suggests that many principals believe there are many impediments when attempting to remove a teacher deemed less than competent. This qualitative study examined what successful principals do to remove teachers who have not met a minimum competency according to district expectations. Ten North Dakota principals, who have successfully guided teachers out of a school system from elementary and secondary public schools, were interviewed to share their stories and learn what strategies, processes, and other support systems were factors in their successes. Three factors emerged from the data: mentors, straight talk, and experience built confidence. Mentors worked closely with principals as they moved through the process providing information on the documentation process, remediation steps, and the timelines and procedural aspects of preparing for a school board dismissal hearing. Straight talk was respectful but direct conversations from principals to teachers about what the teacher was not doing, or what needed to change. A principal's first experience increased the principal's confidence so that if deemed necessary, the principal could guide another teacher to a voluntary exit. These ten principals didn't find the factors

noted in the literature as impediments; they were part of the process and didn't deter them from removing a less-than-competent teacher.

Keywords: Voluntary Exit, Dismissal, Principal Mentor

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, I went through the experience of removing a teacher from the classroom during the course of the school year by guiding the teacher to a voluntary exit for conduct unbecoming the position in the classroom. I had also been part of similar experiences on four prior occasions over the last 20 years of my career as a school principal. In all of the previous situations, the building principals and district administrators were able to remove the teacher from his or her position without having to go to a school board dismissal process. This was accomplished by offering the teacher the alternative solution of resigning or retiring rather than going to the school board for a dismissal hearing.

Because of open record laws, a dismissal or notice of contemplated non-renewal to the school board is public information available to all, including the media, in any community. Since dismissals are very infrequent, the contemplated non-renewal or dismissal of a teacher is usually big news. In many cases this big news is not something that the teacher, the administration, nor the school board wishes to experience. As a veteran school administrator of more than 30 years, I have had many experiences that are stressful, time consuming, and require great attention to detail; yet none of those experiences matches the overall challenges a principal must deal with when attempting to remove a teacher from his or her position. Many principals would say that the dismissal

process is the most difficult and frustrating procedure they will go through in their career (Menuey, 2007).

Researcher's Experience

While completing my coursework for my Ph.D. and searching for a dissertation topic, there was an incident in my school that resulted in my guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit. During a conversation with my advisor several months later, I relayed to him this challenging situation that I had dealt with at my school. He encouraged me to study this phenomenon and it became the beginning of my research project. I share this summary so that the reader can be aware of my experience and any potential researcher bias.

At the conclusion of a day's lesson, the teacher brought up the subject of homosexuality even though this class was not a science, health, or other course in a related field. The teacher described to the class what he believed were the characteristics of lesbians by how they dress, what they do for physical activities, and personal characteristics or traits. Coincidentally his descriptions matched the dress, activities, and personalities of two girls in the class. Students in the class reported that the teacher also frequently looked at the students as he spoke, as if *zeroing in* on these two students as he shared his beliefs. There was no question in the minds of many of the students in that class that his message was that these two girls are lesbians, or at the very least, have the characteristics of being lesbians. Within 20 minutes of that teacher's comments, I had parents in my office very upset about the teacher's actions. I immediately began an investigation of the situation. Following the initial conference with the teacher about the alleged inappropriate language and the teacher's denial of any wrongdoing, the teacher

was placed on “alternate assignment” while the investigation began into the “alleged” misconduct.

I felt comfortable in my knowledge of the process based upon previous experiences, educational leadership graduate coursework, and professional development experiences. However, there was considerable second guessing on my part about every aspect of the process. I wondered if I was being fair to the teacher, if the statements of the parents and students involved were accurate, and if I effectively communicated those statements. I questioned if the public and parent pressure pushed me too much or if I was too deliberate in moving the process at a slower pace than what parents wanted.

In this experience it seemed to me that the procedures and details of the process, the questions to ask, the sequence of the process, and how to conduct the investigative procedures were all left up to me. Even when meeting with the district’s attorney, the superintendent and the assistant superintendent, I often sensed a feeling of isolation that added to the stress of the process. It seemed to me that each documented word that was written would be open for scrutiny and anything that was not clear, concise, or accurate could be contested and cause the process to fail. The impact from the dismissal or voluntary exit would be my responsibility regardless of whether the outcome was positive or negative.

These concerns, as well as others, are all part of why I wanted to learn about what other principals experienced in similar circumstances. My experience of assisting a teacher to make a voluntary exit was a lonely, emotional, stressful, and time-consuming experience. I wondered if other principals who have had to deal with similar personnel issues felt similar emotions that I experienced.

The teacher ultimately made the decision to resign rather than to fight the charges because of many factors including the documentation of the incident, the evidence and statements from students and parents, past documentation from previous principals, and the following of legal procedures. The strong support from the district administration was also an important factor in the resulting resignation.

I have attempted to focus on the principals' stories and descriptions of what they experienced as they guided teachers to a voluntary exit without interpreting their experiences through mine. I have also used multiple means of validity checks to account for and balance any potential researcher bias. When developing the research questions for this study, it was important for me to get to the essence of what I desired to learn. According to Richards and Morse (2007), the research questions are often embedded in the introduction and convey the context of the research. Another view on developing the research questions in a qualitative study is that by stating the questions in a concise manner, there is the risk of over-simplifying the problem. Van Manen (1990) recommended developing the questions as open-ended to allow for more opportunities for the questions to develop as the research progresses.

The Problem Statement

Teachers are the most important factor in student academic success. Berry, Hoke, and Hirsch (2004) concluded "consensus is growing among school reformers that teachers are the most important school-related determinant of student achievement" (p. 684). Because of the importance of the teacher role, competency of teachers is of great concern. Within the school building, it is the building principal who is charged with the responsibility of assuring the teachers within his or her building meet the minimum

standards of competency. Seyfarth (2005) noted in his book, *Human Resources Management for Effective Schools*, that there are many duties of a teacher that vary from preparing lesson plans and presenting information to protecting students from harm and providing a variety of points of view. School principals have, as one of their many duties, the responsibility to supervise and evaluate staff members (Danielson, 2001). Should teachers fall below the line of acceptable standards of teaching, it is the principal's responsibility to remediate or remove that teacher (Bridges, 1985). This becomes a difficult, stressful, and laborious process. When principals can convince teachers to voluntarily leave the school versus using formal dismissal procedures, some of those difficulties, stressors, and labors are eliminated or at least lessened (Whitaker, 2002).

My experience involved the time investigating the incident, interviewing students, getting both written and oral statements from them and their parents, as well as taking the teacher's statement and giving him his due process opportunities to share his side of the story. The process also included interviewing teachers and other staff members who may have heard comments from students about the alleged misconduct. Throughout these steps in the investigation there was also the need to try to maintain some level of confidentiality, which also added to the time and stress of the process. As staff members became more aware of the issue, some supported the teacher, while others were happy to see measures being taken. This division of staff added to the complexity of the situation. The clarification of the sequence of events between the teacher and the students, the inconsistencies between reports, as well as dealing with angry and emotional parents who wanted swift action and were not interested in the teacher's rights or the legal process

were very stressful and took an emotional toll on me. Other than urgent school issues that demanded my immediate attention, the bulk of my time and energy was spent on the teacher dismissal/retirement process during the four week duration that it took to resolve the issue. There were numerous meetings with the school attorney, the assistant superintendent in charge of teachers, and various others who played a part in the process.

In approximately four weeks my goal was achieved: the teacher resigned and was no longer in the classroom. The actual resignation was handled quietly and privately which allowed our students, staff and school community to move on without further disruption. This low-key approach also satisfied parents and allowed everyone to get the focus back on education and move on with the business of teaching and learning. We were also fortunate to find a high quality replacement in the middle of the school year who was qualified, competent, and personable. These qualities also aided in everyone moving forward. Thoughts of the previous teacher faded rapidly. By the end of the school year, even the strongest supporters of the removed teacher acknowledged that his actions were “unbecoming” of someone in their profession and understood that the decision was the correct one.

Following the teacher’s resignation, I reflected on the steps taken and the people who were involved, both as major players and those in support roles. It occurred to me that even with all of the help and support that was available during the process, there was still a feeling that most of the time, I was alone. I experienced a wide range of emotional responses from the anger at how students were treated by the teacher; frustration about how the situation reflected on students, staff, and school climate as a whole; to concern for the teacher who was about to lose his job, paycheck, and likely his reputation in the

community. As I reflected on the conversations, conferences, interviews, written student accounts, and documentation of the issue, I recognized that many other principals must have been in this same position at one time or another, yet there was still the question, perhaps self-doubt, that I was the only one who had ever experienced those great emotional swings when dealing with this difficult issue. Each step of this difficult process required accurate representation; all documents had to be prepared as if this would become not only a school board dismissal issue, but also a potential lawsuit directed at the district and me. I wondered if there was research and literature available that would have assisted me more in the steps of the process, helped me to understand what other principals had experienced, and if they had experienced an emotional roller coaster similar to what I experienced. As this process was taking place, I was completing the coursework for my Ph.D. in educational leadership and looking for a dissertation topic. Shortly after the conclusion of the voluntary exit process, in conversations with my advisor, it became clear that those emotions and questions, as well as other factors, led me to the topic of voluntary teacher exit from a school district as a research project for my dissertation.

Purpose of the Study

My experience in assisting a teacher to a voluntary exit was a very intense, emotional, and stressful experience. I wanted to discover if my experience was typical of other principals or if it was unique only to me. The purpose of this research study was to gain an understanding of the essence of the experiences that school principals go through as they attempt to move teachers to choose to voluntarily exit through retirement or resignation from a school district. A secondary outcome of this research may be that

other principals and administrators will view the findings and recognize that what they are going through is not completely unique to their situation. There are suggestions, strategies, or practices from this research that may assist principals in dealing with the difficulties of voluntary exit in a manner that eliminates some stress often associated with the process.

In his book, *Dealing with Difficult Teachers*, Whitaker (2002) noted that the principal may be able to assist the teacher into making a decision to retire earlier than they might choose on their own. For an incompetent teacher eligible for retirement, the best means of removing that teacher is through retirement.

Principals want teachers to be successful in the classroom. They want students to learn and teachers to teach; however, sometimes things do not work out that way. Principals report that they first try to resolve issues by working closely with the teacher (Tucker, 2001). If that is unsuccessful, they attempt to move the teacher to a voluntary exit. Should that not be successful, the principal's next move is the dismissal process.

Research Questions

1. What is the essence of principals' experiences as they guide a teacher to a voluntary exit?
2. What specific ways and means do principals use to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?
3. What specific support factors encourage principals to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?
4. What specific factors must principals overcome in order to be willing to guide teachers to voluntary exit?

Significance of the Study

Teacher competency in public education continues to be a major concern. While programs and federal mandates seem to come and go in education, within most such as *No Child Left Behind*, (NCLB) there is a component of teacher competency. Within NCLB is the requirement for teachers to be highly qualified,

Under *No Child Left Behind*, all teachers must be highly qualified by the end of the 2005-06 school year. One of the most important ways to close the achievement gap and provide all children with a great education is to provide them great teachers. Studies have shown the single greatest effect on student achievement is teacher quality. For this reason, America must remain steadfast in meeting the goal of ensuring that every classroom has a highly qualified teacher.

To be “highly qualified,” a teacher must (1) hold a bachelor’s degree, (2) hold a certification or licensure to teach in the state of his or her employment, and (3) have proven knowledge of the subjects he or she teaches. (United States Department of Education, 2004, p. 15)

When teachers do not meet the minimum expectations of competence the principal has the responsibility to begin the process of documentation and remediation. Should the teacher be unable or unwilling to meet the minimum expectations there is a process and procedure with identified timeline that the principal and the district must follow to begin the dismissal of a teacher. In North Dakota, the timelines, deadlines, and procedures for the discharge of a teacher are clearly identified in state law. According to the *North Dakota Century Code* (North Dakota Legislative Council, 2009), the following procedures are required when contemplating the discharge for cause of public school teachers:

If the board of a school district contemplated not renewing the contract of an individual employed as a teacher, a principal, or as an associate or assistant superintendent, the board shall, no earlier than March first nor later than April fifteenth:

- a. Provide written notification of the contemplated nonrenewal to the individual.
- b. Schedule a hearing to be held on or before April twenty-first for the purpose of discussing and acting upon the contemplated nonrenewal.
- c. Provide written notification of the date, time, and place for the hearing to the individual.
- d. Provide written notification of the reasons for the contemplated nonrenewal to the individual. (Ch. 15.1-15-07)

These clearly defined procedural steps and timelines identify what is necessary to move forward for a dismissal of a teacher. Nowhere in the *North Dakota Century Code* is there similar information about a **voluntary exit**. Because there is no mention of voluntary exit, administrators must move forward presuming a full dismissal procedure in front of the school board with all of the public and media scrutiny that comes with such an event. There are many variables that also enter into any discussion of teacher competency including, but not limited to: teacher pre-service education, hiring practices, professional development, teacher evaluation programs, and remedial assistance for struggling teachers. These variables play a role in who the person is as a teacher or what kind of a teacher they become (Fuhr, 1993). However, these variables play a secondary role in the scope of this research project.

Researcher Background

The starting point for my work is when the building principal decides that the minimum expectation of competency has not been met, that remedial support has not worked, or that the incompetence or teacher action is such that remediation is not a consideration. Building on my last experience, i.e., when the teacher action precludes remediation, it became clear to me that there was much to learn about this process and that the information gained could be valuable to others. These experiences can assist the

researcher by helping with design of the study to make sure that it is worth doing. These experiences can also help to justify the study. This can also lead to validity threats which can be countered; therefore, using one's own experiences to begin the research is not only an acceptable practice, but also one that may provide additional value to the study.

Validity threats will be addressed in Chapter III.

Definition of Terms

The definitions listed below are important to this study. They provide clarification as to how these terms are used in this study.

Buyouts: Any financial compensation, salary, or benefits offered as an inducement or a negotiated item to encourage a teacher to resign or retire.

Continuing contract: If a teacher is not notified by the school board in writing of the intent to non-renew the teacher's contract that failure to notify constitutes an offer for the following school year (North Dakota Legislative Council, 2009).

Contemplated non-renewal: To extinguish the "continuing contract" rights of teachers and administrators (North Dakota School Boards Association, 2012, p. 28).

Dismissal:

The discharge "for cause" of a teacher or administrator for any of seven categories by the school board prior to the expiration of the individual's contract for any of the following causes:

1. Immoral conduct
2. Insubordination
3. Conviction of a felony
4. Conduct unbecoming the position held by the individual
5. Failure to perform contracted duties without justification
6. Gross inefficiency that the individual has failed to correct after written notice
7. Continuing physical or mental disability that renders the individual unfit or unable to perform the individual's duties. (North Dakota Legislative Council, 2009, Ch. 15.1-15.07)

Formative evaluation: Evaluation whose purpose is to help teachers improve the quality of their instruction through professional growth and development (Dunkin, 1997; McGrath, 1995).

Negotiated agreement:

A negotiating unit as a group of teachers or administrators that have common interests, common problems, a common employer, or a history of common representation, which warrants the group being represented by a single representative organization in negotiations with the board of a school district. (North Dakota School Boards Association, 2012, p. 20)

Non-renewal: A hearing in which the school board ends the continuing contract rights of a teacher or administrator (North Dakota School Boards Association, 2012).

North Dakota Century Code: “The North Dakota Century Code is the codification of general and permanent law” (North Dakota Legislative Branch, 2014, p. 1).

Open records law: Any communication with a public entity or official relating to public business, including minutes, memos, reports, outlines, notes, and other information kept for or relating to official business or public funds, regardless of format or location, including video & audiotape, computer data, e-mails, and photographs, employee salary and job performance records, financial records, telephone records, and travel vouchers (North Dakota Attorney General, 2014, p.2).

Procedural due process:

Procedural due process refers to the aspects of the due process clause that relate to the procedure of arresting and trying persons who have been accused of crimes. It also applies to any other government action that deprives an individual of life, liberty, or property. According to the principle of procedural due process, if a person is deprived of life, liberty or property, s/he is entitled to adequate notice, hearing, counsel, and a neutral judge. This principle follows the concept of fundamental fairness. (US Legal Definitions, 2014, p. 1)

Remediation: The process, prior to dismissal, where a teacher is evaluated by a supervisor or administrator, deficiencies are identified, and the teacher is given an opportunity to correct those deficiencies (Claxton, 1986).

Substantive due process:

Substantive due process is a fundamental legal theory enumerated in the U.S. Constitution. The principle of substantive due process states that the due process clause in the Constitution should protect the substantive right of a citizen. Substantive rights are those general rights that reserve to an individual the power to possess or to do certain things. Freedom of speech and expression is an example of a substantive right. (US Legal Definitions, 2014, p. 1)

School climate:

The feelings and attitudes that are elicited by a school's environment are referred to as school climate. Although it is difficult to provide a concise definition for school climate, most researchers agree that it is a multidimensional construct that includes physical, social, and academic dimensions. (Loukas, 2007, p. 1)

School Size: "North Dakota schools are divided into two classes or divisions (325 and above for class A, 324 and below for Class B)" (North Dakota High School Activities Association, 2013).

Summative evaluation: "An evaluation by the principal whose purpose is to give tenure to, promote, demote, or dismiss a teacher" (Dunkin, 1997, p. 1).

Tenure: A rank provided to competent teachers who have successfully completed a period of probation. This rank also protects teachers' employment from adverse and capricious dismissal (Marshall, Baucom, & Webb, 1998).

Voluntary exit: A resignation or retirement of a staff member in lieu of a potential school board dismissal hearing. A voluntary exit may occur either before a dismissal or a non-renewal school board hearing.

Acronyms

EAP	Employee Assistance Program
ESPB	Educational Standards and Practices Board
IRB	Institutional Review Board
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NDCEL	North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders
NDEA	North Dakota Education Association
NDSBA	North Dakota School Boards Association

Delimitations

The theoretical sampling will be based upon the essence of the experiences that principals have when guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit. For the purposeful sampling, I will select subjects from both Class A and Class B public schools in North Dakota. School district class sizes in North Dakota are composed of Class A schools which have a total student population of 325 or more students and Class B schools which have 324 or fewer total student population (North Dakota High School Activities Association, 2013). I will also invite both elementary and secondary principals to be part of the study. Doug Johnson, Executive Director of the North Dakota Council of School Administrators, stated that he only receives “on average four or five calls [*sic* per year from schools who are considering dismissing a teacher],” (personal communication, February 1, 2012). I anticipate that my targeted sample will be equally small.

The topic of teacher dismissal has many variables that influence the process as well as the outcome. For the purposes of this research, I am limiting my research to the voluntary exit from a school system. Of the many variables that will not be considered in

the research are teacher pre-service preparation, pre-service teacher certification assessments, and hiring practices. While these elements could, and perhaps do, play a role in eliminating some persons who might be less than competent, the focus for this research project is on those that are already employed by school districts.

Assumptions

Branch (2001) noted in his research that approximately 95% of the adults in the United States said there are various levels of incompetence among public school teachers across the nation. Most people educated in United States public schools can share stories of teachers who were, in their personal experiences, less than competent. Because it would seem there are teachers in most schools who fall into that category, I assume that most experienced principals will have gone through the process of assisting a teacher to a voluntary exit. However, because most of this process is not public, it could also be assumed that it will require some searching to find principals who have participated in this process. It could also be assumed that principals might like to have opportunity to share the process and the struggles that accompany their experience of assisting a teacher to voluntarily exit their school.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized in five chapters. Chapter II consists of a review of the literature related to the dismissal and voluntary exit of public teachers. Multiple resources were used in this chapter to provide a full picture of the many variables and factors linked to this process. Chapter III presents the methodology used for this study as well as the data analysis process. Chapter IV is a presentation of the findings in tabular

and narrative form based upon the analysis of the qualitative data collected. Chapter V includes a discussion of the findings and recommendations for action and further study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

It is almost impossible to dismiss tenured teachers; this statement is heard frequently when the topic of teacher incompetence comes up (Thompson, 2006). This statement shows up in the literature from a variety of sources: principals and other administrators, teachers, school board members, as well as the general public. However, at the same time, much of the literature contradicts that statement. In fact, most of the literature indicates that there are some specific steps that principals can take to successfully remove an incompetent teacher. Documentation of teacher incompetence through the supervision and evaluation process, documentation of other actions as reported by students, staff, and parents, following the state legal statutes and time lines, and remediation are all steps that are critical to the success of a dismissal procedure (Conley, 1991; DeMitchell, 1995).

Whom does one believe, the practitioners or the researchers? Why is there such a vast difference of opinion? In fact, some experts would say dismissals do not have to be so trying for principals. Elder (2004) spent over 30 years in school labor relations as a union advocate for teachers in dismissal cases and indicates the procedures and timelines in most states are clearly stated in legislative code. His contention is that when principals follow the procedures and timelines, they will prevail in a school board dismissal hearing.

A great deal of research has been done on most aspects of teacher competency, teacher supervision and evaluation, teacher remediation, and teacher dismissal.

Considering that teachers are the single biggest factor in student learning, (Adamoski, Therriault, & Cavanna, 2007; Dawson & Billingsley, 2000; DeMitchell, 1995; Lawrence, Vachon, Leake, & Leake, 1993; Schmoker, 2006) that should hardly be surprising. What perhaps is surprising is the disparity between those teachers identified as incompetent and the number of teachers who are dismissed.

According to a national survey *Recruiting New Teachers*, which was reported out by Branch (2001), it is clear that the general public shares real concern for the number of incompetent teachers that are perceived to be occupying public school classrooms.

Approximately 95% of the adults in the United States say there are various levels of widespread incompetence among K-12 teachers throughout the nation, but they are optimistic that the teaching force will improve, according to a new survey released by the nonprofit organization Recruiting New Teachers. (p. 16)

Branch also noted, “When respondents were asked how widespread the problem of incompetent teachers is, a combined 78% said the problem was either very widespread or somewhat widespread” (p. 16). These surveys indicate that a large number of the general public believes that there are many incompetent teachers in the classroom that should not be there.

In a recent national survey from Phi Kappa Gamma (Bushaw & Lopez, 2010) participants were asked if they have trust and confidence in the men and women who are teaching children in the public schools. Seventy-one percent indicated yes, 27% indicated no, and 2% indicated they did not know. While this survey did not result in as

definitive responses as the Recruiting New Teachers Survey, 27% is a large number of people nationally who do not have trust or confidence in our teachers.

Within the body of research, some statistics arise that are fairly consistent concerning the number of teachers in public schools that are considered incompetent. National research suggests approximately 5-10% of all teachers are considered incompetent; however, only approximately .5% of those teachers are actually removed from the classroom by one means or another. The difference in the numbers between those teachers perceived to be incompetent and the few that are removed is very important to note (McGrath, 2000; Painter, 2000a; Tucker, 1997; Ward, 1995). In a more recent study by the National Center for Education Statistics' School and Staffing Survey (SASS) the numbers were somewhat higher, but still indicated that the percentage of teachers who are dismissed is low, ranging from 1.3 to 4.4% of a district's teaching staff. The SASS statistics are based on 16,330 schools that responded to the survey (2009). This disparity causes many to wonder how this can be happening and leaving incompetent teachers in the classroom (Menuey, 2007).

There are multiple factors, categories, barriers, or failures that are problem areas that principals must deal with as they contemplate the removal of an incompetent teacher. Many principals believe that dismissing an incompetent teacher is very difficult if not impossible. Tenure laws have created the perception that once teachers become tenured, they cannot be removed from their jobs (Thompson, 2006). At the same time, there is considerable research that indicates that most of these factors are surmountable. The fact that .5% of those incompetent teachers are removed indicates that, while a small number,

there are some principals who have discovered the means of removing teachers from their positions.

When a building principal has identified a teacher who needs to make improvements, has worked with that teacher to make those improvements, and has not seen appropriate progress take place, it is time for the principal to make the decision to move for dismissal (Bridges, 1986). Another option to be considered by the principal is to attempt a voluntary exit in lieu of a full dismissal hearing before the school board.

Unfortunately, there is no “roadmap” that leads to the destination of a voluntary exit. A voluntary exit, which may be the main objective of the principal, is typically a by-product of the formal dismissal proceedings. In addition, the process of voluntary exit usually occurs behind closed doors and, because of confidentiality laws, is a private process wherein the details do not become public. Therefore, this review of the literature begins from the perspective of the dismissal process as the goal. Once the principal determines that the teacher has not made satisfactory remedial growth, the principal begins the dismissal process. The principal needs to be committed to the goal of removing the teacher from the classroom by either means. Consequently, the full dismissal or the desired voluntary exit will unfold as the process proceeds.

There are many variables identified through various studies that help explain this disparity of those determined to be incompetent and the small number of incompetent teachers dismissed. Thompson (2006) described three general categories of these independent variables, which he refers to as barriers: procedural barriers, logistical barriers, and person barriers. Bridges and Groves (1990), on the other hand, categorized these variables as failures and indicated there are five failures under which tenured

teachers are dismissed for incompetence: technical, bureaucratic, ethical, productive, and personal.

Lee (1999) addressed these issues in a slightly different manner when he referred to them as factors and explained that there are also a number of other factors that may play into teacher incompetence including alcoholism, other substance abuse, as well as marital, family, and financial issues. All of these factors may be intertwined, and a definite cause-effect relationship may be impossible to define. Likewise, Bryant (1986) identified three causes for unsatisfactory performance on the part of an employee: organizational shortcomings, personal problems, and non-job related issues. These are also potential factors to teacher incompetence.

There are many variables in teacher incompetency that influence the actions of principals as they go about their work. Some of these may be important in one situation and not so in another. Yet, when several, less influential variables come into combination at the same time, they may take on even greater importance. The factors, failures, or variables that influence or impact the dismissal and voluntary exit process must be considered individually in each situation as circumstances can vary drastically from one case to another. For purposes of clarification, these factors, failures, or variables will be referred to as factors throughout the remainder of this study.

Procedural Due Process

According to the principle of procedural due process, if a person is deprived of life, liberty or property, s/he is entitled to adequate notice, hearing, counsel, and a neutral judge. This principle follows the concept of fundamental fairness (US Legal Definitions,

2014). D'Costa (1993) addressed the matter of due process with this reference to the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution states: No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States: nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law: nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. (p. 105)

Substantive due process: Substantive due process is a fundamental legal theory enumerated in the U.S. Constitution. The principle of substantive due process states that the due process clause in the Constitution should protect the substantive right of a citizen. Substantive rights are those general rights that reserve to an individual the power to possess or to do certain things. Freedom of speech and expression is an example of a substantive right. (US Legal Definitions, 2014, p. 1)

While principals often speak of due process as a deterrent to the dismissal process, that is not the intent of the legal system. Remley and MacReynolds (1988) indicated that due process has not been developed to make life difficult for principals, but rather is there to ensure that teachers are protected from unreasonable people. Due process protects teachers, but also provides the principal with guidance and the process for making a good case even stronger (Camp, Connelly, Lane, & Mead, 2000; Lawrence, 2011). When principals understand that, due process can actually work to a principal's advantage by clearly showing that all of the teacher's rights have been given to them.

Tenure

While due process is an important constitutional right, the courts have determined that new teachers have fewer due process rights than experienced teachers. In most states, first year, and in some states second or third year teachers have very limited due process rights. This limited protection gives school districts an opportunity to dismiss a teacher without the same documentation of cause as required by the courts for those

teachers who have reached the recognized status for experienced teachers which is referred to in most state laws as teacher tenure. In most states teacher tenure allows teachers in their first and sometimes second or third year of employment, depending upon the respective state statute, to be released from their position without cause. However, following the first, second, or third year of employment, teachers are given full due process rights (Marshall et al., 1998). There are some states that do not have tenure laws per se; however, even those states without specific tenure laws have some provisions for due process for teachers with several years of experience in the same school system (Adamoski et al., 2007; Coleman, Schroth, Molinaro, & Green, 2006; Dawson & Billingsley, 2000; Honawar, 2007; Kennedy, 2000).

State Statutes

Most states have laws that have clearly identified steps and timelines for the dismissal process. These steps and laws afford, in most cases, guidance for the teacher, principal, central office administration, and school board as to the due process steps and timelines required when moving through the process. These steps and timelines ensure due process for the teacher in question.

In North Dakota law, there is no reference to teacher tenure, but the principles of due process are just as evident. As noted in the *North Dakota Century Code* (North Dakota Legislative Council, 2009), “the board may not notify the individual under this section earlier than March first nor later than May first of the school year in which the individual has been employed” (Ch. 15.1-15-05) When contemplated non-renewal is being considered, the *North Dakota Century Code* outlines required timelines as well as the details of additional requirements of the school district:

1. If the board of a school district contemplates not renewing the contract of an individual employed as a teacher, a principal, or as an associate or assistant superintendent, the board shall, no earlier than March first nor later than April fifteenth. (Ch. 15.1-15-05)

Finally, the steps and timelines in the *North Dakota Century Code* are also clearly identified in regard to the hearing process:

If the board of a school district elects not to renew an individual's contract, the board shall provide notice of its determination to the individual in writing on or before May first. (Ch. 15.1-15-06)

These steps and timelines, when followed, assure all parties that due process for the teacher has been followed. Missing any of these steps or timelines will derail the dismissal process and either cause the school district to look bad or force them to wait another year before moving forward with the dismissal process.

Negotiated Agreements

Most districts have specific contract language that identifies steps for supervision and evaluation of teachers. Those involved with negotiating should be aware that any provisions in the language concerning evaluations and supervision may impact the dismissal process (Painter, 2000c). There is often language in the negotiated agreement that specifies procedures for the reduction in force of staff members not related to competency, as well as language on remediation and other steps to provide teachers with the opportunity to improve their performance and protect them from undue or unreasonable dismissal.

Defining Incompetence

Defining incompetence remains a major challenge in the process of dismissing a teacher. Bridges (1985) wrote:

Incompetence is an ambiguous concept. Although most state legislatures have singled out incompetence (or one of its blood relatives—inefficiency, gross inefficiency, and inadequate performance) as a legal ground for dismissal, only two states—Alaska and Tennessee—have supplied definitions. (p. 57)

Yet, incompetence is the category which is most frequently used in the dismissal process (Waintroob, 1995a). While the courts have not clearly identified what incompetence is, but have relied on districts to make that determination, the components of incompetence have been identified by many researchers. Frequently these components are listed as the duties of a teacher or other categories of competencies are defined (Drummond & Stoddard, 1990; Dunkin, 1997).

Over many years of court cases, the courts have not come to an agreement on the language that clearly identifies what constitutes incompetence. Barnes (2008) and Ellis (1984) indicated that the courts have not been willing to define standards for competence, but have identified four areas of performance including: content knowledge, teaching pedagogy, effects on student, and personal attitudes. In most cases, incompetent teacher dismissals are based upon more than one issue and a pattern has been identified over time. The courts have consistently recognized districts that are consistent in their expectations of teachers and their determination of when a teacher is incompetent. The courts have also been reluctant to overrule school district judgments about what is and what is not incompetent (Gessford, 1997; Mosley; 2008; Place, 1974). The key element recognized by the courts is consistency by the district in its defined and stated expectations; consistency by the building principal in his or her supervision, evaluation, and remediation process; and consistency in determining recommendations for dismissal. However, because there is no clear definition of incompetence, this is also one of the

biggest areas that dismissed teachers and their representatives are able to dispute through the school board hearing and appeals processes.

The definition of teacher incompetence is somewhat unclear. In fact, a number of references suggest that the courts may have intentionally left the definition vague because of the “art” aspect of teaching.

With respect to the claim that the plan was too vague, a Supreme Court justice said he could not define pornography, but he knew it when he saw it. The same is true of adequate teaching. A successful teacher must have the common sense to know when a classroom is under control, when a student should be sent to the principal’s office for discipline, when the matter should be handled in class, and when physical contact with a disruptive student is inappropriate. (Waintroob, 1995b, p. 2)

Other court decisions have provided some context for incompetency. Bryant (1986) identified factors that the courts may consider to determine incompetence.

The Michigan Court of Appeals (*Bisbee v. Haslett Public Schools*, 66 Mich. App., 718-726 (1979)) give us as good a catalogue of the types of incompetence about which we worry. That court said school boards should consider deficiencies in:

- 1) knowledge of subject area
 - 2) ability to impart that subject area
 - 3) manner and efficacy of a teacher’s discipline over students
 - 4) rapport with teachers and parents
 - 5) the teacher’s physical and mental ability to withstand the strain of teaching
- One may be able to add other areas to the court’s catalogue. But generally, when we think we have uncovered incompetence, it is probably because a teacher is not functioning well in at least one of these five areas. (p. 9)

In cases when it becomes apparent that the teacher in question could not or would not make the necessary improvements in their practices to remain in the profession, building principals are generally faced with two difficult choices: allow the incompetent teacher to continue or remove the teacher from the classroom using the prescribed state and federal guidelines and processes. Removing a difficult teacher should be a final alternative because of the time and work involved. Some administrators feel that

dismissing a tenured teacher is next to impossible, yet the bottom line is that we cannot allow difficult teachers to continue to work with our students (Whitaker, 2002).

According to Madison (1994), leaving a clearly identified incompetent teacher in the classroom is unacceptable; however, it does put the principal in an unenviable position. If nothing is done about the issue of teacher quality, the public will begin to lose confidence in school systems and principals will carry the burden of that loss of confidence.

Bryant (1986) noted that there are reasons that principals are often reluctant to act. They may feel they are making a mistake or they really do not want to take on the challenge of a dismissal. It is hard work to document incompetence, a great deal of paperwork, and a great deal of administrative anxiety. There is also the concern that perhaps no one else will side with the administrator when the incompetence becomes public. Removing a teacher from the classroom is a process that many principals do not relish. The process is extremely time consuming and can become very adversarial, emotional, stressful, and has many potential pitfalls. If there are other means to eliminate incompetent teachers, those means should be explored. It will save the principal and the school district time and resources. However, should those attempts fail, the principal must do the right thing and move into the dismissal process (Whitaker, 2002).

Once the decision has been made to move forward, the principal must proceed with determination, knowing there will be many challenges ahead. If the process should go all the way to a full school board hearing, the principal can expect to be portrayed as evil or incompetent as the teacher's defense team seeks to discredit the person making the charges against the teacher.

The alternative most building principals would prefer that accomplishes the task of removing the teacher from the classroom while at the same time avoiding the full school board hearing is a voluntary exit by the teacher in question. A voluntary exit allows the teacher to resign or retire from his/her position rather than be dismissed.

The process of removing of a teacher from his or her position is not to be taken lightly by most administrators nor one entered into without serious consideration of the many potential pitfalls that may result throughout the process. Dawson and Billingsley (2000) shared this story from their research:

Consider a history teacher in Berkeley, California, hired in 1959 and tenured in 1964. The problem with this teacher was that, like Juliet Ellery, she actually declined to teach . . . Her students would tell their parents that she never said anything in class about history beyond ‘the assignment is on the board.’ One parent raised the issue with her . . . ‘The best thing to do is let them go at their own pace,’ she said. The parent, a professional man who had been educated in public schools, was having none of it.

He pressed the case with the principal, who informed him that attempts had been made to fire this teacher before, but without success. ‘I know your concern,’ the principal said, ‘but it’s virtually impossible to get rid of a tenured teacher.’ In the face of continued complaints, the principal did get rid of her, but not through dismissal. They paid her to go away by fattening her already generous retirement package. (p. 9)

Many administrators know that besides being an extremely long, difficult, and stressful process to undertake, it is they who will become the target should the teacher fight the charges. The building principal’s motives, actions, and credibility, among other things, will almost certainly be questioned. The principal is on trial. It has little to do with the teacher. The principal is put in the position of being “gagged” from public comment while the teacher and colleagues are free to publicly and privately assert innocence leaving the principal very isolated and frustrated (Painter, 2000a).

The stress on the school climate is another factor that cannot be overlooked. The division between students, staff, and parents can be huge and can last a long time, derailing a good school climate. In addition to the emotional strain faced by the principal individually, the process puts a strain on the staff as a whole (Painter, 2000c). This stress on school climate may last a long time, depending upon many circumstances such as the length of time the teacher has been in the building; the popularity of the teacher with staff, students, and parents; and the reason the teacher removed.

Most principals would prefer to have the teacher accept a voluntary exit. Still even in a voluntary exit the teacher must be given due process and told about their rights and reminded they have a right to have representation present. The resignation must be voluntary. Allowing the teacher an opportunity to resign provides an opportunity for the teacher to go out before a recommendation for dismissal is sent to the school board (Frels & Horton, 2007).

Marzano and Brown (2009) explained the concept of the art of teaching in their book: *A Handbook of the Art and Science of Teaching*.

The title words *art* and *science* were carefully selected to convey a message-effective teaching is both art and science. It is art in the sense that it involves no specific script all teachers must follow. Indeed, effective teachers are as varied in their characteristics and behaviors as are effective students. It is science in the sense that there are strategies that research over time has shown to have a high probability of enhancing student achievement. (p. 1)

The roots of this concept of the art and science of teaching are not new. Marzano (2007) in his original work, *The Art and Science of Teaching*, made the observation that the combination of teaching strategies and understanding student needs was first noted over 20 years ago. Teaching is not just content and not just pedagogy. It also includes a sense

of timing, a sense of defining moments, and a sense of the need for adjustments on the fly. Successful classroom teaching is complex and is based upon numerous techniques and skills (Waintroob, 1995a).

Dismissal

The most troublesome category for all persons involved with a dismissal are those that fall into the category of incompetent or, in North Dakota terms, gross inefficiency. According to the North Dakota School Boards Association (NDSBA) (2003), the state of North Dakota identifies the following causes for teacher discharge.

- A. Immoral conduct
- B. Insubordination
- C. Conviction of a felony
- D. Conduct unbecoming the position held by the individual
- E. Failure to perform contracted duties without justification
- F. Gross inefficiency that the individual has failed to correct after written notice
- G. Continuing physical or mental disability that renders the individual unfit or unable to perform assigned duties. (p. 1)

While most other categories can be reasonably well defined, that is not the case with teacher incompetence or gross inefficiency in North Dakota. According to Whitlow (2002), incompetence is the most frequent reason for dismissal of teachers and is listed in most of the states' statutes.

There are many reasons for the lack of a clear definition for competence or gross inefficiency, but they are generally based on the broad range of strategies, pedagogies, practices, and other factors of good teaching and how they are interwoven. Good teachers have an intuitive sense of when a lesson is going well or not going well and what needs to be done, in spite of the lesson plan, to make it go better. Good teachers are able to seamlessly shift gears and sense when students are not understanding or engaged and

make adjustments mid-stream in an attempt to build that understanding or increase that engagement. That intuitiveness is an art that cannot be taught like pedagogies, techniques, or strategies.

In their article, *The Search for Highly Qualified Teachers*, Berry, Hoke, and Hirsch (2004) confirmed the need for these complex skills of understanding how students learn and how to deal with the complexity of the learning. They indicated these complex skills also encompasses the ability to control the classroom, write standards-based lesson plans, understand and assess student work accurately, work with a variety of students with special needs, and use technology in the classroom. All of these and more are expectations of competent teachers.

Un-remediable Actions

There are times; however, when the actions of a teacher are such that remediation is not required or appropriate. According to Swartz (1997):

Interpreting these provisions, the Appellate Court of Illinois noted: ‘A teacher’s conduct is irremediable if it (1) has caused significant damage to students, the faculty, or the school and (2) could not have been corrected if the superiors had given the teacher the statutorily prescribed warning.’ The court further refined this test by noting that ‘individual acts [*sic* which are] separately remediable, may be irremediable when considered in totality; they must have long continued, and a court may consider whether the cause for dismissal is itself irremediable and whether the teacher demonstrated a willingness to correct the conduct. Second, criminal conduct had been held to irremediable *per se*, regardless of the test.’ (p. 3)

Inappropriate conduct with students would be part of criminal behavior that would be considered un-remediable. According to Fulmer (2002), consultation with an attorney who specializes in school law is still an important step even in a case that could, by many, be clearly identified as un-remediable.

Voluntary Exit

Voluntary exit, induced exit, voluntary resignation, involuntary exit, or forced resignations are all labels given to the process of convincing an incompetent teacher to leave a school without a school board hearing. While each label may have some interpretation that is unique, the bottom line is that the teacher is given the choice of leaving the school through their own resignation or retirement or face a lengthy, emotional, expensive, and a very public process of a full school board hearing (Bridges, 1986). While not an easy solution, the voluntary exit is still a preferred method to the full dismissal process for most principals and school administrators. However, when a principal makes a recommendation and the central office administration supports the decision to move to dismiss a teacher, it must be for the full dismissal with no turning back unless the teacher voluntarily exits prior to the completion of the dismissal process.

Teacher Evaluation

Since the courts first began hearing cases concerning teacher dismissal, the lack of definition of teacher incompetence or gross inefficiency due to the combination of art and science of teaching has created problems for the courts, principals, and school boards. Developing a definitive evaluation tool that determines whether a teacher is, in fact, competent or not, appears to be an impossible task. Many researchers and educators have tried to find or develop such a tool (McGrath, 1995).

One of the components of the process that is integral to success of a dismissal is the consistency of the teacher supervision and evaluation process from both a district and building level perspective. When a principal can show that the supervision and evaluation process is universally applied to all staff members, the decision to dismiss is

likely to be supported in the legal system (Mosley, 2008; Whitlow, 2002). The value of an effective supervision and evaluation system that is properly and effectively implemented is one of the most important steps in the process.

Unfortunately, many measures that states use in determining teacher quality have proven ineffective. State certification or degrees from approved programs provide little information about actual teacher effectiveness or quality. Researchers suggest putting more focus on evaluating teachers on the job and requiring better teacher assessments before tenure or full teacher status is awarded (Olson, 2008).

Teacher supervision and evaluation processes are found in public schools across the country. Teacher evaluation programs are legislative attempts to provide quality assurance to the public and to legislators. Administrators understand the complexity of teaching and would like a supervision and evaluation program or tool that promotes quality teaching and teacher professional development (Danielson, 2001). Administrators have a duty to ensure that quality teachers are in all classrooms and a quality evaluation tool is key to achieve that end.

Many researchers do not believe that most of the current evaluation processes work very well. Most school districts do not have the assessment tools for supervision and evaluation that give an accurate reflection of what happens in a classroom. Even in potential dismissal situations, the teacher assessment tool is often not enough to provide a clear picture of the teacher's abilities (VanSciver, 1990).

Principals have a wide range of duties as building leaders. There are constant demands on their time from many sources such as physical plant concerns, student safety, instruction and learning, student activities and athletics, personnel issues on both a

professional and personal level, parent demands, and many more. Painter (2000a)

describes it this way:

A principal who was trying to explain the extensive time required to evaluate professional staff effectively put it this way: 'Principals have so many responsibilities that they can't put them all aside to concentrate on documenting inadequacy.' This is one of the most often-cited barriers [*sic* factors] to effective evaluation. It takes time to observe teaching and gather other data, analyze and diagnose problems and communicate feedback (particularly when the teacher is not receptive to the message). It is easy for principals to postpone these unpleasant tasks. There is always some other work to be done—some of it as a direct result of district office demands for reports or meetings. (p. 2)

Many districts have an identified process, often determined through a negotiated agreement with the teachers' association, intended in part to provide a procedure to support teachers in their work and encourage professional and personal growth as part of the formative evaluation of a teacher's professional work. Additionally, this process also serves on occasion as a component of a summative evaluation for a teacher based upon the principal's professional judgment when things are not going well. The regular supervision of teachers with observations, both formal and informal, is often and should be documented, whether positive or negative. On the other hand, if the principal is simply going through the motions of the supervision process, that too may become part of the culture of the school. Holding teachers accountable for following the district process is a part of the principal's job.

Documentation

One of the most frequently mentioned factors in the literature is the need for documentation that accurately depicts the teacher's action or inaction as well as the response by the building principal. This written documentation details every meeting, observation, and teacher - principal interaction from the regular classroom observation

throughout the entire process. Documentation is the key. Every evaluation and every conference must be noted. It is the responsibility of the district to prove that all the requirements were met. These documents are extremely important because supervisors' professional judgments are recognized as a legitimate form of authority within the school setting (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; McGrath, 2000; Mosley, 2008; Waddell, 1992; Waitroob, 1995a).

Accurate documentation is paramount throughout the supervision process. In most cases the courts have supported the dismissal of a teacher when there are clear and well written documents indicating what the teacher had done or failed to do, was given clear and reasonable opportunities to correct those deficiencies, and provided the necessary remediation, professional development, or other training necessary to make the desired changes in behavior or professional practice. A frequent mantra found in the literature on dismissal is: document, document, document. Clear, concise, and factual written records of what has been observed and of comments made by both parties must be kept for the success of the dismissal process (DeMitchell, 1995; Elder, 2004; Lawrence, 2011; Spitalli, 2003; Swartz, 1997; Waitroob, 1995a). This step cannot be over-emphasized.

Types of Documentation

There are two types of evaluation frequently referred to in the literature: formative and summative. The documentation that principals need to write with consistency follows the same format regardless of the evaluation process. Formative documentation should be used during a typical classroom observation. This documentation provides the teacher with feedback that helps the teacher grow professionally. Summative

documentation provides the principal with evidence and a record of the events that may lead to the dismissal process. While both formats have different purposes, the need for consistency in how each is written helps the principal should the documents be challenged at the time of a hearing (McGrath, 1995).

One strategy to develop consistency in completing formative and summative documentation is a standardized district format. Utilizing a standardized district format helps principals understand the process and takes away or limits one of the many stressors associated with the process. The layout, language, and documentation steps are just some of the many areas that are all potential issues for opposing counsel at the board dismissal hearing. Using a standardized process helps provide that needed consistency. Standardization also helps principals in allaying their feelings of isolation and stress because they know that they are following a district model. While each potential dismissal will be unique, knowing where to start and how to proceed will assist principals in doing the right thing. Dismissal is a long and difficult process; however, principals do note when they follow the process and meet all the requirements, they are generally supported in the dismissal process (Adamoski et al., 2007). While the process may be long, careful and accurate documentation will help make the process successful.

Additional Documentation

Another component in the documentation process, beyond the principal's record of conferences and other communication with the teacher, is the process or proper manner of documentation of evidence or interviews with students, parents, teachers, other staff members, or other witnesses. Many experts indicate that getting written statements

from parents and other staff members is an important means of documenting teacher incompetence (Bridges & Groves, 1990; Frels & Horton, 2007; Place, 1974).

Lack of knowledge about how or what is important to document could also be factors that prevent principals from doing the right thing. Determining when and how the information from witnesses should be shared with the teacher, who can accompany the teacher to a principal conference, and what role that representative has are all questions that principals encounter as they begin the dismissal process.

Remediation

Frequently principals feel that they have little recourse but to move to dismissal, leaving them with little middle ground for teacher remediation. However, there are numerous ways that principals can work with teachers to improve their teaching practices without moving to dismissal. One of the purposes of the supervision process is to provide and encourage professional growth of teachers in all areas of their professional lives. To that end, an effective remediation plan may help a teacher make the corrections or adjustments that will allow him or her to retain the teaching position. This remediation demonstrates to teachers the concern the district has for them professionally and the district demonstrates to the community, parents, and students that the district is committed to quality teachers. Remediation also provides documentation in the event that the remediation effort fails, that the district is committed to helping teachers improve and not just dismissing them without supporting the teacher's efforts to become competent (Camp et al., 2000; Kennedy, 2000; Lawrence et al., 1993; Tucker, 2001; Waddell, 1992).

A possible resource for principals and teachers might include a bank of potential remediation options as well as a framework of what is and what is not acceptable. This would assist principals as they move forward with this difficult task. The remediation options for the principal and the teacher range from professional development activities to personal one-on-one assistance (Frels & Horton, 2007; Tucker, 2001; Waintroob, 1995b).

Another aspect of the remediation process is the duration and follow-up with the teacher. Consideration must be given to how much time is allotted for the remediation and if the remediation plan's goals are met, the next step for both the teacher and the principal should be determined. Conversely, if the goals are not met, the next step needs to be identified and another timeline developed. Additional consideration is required when attempting to correct more than one area of deficiency and determining how the principal proceed. If the remediation process continues without resolution, the principal must determine it is time to move beyond the remediation to the dismissal process. There is a point at which principals and district administrators must determine whether the teacher has made enough gains to stay in the school or move to the next step (Frels & Horton, 2007; Kennedy, 2000; Place, 1974). While these are all considerations that building level principals may be able to address based upon their own education and/or personal experiences, guidance and support from the district administration would eliminate some of the guesswork that principals experience when there is no district plan in place.

The process of documenting the results of the interviews, investigations, and the conferences with the teacher is also noted as extremely important in the quest for a

successful dismissal. A defined procedure for guidance through the process that is identified, accepted, or otherwise approved by the district not only helps the principal with the process, but provides substantiation of the accepted practice in a hearing, whether it is a school board or court hearing.

School Climate

Involving staff in the documenting process, either through written accounts or as witnesses is another issue for principals. This form of staff involvement may help the case, but might do additional harm to the school climate. Research indicates schools that are faced with a dismissal process frequently have difficulties with school climate as staff support sides with either the teacher or the principal. These divisions can occur between staff members, between the principal and staff members, between groups that support the teacher in question or the principal, or any combination of these groups. This conflict can have a negative impact on the school climate of a building (McGrath, 1993). Principals often rely on their good working relationships with teachers to promote a positive school climate. The changes in school climate that can take place when a teacher is dismissed can be divisive, last a long time, and take years to re-build.

Local and State Teacher's Union or Association

Teachers in most states are represented by teachers' unions or associations. For the purpose of clarity in language, these organizations will be referred to throughout this document as associations. These associations, as most labor organizations do, promote the welfare of their members, providing support for compensation, benefits, working conditions, legislative lobbying, and other items specific to their particular profession.

Included in those purposes is the representation of members in dispute with management which, in the case of education, would typically be the school principal.

Frequently principals believe that the teacher associations are a factor and often a roadblock to the dismissal process (DeMitchell, 1995; Goldstein & Noguera, 2006; Painter, 2000a). Some principals indicated that overly-zealous association representatives and their legal counsel often create many difficulties in the process including delay tactics, attacking elements of process and documents, as well as questioning the competence of the principal (Lawrence, 2011; Waintroob, 1995).

In contrast, association representatives generally indicate they believe they are just making sure due process is afforded their members and if the principal has properly prepared his or her case and followed the state guidelines, the dismissal will be judged on its own merits. Associations have a legal responsibility to represent their members in a dismissal hearing and continue through the appeals process should that occur. Should the association be less than zealous in that representation, the association opens itself to lawsuits from its own membership (Bridges, 1986). Associations are not only duty-bound to support their members, but they also have a legal responsibility to do so.

District Support

It is vital that the school district administration, in no uncertain terms, supports their principals in order for principals to move a staff member to dismissal or voluntary exit if justified. That support comes in a number of forms including financial resources, moral and emotional assistance, as well as support through other means. Financial support means that the district is willing to move forward with the dismissal even though the expense of a dismissal hearing and the ensuing court appeals could be very expensive.

While the costs may vary across the country, the expense to the district of a dismissal case can be very expensive, costing well over \$100,000 in most cases (Dawson & Billingsley, 2000; Keller, 2008; Whitlow, 2002).

The dismissal process is difficult, time consuming, and mentally and emotionally draining. School principals should have support in making the supervision, evaluation, and dismissal procedure a high priority from the district central office (VanSciver, 1990). Principals must often balance the challenge of maintaining a school climate that is conducive to a good learning environment, along with the need to accommodate demands from district patrons and stakeholders, and respond to district and state accountability (Adamoski et al., 2007). Providing principals with assistance in meeting some of the other job requirements such as more leeway on meeting timelines of district duties and obligations or providing additional staffing to cover some of the workload are some ways the district might support the principal in the midst of this process.

The moral and emotional support a district provides for the principal can be critical. There is a great deal of stress for most principals throughout the dismissal process. The open and obvious central office support sends a sign to building principals that they should move forward knowing they are doing the right thing.

Additionally, when principals know that there will be district support if they bring a dismissal recommendation there is greater likelihood that principals will take the steps toward the dismissal process (Adamoski et al., 2007; Henry, 2010). At the same time, the open, obvious, and committed district support of principals in the dismissal process sends a message to teachers that non-professional behavior will not be overlooked and

documentation, remediation, and other steps in the supervision process have meaning and value.

District Culture

Another factor to consider that may impede principals in removing incompetent teachers is the organizational culture of their district. Organizational culture plays into principal willingness based upon the value placed upon the supervision and evaluation process by the district administration. When the practice of the central office administration includes a systematic evaluation of principals that is similar in nature to the process used with teachers and the process is thorough and complete, including remediation and dismissal, then principals will be more inclined to follow the same practice. This is particularly true if principals are held to a high standard of quality through their own supervision and evaluation by their supervisors. District administrators must demonstrate by both word and deed that they support principals in their efforts to remove incompetent teachers. Similarly, when district administrators remediate or remove an incompetent principal, they send a strong message to teachers that the evaluation, remediation, and dismissal process includes all parties. When a principal takes on a dismissal case, other principals are watching to see how the district administration responds (Painter, 2000b). On the other hand, if the district supervision process of principals is minimal and is more about completing the requirements than using the process for principal professional growth, that minimum “just get it done” attitude may become part of the organization’s overall culture concerning supervision and evaluation.

Administrator Competence

Competence in the role of a building principal takes on many facets. The job is varied, demanding, and time-consuming. Not all people hired as principals are cut out to meet the demands of the position. This incompetence may show up in a number of ways. For example, the person could simply be unqualified or incapable. Incompetence may show up only in certain areas as just weak or under-developed skills. As noted by Ward (1995) “superintendents in the study rated fully one-third of the principals in their districts as being ‘below standard’ in the skills of documenting teacher performance problems, providing performance counseling, and implementing dismissal procedures” (p. 3). These skills included administrator competence, principal professional development, teacher evaluation, supervision and dismissal processes, and the personal and/or professional ability to confront teachers and deal with difficult situations.

There are many sub-categories included in principal competence. The first of these is the principal’s belief system. Most principals are former teachers. As teachers they were taught to find the good in all students and help those who were not doing well. That mentality stays with most principals, in fact, it is frequently a quality highly regarded in the hiring process (Waintroob, 1995a). As such, it is difficult for many principals to admit that there are teachers who are not capable of being good teachers and that some teachers cannot become successful even with the right coaching, professional development, or counseling.

Principal Professional Development

Principals may feel incompetent to proceed with a dismissal process if they feel they have not had the necessary training or professional development to handle the

myriad of duties and responsibilities required to effectively follow the dismissal process. Principals may be reluctant to act because they see the process long and arduous. They may feel that the difficulty involved is more than they were trained to do (Bryant, 1986; Lee, 1999; McGrath, 1995). Something as seemingly simple as how to appropriately write up teacher documentation can be areas of concern or weakness that need strengthening. Documentation is a skill that can be taught in professional development sessions. Quality documentation will encourage trust and respect between the principal and the staff (McGrath, 1993).

There is also the fact that there are principals that are not very good at their job or at least this part of their job. Perhaps it is a lack of understanding of duties or roles of the principal's position or simply a lack of the necessary qualities and/or skills to be a competent principal. In some instances, they may not be able to admit they lack the confidence to take on the difficult process of dismissal or they do not want to deal with the criticism that often accompanies the dismissal process (Painter, 2000b). Specific professional development for principals based upon their evaluation from their supervisors may help principals strengthen their professional weaknesses and allow them to be better at their job as well.

Becoming the Villain

There is, without question, the possibility that when a principal moves forward toward a dismissal process there will be staff members within the building that will view the principal as a bad person, doing harm to a colleague, depriving them of their income, and causing that teacher to lose respect of others in the school and community. Some will take sides; others may wonder if all was done that could have been done to rectify

the situation. Even teachers who complained about the teacher being dismissed will often support that teacher in opposition to the principal. When the information that a principal is seeking the dismissal of a teacher becomes public, the principal often becomes the target, not the teacher. Regardless of the investigation and documentation, the principal will find themselves on the defensive (VanSciver, 1990).

When principals take on the task of individual teacher improvement in their buildings, there will be changes in the school climate. Most principals work closely with teachers to improve student learning. When a principal moves into the disciplinary role with a staff member, that close working relationship will change, not just with the teacher involved, but with many staff members as well (DeMitchell, 1995; Frels & Horton, 2007; Lawrence, 2011; Painter, 2000b; Spitali, 2003; Waintroob, 1995b). Even though teachers may recognize the teacher in question has difficulties, they may wonder if they may be next to be dismissed.

Cannot Dismiss Myth

Principals often hear mixed messages about the difficulty in dismissing a teacher. Research indicates many people believe dismissing a teacher, particularly a tenured teacher, is next to impossible (Dawson & Billingsley, 2000). However, the literature is clear that teachers, even tenured teachers, can be dismissed. What is not clear is how difficult the process actually may be. Some researchers believe if the documentation, remediation, timelines, and other steps are met, the process is not that difficult. Others indicate that it is, or can be, a long and difficult process with no guarantee of success. Difficult is perhaps a relative term when it comes to the dismissal process. Dismissal is not difficult in terms of following all of the procedures and deadlines as these are

identified through state statutes. However, in terms of the time, additional workload, stress, and the difficult position principals' face in the process, many principals indicate they would not go through the process again.

Self-Doubt

Principals may question themselves about their accuracy, their motivation, their judgment, and whether they have done all that they could do to assist or correct the teacher's shortcomings. This is often based upon the limited time that principals have to spend on the evaluation process (Goldstein & Noguera, 2006). With the many demands of the position and an often inadequate supervision and evaluation tool, principals are often faced with the dilemma of prioritizing their time and efforts.

The Principal

Workload

A typical principal's day is very full with many demands on his or her time (Painter, 2000c). The research is clear that dismissing a teacher is a time-consuming process. Adding the additional time required to an already full day presents priority dilemmas for principals. The principal must determine what has to give in order to do the work required to investigate, document, remediate, and do the paperwork in order to move the teacher to dismissal. While setting these priorities, the principal knows that there is no guarantee that the teacher will voluntarily exit or be dismissed. The extra duties of the dismissal process create an additional workload to an already time-strapped administrator. More than 56% of principals identified time as a factor with identified reasons such as: too many demands on the principal leaving very little time for the supervision of teachers, not enough time to concentrate resources when the system

requires a large number of quality teachers to be evaluated bi-annually, and removing a teacher requires a tremendous amount of time which takes a principal away from other important tasks (Malone & Caddell, 2000; McGrath, 2000; Painter, 2000a).

While there is little in the way of concrete statistics indicating how much time this preliminary dismissal work takes, the fact that dismissals can take several years to complete would be a clear indicator that the time invested in the process is immense. In many cases, a dismissal process can take two years or more to resolve (Dawson & Billingsley, 2000; Honawar, 2007; Lawrence, 2011). In some situations, cases can stretch out far beyond two years as Blacklock (2002) noted in her experience:

For the next four and a half years, the union supported Ms. Jackson in a lawsuit against the district, based on a claim that she had been suffering from depression and was entitled to special accommodations that had been requested and denied. Finally, the union and the teacher dropped their appeal—six and a half years after the ordeal began. (p. 28)

The workload of principals has grown over the last 10 years with the advent of No Child Left Behind as well as many other current trends and mandates in education including: school safety, differentiation, Response to Intervention, and technology integration, to name a few (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009). At the same time, there are no apparent duties that have been removed from the principal's duties (Painter, 2000c). The workload grows as the dismissal process adds significantly to the principal's already full day.

Stress

Stress is frequently mentioned in the literature as a major factor in the dismissal process. The combination of increased workload, timelines, attacks by the teacher in question, the self-doubt about doing the right thing, the teacher's association

representation, and the impact upon building climate may add to the principal's stress level. There are also costs in morale. Often these hearings will create hard feelings and animosity that last for years (Blacklock, 2002; Keller, 2008; Painter, 2000b). The research about principals who have undertaken the dismissal process indicate that there is a strong feeling of isolation by the principal as they assume this sometimes daunting task. This feeling tends to be there even if there is strong district support of the building principal to move forward. Good legal counsel and district support help in the process, but the principal is the only person that can do all of the preliminary work of documenting, interviewing, conferencing with the teacher, developing a remediation plan, and evaluating the progress. Others may provide some feedback and moral support, but it falls to the principal to appropriately complete all of the steps of the process. Another reason for the stress may come from the fact that the potential exists that every aspect of the process and everything that the principal does will be called into question. Ultimately, the realization that the success or failure of the dismissal falls on the principal's shoulders also adds to the stress of a difficult process.

Confidentiality

Another factor in the stress of the process is that the principal must complete his or her work while protecting the confidentiality of the teacher in question. This can become a difficult juggling act as the principal attempts to investigate allegations, identify and interview witnesses, corroborate information, and deal with the school rumor mill. At the same time, the teacher is free to say whatever he or she chooses about the process, often attempting to win support from colleagues, the public, or anyone who will listen. The principal, however, may be portrayed as the villain and is unable to respond

to any of the allegations in a public manner because of the obligation to keep confidential any and all information pertaining to personnel issues.

Dual Role

Some research indicates that one of the fundamental struggles principals face is the dual role of serving as both the educational leader attempting to help teachers grow and improve in their profession and also as the evaluator who may have to make the difficult decision to release a teacher. Those opposing roles tend to keep teachers wary and keep trust from developing to a high degree between principals and teachers (Conley, 1991; Waddell, 1992). This dual role is a balancing act that is difficult at best, and when a dismissal process begins, often becomes even more tenuous.

Other Strategies

There are several other strategies that principals use to persuade teachers to move to another line of work without beginning the full dismissal and documentation process. These strategies may stand alone or they may be part of the dismissal process. Principals and district administrators often seek other avenues to move teachers out of a school. In some cases it is because they do not have the documentation, time, or will to go through the full process. At other times, it is as much their concern for teachers as people and the negative image that a public dismissal brings for all parties, including the teacher in question.

Counseling Out

Counseling a teacher out of the profession may come from the principal or others such as an employee assistance program. This counseling helps the teacher recognize that another line of work may be more fulfilling. It is not an easy process, but one that

may be preferable to both the principal and the teacher in the long run (Conley, 1991; Elder, 2004). If and when teachers recognize that they have skills, just not in the area of teaching, or that they accept that they really are not happy with their chosen profession, they may come to the conclusion that there are better career choices for them.

Dance of the Lemons

One long-standing means of removing a teacher from a school is to rotate that teacher to another building or grade level. This transfer of an incompetent teacher from one building to another as students and parents complaints rise is often referred to as “Dance of the Lemons.” In some cases, this new environment and fresh start may help the teacher, but that is not often the case (Bridges, 1990; Conley, 1991; DeMitchell, 1995; Fuhr, 1993; Jones, 1997; Painter, 2000c). On occasion this fresh start will work, but in most cases it is simply delaying the inevitable. Sometimes this strategy also alerts the teacher to the dissatisfaction of the administration of the quality of his or her work, but it is usually a strategy used to resolve pressure from parents and students about a poor performing teacher without going through the dismissal process.

Teacher Buyouts

Another component of the voluntary exit process is the teacher buyout. Districts are seldom flush with funds, but sometimes it is financially efficient to make an offer to buy out a teacher rather than to go through an expensive and long dismissal process (Keller, 2008). The practice has limited use in many districts both because of funding scarcity and the public’s negative perception about paying extra taxpayer dollars to an incompetent teacher; however, in some cases it can make the difference between a

teacher accepting a voluntary exit and a school board dismissal hearing which can be far more expensive.

Teacher Harassment

Still another means of inducing teachers to leave a school is the use of harassment. This can take shape in many forms, but the goal is often to make the teacher so uncomfortable that they might choose to leave of their own accord. Some strategies include assigning classes to the teacher that are out of his or her certified or preferred area of expertise, assigning the teacher a difficult schedule, creating physical obstacles such as a large class in a small classroom, or making the teacher transient so that he or she must move from classroom to classroom in opposite parts of the school (Stoelinga, 2010).

While not necessarily viewed as an ethical means of removing a teacher from a school, when principals feel they do not have any alternatives, this tactic is sometimes employed. The “Dance of the Lemons” is often included in this category (DeMitchell, 1995; Jones, 1997). The hope is that frequent moves will frustrate a teacher to the point that they will quit; like the other strategies, this seldom works.

Organizational Culture Theory

Throughout the literature on the dismissal process, one of the many recurring themes is that principals seek guidance and support from the district office when seeking to remove an incompetent teacher from the classroom. Perhaps the most important factor is the district support of high quality teachers and instruction in classrooms by both word and deed. This commitment rings hollow if the district is reluctant to pursue the dismissal of staff members, regardless of the reason. A commitment by the district to not

only advocate for the goals and values of supervision and evaluation, but to also commit to them by action ultimately becomes part of the organization's culture.

Bolman and Deal (2003) defined culture:

The way we do things around here. Culture is both a product and a process. As a product, it embodies accumulated wisdom from those who came before us. As a process, it is constantly renewed and re-created as newcomers learn the old ways and eventually become teachers themselves. (p. 243)

Culture is not just what leaders say, but what they do, and where they focus their attention. It also includes how they react to major issues or crises, how they demonstrate and practice the responsibilities of the organization, how they recognize and promote within the organization, and how processes of employment, dismissal, and other employee interactions are defined and carried out (Miner, 2006).

The culture of an organization helps members understand that culture. It is passed on to new members of the organization and is confirmed as new members seek to understand those components of the organization's culture (Schein, 1984). Organizational culture is present not only in the top level of an organization, but is evident within many sub-groups as well. Some organizations have sub-groups within the organization that develop their own culture. For example, within a school building the teachers association might be considered a sub-group of the school and have a culture of its own. New teachers to the building may be taught specific things about "the way we do things here" (Schein, 1984). As such, each sub-group has its own culture and impacts the overall culture of the entire organization. This aspect of organizational culture theory tells us that an organizational standard is not what the organization professes it expects as a standard, but what it accepts.

Culture manifests itself at three levels: the level of deep tacit assumptions that are the essence of the culture, the level of espoused values that often reflect what a group wishes ideally to be and the way it wants to present itself publicly, and the day-to-day behavior that represents a complex compromise among the espoused values, the deeper assumptions, and the immediate requirements of the situation. (Schein, 1996, para. 15)

Therefore, if the district vision publicly states there is an expectation of teachers of excellence, yet the district does not remove or remediate teachers who do not meet that standard of excellence, there is a disconnect between what the district expects and what it really accepts. This sends a tacit signal to principals and teachers alike that the real district vision is “excellence in our teaching staff, unless it costs a lot of money or is really hard to do.” That message becomes clear to the public as well if incompetent teachers are in place in schools for years and nothing is done to remove them. District leadership is critical in shaping that culture of the organization. What the district leadership stands for and communicates to those both inside and outside of the organization is most important. How leaders communicate the meanings of the work the organization is doing, the focus on what is most important within the organization, and the connection that each member makes to the goals is vital to the success of the organization’s leadership (Sergiovanni & Corbally, 1984).

Principals are, in effect, mid-level managers. While they perform the many varied duties of running a school, they are dependent upon the district administration to make the removal of incompetent teachers happen. Because of financial, legal, and other district responsibilities, district leaders must play an active role in the process as they ultimately report to the school board on all matters of this nature. The advocacy and

support they show for principals through their action is vital to principals removing incompetent teachers.

Conclusion

Throughout this literature review, many factors have been identified that impact the ability of principals to dismiss or otherwise remove incompetent teachers from their schools. It is a myth that it is impossible to dismiss a tenured teacher. The truth of the matter is that it is not an impossible task. Principals who follow the steps of the process, meet the deadlines, document accurately, and provide remediation opportunities for growth, may have an excellent chance of winning the dismissal.

However, there are also other truths about this process to be considered. It is very time consuming, stressful, emotional, and the outcome is seldom clear cut. All of these as well as the other factors noted earlier can create a mindset in principals to look to other options rather than a full dismissal. Voluntary exit is one of those options.

This study continues in Chapter III which describes the research methodology and includes the processes used in selecting the subjects, the data collection methods, and analysis of the data. Chapter IV is a presentation of the findings of this study in tabular and narrative form based upon the analysis of the qualitative data collected. Chapter V includes a discussion of the findings and recommendations for action and further study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to gain an understanding of the essence of the experiences that school principals go through as they attempt to move teachers to choose a voluntary exit through retirement or resignation from a school district. A secondary outcome of this research may be that other principals and administrators will view the findings and recognize that what they are going through is not completely unique to their situation. There might also be some suggestions, strategies, or practices from this research that will assist principals in dealing with the difficulties of voluntary exit in a manner that eliminates some stress often associated with the process.

Research Questions

1. What is the essence of principals' experiences as they guide a teacher to a voluntary exit?
2. What specific ways and means do principals use to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?
3. What specific support factors encourage principals to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?
4. What specific factors must principals overcome in order to be willing to guide teachers to voluntary exit?

Methodology

The opportunity to discover firsthand the experiences of principals in the voluntary exit of teachers was intriguing to me. The opportunity to research and to visit with people who had similar experiences to mine also added to the interest of this research topic for me. While a quantitative study might provide a researcher with numbers and other statistical data, for this research the need for me to hear the thoughts and feelings of others as they went through this process was more valuable than statistics to the research. Glesne (2006) believes that qualitative research offers the researcher much more meaningful data from a personal perspective because the data reflects on the personal experiences of the subject and on the researcher. Quantitative research methods are designed with the intention of making generalizations about some social phenomena, creating predictions about those phenomena, and providing causal explanations. Qualitative research methods are used to understand some social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved, to contextualize issues in their particular circumstance, and sometimes to transform or to change social conditions (Creswell, 2007).

Qualitative research will give voice to the struggle of emotions, the feelings of isolation, and the time consumed as principals try to do the right thing by removing an incompetent and perhaps harmful teacher from the classroom. Recognizing that qualitative research was the best fit for my dissertation, the next question became what type of qualitative research to apply to get to the heart of the research questions. Within the research parameters of qualitative research, phenomenology appeared to be the logical choice for this research project.

Phenomenology

Because there are a relatively small number of North Dakota principals and an even smaller number of principals who have worked with teachers to voluntarily exit a school system, phenomenological study was the best choice for this research project. Once identified, it was assumed that this small group of principals likely has had similar experiences and has stories they could tell concerning voluntary exit. From these stories, I intend to develop an essence of what they all experienced. Creswell (2007) offered how phenomenology will meet researcher expectations:

Whereas a narrative study reports the life of a *single individual*, a *phenomenological study* describes the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (e.g., grief is universally experienced). The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. . . The inquirer then collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon, and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals. (pp. 57-58)

The use of phenomenology provides a description of what the participants experienced as well as how they experienced it.

Collecting the data from principals who have helped a teacher move to voluntary exit through a phenomenological study will give me the essence of their experiences. This essence may be helpful to others who have experienced a similar event and may help those who have not experienced a voluntary exit understand what those principals have gone through.

Preliminary Research

In the preliminary research there was a great deal of literature on teacher dismissal and the accompanying process, but there was considerably less research on

voluntary exits. There was sufficient information available to support the research goals and to confirm that the topic had merit. Glesne (2006) addressed the importance of the qualitative researcher doing research that will confirm that the work is worthwhile and yet, at the same time, not do so much that it clouds the direction of the researcher. She also suggested on-going reviews as the researcher moves forward in the study.

Reviewing the literature is an ongoing process that cannot be completed before data collections and analysis is completed. The data may suggest the need to review additional literature because there may be items that were overlooked in the initial literature review that may become important as the research continues.

Qualitative research dictates that while there should be research prior to beginning the investigation, it should continue during the study and after the data has been collected and analyzed. Following the field research, completion of data analysis and making meaning of the data, the researcher will seek out additional research that might inform the work as part of the qualitative process.

Interviews

The interviews were the primary source of data. The interview process used is referred to as the three interview series. In this process, the interviewer and the subject get to the depth of the event and come to an understanding of the meaning of the experience. Each interview had prescribed steps. The first interview developed the context of the event. The second interview gave the subject the opportunity to share the details of that experience, and the third steps helped the subject to review the experience and its meaning (Seidman, 2006).

Each interview was scheduled for 60 to 90 minutes in length. The principals had the opportunity to share as much or as little of their stories as they chose. Several open-ended questions served to start the conversation (Appendix A). As their stories progressed, I used standard qualitative interviewing techniques to explore areas that were missed or were not covered in much detail. Much of the interview process played itself out as the interviews progressed. The principals were allowed to share their stories in the manner that they chose. I asked clarificating questions to understand more clearly what the subject was speaking about. Not all of the questions were pre-determined, but were developed as the stories unfolded. The interviewer was able to re-word questions and understand how the interviewee responded to them (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Both the subjects and I shared in the development of the interviews. Following the initial questions I provided an open-ended invitation to the subjects to share their story in their own way and words. The openness that subjects were allowed in telling their stories enabled them to take the story where they want it to go. Open-ended questions influenced answers the least, because they gave the subjects the option to take their conversation anywhere they wanted it to go. Being face-to-face encouraged more self-generated responses on the part of the subjects. The virtue of the in-person interviews had the context potential of simulating natural everyday conversations (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). I also watched for body language and facial expressions for clues as to deeper or hidden meanings or possible inconsistencies between what is being stated and what the nonverbal cues might suggest.

Each subject had a story or stories to tell about their experiences in working with teachers to voluntarily exit their school system. All interviews were recorded with

subject permission (Appendix B). The recordings were transcribed by professional transcriptionists. The subject and place identifiers as well as the teachers being discussed in the subject's story were given pseudonyms in the transcriptions. In all cases the identity of the school, subjects, and teachers were concealed. There was no way to link the subject to the data or to the consent forms. The name changes were known only to me. When reporting excerpts from subject stories, any other identifying facts were deleted or slightly altered to protect the subject and the teachers, but not so much as to alter the integrity of the story.

Subjects

This research topic focused on a narrow group of people: public school principals. As such, I employed a purposive and theoretical sampling to find participants for the study. By using purposive sampling, I was able to study a specific case and the population directly connected to that case (Silverman, 2005). School principals who have experienced the process of encouraging a teacher to make a voluntary exit are the only group of people who can accurately provide the information that was sought.

The theoretical sampling in this research is based upon the generalizability of the research project to other theoretical situations rather than to larger populations. Determining the participants on the basis of the researcher's questions and the theory that was being developed provided a more direct connection to the events and to the participants (Silverman, 2005). Only principals who have experienced guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit were able to address with any accuracy what the experience was like. In the initial search for subjects, I found principals who were willing to share their experiences concerning the dismissal and voluntary exit processes.

Description of Subjects/Research Population

The theoretical sampling was based upon the generalizability of this research project to other theoretical situations: principals who have guided teachers to a voluntary exit, rather than to a larger population of principals who have not had that experience. For purposive sampling, I selected principals from both Class A and B public schools in North Dakota. I initially attempted to limit subjects to secondary school principals; however, that limited the availability of the targeted sample population. It was necessary to include elementary school principals in the study as the sample was not large enough. It was determined that if those elementary principals had similar experiences to secondary principals, that would create an even stronger generalization to other schools at both the secondary and elementary levels.

I recruited subjects using the typical snowball sampling approach by contacting principals with whom I have worked in various professional and educational settings such as various committees and state educational organizations. This snowball process is noted by Rapley (2007) when he stated, "For accessing potential subjects, I followed many paths, often relying on friends and colleagues, and on contacts given by other interviewees or focus group participants." I asked my contacts if they had such an experience and if they would be willing to be part of my study. I also asked them for referrals of colleagues that they were aware who have gone through the voluntary exit process. Finally, I placed a subject appeal notice in the North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders monthly newsletter and the state-wide administrator listserv (Appendix C). The snowball process allowed for a focus on those persons who have

knowledge or experience in the research topic in a less random, more direct manner and lead to persons who do have that knowledge.

Once a list of potential subjects had been developed, I contacted each of them to invite them to participate in this study. I limited the number of subjects to a sample size of 10 principals. For a phenomenological study, this number provided a large enough sample to gain the essence from those subjects' experiences.

When inviting the subjects to become part of the study, I explained the research project and shared information from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) about consent forms, confidentiality, and other major points of the IRB process. At the invitation to participate, arrangements were made for a date, time, and place that were suitable to both the subject and me. At the initial meeting with each subject, I explained in more detail the purpose of the study as well as all of the necessary components of the IRB requirements for research with human subjects. I used the United States Department of Health and Human Services (2009) detailed guidelines on informed consent that include opportunity for subjects to consider whether they want to participate, in a language level they could understand. Many more elements of appropriate research including a statement of the purpose of the study, a description of the foreseeable risks, disclosure of alternate procedures, subject confidentiality, contact information about the research, and the right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study with no penalty of loss of benefits to the subject were also reviewed (Appendix B). The protection of subjects in the research process was paramount.

Creswell (2007) shared tips about data storage and management that assist with the confidentiality of the research and subjects. Data storage is also important for

continued confidentiality. Anonymity of subjects, back-up computer files, a master list of information, and a matrix of all data collected are essential to maintain good record keeping of the research data. This type of process allows for confidentiality while at the same time providing a paper trail to all for the checking of data. The paper trail is also helpful for the validity process, which will be discussed in more detail later in this paper. Obtaining willing subjects who will assist with the research project is an important task. Obtaining permission from subjects and protecting their rights and their privacy are also top priorities.

After the interviews were completed, the recordings were stored in a locked cabinet in my home separate from the signed consent forms. They will be kept for a period of three years. At the conclusion of the three-year period, the recordings will be destroyed and the papers shredded according to standard research protocol.

Data Collection

Data was collected in a number of ways. Fieldnotes of each interview was kept along with a journal of the research process. My thoughts and responses in regard to what was seen and heard about each interview was recorded. Recording of the interviews was the primary means of data collection. I recorded each interview and had them transcribed for analysis. All transcriptions were noted in a spreadsheet for tracking and validity checks.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involves taking all of the gathered research through the data collection process and making meaning of it in a logical and consistent manner that allows for as clear a picture of what the subjects are saying as possible and allowing the

researcher to make meaning of the data. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) described it as a process that can take many forms, but is a nonmathematical, analytical procedure that involves examining the meaning of people's experiences and actions. The findings are analyzed from the subject interview data.

Glesne (2006) further defined the analysis process to include coding, categorizing, searching for patterns, and interpreting the data. When working with the data, researchers describe, create explanations, pose hypotheses, develop theories, and attempt to link each story to the other stories. The researcher must categorize, synthesize, search for patterns, and interpret all the data that has been collected from all participants to develop a strong theory of the event.

All data was analyzed in multiple forms. First, typed transcriptions were compared to the recordings for accuracy by reading the transcriptions while listening to the recordings. Nuances such as pauses, hesitations, and other utterances that may indicate subtle variances between what was said, what was not said, and what may be less than accurate were identified. Both the verbal and nonverbal cues were helpful in interpreting the meaning of the response, evaluating the validity of the response, and judging the emotional state of the subject. Nonverbal cues were noted in the interview field notes and incorporated into the manuscript as part of the thick descriptions.

There were several aspects to interpreting the meaning of a response. First, the visual cues helped me to understand the cognitive meaning of the responses. Second, the visual cues helped me to understand the affective meaning of the respondents. Finally, the nonverbal behaviors helped me to determine if the respondents were being truthful

and accurate (Gorden, 1992). These verbal and nonverbal cues helped to provoke additional questions for follow up interviews with the subjects and additional research.

Coding

The next stage of analysis consisted of analyzing the transcripts for major or key words, then reducing those key words to themes or clusters of meaning. Using the transcribed data from the interview questions, I went through the data and highlighted statements, sentences, or quotes that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. From there, I developed clusters of meaning from these statements and organized them into themes (Creswell, 2007).

Categories

After all interviews were analyzed in this manner, the themes of all participants were compared for any commonalities between them. From this an analysis was developed and new information was drawn from the research data. These categories and patterns helped me to understand the essence of knowing what the subjects experienced.

Creswell (2007) added additional insights into this process as the researcher shares his or her own experiences as part of getting to the essence of the findings.

These significant statements and themes are then used to write a description of what the participants experienced (*textural description*). They are also used to write a description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon, called *imaginative variation or structural description* . . . From the structural and textural descriptions, the researcher then writes a composite description that presents the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon, called the *essential, invariant structure (or essence)*. (pp. 62-63)

These were the types of findings that I was looking for in the research: the essence of what principals experienced as they moved a teacher to voluntary exit.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), another component of qualitative research is the use of thick descriptions. Thick descriptions provide detailed descriptions of the setting, surroundings, and the participants, which enables the reader to transfer understanding to similar situations Creswell (2007). While thick descriptions are not part of the findings per se, they do help the reader understand more completely what the researcher used as part of the process and ultimately, will help the reader understand the findings. Thick descriptions provide context for the reader, and while these descriptions are not part of the findings, they do help support those findings. Thick descriptions were developed by me in concert with the essence of the experience and provided the reader with a real “feel” for the experience of the principals who have been through the process of helping a teacher leave a school system without going through the dismissal process.

Validity

In contrast with quantitative studies, validity in qualitative studies relies on elements other than numerical data (Creswell, 2007; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Maxwell, 2005). There are several ways to check for validity and protect the integrity of a qualitative study. One way is for the researcher to disclose his or her interest or connection to the subjects or to the study. By the researcher disclosing any specific interests in the study, those reading or using the researcher’s data can make their own determination as to the validity of the researcher’s claims. The researcher’s influence on the study is also a concern. Consideration must be given to how the researcher’s questions, tone of voice, and body language impacted the subjects to a particular point of view. The researcher’s prior experiences, if any, in the research area may impact the

analysis for making meaning. These are a few of the important considerations that might be raised by those reading and reviewing the research.

Member checking is a good way to determine if the analysis is accurate. The reactions of research subjects will help verify that the researcher has interpreted their point of view accurately and, perhaps, give the researcher some additional or new perspectives (Glesne, 2006; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The issue of validity can be substantiated by elaborating further on multiple methods of checking for validity, including multiple methods of collection, building an audit trail, working with a research team, and member checks. The researcher's journal and other notes such as the original interview transcripts and field notes, the unitized data, and the analysis process all provide an audit trail.

For this research, I used all four methods. For multiple methods of data collection I conducted personal interviews and while interviewing, I made observation notes of the subjects and their reactions and responses to the interview. These observation notes became part of my field notes and journaling. The observations obtained during the principal interviews also became a telling part of the research process. I utilized information gained through the subjects' non-verbal responses through body language and facial expressions as clues to those things left unsaid and followed-up with these clues by asking additional questions for further clarification.

I also used an audit trail. This was established through journaling and a timeline of all interviews and other research components including the original interview recordings and transcriptions. I also included the data analysis notes and charts. The use of the my journal entries in the field notes also helped in the validity of a study. The

logged timing, order, and structure of the process helped validate the process. The journal entries which recorded principals' emotional responses as well as the non-verbal cues also added to the accuracy of the my conclusions.

My advisor and doctoral committee served in the capacity of a research team. By reviewing and discussing my work, offering questions, feedback, and suggestions they helped to clarify my research and separate it from my own personal experiences. Member checking was also an important step in the process. All participating principals were e-mailed transcripts and the summary of the research. They were asked to review their quotes and a summary of my conclusions to confirm or offer further insights into my work. I welcomed their feedback and included it in my findings.

Outcome

For this research, I used a narrative line format to develop the conclusions in the research. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995), the narrative line format reveals a problem or process step-by-step or event-by-event, building to the conclusion of what happened, why, and when. This approach leads to an effective way to construct a conclusion for this research.

I detailed the research procedures and all of the processes in a timeline pattern from the initial questions of the topic, through the data analysis process, to the conclusion, and outcome. The findings of the research were a coalescence of the significant elements of the principals' experiences. While each participant had his or her own background and experiences from which to draw opinions, conclusions, and interpretations, the conclusions highlighted those common experiences that were the essence of their experiences.

Beyond the essence of their experiences, I identified any additional themes or questions that emerged as potential topics for follow-up studies. Any recommendations, ideas, or procedures that may assist other principals who find themselves in a similar situation of guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit of a school system were also noted. Those outcomes are an important part of the study.

Next Chapter

Chapter IV is a presentation of the findings of this study in tabular and narrative form based upon the analysis of the qualitative data collected. Chapter V includes a discussion of the findings and recommendations for action and further study.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to gain an understanding of the essence of the experiences that school principals go through as they attempt to guide teachers to choose to voluntarily exit through retirement or resignation from a school district. A secondary outcome of this research may be that other principals and administrators will view the findings and recognize that what they are going through is not completely unique to their situation. There might also be some suggestions, strategies, or practices from this research that will assist principals in dealing with the difficulties of voluntary exit in a manner that eliminates or minimizes some challenges that these principals often associated with the process.

Important Note

Each state has its own laws, legislative rules, regulations, and timelines regarding the dismissal process. Principals in any state, including North Dakota, should consult their central office administrators and legal counsel familiar with their respective state's laws, rules, regulations, and timelines before they begin the documentation, remedial, and dismissal process.

Research Questions

The study's research questions were used to guide the presentation of my findings. The first research question, "What is the essence of principals' experiences as they guide a teacher to a voluntary exit?" focuses on the categories that emerged that principals experienced when guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit. The second question, "What specific ways and means do principals use to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?" centers on the strategies that successful principals have used to achieve their goal. While not a definitive list, nor a recipe, these strategies were frequently used by successful principals. The third question, "What specific support factors encourage principals to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?" looked at the support themes that successful principals used that enabled them to meet their goal of guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit. And the final question, "What specific factors must principals overcome in order to be willing to guide teachers to voluntary exit?" examined the obstacles that principals must overcome to successfully guide a teacher out of the school system.

Principal Demographics

The theoretical sampling was based upon the essence of the experiences that principals have when helping a teacher come to a voluntary exit. For purposive sampling, I used multiple means to recruit subjects. I selected subjects from both Class A and Class B public schools in North Dakota. I used the snowball sampling approach by contacting principals with whom I had worked in various professional committees and state educational organizations. I asked them if they had experienced a voluntary exit and if they would be willing to be part of my study. I also asked them for referrals of colleagues of which they may be aware that have gone through the voluntary exit process

as well. I also placed a recruiting appeal in the North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders (NDCEL) monthly newsletter and placed the same appeal on the NDCEL listserv which is a voluntary listserv for North Dakota public school leaders. I also emailed personal directors in larger districts where I did not have a professional connection and asked them to circulate the same recruiting appeal. Through this appeal, 10 principals responded by agreeing to be part of the study. All 10 remained in the study; no one dropped out nor refused to complete any of the interviews. Reviewing the current literature reveals that the most frequently used number of incompetent teachers is approximately 5% of a school's teaching staff while the dismissal rate of teachers determined to be incompetent is approximately .05% (McGrath, 2000; Painter, 2000a; Tucker, 1997; Ward, 1995). Because these statistics indicate that very few teachers are dismissed and because voluntary exits is a much more private process, I anticipated that the sample would be small and believe that 10 participants is a valid sample for this study.

Once I had the names of the perspective interviewees from my recruiting appeal, I made personal phone calls to each, explaining my study and shared information from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) about consent forms, confidentiality, and other major points of the IRB process. The plan included two interviews, preferably face-to-face; however, if time or distance made that impossible, we agreed to use an electronic process such as Skype or a telephone interview. All subjects were very willing to be part of the study so as each agreed, we made arrangements to meet for the first interview at a date, time, and place that were suitable to both the principal and me.

At the initial meeting with each subject, I explained in more detail the purpose of the study as well as all of the necessary components of the IRB requirements for research with human subjects. Each initial interview was done face-to-face, and all but two of the second interviews were also done face-to-face. The two that were not done face-to-face were conducted via phone calls due to weather and distance. Three of the eight face-to-face interviewees were also called for some follow-up questions after the second interview. The interview process began in June 2010 and the last one was completed in February 2013.

Ten North Dakota public school principals were interviewed for this study. The 10 were geographically spread out across the state with two from the northeast, two from the southeast, three from the southwest, and three from the northwest part of the state. Five principals were from Class A school districts with enrollments of 325 students or more and five from Class B districts with an enrollment of 324 or fewer students. Three of the principals were female and seven were male. Four were high school principals, two were elementary principals, and four were either K-12 principals or had worked with various grade combinations. Nine of the 10 have guided more than one teacher to a voluntary exit. One principal has only guided one teacher to a voluntary exit, but stated that there has not been a reason to do another; however, if deemed necessary she would do it again. All 10 guided their first teacher to a voluntary exit within the first five years of their initial appointment as a principal. Seven of the 10 took that step in their first year as a principal. In total, the 10 principals in this study have guided 23 teachers to a voluntary exit. At the time of the interviews, the principals ranged in administrative experience from two to over 20 years as building principals. In the time since their

interviews, two of the principals have moved into other leadership roles within public education.

In the interview process, I recorded each interview with a digital recorder and took notes. Following each interview, I also made observation notes on the interview process in a journal. Each recording was sent to a professional transcription service which guaranteed confidentiality as well as accuracy. When the typed transcripts were returned to me, I reviewed each transcript by comparing the recording to the transcript to make sure the transcription was correctly interpreted. I made corrections or adjustments when the recording was unclear to the transcriptionist based upon my notes, as well as for terminology, names, and acronyms that were not common language for the transcriptionist. All transcriptions were verbatim. The hesitations, broken sentences, incomplete thoughts, and the use of “um” and other fillers denote the principals’ reflections of challenging situations and their efforts to put those situations into words.

Data Analysis

As the researcher, I analyzed all of the data myself. The initial step of the data analysis was to compare the transcripts to the recordings for accuracy as well as noting any verbal or nonverbal nuances including: pauses, hesitations, nervous laughter, or facial expressions that words might not express. The next step of the data analysis consisted of analyzing the typed transcripts for quotes from the principals regarding the process of guiding teachers to a voluntary exit. Four hundred six quotes were identified through the initial analysis. These quotes were analyzed and assigned codes that emerged through the analysis process. These coded quotes were again analyzed and separated into 36 coding categories. A cross-analysis of the coding was done to determine if any of the

coded quotes fit into additional categories beyond their original designation. Further analysis was conducted to determine if any of the coding categories were duplicates, overlaps, or had been misinterpreted. Through this analysis, the categories were regrouped into larger, broader categories that brought the final number to 11 categories. All of the coded quotes and categories were recorded on a spreadsheet for future reference.

Of the 11 categories, three focused specifically on teacher issues: reasons for teacher incompetence, teacher remediation, and teacher support. Six categories focused on principal issues: principal training, principal motivation, principal support, principal strategies, principal experiences, and principal regrets. The remaining two categories were a combination of teacher and principal interactions: staff involvement and negotiated endings.

The next step in the analysis was to determine which categories related to each of the four research questions. Table 1 identifies which categories answered each research question.

Table 1. Categories that Relate to the Research Questions.

Category	Research Question 1 What is the essence of principals' experiences as they guide a teacher to a voluntary exit?	Research Question 2 What specific ways and means do principals use to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?	Research Question 3 What specific support factors encourage principals to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?	Research Question 4 What factors must principals overcome in order to be willing to guide teachers to voluntary exit?
Negotiated ending		X		
Principal experiences	x			
Principal motivation	x		x	
Principal regrets	x		x	
Principal strategies		x		
Principal support	x		x	
Principal training			x	
Reasons for teacher incompetence				x
Staff involvement				x
Teacher remediation		x		
Teacher support				x

While each of the 11 categories in Table 1 is distinct, they are not discrete.

Within each category there are codes that could be found in categories other than those that were identified; however, when the context of the quote was taken into consideration through the data analysis, the codes and categories supported each question as listed.

Research Question 1

What is the essence of principals' experiences as they guide a teacher to a voluntary exit? The four categories addressing the essence of principals' experiences include: *principal's experiences*, *principal's motivation*, *principal's support*, and *principal's regrets* are detailed in Table 2. Each of the categories has important quotes from interviewed principals. To protect the confidentiality of the principal, the teacher or others in the principals' stories pseudonyms have been given to all. Schools, cities, and

other place names that might connect the participants have also been changed or altered to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Principal's Experiences

This category identifies what overall experiences principals have when they begin the process that will guide a teacher to a voluntary exit or a dismissal by the school board. Those interviewed, while small in number, represented high school, elementary principals, as well as some variations or combinations of K-12 school systems or principals who had served in various principal positions in several different schools. These principals also had experience in a variety of school district sizes. Four principals were from Class A districts, three from Class B districts, while the remaining three had experiences in both Class A and Class B districts. The 10 were geographically spread out across the state with two from the northeast, two from the southeast, three from the southwest, and three from the northwest part of the state.

Table 2. Principal's Experiences.

Principal	Quote
Noreen	"We finally did have a meeting with NDEA the rep and um, I basically was in there three hours with them and it was not at all about him, it was about me you know? She asked like: 'Well, what would you do? So you say this is wrong. So what would you do?'"
Dan	"It's stressful whenever those things wind up in public and uh, I don't think anybody values, anybody feels good about having to deal with that stuff."
Courtney	"Umm, we posted it after school was out and she came in and ya know, I said, 'Well, I just want to thank you,' and she just, ya know, right away: 'If you'd liked me and I just want you to know that you've taken away my dream.' And she did [<i>sic</i> say that]. So, when she left my office it was devastating, but I knew in my heart, that I had done what I had to do; and I think, like I said before, in the big picture, she knows exactly what happened. But I think she needed a front, she needed a picture, she needed us to see this isn't about her. It's easier to blame it on someone else."

Table 2 cont.

Principal	Quote
Mark	“Am I going to call this person out and bring that person in and try to change [<i>sic</i> him or her] or take it to the level of removing them? I think um, it was big time stress you know? And I know my wife, she was, we were questioning things. I mean is this something I want you know, that you need to go through? Is it something that um, you know, what if I lose this whole deal and this guy still remains? I mean the risk in that um, what if I don’t do all of this correctly? I mean it is um, big time stress.”
Stan	“I was to the point where, and I’d taken over as principal, and what I decided was that if he’s not appropriate to be in classroom, if he’s hurting kids, it’s my job to make sure I do something about it.”
Bobby	“Uhh . . . every, I think I am a pretty decent writer, but everything I wrote down, I read and reread and edited and clarified to make sure that if this got to court that it was going to be something that I could stand up and say yes I said that or yes I heard somebody that said, you know, that this teacher is causing trouble.”
Hank	“And how about the emotional part of it? . . . Yeah, that’s draining too, because you have a situation where you’ve got, or trying to do the process right so that if you need to end up, if you end up in a discharge situation or a, a nonrenewal for cause that you’ve got your documentation right.”
Paul	“If it’s, ya know, I don’t watch the clock when I come to work. I come early and stay late kind of a thing, but this is easily adding 2 to 3, 3 to 4 hours a day consistently, I mean you’re sitting in a classroom observation, you write it up, you visit with the instructor, you do your follow up, you document. But when it came to the point of looking, writing up the improvement plan, following up on those and working through the videos and the worksheets and putting him in touch with other instructors.”
Mark	“You know things that others don’t and they shouldn’t know. And that is the way I felt, that I couldn’t really you know, I couldn’t really share it with anyone other than my own you know, other principals and things. Because you know, they [<i>sic</i> staff] didn’t understand it and obviously I am not going to go around and talk to the teachers about, oh I am removing a teacher.”

There were two key themes that surfaced in principals’ experiences as they guided a teacher to a voluntary exit: *stressful and emotional and isolation and workload*.

Theme 1: Stressful and emotional. Principals stated over and over again that their primary concern is protecting students. They want all students to get a quality education, they want students to be treated fairly, and they want all students to be treated

with dignity and respect. At the same time, principals recognize that they are potentially taking away the teacher's livelihood and perhaps reputation. They are making a decision that will impact the person, his or her family, the school, and perhaps the community as a whole. Principals report that they want to be fair, be accurate, and want documents and action plans to hold up in a school board hearing or in court should that possibility arise.

Reflecting on this balance can create personal questioning about whether or not this is an appropriate move to guide a teacher out. That reflection, while important, can result in emotional turmoil for principals as they consider the decision to move for a voluntary exit or to a dismissal. When asked if making the decision was difficult, Stan replied, "Was it tough making that, that call when it was time to say 'you got to go?' No, because I was exhausted, just like he was." Stan had inherited this teacher from another school, the teacher having been given another opportunity to succeed in a different environment. Stan had worked with this teacher for two years before coming to the conclusion that the teacher had to go. In another school, when asked about his feelings about the process, Dan, a veteran principal stated, "So I think those are somewhat, I don't know if there defining moments or [*sic* not], but they're surely stressful moments in, in the role of a principal." Dan had related a story of a teacher who appeared to be the right choice for the position, but had very little rigor in the content which was for high school seniors. Students and parents came in to complain that they were not being readied for the rigors of college academics. The teacher did not give tests and most of the student assigned work was below the high school curriculum level. After conferences with the principal, then remediation, Dan felt he had no alternative but to move to dismissal or voluntary exit.

Bobby's summation was more succinct: "It takes your energy: it's emotionally draining." One of Bobby's stories was one of a major staff rift with teachers taking sides. The teacher in question was extremely aggressive in trying to build a case that the principal was persecuting her and that as the classroom teacher she was doing many things to meet the needs of students. This teacher continued to work, not only against the principal, but also with teachers who were clearly supporting her. This teacher also attempted to find support not only with staff, but also with students, parents, the school board, and community members.

Theme 2: Isolation and workload. Because of the need to investigate, document, and prepare all paperwork as if all components of the decision will become public and potentially legal court documents, the workload increases dramatically. Paul expressed it this way when sharing about a teacher who had been a late hire in a hard-to-fill content area. The teacher had a questionable work history but school was starting and they needed a teacher. When the issues started to appear and it became apparent that the teacher was struggling, the principal's role grew with the remediation process and then eventually the documentation for the voluntary exit or dismissal. Paul explained, "The time was, it was like another full time job." Paul was frequently in the classroom dealing with student management issues because the teacher could not effectively deal with students: he yelled, frequently. Paul would document what had happened and respond to angry parents who were concerned about the way their students were being treated. With the added workload in addition to the regular duties, plus the confidentiality that principals must maintain, principals frequently reported that they felt all alone in the process. While most expressed this aloneness, there was more discussion on this topic

from those principals who worked in small districts or who were the lone principal in their school building. The need to protect the confidentiality of the teacher often left the principal with no one near to vent to, to explore pros and cons, look at options, or to explore other points of view. Mark responded, “You know I think the big thing, and I am sure when you went through it in your in this position, you are on an island by yourself.” This sentiment was expressed by most of the principals at one time or another during their interviews. There was also within that comment frustration that staff and the community only hear one side of the situation, that which the teacher chooses to share with others.

Principal Motivation

The second category from Research Question 1, *principal motivation*, is described in Table 3 which provides quotes from principals who describe their thoughts when considering whether or not to begin the process that would move a teacher to a voluntary exit or a dismissal by the school board.

Table 3. Principal Motivation.

Principal	Quote
Courtney	“I think enough is enough, I think if we’ve given them the opportunity, that I’ve spent the amount of time I’ve spent, and I see how it’s affecting kids, and the teacher, the curriculum. I think you have to do that. We owe it to our profession . . .”
Steve	“Would I want my grandson having, I mean it just really helps us refocus again on what are we here for and so it is not to be friends with these people. It is our kids’ only opportunity to go through school.”

Table 3 cont.

Principal	Quote
Dan	“I had, ya, not so much from kids but from parents. Ahh, ya know kids. Parents were concerned that their kids weren’t getting prepared well enough for college, ya know? They were concerned about the lack of graded assignments. Umm, ya know, they questioned the things that, when I told them that I was working on it and that uhh, that I had some of those same concerns. They did cooperate and agree that there was some issues within that classroom.”
Jackson	“I worked with that individual for two years probably to help her with her understanding of relationships with the kids. And this was a 7 th grade teacher and she was able to intimidate those kids to make it look like it was their fault and convince the parents it was.”
Hank	“The first walk out with a handful of kids that had come to see me. First it was one or two kids that came to see me and then, then it was three or four in a group, and then there was a mass walkout. There was 15 or 16 kids in the class and they all came and said, ‘We’re not going back.’ And they used words like, ‘This lady’s crazy’, ‘You should be down there’. ‘She gets on somebody and she’s just relentless’, and ‘Ya know, she just doesn’t let go’, and ‘She’s never wrong’, and ‘She won’t even talk to us’, and ‘We can’t ask questions’, and the whole group said, ‘We’re done.’” After that meeting there were five or six of the parents that came in and said, ‘You’ve gotta do something, this is not working.’ And we frankly knew that.”

Theme 1: Protecting students. There was one theme that surfaced in Principal

Motivation: *protecting students*. The bottom line for all principals was stopping students from being hurt. In some cases it was actual physical harm, sometimes it was verbal abuse, but primarily it was harming students by not providing them with a quality education. Steve made his point when he said, “And maybe as I have gotten older I thought, would I want my granddaughter being exposed to teachers like that?”

Personalizing the situation helped Steve to move forward in dealing with this difficult situation. In another school, Mark said, “I think any, I mean if the kids are getting slighted, to me that is where I am going to make my decision. I know that is not always the popular thing you know [*sic* with staff]?” Mark was dealing with a teacher with addiction issues who frequently missed school and when at school, was often poorly

prepared and doing very little teaching of any sort. In Table 3, Jackson’s comment refers to his concern for students that were being verbally intimidated and harassed by the teacher who were unable or unwilling to make the verbal abuse known.

The poor quality of education could be due to lack of content knowledge, lack of understanding of the process of teaching and learning, or poor student or classroom management skills. In a number of the responses to this category, classrooms were out of control to the point of chaos, students walked out of the classroom, or parents made a concerted effort to demand that something be done to improve the quality of the teaching and learning in those respective classrooms.

Principal Support

The third category from Research Question 1, *principal support*, is described in Table 4 through principal quotes in regard to support they experienced when they began the process that moved a teacher to a voluntary exit or a dismissal by the school board.

Table 4. Principal Support.

Principal	Quote
Dan	“If I’m proceeding towards where I might need to ahhh, encourage them to leave or go through a nonrenewal process, then I would involve an HR person in our district. Umm, in this case, umm, I just shared with her what I was doing. I didn’t necessarily ask for advice. Umm, I knew that this was what we needed to do for the benefit of our kids.”
Hank	“The district really acts in a support role when this happens and, at some point, they become really involved if it’s going to go to a nonrenewal, but to begin with, my role is to document and then to inform the key people what’s going on, and then the two people that I really reported to on it, one was the Human Resources Director and then the other person is the Assistant Superintendent [<i>sic</i> become involved].”

Table 4 cont.

Principal	Quote
Bobby	“And then there was one particular time when it was like an open meeting or something. I can’t exactly recall exactly what it was, but he said: ‘I’ll just come up to the school.’ So, he came up to the school, I think I had a meeting with her, it might’ve been an evaluation meeting, and he brought the newspaper, I’ll never forget it, and he just sat down and she came in and it was always intense because she was always in attack mode and I was always trying to figure out how I was going to keep my composure and kind of get through this process, and Tom would read the paper. I mean it was just like this is what we do, she is not doing her job.”
Courtney	“We wanted her to know what we expected, black and white, and Susan was great at that. Umm, she gave me some material to look at that I could peruse. She gave me blacked out versions of other improvement plans that I could look at so that I could give Andrea [<i>sic</i> the teacher] the best opportunity for success. So she was very, I mean once a week she [<i>sic</i> Susan] would call: ‘How are things going, what can I do to help?’ Yeah, she was a, she was a hands on, hands off; it’s really up to us, if we want her to help she’ll be there.”
Mark	“Then I called the ND School Board’s Association attorney and I said: ‘You have to deal with this guy.’ And I know what I am doing is right you know? And I think at the end of the day that is a big thing, you know? What I am doing is right and not everybody else may see that but it is all about what is going on in the classroom. If it is not, you know, if it is not good for kids then so be it.”

There were two themes that stood out in this category: *legal/procedural* and *mentors*. It is important to note that while not a recognized theme, most principals felt strong administrative support, but sometimes principals moved forward in spite of a lack of support. This lack of support was only noted by two principals, Noreen and Mark. Both of their superintendents questioned the wisdom of moving to dismissal; however, neither denied them the opportunity to attempt to guide their teachers to a voluntary exit.

Theme 1: Legal/procedural. Legal/procedural advice is an important consideration when moving into the potential of removing a teacher from the classroom or a teacher dismissal. Following the state mandated timelines and guidelines, knowing how to prepare the documents, what to say and what not to say, as well as the many other

details that attorneys attend to are all extremely important in making the case and being successful in the outcome. Hank shared, “The N.D. School Boards Association attorney was, was particularly helpful. I don’t think I would have made it through without him saying here is how you have to write this and so we would write up what we had to write up and he actually, he would kind of take a look at it.” The help of someone who has been through the experience and knows the procedures and process was mentioned frequently by principals. Bobby stated: “I would do them step-by-step-by-step and then towards the end when it was getting closer to the end of the year I would fax him what I wrote for my notes because he wanted to read my notes and correct my notes.” Principals indicated that the need for good legal advice was critical for not only to meet necessary deadlines and requirements of documentation, but to also to ease some of the stress and emotion of the process.

Theme 2: Mentors. The second, but equally important category is that of mentors. All of the principals had someone who served as a mentor to help them through the process. Many of them provided an understanding of the timelines and other requirements of the dismissal process, just as the attorneys had done. However, what distinguishes the mentor from the attorney is that the mentor also served as a sounding board, a person to confide in, to vent to, and someone who could provide an empathic understanding of the stress and emotional nature of the process. In some cases the mentor was a colleague, sometimes someone who was recommended to serve in that capacity, sometimes someone in the district’s Human Resources Department, and sometimes it was an attorney. But in all cases, they served not only to make sure that

things were done correctly, both legally and procedurally, but also to help the principal with those stressful, emotional, and lonely moments.

In his first situation Stan stated: “So then at the time, my university advisor, and he had been through this. So I called him up and he said, ‘Alright come on in, I’ll debrief with you.’ ” This debriefing gave Stan and others in similar situations the opportunity to have an unbiased, trusted person listen, reflect and respond with advice, constructive suggestions, and empathize over the many challenging aspects of the situation.

Bobby spoke to the emotion and stress when she stated, “I mean he actually kept me calm and he would listen to the conversation and then she would leave he would tell me these are the things that you need to do.” Each principal could identify someone who assisted them in the process, not only to meet all of the legal and procedural requirements, but also someone to confide in, someone to reassure them that they were doing the right thing, and someone who had been through it and could truly understand what the experience was like.

In their first dismissal proceedings, principals Mark and Noreen had superintendents who were leery about moving to dismissal. Noreen reported:

You know he [*sic* the Superintendent], I think he was scared of them a little bit. Umm, you know the father-in-law was kind of a big, big, person in town and I don’t know why, but um, I don’t, I am not sure because he didn’t feel I should go forth. I mean, he felt like I was, yeah, that I was creating way too much, you know? That I shouldn’t have, but I just had to.”

Not only did both principals move forward with the dismissal, they were both successful in removing teachers in very challenging situations.

Principal Regrets

The third category from Research Question 1, *principal regrets*, is described in Table 5 which includes quotes from the principals that indicated in retrospect they would have done some things differently as they made decisions to move to voluntary exit or dismissal.

Table 5. Principal Regrets.

Principal	Quote
Dan	“Looking back on that now, I’m never going to give a person a pass on that type of thing, ya know. It’s totally inappropriate we should have pushed it legally. We should have said, we should have ahhh, dismissed him for just cause.”
Courtney	“I knew something was not right. I would trust my instinct more. I would start documenting earlier. I would move up the improvement plan. I would have tried to allow one year to have been enough instead of two.”

The themes in the principal regrets category are *act sooner*, with a secondary but still important theme of *follow through*. A number of the principals indicated that at one time or another they went to an additional improvement plan, another one-on-one conference, or waited another year to see if things would get better. In most cases principals came to realize that they were just delaying the inevitable.

Theme 1: Act sooner. Principals frequently reported that remediation seldom was effective in long lasting change. Many stated that they learned through their experiences that they gave too many chances, too many remediation opportunities, and rarely had a turn-around in teacher behaviors. Jackson said:

When I came in [*sic* as a new principal to the building] I worked with that individual for two years probably to help her with her understanding of relationships with the kids [*sic* and still] she was able to intimidate those kids to make it look like it was their fault.

In spite of the time spent helping the teacher to understand what she was doing wrong, the teacher made no changes in her behavior or attitude. Jackson reported that he should have moved to action sooner.

Theme 2: Follow through. While a theme by only one principal, the severity of the violation of teacher/student trust is important to note. The quote from Dan in Table 5 refers to a teacher who had made sexual suggestions to a student who was about to graduate from high school. The teacher was given the option to resign or face dismissal proceedings. He chose to resign and left the state and the region. Later information circulated that he had made similar suggestions to other students; however, no one reported that there had actually been any inappropriate sexual contact. The principal's regret was that at the time of the reported incident they hadn't moved forward with a dismissal. Dan commented, "The guilty conscience in me says I should've pushed that really towards ESPB, and maybe not knowing that process as much as I do now, ya know, I didn't really understand what the role of ESPB was." A dismissal could have resulted in the North Dakota Educational Standards and Practices Board (ESPB) revoking the teacher's license. The revoked license would have, in most instances, effectively kept him from being a licensed teacher in any state. While this was not an experience reported by other principals, the severity of the circumstances of a teacher violating the teacher/student trust and the possibility of stopping a potential predator sex offender was an important situation to note.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2, "What specific ways and means do principals use to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?" seeks to determine if there are specific categories and

themes that emerge that principals used to successfully guide a teacher to a voluntary exit. There were three categories that aligned with Research Question 2 and include: *teacher remediation, principals' strategies, and negotiated ending.*

Teacher Remediation

The first category from Research Question 2, teacher remediation, is described in Table 6 and identifies the strategies that principals used as part of the process to help teachers move from potential removal from the classroom to meet at least the minimum competency to remain in the profession. The quotes in Table 6 emerge from the interviews as themes in this category.

Table 6. Teacher Remediation.

Principal	Quote
Hank	“Provided her with a lot of materials, but it didn’t help. It’s hard to staff develop someone into somebody they are not and especially when you’re dealing with somebody who umm, really felt they were doing what they needed to do.”
Stan	“So, uhh, the complaints continued to mount, umm, and I would call him in and we would talk about it and so ultimately I put [<i>sic</i> him] on an improvement plan and I had steps identifying things he had to do. It was no longer just talking about it, now it was identifying the specifics and saying here’s what you need to do, here’s how we’ll follow up on it, and then we would have these meetings and follow up on it.”
Courtney	“So I invited her to video tape herself, umm, and I invited her to, and I actually required her, and I required her to have others come in and observe her class room, and I required her to observe other people. And I would say that she always came back with a resolve, but she would fall.”

There are two themes that emerge in this category: *support techniques* and *gains/backslides*. Principals reported that when working with struggling teachers, in most instances, they first sought to help the teacher improve in those areas deemed inadequate. Only when attempts at remediation prove to be unsuccessful did they begin to move to a voluntary exit. It is important to note that remediation is not appropriate if

the teacher has committed a crime or some type of offense that the state laws dictate are so egregious that remediation is not an option.

Theme 1: Support techniques. Strategies to support those identified teachers ranged from skill and technique building to helping them find support for personal or family issues. The strategies included but were not limited to: strengthening student management skills, additional curriculum and content coursework, observing others, self-recording of instructional practices, and professional development opportunities. Paul shared about how he had to coach his teacher to build relationships with parents:

[*sic* I] visited with the instructor, gave her suggestions on what she could do in the classroom, on how she should contact parents . . . Gave her ideas on what to say, how to say it, how to get the parents involved and active and on your side, when it comes to discipline issues. I even sat down with her and listened to her as she, ya know, and talked to, her, a couple parents and so on, kind of giving her a script.

In the end the teacher refused to make any changes declaring that what she was doing was right and was working.

Hank also talked about some techniques, but not with the outcome he would have liked:

Umm, and by that time we had already talked about improvement plan. Here's what you need to do, you need to go observe these teachers. We need to work more on classroom management. [*sic* I] provided her with a lot of materials but it didn't help.

Stan provided lots of support, and was, for a time, encouraged.

I would write down results and then I did see some improvements. In the short term there were some improvements uhh, and of course go to conference and say: 'Great here we are, you're improving and getting better.' and then all of a sudden he would just go back to what he was doing.

Theme 2: Gains/backslides. Gains/Backslides refers to those teachers who are in a remediation plan who made gains in understanding that they must make improvements

and work to make those changes, but return to prior practices or become resistant to continuing the process. When Dan discussed his concerns about a teacher he was working with on an improvement plan he relayed this conversation:

You didn't follow through with this, you didn't do this, and you didn't do this. And why didn't you?" [*sic* Teacher] 'I don't know.' I mean it was kind of like a shrugging of the shoulders and just hands in the air, 'I don't know.'

Principals noted that in some cases, good gains were made in one focus area only to see a weakness develop in another area.

Noreen noted:

Yeah, I mean he, we would do an improvement plan and then it seemed like that was OK. He would do whatever I wanted and then it was something else, I mean it was just unbelievable, it was just like [*sic* he didn't really get it].

This teacher created major school and public scenes when Noreen questioned his behaviors or asked him to make adjustments in his teaching. He shouted at her in front of other teachers and students and gave her "the finger" when he would see her in public away from the school setting. Noreen also reported that she notified the sheriff's office when her husband was going to be out of town. He intimidated her to the point that she was concerned for her safety, but the intimidation didn't keep her from moving forward toward dismissal.

Jackson also indicated his frustration when he shared:

You know, I couldn't make that teacher understand that [*sic* how she was treating students] and I knew then that was where the problem [*sic* was], one of the problems, was. Not just on how she taught you know, it was always the kids' fault.

Additionally, there are other means of remediation as determined through principal-teacher supervision and evaluation meetings. For teachers under stress due to

personal or family issues, principals often encouraged teachers to seek professional help, sometimes with district support through programs such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or medical leave, sometimes as a private matter for the teacher and/or family address.

Bobby indicated that there are sometimes reasons to be hopeful. “I believe that this young girl, when she gets her legal pieces put together I believe she’ll go back into the teaching system and she’ll be a very good teacher.” However, because of the legal issue, this young woman would not be in Bobby’s school to become that good teacher.

Also of note is that of the 24 teachers who were placed on remediation plans as identified by the principals in this study, only two teachers moved from being potentially dismissed to acceptable or above average as teachers and were able to keep their positions. Principals stated that while they worked hard to provide appropriate and quality opportunities for struggling teachers there was seldom enough improvement to move the teachers out of remediation.

Principals’ Strategies

The second category from Research Question 2, *principals’ strategies*, is described in Table 7 where principal quotes identify the means or strategies that principals used in guiding teachers to a voluntary exit or a dismissal by the school board.

Table 7. Principals' Strategies.

Principal	Quote
Stan	<p>“I said in here, ‘Mr. Olson asked what I was, I was recommending and I said I believe he needs to be removed from the classroom for the rest of the school year.’ I explained that this has gone on for several years and the issue of students wanting out of his classes, his style of teaching, and the overall issues was continually brought to the counselors and myself, have not improved over the last two years. So I was right, this was my third year. Umm... An action plan had been developed last year addressing many of the issues which came up in regard to Mr. Olson’s teaching style. The plan was filled with many levels of intervention to change Mr. Olson’s teaching style, yet the issues of his teaching style and abrasive demeanor when working with students did not change. This does not mean that he has not made efforts to change, the problem is the issues still remain and that they have not gotten better over time.”</p>
Paul	<p>“Now, he moved from being unable to change to being unwilling to change. Said he wanted to do two more years to retirement. That, that’s one of the first things he said to the superintendent. ‘I just want to do two more years. I was hoping to do two more years until I can retire.’ ‘You’re not going to do that. Our students have suffered enough. You’ve done enough harm.’ We always say, do no harm. Well he’s done enough harm that we couldn’t just say, ‘okay’ we’ll just babysit you for two years. That would be so wrong for the students that, it was just out of the ballpark.”</p>
Dan	<p>“It isn’t working for me and it’s not working for you. You know and sometimes you know, then you don’t necessarily hold yourself to that timeline of April 15 but instead you can be counseling people in May. You know that is what I have done in some cases and I found that to be for their own psyche maybe even a little bit easier to deal with.”</p>
Courtney	<p>“We think it’s not in your best interest to be an employee here. This isn’t the right setting for you. We’d like to know what you think about it. ‘Well, next year when I come back I’ll, I’ll try harder and.’ Rick [<i>sic</i> building principal] said, ‘I think you need to listen to what I’m saying.’ And we said, ‘there are three ways this can go.’</p>
Hank	<p>“Because it went from let’s try to improve, to you need to understand that this is going nowhere, it’s going nowhere fast and I can’t have mass walkouts going on, and you need to accept the fact that you have a problem and with the relationship with students. And how do you build those relationships? We had discussions, we met weekly and ya know, and tried to work on building . . . tried to work on skills that would help her build rapport with students and [<i>sic</i> she] just, just couldn’t get that.”</p>
Steve	<p>“So we got down to about, actually it was the day of, it was the day of a board meeting and I can still remember meeting downstairs somewhere with him and the superintendent and I was, it was not like we had a spotlight on him or anything but, and he was saying: ‘Let’s just go through what has happened this year and for your best interest, and ours, you are not going to make it here.’”</p>

Table 7. cont.

Principal	Quote
Hank	“Ya know and you end up with these binders full of documentation. We want you to do this and we want you to do that, but ... I have two, three big binders like this, there four. Documentation of meetings and plans for improvement; that takes a lot of time, a lot of time.”
Mark	“It is just too bad but umm yeah, I mean, and I think the stress of trying to get someone to resign and trying to, you know, because I was hoping for something let’s say in, I remember last year something was, hoping for a resignation letter by December and it hadn’t come and he told me it was going to come.”
Courtney	“She did bring in the Uniserve rep, and, she listened, very closely. Umm, we had a meeting where we listed our concerns over time, we brought in the improvement plans, we brought in all the information that we’d had. And the Union rep basically just looked at her and said, ‘We’ll be in touch.’ She asked us umm, for documentation. We gave her notebooks full of it.”
Jackson	“But moving her to ninth grade, they just weren’t going to put up with that stuff so, [<i>sic</i> laughter] so genius move on my part. But, and I was documenting it, but I was just tired of it. I wanted to get this over with and get her done so I had the opportunity, I made it happen.”

There were six themes that emerged from the principals’ statements on strategies they used to guide teachers to a voluntary exit: *building your case through documentation, straight talk, counseling out, options, perseverance, and harassment.*

Theme 1: Building your case through documentation. One theme that was referenced frequently by all principals was that of documentation. Documenting the concerns that the principal had about the teacher, documenting the steps the principal took to help the teacher remedy those concerns, and documenting the due process that the principal provided to the teacher as well as meetings, conversations, and confrontations were all critical aspects of the documentation process.

Hank stated: “But the, the documented evidence on parent complaints, student complaints, what was going on, watching the videos. It was very apparent that, I think we had a very solid case for incompetence.”

When Stan decided that there were issues of concern with a teacher that was transferred to him he noted:

I started to document and every time I would get a complaint, I would talk to the teacher and bring him in and I'd say, 'you know, here's the situation and here's what's come up,' and we would talk about it and I would do what, post-meeting notes. I would do a memo and type up, this is what we talked about this is what the issue was. Here's how we're going to address it and then I would give that person a copy.

Principals said they that when they begin the process to help teachers improve, they were often portrayed as mean or evil people who did not care about teachers. The careful documentation of the process dispels that characterization as Hank notes, "I would agree, and I think the key to helping the teacher make the best decision on their behalf is showing them the documentation and building a case that, that says that you, you care about them." The documentation would include those conversations about how principals tried to help teachers grow professionally or personally.

Bobby also added that with the workload and the stress it would be easy to forget something if it was just in your memory.

You had to do the documentation or you would forget or something else would come up, especially when she started to bring more people into it you know? When she'd take it up to the bar and she started getting community members involved, I mean you had to document those pieces.

In this situation Bobby's teacher, who refused to acknowledge that she was doing anything wrong, tried to build a case against Bobby by making the process very public and very hostile. When it came down to the day of the school board hearing, the teacher finally submitted her resignation.

Theme 2: Straight talk. All of these principals talked about being diplomatic and respectful to the teachers they were working with, but also very clearly stated their

concerns and the outcomes if teachers didn't improve. When principals were looking at taking away a person's livelihood and perhaps career, there was no room for subtle or understated language. While he had many straight forward conversations with Mr. Olson, at one of the final meetings when the NDEA representative who was representing Mr. Olson asked what Stan's plan was, this was his response: "Therefore, for the sake of Mr. Olson's well-being and overall well-being of students in the class, I would recommend that he be removed from the class for the rest of the year." And because all of the procedures, timelines, documentation, that's exactly what happened.

Bobby relayed how her teacher had been involved in some legal issues over the weekend and how she responded after hearing the teacher's story: "I think she came in to talk to me on a Monday and we told her by Thursday morning at 9:00 we had to have a resignation or we were going to proceed with the board meeting at 10:00." Other principals relayed similar stories: straight talk with little chance of misunderstanding. In every case, principals were straight-forward with teachers as they moved through this process. While principals often wrestled personally with the question about whether or not to move a teacher out, once that decision had been made, the conversation with the teacher, while respectful, was factual and to the point.

Theme 3: Counseling out. Counseling out was used in a more subtle manner. Comments like, "this isn't working for you or for us," or "it's in your best interest and ours that you not continue to work here," were used and sometimes not coupled with the "options" conversation.

Dan shared his belief:

I have been able to counsel people out and so is that right or wrong? I don't know, but I have been able to counsel. I wouldn't say that those were the formal removals but um, it was maybe easier on both people's parts just to describe the things that were being witnessed or recognized and then being able to you know, have them look at it from another set of eyes and perspective and say you know what, this isn't working.

Principals report that sometimes this counseling out occurred beyond the timelines for dismissal yet were sometimes effective in some situations. Other times the counseling out conversation was a starting point for the "options" discussion that might follow.

Theme 4: Options. Offering options was also very straight forward. Principals frequently would list the options teachers had: resign, retire, potentially be dismissed, or take a leave and then resign or retire.

Courtney explained, "And we said, 'you can resign and it will be a voluntary resignation, we can really encourage you to resign, or maybe we can take it to the school board.' " Courtney made it clear to the teacher that she wasn't returning, how she left the school was the only question yet to be determined.

Steve relayed one of his experiences that was difficult on many levels and was extremely emotional for him even years after the event.

With the momentum that has gone on with you whatever [*sic* changes you make] the kids are going to perceive it the wrong way and so I am going to go forward with a non-renewal, a proposed contemplated [*sic* non-renewal] at the board meeting tonight unless you want to resign. I mean, I am not saying you have to, but you can. But just, I wanted you to know, I am going to go forward with the contemplated non-renewal and he wrote it out by hand, the resignation right there and he was crying while he did it and we accepted his resignation.

In this situation Steve's teacher was a first year teacher that had been a late hire. Steve held hope that the experience would help the teacher mature and that he still had the

potential to be a good teacher, but not in his district. Options usually came about when the principal felt that there was a very strong, well-documented case; however by the time these options are offered, additional improvement plans or other remediation possibilities were no longer available to the teacher.

Theme 5: Perseverance. Perseverance, while not a skill or technique directly involving the teacher, is nonetheless an important part of principals' strategies. Being able to stick with the goal of moving someone out when there were obstacles, reluctance, stress, and other work to do was critical to the success of the voluntary exit.

Mark shared one of his stories, "So I was like OK, when do I, I got to go back in and have that conversation again. I don't want to go and have that conversation but I need to, and so then I would go back in." In this situation, Mark was working with a teacher who was qualified to take the state retirement plan, but was not ready to retire yet. He was putting very little effort into his job, including the supervision of students. In his content area, safety was a major concern, yet he spent much of his time in his office rather than supervising students. Other principals reported similar stories, that when a teacher refused to acknowledge there was an issue or the teacher decided to contest the principal's judgment, going into another meeting to face the denial or confrontation at times took some effort. However, they did meet and continued to move forward toward a dismissal hearing.

Theme 6: Harassment. While seldom identified by the principals as a strategy, it was mentioned a number of times as principals sought to provide remediation for struggling teachers including changing subject areas, room assignments, and other alternatives to working directly with students. Harassment in this context refers to

supervision practices that are characterized by the goal of making the teacher feel uncomfortable in the hope that they will leave voluntarily. Harassment refers to assigning the teacher to duties or responsibilities that are legitimate teacher duties for which the teacher is qualified, but those which are perceived by most teachers to be less desirable or uncomfortable for the teacher. These assignments might include: assigning a teacher to a new curricular area, moving the teacher's room to different parts of the building, assigning less desirable duties such as lunch duty or bus supervision, or working with students they are qualified to work with but are not used to working with. These assignments and others are all ways of making the teacher feel uncomfortable.

Jackson relayed his version,:

I started working with that person and knew that [*sic she*] wasn't going to make it, so I had an opening in ninth grade. I moved that teacher to ninth grade the next year . . . instead of seventh grade level because I knew that those kids aren't going to put with that and basically it fell apart.

This strategy may precipitate a voluntary exit; it may emphasize the teacher's weaknesses for documentation, or may be used in future conversations about leaving the profession.

Negotiated Ending

The third category from Research Question 2, *negotiated ending*, is described in Table 8 and identifies statements that principals shared that they indicated have helped them to influence the teacher to move to a voluntary exit. In most cases these situations required the assistance and approval of the superintendent or other administration, and in some cases approval of the local school board.

Table 8. Negotiated Ending.

Principal	Quote
Mark	“I remember it was right before Christmas break He uh, he decided to resign you know contingent on some things and we agreed to pay his insurance at least for the next year and um, finish his contract out. And so you know, I didn’t want to give in to some of those things, but in the end I think, you know, it was, he was done at Christmas [<i>sic</i> and I] didn’t have to see him anymore.”
Stan	“Uhh . . . you’ll work in a department with no student contact and in effect you would be done etc. . . .So that was the plan and so he agreed. He signed a sheet of paper saying that he would resign at the end of the year and retire officially and all that. So when we got to January 15 th he did submit his retirement papers and quit like any other teacher and uhh, we finished out the year with a long-term sub.”
Bobby	“I said, ‘Understand I’m the elementary principal, [<i>sic</i> but the] superintendent is going to make the decision.’ But I explained to her that if you cooperate you’re looking at most likely getting a more positive recommendation from me for a classroom assignment you may want to apply for and you’re, the school board is going to look favorably on you. And you will most likely have your contract paid out. So I just told her that right up front and the superintendent was you know, okay with it.”
Paul	“Now the reason why we did that was not a bribe, but a fact that knowing this instructor and so on, his wife had significant medical bills, significant medical issues involved. Ya know, not to grease the skids to push him out the door, but that was one of those—humanitarian kinds of—Ya, and, and we’re trying to do, to do something right.”
Hank	“We were ready to move her out of that classroom and go for a causal hearing right now and be done. They obviously thought we were on pretty solid ground because they came back and said, ‘Would you allow for a leave of absence and hire a sub for the remainder of the year?’ That was right before the hearing deadline in April and everybody signed off on it.”

There were three themes that were prevalent in negotiated ending: *compensation*, *compassion*, and *recommendations*. In some stories there were no negotiations, but frequently it was a consideration and factor that helped to motivate the teacher to resign or retire.

Theme 1: Compensation. Compensation was offered in many but not all cases. It might be in the form of salary, benefits, or both. In one situation, the compensation involved the school district allowing the teacher to remain on the payroll for the

remainder of the school year, but either on some type of leave or assigned a different job within the district.

Stan reported the negotiation with one teacher, “Okay, here’s our plan. Here’s what we would do. You know, you agree to resign at the end of the year, you can retire, get full retirement, we’ll carry you for the end of the year. You won’t lose that.” The teacher needed the full year to qualify for Teachers Fund for Retirement, the state pension plan for educators. In this situation, the teacher was reassigned to a non-teaching position within the district. Stan reported that once the district agreed to let him finish the year, the teacher relaxed a little and was willing to sign the resignation papers.

Theme 2: Compassion. The second theme was that of compassion for the teacher and family. In a number of situations, principals reported that there was concern not only for the teacher, but for the teacher’s family as well. As such, sometimes the compensation included health insurance, because there were major family medical issues.

Bobby shared one of her experiences:

Yep and then I told her the school district would be willing to work with her and they ended up paying her contract out. You know, they worked with her, they paid her contract out uhh . . . paid her health insurance until she had an opportunity to move forward with that.

The salary plus the health insurance helped to move Bobby’s teacher along as well.

In Hank’s situation, his boss made the final call.

[sic The] superintendent was brought to the meeting and that was the offer they made to us. At that time our superintendent was a pretty benevolent person. [sic He] wasn’t interested in, ya know, a pound of flesh or anything like that and just felt it was better for everybody.

So the deal was struck and the teacher took a medical leave of absence for the remainder of the year. The district hired a substitute teacher and the year ended better for

all involved. Just as Hank noted, so too did other principals, that the compassion shown allowed teachers to be able to make a more graceful exit than through a dismissal.

Theme 3: Recommendations. The final theme was that of Recommendations. In a number of meetings with teachers where there were some negotiations, teachers asked for a positive recommendation. Most principals who agreed to give recommendations indicated that it would be an honest reflection of the teacher's work experience in the school.

Bobby indicated, "But I explained to her that if you cooperate, you're looking at most likely getting a more positive recommendation from me for a classroom assignment you may want to apply for." In this case, the principal used the recommendation as a strategy to help convince the teacher to resign, rather than the teacher using the resignation as a lever to get a positive recommendation.

Hank shared the second situation. "One of the caveats that was in there was will you write her a letter of recommendation? My response was, 'I will write a letter of recommendation, but it's going to be an honest letter of recommendation.'" While this was a negotiations point with some teachers, most of the teacher exits reported did not include these negotiation strategies.

Research Question 3

There were four categories that address Research Question 3, "What specific support factors encourage principals to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?" These categories include: *principals' training*, *principals' motivation*, *principals' regrets*, and *principals' support*. The themes that emerged from these four categories identified what

principals reported were the important support factors in guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit.

Principals' Training

The first category from Research Question 3, *principals' training*, is described in Table 9 and identifies the themes that principals stated have given them the background, understanding, knowledge, and confidence to move through the process to help teachers move to voluntary exit.

Table 9. Principals' Training.

Principal	Quote
Noreen	“Document, you know, I mean document everything, you know? You think that you are going to remember things and you don’t, I mean, when it comes up find help. Yeah, you need somebody to be able to talk to about it and umm, you know, yeah in smaller schools too, [<i>sic</i> what] we really don’t have is, is an evaluated evaluation tool or you know, that would have maybe helped a little bit too.”
Bobby	“You have to go through the experience and you have to be the one that drives, in my opinion, so you learn exactly what to do, how to say it and how to help, because when I went through the last two it was much easier. I just simply sat down with them and said these are the things that took place, that can’t happen in our school district. I was much better prepared to communicate with the families of the students that were in the classroom, the letter that I sent, just all those pieces were much easier, but I think you do have to experience it. I don’t think you can just.... you have to be in the trenches and go through it: it’s got to be an experience.”
Bobby	“The North Dakota School Boards Association has the law seminar the day before or they have it one day or sometimes two days prior to the school board [<i>sic</i> state conference]and I went through those pieces. I went through several of those sessions and so I listened very carefully and read the Century Code. I mean you know, all of a sudden, and the school policy, I mean the school policy manual, the Century Code, all those components that they talk about in those law seminars suddenly become very real, very important, and that law seminar is very good. I mean it really is very good. Administrators, principals should go at least every other year if they don’t go every year.”

Table 9. cont.

Principal	Quote
Dan	“There isn’t much professional development or inbox type of activities you know umm, because I don’t know, I mean these are difficult jobs and if you are going to be confronting people you probably have to have a good support mechanism within your administrative team.”
Hank	“I scrambled to find materials. I had, really the only staff development or training that I had in non-renewal had been um sitting in a couple of legal seminars with you know [<i>sic state</i>] school board’s attorney who said, ‘You know, if you end up in this situation here is what the law says and you have to.’ So I became very familiar with the Century Code and what it very specifically said.”

Three themes emerged from the category of Principals’ Training and include: *graduate classes, self-taught, and experience builds confidence.*

Theme 1: Graduate classes. The first theme identified for the category of principals’ training was graduate classes. All principals were fully certificated principals with at least a Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership. Principals reported that this graduate level coursework provided a solid foundation for principals for teacher supervision and evaluation. These graduate level classes also helped prepare principals with a solid foundation of the dismissal process and how it functions. Principals also stated that because of that foundation, they knew that it was possible to remove a teacher and they had at least a basic knowledge and understanding that there are timelines and documentation that are required. Stan reported:

I felt very well prepared to go through the process because I had just come fresh out of [*sic a graduate school level*] class. And I’ll tell you what, that was probably the best class I took in my graduate work at the master’s level and that was the principal-ship class, and he spent a whole full two days on ‘How do you remove a teacher from classroom?’

However, principals also reported that they needed much more information once they determined that they had a struggling teacher that needed assistance. The

foundational information was important in the identification, but to deal with the situation head-on required additional information. This information came through various sources as principals sought to make sure that what they were doing was responsive, appropriate, and met the demands of the situation and the requirements of state law.

Theme 2: Self-taught. The second theme from the category of principals' training was that of principals being self-taught in a more complete understanding of what to do with teacher remediation, developing improvement plans, the process of guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit, or teacher dismissal. Bobby shared:

You have to go through the experience and you have to be the one that drives, in my opinion, so you learn exactly what to do, how to say it, and how to help, because when I went through the last two it was much easier.

Many principals stated that while their base knowledge from their graduate program was a good foundation, once they were in the actual experience of working with a struggling teacher, they needed to reach out and gather more information. In some cases it was workshops or seminars, in others it was additional books and materials, and to others it was with the help of the mentor guiding the principal through the process.

Hank explained, "I remember ordering books on the marginal teacher and you know, how to do this without pain and did a lot of reading and what I found out in that process is that material that was available at the time."

Bobby also stated:

The North Dakota School Board Association has the law seminar the day before or they have it one day or sometimes two days prior to the school board and I went through those pieces, I went through several of those sessions and so I listened very carefully and read the Century Code,...all those components that they talk about in those law seminars suddenly becomes very real, very important.

Theme 3: Experience builds confidence. The third theme in the category of principals' training was experience builds confidence. In this theme, principals shared that once they had successfully worked with a struggling teacher and guided them to a voluntary exit, repeating the process when appropriate was less daunting. Mark stated:

I would say I am thankful now that I went through it you know because I think it was a very, very good experience you know um it really, I think it tested me as a person . . . It makes sure that we are all being held accountable and um so it tested me to, okay, am I going to walk the walk here?

The themes of guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit increased the principal's confidence which enabled him or her to undertake the remediation, voluntary exit, or dismissal of additional struggling teachers should that become necessary.

Principals' Motivation

The second category from Research Question 3, principals' motivation, is described in Table 10.

Table 10. Principals' Motivation.

Principal	Quote
Courtney	"I think enough is enough. I think if we've given them the opportunity that I've spent, the amount of time I've spent, and I see how it's affecting kids and the teacher, the curriculum. I think you have to do that. We owe it to our profession."
Steve	"I want the best possible education for these kids. They are the ones that we owe it to. This is their only chance to go through and so if I am not doing it, that is generation after generation that are getting less than they ought to and so that kind of, I think, searching your heart helps give people the fortitude to do the right thing."
Hank	"[sic Students say:] 'She gets on somebody and she's just relentless and ya know she just doesn't let go and she's never wrong and she won't even talk to us and we can't ask questions.' And the whole group said, 'We're done.' After that meeting there were five or six of the parents that came in and said, 'You've gotta do something, this is not working.' And we frankly knew that."

There were two themes that emerged from the data in the category of principals' motivation. Those two themes are: *it's about students* and *community pressure*.

Theme 1: It's about students. The predominant theme that was repeated over and over again was the concern for students. How students were treated, the quality of instruction, and what they were learning were the elements of this theme. Steve said it simply, "I want the best possible education for these kids. They are the ones that we owe it to."

Paul also noted:

I stressed my concerns about student work, students not on task, disruptive behavior. I stressed my concern and stated that classroom management has to get better. I explained to this instructor that she may know subject matter, she's not, she is not and will not be able to teach the material as long as there are poor classroom management skills.

Paul also shared about another teacher's work with students and explained, "You walk by his classroom. You would hear him yelling, frequently. Again, it was a yell or yell louder kind of a philosophy to, to classroom management."

Principals expressed clearly that students who were being harmed emotionally by verbally abusive teachers or academically by teachers who were not prepared or unequipped with the skills and/or knowledge to deal with a classroom of students were their biggest concerns.

Theme 2: Community pressure. The second theme in the category of principals' motivation is that of community pressure. Principals reported that parent pressure, as well as pressure from members of the community, influenced their motivation to act.

Mark commented, "So here I am, first year principal dealing with this situation and it is a mess and parents ask me: 'Why is this guy is still in the classroom? What are you guys doing?'"

In some cases it was overt. Parents who came to the principals reported there were issues of concern and demanded that something be done. Hank notes, “After that meeting there were five or six of the parents that came in and said, ‘You’ve gotta do something. This is not working.’ And we frankly knew that.” At other times it was more subtle comments from other stakeholders in the community.

Principals’ Regrets

The third category from Research Question 3, principals’ regrets, is described in Table 11 which identified the theme that emerged as principals reflected on the circumstances and decisions that they wish could have been handled differently.

Table 11. Principals’ Regrets.

Principal	Quote
Courtney	“And so, I’d try to move quicker, I would umm, probably not . . . do so much of it for her. I mean I think about that, I, I,[<i>sic</i> was] trying to be fair. I did so much of the foot work for her.”
Stan	“I don’t think I would have waited as long, you know. I know that because I know it now. I wouldn’t have waited as long.”
Hank	“I think in a lot of times in non-renewals and improvement plans, when you put people on improvement plans, so much of the heavy lifting, if you aren’t clear on that, is done by whoever the supervisor is, the principal, assistant principal, whoever that person is.”

The single theme that emerged through principals’ regrets was *act sooner*. These regrets were in hindsight, but were motivational factors for principals as they moved forward in teacher supervision and evaluation within their school. Principals reported that their first experience gave them the confidence to continue to work with struggling teachers and to do what they had to do. Principals also stated that they gave teachers too many opportunities to get better at their job only to find that the teacher was either going

through the motions, got better only to decline in another area, or that the teacher made improvements only to backslide into the original behavior.

Theme 1: Act sooner. Stan summed it up, “I wouldn’t have given him as many chances as I did because we let it drag on way too long. I think it should have been, looking back on it, I would have been more aggressive.”

Courtney had similar thoughts, “I knew something was not right. I would trust my instinct more. I would start documenting earlier. I would move up the improvement plan. I would have tried to allow one year to have been enough instead of two.”

Nine of the 10 principals reported guiding more than one teacher to a voluntary exit, so this theme helped them to make additional moves when the need arose to guide another teacher to a voluntary exit. Many principals indicated that they gave too many chances in their initial experience and have or would give fewer chances in future situations.

Principals’ Support

The fourth category from Research Question 3, principals’ support, is described in Table 12 which highlights principal quotes that emerged in this category.

Table 12. Principals' Support.

Principal	Quote
Stan	“And I got up and I walked out. So then at the time, my [<i>sic</i> university professor] advisor, and he had been through this, so I called [<i>sic</i> him] up and [<i>sic</i> he] said ‘Alright come on, I’ll debrief with you.’ So we went through it and okay, so then at that point that’s when [<i>sic</i> the assistant superintendent] got called.”
Mark	“Umm, but I think the number one thing is making sure that, you know, you have a good group of people around you that you can ask for advice. And you just don’t start going off the cuff and making decisions when they are not very well informed you know?”
Hank	“The district really acts in a support role when this happens and, at some point, they become really involved if it’s going to go to a nonrenewal, but to begin with, my role is to document and then to inform the key people what’s going on.”
Noreen	“I remember [<i>sic</i> the NDSBA Attorney], I would send everything I wrote up to him and then he would you know, I would have to, we would meet. He would say, ‘So what do you mean by this?’ You know he would just clean things up a little bit more, tell me what to do you know, just make sure you have to say this, and don’t say that.”

The category of principals’ support centered around one theme, that of a *mentor*.

These mentors served in a variety of professional capacities but provided principals with important support in many ways.

Theme 1: Mentor. All principals reported that in their first experience of guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit they had someone who helped them through the many parts of the process. Not just the legal and procedural parts of the process such as the documentation and timelines, but just as importantly by the support through the emotional and stressful parts of the process.

Bobby expressed it this way:

Now I have this person who is just giving me all kinds of trouble. So I didn’t know where to turn, so I called uhh . . . the LEAD Center and they gave me Bill’s name and he was so good with me. He would call me every day and he would tell me, ‘Okay, this is what you need to look for Bobby. This is what you need to do.’”

Mark also noted, “You know I spent a lot of hours on the phone with her, lot of hours on the phone with my Graduate Advisor you know, just helping me, you know?”

That mentorship and the successful experience of guiding teachers to a voluntary exit can lead to the principal now becoming the mentor as Hank relates, “Frankly, I find myself getting some phone calls occasionally from middle, high school, elementary principals saying, ‘Have you been through this and what would you recommend?’”

Principal mentors were a common theme for all principals. All principals had someone to whom they turned to help them through the process. These mentors served in many capacities including editing documents, serving as a sounding board, providing the empathic ear, offering ideas and suggestions, and being someone who “has been there” and can understand what the experience is all about.

Research Question 4

There were three categories that emerged to address Research Question 4: “What specific factors must principals overcome in order to be willing to guide teachers to voluntary exit?” These categories include: *staff involvement*, *reasons for incompetence*, and *teacher support*.

Staff Involvement

The first category from Research Question 4, staff involvement, is described in Table 13 and describes how teachers responded to the poor performance of a colleague.

Table 13. Staff Involvement.

Principal	Quote
Noreen	“And they would come to me and say, ‘Isn’t anything going to be done with him?’ You know, ‘Why can he do this?’ What, you know, and you can’t, what do you say? You know and then they would come to me and say, ‘Well NDEA says we are going to be happy and you know, I guess you know about what happens.’ So they are trying to figure out what is going on and you know, it just, I wish they wouldn’t have said anything.”
Dan	“... and so they would filter in a little bit and they would stop in, but they didn’t really want to be any part of that. They wanted to distance themselves from any of that. They didn’t like [<i>sic to</i>] see another teacher, umm, be subject to some of that scrutiny.”
Mark	“I think and, I think umm, the other staff saw that too where if I went to that [<i>sic person</i>] and [<i>sic hadn’t</i>] acted on him next then they would have said, ‘You know, what is the deal?’ I mean, because this guy should be done too. I mean you know, just a series of things with him. It wasn’t one major thing it was, I think if I wouldn’t have done that I would have lost whatever I had generated with the other staff you know. Just accountability things.”
Bobby	“And I gave her the opportunity to respond and work with me on an improvement plan. She would have absolutely no part of it. So what she started doing then was uhh... gathering the troops... in the building and she started playing teachers against teachers . . . It got to be where nobody, I mean, people would come to work in the morning and they would go in their classrooms and shut the door and half of them wouldn’t even have lunch in the lounge anymore because they just weren’t going to put up with it.”
Hank	“There was definite support from the other staff members. [<i>sic For the principal</i>] this is the right way to go. The pressure that came on with the, the . . . the pressure that was dealt with the inappropriate conversations and activity between or conversation between the mom [<i>sic and the teacher</i>].”

There were three themes that were identified in the staff involvement category and include: *just want you to know*, *move them along*, and *stirring the pot*.

Theme 1: Just want you to know. In a number of interviews, principals reported that teachers would come in and informally share information about a colleague who was struggling in the classroom. In some instances they just wanted the principal to be aware, in others they wanted the principal to not only be aware, but to respond. Dan relayed, “Again, we probably have a fairly non-confrontational English department in terms of

wanting to confront one another about issues that are, umm, but ya know, just wanted us to be aware of some of the things that were going on.” However, in this theme as Dan pointed out, “So they just wanted me to be aware, but then they wanted hands off.” Teachers did not want to get involved beyond quietly sharing their concerns about the teacher’s performance.

Theme 2: Move them along. Teachers were more outspoken to the principal in the theme of Move Them Along, wanting something done, and sooner rather than later. While more assertive in sharing information, teachers still were reluctant to get involved, but were more vocal about the need to do something to change the behaviors that raised their levels of concern.

Noreen shared “And they would come to me and say, ‘Isn’t anything going to be done with him?’ You know, ‘Why can he do this?’”

Teachers were much more adamant about the principal moving the teacher out of the school. Nonetheless, the teachers still wouldn’t testify against him: they left it all to the principal.

Theme 3: Stirring the pot. In the third theme of Stirring the Pot, the teacher who the principal identified as needing improvement took an aggressive approach to defend his or her behaviors and actions by attempting to build support within the teaching staff.

Emphasizing that theme, Bobby said, “And the teachers that I thought would stand up for professionalism and professional ethics and those kinds of things, just sold the farm on me.” In Bobby’s situation not only did the established teachers not attempt to influence the first year teacher on the culture of the school and how things were done

there, some of them sided with the teacher, who was lying and manipulating people to gain their support.

Mark remarked, “You know that is the piece I saw that I was really surprised about. Even though they knew how bad this guy was that they would still support him.” Mark’s surprise came from the fact that the teacher had sent, by mistake, a ranting email to all the staff that was intended for him. In this email he berated many staff members, called them names, and other very disrespectful comparisons. Even after that email, many of the staff felt some support for this teacher who was an alcoholic, verbally abused students, and often didn’t teach, but slept in the classroom.

Reasons for Incompetence

The second category from Research Question 4, reasons for incompetence, is described in Table 14 where principals identified what they believe were the reason for the teacher’s poor performance in their particular experiences.

Table 14. Reasons for Teacher Incompetence.

Principal	Quote
Paul	“Very poor classroom management. [<i>sic</i> He] would send students out frequently. You walk by his classroom you would hear him yelling frequently. Again, it was a yell or yell louder kind of a philosophy to, to classroom management. Working with music groups, you’re working at a small school, so you’re usually working with 20 to 40 students, which is a lot. And, and, he had a very difficult time managing the students.”
Steve	“I had to hire and I ended up hiring a person on the phone and he came and struggled. It was a year of kids vandalizing his house, of me having to take over his classroom on at least two occasions where he sent the student down to get me to bring me up to the room because the kids were refusing to obey him, and I would have to sort of take charge. He would get on their case for not putting their feet lined up straight and stuff like that and so it just, you know, he lost, they lost respect for him and [<i>sic</i> yet] he was a good person.”

Table 14. cont.

Principal	Quote
Stan	<p>“We put together a plan and I was going to work with him on some of the things that were causing him trouble in the class room. So we talked about body presence, we talked about the way he speaks with the kids. He didn’t see himself as being sharp and too hard on the kids and, but the image was there and he was. Umm... About how he should dress, you know, how his glasses should be on his face because he would always pull them down to his nose and be holding the book in front of him and then looking over the book and asking the questions and his speech pattern was very quick. So when he would ask a question, if you didn’t know it, boom he was onto the next kid and so if you didn’t get it right, you almost felt like, you know, you were being scolded.”</p>
Dan	<p>“I said, ‘Well, didn’t you have tests and exams in college, why aren’t you giving some tests and exams? Did you have them in College?’ [sic teacher] ‘Yes, I had them in college.’ [sic Dan] ‘Well, why aren’t you giving them here?’ [sic Teacher] ‘I didn’t want the kids to feel bad.’ [sic Dan] ‘Well, how do you know how they’re doing?’ I mean it was just like . . . What school did you go to?”</p>
Dan	<p>“And a girl comes in, this was during finals week of the last days of school. And, I think there was one more day of workshop. One more day of workshop. So she comes in late on the Thursday before the Friday workshop. And she talks about the behavior of this staff member. And the fact that they have gone out to eat, had lunch that Thursday to Buffalo Wild Wings. And then this type of discussion that occurred during lunch time was inappropriate. He was talking about going back to [sic his] apartment and having casual sex and ya know, doing some other things that were really inappropriate.”</p>
Mark	<p>“I mean it is that bad and um, they do it in a way. We are in a small community where they go to his front door. They pull him out front and you know where everybody can see right on the corner in front of the daycare that he is getting breath-analyzed during a school day. So I mean, we have a lot of things going on.”</p>
Stan	<p>“And I said, ‘Ya know, I really like you, you’ve done a good job, and you’re a good teacher.’ But I said, ‘Your personal issues get in the way, ya know, . . . Your demons, huh, if you will.’ And so, ya know, she had all sorts of scars on her arms, where she tried to commit suicide or where she would cut herself.”</p>
Courtney	<p>“Ya, I think honestly that there were some emotional issues perhaps, maybe that got worse as time went on. Umm, I think she was very insecure. Very . . . We tried to build confidence. We tried to give her, ya know, she just had personal issues that ya know, that interfered.”</p>

Table 14. cont.

Principal	Quote
Hank	<p>“We care about what’s going on here. Not just about the student, but what’s going on with you. It’s clear to us there are some issues here. Ya know, you’re not really enjoying this work and it’s because maybe there are some mental health issues, maybe there’s some competence issues, maybe there’s some physical disabilities all coming together that are making this a very difficult place for you to be successful right now. We’re not interested in ruining your life, but we do have a responsibility to make sure that we provide the best education for this student. Right now you’re not in a place where that can happen and forcing our hand to do what we thinks best for the student, you need to think about that, and, and there are some options for you to look at.”</p>

Within the category of reasons for incompetence are eight themes that principals stated were part of the reasons that the teachers were struggling and in need of remediation or removal. The themes included: *teacher shortages, poor relationships, lack of training, personal traits or characteristics, illegal activities, addictions, mental health or disease, and emotional stressors.*

Theme 1: Teacher shortages. Teacher shortages where there is a small applicant pool or the district is late in hiring for a position sometimes forced school principals to hire candidates that they knew were suspect, but principals reported that, in those situations, they had little choice but to work with that teacher and hope that the person would work out.

Steve explained:

The teacher that we hired on the phone, it was a boom time and the teacher who had taken the position left the first day of school and I lost two people the first day of school my first year there

The replacement struggled from the first day of school on. Classroom management skills were lacking and he also had some personality quirks that opened him to students not respecting him.

Other times principals had late resignations or late hires based on enrollment increases or other circumstances. Again, principals reported that they hired the best candidate they could find, but acknowledged that sometimes they knew the teacher would require lots of guidance and monitoring.

Theme 2: Poor relationships. Principals reported that when teachers had poor personal relationships with students, parents, or staff, this also created circumstances that lead to confrontational or adversarial situations. Stan talked about his first voluntary exit, “So when he would ask a question, if you didn’t know it, boom he was onto the next kid, and so if you didn’t get it right, you almost felt like, you know, you were being scolded.” This teacher was very critical of all students except the brightest and was also very rude and sexist toward females.

Paul talked about the poor relationship his teacher had with students: “You walk by his classroom you would hear him yelling frequently. Again, it was a yell or yell louder kind of a philosophy to, to classroom management.” When Paul attempted to work with this teacher on how to connect with students, which would eliminate some of the classroom management issues, the teacher was at first willing to do anything to keep his job; however, he later moved to denial stating that he was doing nothing wrong and that it was all the students’ fault. These poor relationships frequently reflected back negatively on student rapport and created issues with parents and with the school staff.

Theme 3: Lack of training. Teachers with a lack of content knowledge, teaching pedagogy, or student management skills frequently developed problems with classroom management. Paul offered this story:

I sat down with her for a good hour to discuss what she was doing in her classes. We went down class by class, okay this is class, the bell rings at 8 o'clock, how are you going to set up the 50 minute class period? Well, I'm gonna do this for 10 minutes. I said, this isn't gonna take 10 minutes, lets break it down into 3 minutes, 4 minutes, 5 minutes, and so on. So I started point blank writing down. And this is someone with seven years of experience that we're going through on how to set the 50 minute class. That just didn't add up to me.

Poor classroom management often led to a chaotic classroom, where little or no learning takes place.

Theme 4: Personal traits or characteristics. Noreen reflected on her teacher's frequent outbursts.

I remember that was a big scene in front of kids and the second grade teacher was out there when he [*sic* said] 'You know, who do you think you are? What are you going to do? I am not going to sign this, I am not going to!'

Noreen also shared with me that this man and his family had suffered a family tragedy early in his life for which he was blamed and that had never been resolved. She believed that he carried this burden with him and made him the angry man that he often was.

Theme 5: Illegal acts. Illegal acts such as criminal activity, drug use or possession, sexual advances to students, as well as other acts negatively impacted some of the teachers' abilities to function in school, impact school staff and morale, and impede student learning. Stan shared, "He was talking about going back to [*sic* his] apartment and having casual sex and ya know, doing some other things that were really inappropriate."

Bobby told about one of her teachers:

[sic She] left school on a Friday afternoon, went down to a local establishment uhh . . . must have stayed longer than she should have and was stopped on the way home and was picked up for umm . . . DUI and in the, and I'm not sure of all the details, but it must have been in plain sight, paraphernalia and marijuana.

This was a first year teacher that Bobby was very pleased with to that point. Bobby told her she needed to get the charges, any penalties, etc. cleared up and that when that was done, she could probably still have a bright future as a teacher.

Theme 6: Addictions. Addictions to alcohol or other drugs or addictive activities, such as gambling also distracted and impeded the teachers' performance and created a classroom environment where learning did not take place. Mark described one of his voluntary exits:

Umm, the teacher has an alcohol problem big time. He is um, he is at 4:00 every day after school, he goes [sic home] and the police department comes by and gives him a Breathalyzer [sic test]. In this small community many people knew this teacher had a major problem, but he was still employed, but not doing much teaching because of his addiction.

Theme 7: Mental health or disease. Stan described a teacher that worked well with students, but was erratic, forgetful, and missed lots of workdays.

But I said, 'Your personal issues get in the way, ya know . . . your demons huh if you will.' And so, ya know, she had all sorts of scars on her arms where she tried to commit suicide or where she would cut herself.

Stan encouraged her to seek professional help and when she was better, he would be happy to have her back.

In another case, Stan shared a difficult conversation when a highly regarded teacher by both staff and students began to forget things.

And that's what it was, she just, umm, after a minute or two she just couldn't remember what she had done. So then that got to a point where I went into her class after that, when school was finished at 3 o'clock, and went in there and told her 'we need to talk.' She sat down at the table and she said 'It's bad isn't it?'

And I said, 'Well.' She was scared. And I said, 'Well here's the deal,' I said, 'There are some things going on in here, you need to get some help with that' and she just broke down. So, I called her husband, had him come over.

It was the onset of early dementia, so they worked out a negotiated ending with a medical leave and a substitute teacher so she could take retirement at the end of the school year.

Theme 8: Emotional stressors. Principals reported that teachers' incompetence was sometimes the result of stressors outside of the workplace. In some of those cases family issues arose from a variety of situations: financial, major medical issues, a loss of a loved one in the family, and many more. The breakup of a family was another issue that took a toll on teachers and left them unable to fulfill their responsibilities.

Courtney offered insight into one such situation:

Well, later she tells me she has two kids under the age of five, she's going through a divorce, her husband has had an affair, they were losing their home. Ya know, all these things were factors and I had given her every opportunity. 'Is there something I should know about?' Ya know. That's the other thing is what don't we know. What's going on?

Sometimes teachers wanted to keep family matters private, but that privacy sometimes had negative consequences. Fortunately in this instance, the teacher had taken Courtney's remediation plan seriously and was able to turn things around without losing her job. Courtney went on to say that the teacher not only kept her job, but became one of the best teachers in her department. This turn-around was only one of two out of the 25 stories that principals shared.

Teacher Support

The third category from Research Question 4, teacher support, is described in Table 15 where principals described the various types of support that poor performing teachers received as they moved through the voluntary exit process.

Table 15. Teacher Support.

Principal	Quote
Steve	“I do think it is a challenge to some degree, a greater challenge in a small community. Umm, if you are there and have been there forever you know, these are relatives. The separation is very small or friends. I mean, you are socially connected, you are all of those things and so umm, I do think it is more difficult.”
Courtney	“She did bring in the UniServ rep. and she listened very closely. Umm, we had a meeting where we listed our concerns over time. We brought in the documentation and plans. We brought in all the information that we’d had and the union rep basically just looked at her and said, ‘We’ll be in touch.’”
Hank	“You have a process to do, follow it. We are going to do what our job is which is to make sure that you do that, so part of that is defending and saying do your job Mr. Administrator. If you do it right and you do it with some respect and maintain the dignity of the person that is involved, you will gain a ton of respect from your colleagues because they, although they may rise to that level of supporting that teacher, what they are really saying is we are going to stand behind this person and we want you to do your job and if in the end you are correct, we will fully accept and probably applaud that decision.”

There were three themes in the category of Teacher Support which included:

community support, NDEA support, and follow the process.

Theme 1: Community support. In the theme of community support, poor performing teachers were sometimes able to retain their position because of their strengths in non-academic areas. Coaching would be one of those areas. Noreen noted, “He was known for um, football and coaching track. He had some state winners and very well liked in the community.” Yet his abrasive manner and intimidation of students and

colleagues was, while not unknown in the community, overlooked because of the successful coaching.

In other instances, principals reported that the teacher was a hometown boy or girl who had status in the community through powerful family connections or position. In other cases, the teacher in question had family members who were also involved with the school as staff members, administration, members of the school board, or other influential members of the community.

Theme 2: NDEA support. The North Dakota Education Association (NDEA) support refers to the association or union representation that member teachers were entitled to as part of their membership in the local, state, and national teachers' organization. Most principals reported that they had a professional working relationship with the Uniserv directors who represented teacher members when those members required their services.

Courtney described one of her meetings:

She did bring in the UniServ rep. and she listened very closely. Umm, we had a meeting where we listed our concerns over time. We brought in the documentation and plans. We brought in all the information that we'd had and the union rep basically just looked at her and said, 'We'll be in touch.'

While several principals reported that the Uniserv directors were aggressive or hostile, most reported that the directors were doing their job of defending the teacher, making sure that the principal had followed the process and timelines, had the necessary documentation, and had met all of the other expectations of helping a teacher to improve. NDEA Uniserv directors also assisted the teachers with a negotiated ending in many cases. Principals also reported that in a number of cases the Uniserv director encouraged

the teacher to accept a negotiated ending. Usually it was because of the efforts the principal had made to assist the teacher with the remediation necessary to keep his or her job. It also almost always included the amount and quality of the documentation the principal had about teacher's actions and remediation effort and results.

Theme 3: Follow the process. The final theme in the third category was Follow the Process. Principals stated they believe that their teachers wanted them to remediate or remove poor performing teachers from their school; however, those same teachers also wanted principals to be fair, equitable, and even-handed in the process. Hank said, "And because if they are a member of the union, the teacher perspective is, as an administrator, you need to go through this process the right way." Principals stated that most staff members wanted principals to treat all teachers, even those who are poor performers, with dignity and respect in addition to following the remediation or removal process.

Chapter IV Summary

There were four research questions in this study. Categories and themes emerged in each of them to effectively answer each question.

When answering the first research question, "What is the essence of principals' experiences as they guide a teacher to a voluntary exit?" four categories emerged from principal responses. The four categories included: principals' experiences, principals' motivation, principals' support, and principals' regrets. The themes that emerged from the two categories were: stressful and emotional, and isolation and workload, principal motivation, protecting students, legal/procedural, mentors, act sooner, and follow through.

The second question: “What specific ways and means do principals use to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?” centered on the strategies that successful principals used to achieve their goal. The categories that emerged for Research Question 2 included: teacher remediation, principals’ strategies, and negotiated ending. The themes that emerged from the three categories were: support techniques, gains/backslides, building your case/documentation, straight talk, options, counseling out, options, perseverance, harassment, compensation, compassion, and recommendations.

When answering the third question, “What specific support factors encourage principals to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?” four categories emerged. The categories included: principals’ training, principals’ motivation, principals’ regrets, and principals’ support. The themes that emerged from Research Question 3 were: graduate classes, self-taught, experience builds confidence, it’s about students, community pressure, act sooner, and mentor.

The final question, “What specific factors must principals overcome in order to be willing to guide teachers to voluntary exit?” identified the obstacles that principals had to overcome in order to successfully guide a teacher out of the school system. The categories for Research Question 4 were: staff involvement, reasons for incompetence, and teacher support. The themes that emerged were: just want you to know, move them along, stirring the pot, teacher shortages, poor relationships, lack of training, personal traits or characteristics, illegal activities, addictions, mental health or disease, emotional stressors, community support, NDEA support, and follow the process.

Chapter V includes a discussion of the findings and recommendations for action and further study.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Chapter V is divided into five sections. The first section includes an overview of the study and rationale for the research questions. The second section is a discussion and summary of the findings related to each of the research questions. The focus of the third section is the conclusions and limitations of the findings. The fourth section discusses the implications of the data. The final section suggests recommendations for action and future research.

Overview and Rationale

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to gain an understanding of the essence of experiences school principals go through as they attempt to move teachers to choose to voluntarily exit through retirement or resignation from a school district. A secondary outcome of this research may be that other principals and administrators will view the findings and recognize that what they are going through is not completely unique to their situation. There are suggestions, strategies, or practices from this research that will assist principals in dealing with the difficulties of voluntary exit in a manner that eliminates some stress often associated with the process.

Research Questions Rationale

The first research question, “What is the essence of principals’ experiences as they guide a teacher to a voluntary exit?” focused on emerged themes from the data analysis that principals experienced when guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit. The second research question, “What specific ways and means do principals use to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?” focused on the strategies that successful principals use to achieve their goal. While not a definitive list or a recipe, these strategies were frequently used by successful principals. The third research question, “What specific support factors encourage principals to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?” identified the themes that supported successful principals to meet their goal of guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit. The final research question, “What specific factors must principals overcome in order to be willing to guide teachers to voluntary exit?” focused on the obstacles principals overcame to successfully guide a teacher out of the school system.

Discussion of the Findings

As I began to research the topic of dismissal and voluntary exit, I discovered there was a disproportionate number of teachers nationally who are considered incompetent compared to the number of teachers who are removed for incompetence. Review of current literature indicates that the most frequently used number of incompetent teachers is approximately 5% of a school’s teaching staff while the dismissal rate of teachers determined to be incompetent is approximately .05% (McGrath, 2000; Painter, 2000a; Tucker, 1997; Ward, 1995). The disparity between the two numbers of 5% and .05% is of concern. As I continued my literature review, I discovered that most of the research focused on why so few incompetent teachers are not removed and the barriers that

principals indicated kept them from removing more teachers. While .05% is a small number, it does indicate that some principals are able to remove teachers.

Two questions occurred to me when considering these facts. First, what are these principals doing to successfully remove teachers from a school that others are not able to do? Second, are these unique cases or do these principals have some specific skills, knowledge, or strategies that make it possible for them to do what many other principals cannot or do not do? Thus began my research to find out if there are things that successful principals do that others could do to guide teachers to a voluntary exit.

Dismissal vs. Voluntary Exit

The dismissal of a teacher is, in most instances, one of the most difficult and frustrating process that principals experience (Menuey, 2007). It is often a long, stressful, and emotional process that creates a tremendous workload for the principal. Because of open records laws, the school board dismissal process is for the most part public information. Because the school board is the decision-making body that must actually vote on the dismissal, their vote and decision is done in full view of the general public. With the public nature of this process, it often becomes an item for the local media with resulting public interest often accentuating the support for and opposition to the dismissal proceedings. This increased focus can create a rift between the school staff as well as between members of the community. School board dismissal hearings are often emotional and adversarial (Bridges, 1986) as the teacher's defense team attempts to find ways to discredit the principal, the documentation, or any other action that was taken in order to defend their client.

In addition, these hearings are very expensive to the school district and to the teacher. According to Dr. Larry Nybladh, Superintendent of the Grand Forks Public School, (personal communication, April 19, 2011) besides the school's attorney fees, the school district is responsible for the costs of the hearing which could include the hiring of a hearing officer and a court reporter, the cost of transcripts of the proceedings, and other expenses that may occur. The teacher and the state teachers' association, if the teacher is a member, also have attorney's fees, as well as other expenses related to the defense.

When a teacher can be convinced to retire or resign without going through the school board dismissal process, there is still emotion, stress, and a very large workload; however, in guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit, much of the public attention is avoided, resulting in less stress, less emotion, and less division among the staff and the community. The dismissal of a teacher by the school board is in effect a termination; a negative final decision.

Depending upon circumstances, this termination may also result in the loss of the teacher's license if deemed appropriate by the North Dakota Educational Standards and Practices Board (ESPB), the state teacher licensing board in the state of North Dakota. According to Dr. Janet Welk, the Executive Director of ESPB (personal communication, February 21, 2014), the board considers many factors when revoking a teacher's license. It is not automatic, but is based upon the facts presented at an ESPB hearing. The revocation of a teaching license may prevent the teacher from being licensed in another state.

The voluntary exit by a teacher is a resignation or a retirement that can be viewed by most as a positive or at least a less negative ending. Teachers can walk away with

more self-respect than from a dismissal. In most cases, a voluntary exit is a better outcome than a dismissal for both parties.

However, the voluntary exit cannot be the ultimate goal. From the initial decision that the teacher cannot remain in the classroom, the principal must prepare for a school board dismissal. The voluntary exit could be considered a settlement before going to the school board hearing; however, there is no guarantee that the teacher will accept a voluntary exit, so the principal, when making the decision to remove the teacher, must commit to taking the dismissal to the school board should the option of a voluntary exit not be accepted by the teacher.

Summary of the Findings

Research Question 1

The first research question, “What is the essence of principals’ experiences as they guide a teacher to a voluntary exit?” focused on principals’ experiences when guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit. Four categories were identified through data analysis that addressed the essence of principals’ experiences and included: principals’ experiences, principals’ motivation, principals’ support, and principals’ regrets. The themes that emerged from the four categories were: stressful and emotional, isolation and workload, protecting students, legal/procedural, mentors, acting sooner, and follow through.

The essence of the principal’s experiences indicated that dismissing a teacher is an emotion-filled experience because of the need to protect students, the pressure from parents and community, and the knowledge that the principal is potentially taking away the livelihood and the reputation of the teacher. It was stressful because of workload, the

need to protect the confidentiality of the teacher involved, and the detail required to meet the legal and state timelines and other procedural requirements. The principals reported they often felt a sense of isolation as they kept the confidentiality of the staff member while the staff member was free to share his or her side of the story. Principals noted that remediation seldom worked, and that while they were willing to help the teacher, oftentimes, the teacher wouldn't help himself or herself. Principal Paul noted in his conversation with a teacher, "This is what we need to do better. And yet, right away she started, 'Okay, I understand, I understand.' And about halfway through the conversation it's like 'well, I do this okay, I do that all right. You don't think I instruct, I instruct,'" (personal communication, June 16, 2010). The teacher at first acknowledged the concerns Paul had for her teaching, but the deeper into the conversation, the more resistive she became.

During the remediation process, principals stated that when the initial remediation strategies failed, they frequently gave additional opportunities only to see those fail as well. This inability to meet at least a minimum standard of competency also adds to the stress and the workload of the principal.

Thompson (2006) identified 23 factors that were barriers to principals when dismissing teachers. When analyzing responses to Research Question 1 in the current study, nine themes emerged, eight of which corresponded to the Thompson factors. Those eight themes were mentioned by the eight of the 10 interviewed principals, not as barriers to the overall dismissal process, but simply as barriers to part of the process.

The one theme that emerged from this study, but did not match any of Thompson's identified factors was principal support through mentors. Tucker (2001)

noted that all principals need a support system as they move through the process. All 10 principals in the current study noted that they had someone that served in the mentor capacity at least during their first dismissal. The principals in this study stated that mentor was, in each case, someone who had been through the process. The mentor knew not only the steps to take in the process, but also how the experience felt. They knew the isolation, the workload, the stress, and the emotion. They knew the struggle of helping a teacher to understand what they needed to do to become a better teacher and then watched the teacher move to denial or refusal to make the changes necessary even when his or her job hung in the balance. The mentor also knew the procedural aspects of the process. They knew who to talk to, what the timelines and deadlines were, and how to write the documentation effectively. These people understood that part of their job was also to listen to the principal, to reassure him or her that this was the right thing to do, and to build confidence in the principal in regard to the capability to achieve the desired outcome.

Principal Bobby shared about her mentor:

I mean it was just like this is what we do, she is not doing her job, I mean he actually kept me calm and he would listen to the conversation and then she would leave he would tell me these are the things that you need to do, and I would do them.

Mentors made a difference for these 10 principals as they were a vital part in the success of guiding a teacher to a voluntary exit.

Research Question 2

The second research question, “What specific ways and means do principals use to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?” focused on the strategies that successful principals

used to achieve their goal. The categories that emerged in Research Question 2 were: teacher remediation, principals' strategies, and negotiated ending. The themes that emerged through the three categories were: support techniques, gains/backslides, building your case/documentation, straight talk, options, counseling out, options, perseverance, harassment, compensation, compassion, and recommendations. Of these 12 themes, straight talk and counseling out were rarely mentioned in the literature.

All 10 principals in the current study were respectful, but very direct when it came time to have the conversation about each teacher's performance and what needed to change. The straight talk continued as the principals met with their teachers for remediation work and when sharing the results of that remediation.

Principal Dan noted, "I made it very clear on the second improvement plan that failure to, to follow through is job threatening," (personal communication, June 15, 2010). When it was clear to principals that remediation was no longer an option and that dismissal was the necessary outcome, they continued to be honest and straight-forward with the teacher. Principals noted that they always tried to be respectful even when the teacher, NDEA representative, or staff members supporting the teacher were not. They viewed this respectful approach as an important part of the professionalism on their part as well as showing respect for the teacher and trying to leave the teacher with some dignity in a difficult situation. This approach was also an attempt to keep the process as amicable as possible given the situation.

Counseling out was also noted by several principals, not necessarily as a technique that would work prior to a deadline, but one that would get the teacher's attention and introduce the idea that there were better jobs out there that might be a better

fit with the teacher's particular skills and strengths. Counseling out also allowed the teacher to have a little more control of the situation, with the teacher deciding when to resign or retire.

Principal Dan's comment that "this isn't working for you or for us," (personal communication, June 16, 2010) sent a clear message that change needed to happen, yet gave the teacher empowerment in regard to the when and the how the change would be made. While there were implications for what might happen in the future, the teacher in question still had some time to make the decision on their own. Counseling out sometime allowed for more informal and less confrontational conversations with teachers about the teacher's strengths and how those might be used in different jobs or careers.

Also of note was that the theme, building your case, referred to the documentation and other investigative steps the principals were required to complete in order to have a strong, defensible case. Document, document, document was a frequent mantra in the literature. Principal Courtney stressed the importance of documentation when she described one of her experiences, "She asked us umm, for documentation. We gave her notebooks full of it." (personal communication, June 25, 2010). Documentation is not new or different from the literature; all 10 principals in this study spoke frequently about the time, energy, and exacting detail they put into the documentation process which was frequently highlighted in the literature on this topic.

Research Question 3

The third research question, "What specific support factors encourage principals to guide teachers to a voluntary exit?" looks at the themes of support that successful principals had that enabled them to meet their goal of guiding a teacher to a voluntary

exit. The categories which emerged were: principals' training, principals' motivation, principals' regrets, and principals' support. The themes that emerged from these categories were: graduate classes, elf-taught, experience builds confidence, it's about students, community pressure, act sooner, and mentor. There were seven themes that emerged in Research Question 3. Of these seven, experience builds confidence and mentor were two that were seldom identified as significant in the literature.

Principals reported that they believed their graduate coursework gave them the knowledge and confidence that they could in fact dismiss teachers despite the myth that it cannot be done. That coursework also gave them the foundational understanding of the process, what people they needed to involve, and some understanding of the legal process. Although coursework was recognized as providing the foundation, principals reported that it was while working with their mentors that they were afforded the comfort level and confidence needed to successfully navigate the process. Once they had successfully guided a teacher to a voluntary exit, principals reported they felt comfortable in moving to dismissal for other teachers should it be deemed necessary. Principal Bobby said, "It's a struggle, but you have to go through it yourself in order to understand it and be confident that you could do it again" (personal communication, June 6, 2010). While each new situation is unique in many regards, the general process of dismissal remains the same: document, remediate, and meet the deadlines. As with most procedures, the learning curve flattens considerably the second time and principals reported that this was also true with the dismissal or voluntary exit process that they could guide teachers out, and many reported they have guided out more than one. While the process was still emotional, stressful, isolating, and a heavy workload, principals

reported that some of the stress was lessened because they had done it before and were confident they could successfully complete the process again.

Research Question 4

The final research question, “What specific factors must principals overcome in order to be willing to guide teachers to voluntary exit?” examined the obstacles that principals must overcome to guide a teacher out of a school system. The categories that emerged for Research Question 4 were: staff involvement, reasons for incompetence, and teacher support. The corresponding themes that emerged were: just want you to know, move them along, stirring the pot, teacher shortages, poor relationships, lack of training, personal traits or characteristics, illegal activities, addictions, mental health or disease, emotional stressors, community support, NDEA support, and follow the process.

Fourteen themes emerged from the data when answering Research Question 4. There were no surprises in any of these themes as all 14 were frequently mentioned in the literature as factors which sometimes lead to principals being unable to dismiss teachers (Bridges, 1990; Lee, 1999; Thompson, 2006). However, what is different in my findings from the research literature is that in spite of numerous barriers, these principals were able to successfully guide teachers to voluntarily exit their schools. In many cases, principals acknowledged that school climate was impacted when beginning the dismissal process and that some teachers reacted negatively and aggressively to dispute the principal’s assertions which sometimes created a rift among staff members. Principals also reported that when hiring new teachers, they were not always able to determine personal traits or characteristics that impacted a teacher’s ability to be effective in the classroom. In other cases, principals reported they suspected inadequacies about their

candidate; however, they had little recourse due to a short supply of teachers in some content or specialty areas. Principal Hank (personal communication, June 25, 2010) described one situation, “And we had red flags when we hired her. We had a committee of people that sat down, we had a limited pool of applicants. It was in an area of need for teaching.”

With other situations, factors beyond the principal’s control influenced a teacher’s inability to be successful in the classroom. Family issues from a failed marriage, addiction, mental health issues, and other situations were reported with various teachers or within the teacher’s families. Principal Mark (personal communication, January 13, 2013) shared:

The teacher has an alcohol problem big time. He is um, he is at 4:00 every day after school he goes, and the police department come by and give him a Breathalyzer. I mean it is that bad, and um they do it in a way, we are in a small community where they go to his front door.

Illegal or criminal acts were also reported to cause the principal to guide a teacher to a voluntary exit.

Principals reported that in most cases the state teachers’ association, North Dakota Education Association (NDEA) represented the teacher being dismissed. Most principals reported that they believed that the NDEA representatives were there for a good reason and while at times the meetings were adversarial, in many instances the representatives eventually encouraged the teacher to resign rather than to go through a dismissal hearing. Principal Noreen relayed this situation, “Um NDEA wanted him to resign and he wouldn’t. I will never forget . . . I was doing something I heard shouting. It was after school. I mean shouting and I thought what is going on?” The teacher refused to accept

that there was sufficient documentation to have him dismissed. In the end; however, he did agree and did resign. Frequently this decision was based upon the documentation that the principal had provided. In some instances the teachers were highly regarded in the community for coaching or other non-classroom accomplishments. This made the prospect of removal more challenging, yet the principals were able to move the teachers out of their respective systems.

Principals reported that sound hiring practices, complete background checks, and detailed references generally helped them to make sound hiring decisions; however, sometimes circumstances beyond their control factored into the teacher becoming less than competent. It was at that point that the principals began to document and consider the remediation options with the hope of the teachers' improvement so that a dismissal or voluntary exit was not necessary.

Conclusions and Limitations

Conclusions

In this study, 10 North Dakota public school principals were interviewed. Those 10 shared a total of 25 stories of teachers they believed were incompetent and needed to be removed from the school. Two of the 25 teachers were able to follow the remediation plan that the principal required and were able to keep their jobs. In the remaining 23 stories, all of the teachers were guided to a voluntary exit rather than dismissed through a school board hearing. Seven of the 10 principals guided their first teacher to a voluntary exit in their first year as a principal. The three other principals guided their first teacher out within the first five years as a principal. Most of the stories the principals shared were complex and the process to guide teachers to a voluntary exit took months to

complete. The process moved slowly and the exit did not come easily. Several situations included illegal acts by teachers and thus moved more quickly to the conclusion, but the principals involved reported similar experiences that were not based upon illegal activities. All reported that the process was emotional, stressful, and required a tremendous amount of work on the part of the principal. Nine of the 10 have done more than one voluntary exit. The lone principal who has done only one voluntary exit stated that if needed, she could and would move forward with the dismissal process again.

There were three themes that stood out in the success that these principals had in guiding their teachers out: a mentor who helped them to negotiate the procedures and processes, the use of straight talk when working with teachers, and experience builds confidence. Experience builds confidence while not a support in the initial experience of guiding a teacher out became important if the principal had to consider dismissal with other struggling teachers. Principals reported that once they had gone through the process, they were comfortable with their knowledge and skills and believed that they could do it again. Additionally, most principals had moved more than one teacher to a voluntary exit.

One of the unknowns of this study was how many voluntary exits took place not only in North Dakota, but nationally. Because voluntary exits are relatively private compared to public nature of a school board dismissal, there is little in the literature to determine with any accuracy how frequently these voluntary exits take place. Based upon my multiple appeals to the approximately 516 principals (Department of Public Instruction, 2012) in the state looking for principals willing to share their stories, with

only 10 responding, it would seem that the number of principals who have guided a teacher to a voluntary exit is likely a small number.

Limitations

There were three limitations with this study. First, the sample size of principals interviewed was small, regardless of the efforts to recruit principals using multiple strategies. I began with a personal contact to principals across the state that I knew from working together on various committees and other professional associations. I asked for their participation in my study. I also used the snowball technique of asking those same principals to pass on the names of other principals that they knew who might have had a similar experience. Written appeals were also made to principals across the state through an announcement in the North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders' monthly newsletter, "The Umbrella" (Appendix C). I also posted the same appeal through the statewide administrators' listserv. While the number was small, all principals that I approached or those that responded via the written appeals were very willing to share their stories.

The second limitation is that with personal interviews, there is always the chance that as principals shared their stories there were questions not asked or nuances that were missed during the interviews. Each principal was interviewed at least twice. All had at least one face-to-face meeting while eight had a second face-to-face meeting and two were conducted via telephone due to distance and time factors. Three principals were called for a third contact with follow-up questions.

The third limitation is that any generalization of the data and resulting recommendations are only germane to public school principals in the state of North

Dakota which, as a rural agricultural-based state, is not recognized as a strong union state. Public school teachers and unions or associations, by state law cannot strike (North Dakota Legislative Council, 2009, Ch. 15.1-16-16). This inability to strike impacts the bargaining power on items such as tenure compared to states with strong unions. Tenure is another factor that Thompson (2006) listed as a barrier to dismissal. While tenure is not recognized in North Dakota state law, after their first year of teaching, teachers are entitled to full due process before being dismissed by the school board; however, first year teachers may be dismissed without cause (North Dakota Legislative Council, 2009, Ch. 15.1-15.02). While tenure is not specifically mentioned in state law, there is little difference in actuality, as school boards are required to give teachers the full protection of due process.

Implications

The purpose of this research study was to gain an understanding of the experiences that school principals go through as they attempt to move teachers to choose to voluntarily exit through retirement or resignation from a school district. A secondary outcome of this research may be that other principals and administrators will view the findings and recognize that what they are going through is not completely unique to their situation. There are suggestions, strategies, or practices from this research that may assist principals in dealing with the difficulties of voluntary exit in a manner that eliminates some stress often associated with the process.

All of these principals guided teachers out in challenging situations with several of those under very hostile or negative circumstances. As this quote from Principal Noreen (personal communication, February 4, 2014) indicates:

You know he, I think he [*sic* the superintendent] was scared of them a little bit. Um, you know the father-in-law [*sic* of the teacher] was kind of a big, big person in town and I don't know why, but um, I don't I am not sure because he [*sic* the superintendent] didn't feel I should go forth. I mean he felt ... I was creating way too much you know?

Despite these circumstances, most of the principals in this study have not only guided out one teacher, but most have guided out more than one teacher. The 10 principals were committed to protecting their students by improving the quality of instruction and education from teachers who, regardless of the reason, were not able to meet at least a minimally acceptable level of teaching. One of the important findings was the conclusion that it is possible to remove a teacher from a school and do it in a manner that minimizes some of the emotion, stress, workload, and the public spectacle that a dismissal can evoke. In spite of the attempts of many educational researchers to dispel the myth that teachers cannot be fired or dismissed (Dawson & Billingsley, 2000), there is still a belief by many principals that teachers cannot be removed. This study provides first-hand accounts of principals who have been able to remove incompetent teachers through a voluntary exit process.

There were four implications that emerged through this study. The first was that principals can and do remove incompetent teachers despite the laws, regulations, timelines, and the myriad of other barriers that are often reported in the literature. The second was that principals who were resolved to remove a teacher had to search on their own to find much of the information, training, materials, and people who could help them be successful in their quest. The third implication was that these successful principals had one common principal support factor seldom noted in the literature on dismissal: that of the mentor. There is limited existing research on principal mentors in terms of the

dismissal process. The final implication was that there is little systematic or systemic district-level training, professional development, or established processes or procedures for most districts on teacher documentation, remediation, or dismissal.

Teachers can be Dismissed

The findings from the data indicated that these principals had no secret weapon and that the strategies that they used were frequently found in the literature. Despite the long standing myth that teachers cannot be dismissed, the principals in this study were able to remove incompetent teachers. In all cases teachers were resistant, none went willingly. In 15 of the 23 cases they were very hostile and attempted to cast the principal as the one who was in the wrong. In the principals' stories, many of the barriers that are found in the literature were mentioned; however, none of the principals reported that they were unable to move forward with the process. None of them indicated that they were held up or delayed in the process let alone stopped from moving to the dismissal or voluntary exit.

Finding Resources on their Own

Principals reported that the graduate coursework required for principal certification in North Dakota gave them the foundation for the evaluation as well as a basic understanding of the process that was required to remove a teacher. However, most principals reported that they believed that there was not the time in most master's level graduate courses to go into the detail that was required to be ready to independently attempt to dismiss or guide a teacher to a voluntary exit. Many principals reported that they found their own books, workshops, professional development, and other means of

obtaining the information and details that they needed to begin the process to attempt the removal of a teacher.

In his first year, Principal Hank began looking for information (personal communication, June 25, 2010):

I scrambled to find materials. I had, really the only staff development or training that I had in non-renewal had been um, sitting in a couple of legal seminars with you know school board's attorneys . . . who said you know if you end up in this situation here is what the law says.

When principals were asked if their district provided specific professional development or training on the dismissal process, only two reported that there were opportunities available; however, they were not required for district principals, but were optional. When left to their discretion, principals with their heavy workload may not have time to search for professional development on this topic, particularly when there are many state and district initiatives competing for the principals' professional development time and budget.

District Professional Development

Many principals also noted that within their respective districts, there were few written templates or formats for them to follow for documentation, remediation plans, or steps to the dismissal process. The ND LEAD Center programs on dismissal includes the steps, timelines, deadlines, and other procedural components that are required for principals as they move a teacher to dismissal. The written templates or procedural guides, the district-wide remediation format, and a clearinghouse for mentorship are all additional means of signaling to all stakeholders that the district is committed to quality educators for all children in all schools.

The North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders (NDCEL), the state professional organization whose purpose is to support educational leaders' interests and supporting those interests and educational matters in North Dakota (2009), and the North Dakota LEAD Center have professional development programming for principals which focuses on teacher growth and teacher dismissal. School districts and the North Dakota LEAD Center could work cooperatively to implement a district-wide professional development program that focuses on helping teachers improve and assists in the principals' understanding of the dismissal process in a more organized and consistent manner.

The principals in this study were able to move teachers to a voluntary exit without the organized support and professional development recommended above. They searched on their own to find the books, journals, professional workshops and other sources of information necessary to educate themselves and to begin this difficult process. They also sought the advice of someone who would become their mentor. They had a strong belief that what they were doing was the right thing.

Principal Steve (personal communication, February 1, 2012) noted, "This is where a person has to search their heart, what do I want? And hopefully they are going to say I want the best possible education for these kids. They are the ones that we owe it to." Their commitment to their students was the impetus for the drive to remove a teacher that they believed was harming students.

Mentors

The one theme that emerged from the interviews with principals that has little reference in the literature is that of the mentor for the dismissal process. All principals

reported that as they began their first dismissal process, they had someone whom they could turn to that would help them through the process. This help came not only in the guidance of the procedural steps and legalities, but also served as a sounding board, someone who had been through the process and could not only offer advice and suggestions, but also empathized with the principal on the challenges of the process.

During a conversation with Aimee Copas, NDCEL Executive Director (personal communication, February 20, 2014), she indicated that while there is an informal mentor referral process, there is no formal mentor process for new principals in general, nor mentors for principals beginning the dismissal process. She also stated that a proposal had been presented at the last legislative session to create a more formal mentor program, but the funding was denied. The implication for the mentor theme is that a more formalized structure for mentoring principals for the purpose of remediation and potential dismissal of a teacher should be developed on a district-wide or state-wide basis. Developing a formalized plan, such as a clearinghouse that connects principals who have experienced a dismissal or voluntary exit with a first time principal, would provide the inexperienced principal with experience and expertise that they may not know or be able to find on their own.

The theme of mentor was referred to in two different research questions, Research Question 1 and Research Question 3. In Research Question 1, the mentor was an important part of the principal's experience in the voluntary exit process. All principals noted the mentor as an important part of the success of that experience. In Research Question 3, principals also stated that the mentor gave them tremendous support beyond the procedural aspects. Their support with the understanding, empathy, and an

encouraging attitude helped the principal when things were rough and the stress and emotion were high. Mentors understood not only the process, but also the impact a dismissal had on staff members, the community, and the building principal. That understanding helped principals persevere and see through their course of action.

Recommendations

As stated earlier, there is little in the literature about what principals who have been successful at dismissal and voluntary exit do differently. This research indicates that voluntary exit and dismissal can and does happen, but there are some ways that the process should be improved to make it more accessible, feasible, and consistent for principals.

Recommendations for School Districts

- Adopt a research-based teacher evaluation.

School districts that value quality teachers must have a researched-based teacher evaluation process that is consistent in assessing teacher performance, addresses both summative and formative evaluation, and is standardized across the school district. A standardized evaluation process will not only improve, as a formative process, teacher performance, but will also serve as a summative process assessment for determining teachers' competence level. This evaluation process assists principals in determining which teachers do not meet the minimum standard of competency.

- Develop a professional development program to train both teachers and administrators in the purpose and use of the teacher evaluation process.

Professional development is essential to consistent application of the evaluation process and provides teachers and principals with a clear understanding of the

expectations of the district. This consistent application also supports the principal in a dismissal hearing when the principal can demonstrate that the same expectations were required of all teachers.

- Adopt a standardized teacher documentation, remediation, and dismissal process.

When the teacher evaluation process indicates that a teacher has not met the minimal level of competence, the teacher's incompetence should be documented using a standardized district format that meets the state and federal due process requirements. A standardized documentation process will provide evidence that professional development and other opportunities were provided to the teacher; however, it was not effective in remediating deficiencies to a minimum acceptable standard.

If the teacher is unable to meet the minimum expectations of the school district, there should be a standardized district dismissal process for the principal to follow to begin dismissing the teacher from the school system. Standardization of the process will eliminate some of the stress, emotion, workload, and isolation that principals in this study reported was part of the process.

Many researchers including Bridges (1990), Frels and Norton (2007), and McGrath (2000) have studied the barriers that principals face when attempting to remove a teacher and have developed forms, procedures, and other practical tips for assisting principals in dismissing a teacher. Yet, the 10 principals in this study, representing 15 different school districts, reported that there were no such forms, procedures, or information available in their school districts. Each principal indicated that the

documentation they developed was based upon their own design as well as input from their mentor.

- Create a professional development program that trains administrators in a standardized process of teacher documentation, remediation, and all aspects of the dismissal process.

Professional development is essential to consistent application of the teacher documentation, remediation, and dismissal process and provides administrators with a clear understanding of the district process. A consistent application of the process eliminates some of the stress and workload of the principal and provides a framework for principals as they move through the process.

Recommendations for Collaboration

- Create a collaborative working group of North Dakota public education organizations such as the Rural Education Cooperatives (REC), North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders, North Dakota LEAD Center, North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, North Dakota University Systems Graduate Schools in Educational Leadership, and the North Dakota School Boards Association among others, to develop a standardized teacher documentation, remediation, and dismissal process that include the necessary documents for each step of the process and administrator training.

This collaborative working group's standardization of teacher documentation, remediation, and dismissal would ensure that all teachers statewide have similar expectations and requirements regardless of the school district in which they are hired. As teachers move from district to district the expectations of the processes would remain

constant. One of the products of this collaborative effort should include the development and implementation of templates, formats, and procedures that would provide a consistent, statewide means of working with teachers for documentation, remediation, and dismissal. Dr. Jim Stenehjem (personal communication, February 1, 2012), North Dakota LEAD Center Director, stated that very few districts have asked for training on documentation, remediation, and dismissal from a district-wide perspective. None of the principals in this study were aware of any North Dakota districts that have system-wide training for documentation, remediation, and dismissal.

- School districts should pursue required professional development for principals that support teacher growth, evaluation, and teacher dismissal procedures in conjunction with graduate schools of educational leadership, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, and other regulating government entities to require as part of a principal's continuing professional development, a minimum number of hours or credits in teacher growth, evaluation, documentation, remediation, and dismissal process.

Graduate school coursework provides a foundation, but principals reported that they needed much more information before they were ready to take on the task of documenting, remediating, and dismissing a teacher. Beyond the templates, formats, and procedural information suggested above, districts need to require the professional development of principals to ensure that they are prepared to deal appropriately with teachers who are less than competent.

- Public school leaders, through the North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders and the North Dakota LEAD Center, should renew their support and

lobbying for legislation to support and fund a formal mentoring program for beginning principals for the 2015 North Dakota State Legislative Session.

A proposal for principal mentoring was included as a portion of the Education Commission's recommendations for the 2011 North Dakota Legislative Session; unfortunately, the funding was denied. This formal mentor program should be presented again for consideration in the 2015 session. The development of a formal process would address many of these concerns for principals new to the position. This standardization gives the principal a starting point without needing to do so much research on their own about the process and how to proceed. The North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders and the North Dakota LEAD Center should continue to support this goal through political lobbying to bring this proposal to fruition.

Recommendations for Further Study

- North Dakota Universities offering graduate degrees in educational leadership should work collaboratively with public school districts and state governmental educational agencies to provide required master's degree coursework in the documentation, remediation, and dismissal process.

Requiring educational leadership students to take coursework in regard to the documentation, remediation, and dismissal process extends the continuity and consistency for all administrators. While mentors and attorneys provide "just in time" guidance through the process, the coursework creates the solid foundation from which to begin.

Recommendations for Further Study

Because there is little in the literature from the perspective of principals who successfully guide teachers to a voluntary exit, there are many possibilities that could be studied.

- A study could be developed to look at the voluntary exit from a regional context such as the upper Midwest or rural states to determine to what extent this process is utilized by principals across the region.

As previously noted, there is little in the literature about mentors for principals who are attempting to remove a teacher for the first time. I have not found any studies that attempted to determine how frequently voluntary exits were utilized versus a dismissal. Because of the more private nature of a voluntary dismissal, there are no compiled records to access this type of data.

A number of areas could be researched to develop a larger understanding of what successful principals do to dismiss teachers. This type of study would offer more information about why some principals are able to dismiss.

- A study could be developed around the question: “Why don’t districts have standardized formats, procedures, and professional development regarding documentation, remediation, and the dismissal process?”

This study would also yield interesting information on school districts’ and states’ department of education’s perspective on the formalization and standardization the documentation, remediation, dismissal process, as well as the professional development component.

- A study could be developed that would be a comparative study or meta-analysis to compare the laws, processes, and barriers specific to the dismissal process.

A study of this type would help determine if some states have more restrictions on documentation, remediation, and dismissal than others. This type of study might reveal barriers or factors that are not issues in North Dakota or might indicate that some North Dakota principals are able to deal with a difficult, emotional, and time-consuming challenge because it is what is best for students and their school.

Important Ending Note

Each state has its own laws, legislative rules, regulations, and timelines regarding the dismissal process. Principals in any state, including North Dakota, should consult their central office administrators and legal counsel familiar with their respective state's laws, rules, regulations, and timelines before they begin the documentation, remedial, and dismissal process.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Principal Interview Prompt Questions

TITLE: "You Do Understand this is Potentially Career Threatening" A Study of Public School Principals Who have Guided Teachers to a Voluntary Exit

PROJECT DIRECTOR: Barry Lentz

PHONE # C: 701-740-9574, W: 701-746-2360

DEPARTMENT: Educational Leadership

1. Tell me about your school year.
2. What has been the most satisfying part of your job this year?
3. What has been the most frustration or disappointing part of your job this year?
4. What would you change if you could?
5. Tell me about your beliefs about teacher dismissal.
6. Tell me about a teacher that you believed no longer belonged in a school system and how you helped that teacher arrive at the decision to voluntarily exit the school system either through retirement, resignation, or some other option.
7. What was the most difficult part of the process for you as a principal?
8. What practices, skills, or traits did you use to guide the teacher to voluntarily exit your school system?
9. What support factors were there to encourage you to move forward in the process?
10. What support factors were the most important in your success?
11. What factors were the most difficult to overcome?
12. What specific things would you do differently the next time?

13. Is there anything that you would have liked to have had to help you through the process that you couldn't get or find?

Additional prompt questions:

Considering the following factors, what significance did they play in your process and why?

1. Student concerns about the teacher
2. Parent concerns about the teacher
3. Staff concerns about the teacher
4. Staff support for the teacher
5. Community support for the teacher
6. Others attempting to influence the situation
7. Teacher Association involvement, local or state
8. School Board member support
9. Central Office support
10. Your professional training in the dismissal process
11. Your personal professional reputation
12. School reputation
13. Teacher reputation
14. Teacher ties to the community
15. Welfare of the teacher

Appendix B

PRINCIPAL INFORMED CONSENT FORM

TITLE: "You Do Understand this is Potentially Career Threatening" A Study of Public School Principals Who have Guided Teachers to a Voluntary Exit

PROJECT DIRECTOR: Barry Lentz

PHONE # C: 701-740-9574, W: 701-746-2360

DEPARTMENT: Educational Leadership

Dear Colleague,

We are asking your permission to conduct a research project concerning public school principals entitled: "You Do Understand this is Potentially Career Threatening" A Study of Public School Principals Who have Guided Teachers to a Voluntary Exit". The data from this research will form the basis of my dissertation for the fulfillment of my PhD in Educational Leadership. The focus of the research project is on school principals' perspectives of the process of convincing teachers to voluntarily resign or retire from their teaching positions. Through an interview process you will be asked to relate a situation or situations in which you worked with a teacher or teachers to achieve a voluntary exit from the school system. The purpose of this research study is to gain an understanding of the experiences that school principals go through as they attempt to move teachers to choose to voluntarily exit from a school district. As part of the interview process participants will be asked to tell their story about one or more teachers that they convinced to resign or retire from their school. School principals are the key change agent in a school building. It is part of their responsibility to evaluate, remediate and when necessary, remove teachers from their positions. This is a difficult, stressful, and laborious process. When principals can convince teachers to voluntarily leave the school, versus using formal dismissal procedures, some of that difficulty, stress, and labor is eliminated. It is my hope that this study will provide information that will assist principals and other administrators in developing sound strategies to assist them in gaining voluntary teacher exits.

STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH

A person who is to participate in the research must give her of her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

Purpose and components of the study

You are invited to be in a research study about the process of voluntary teacher exit because of your previous experience in this process. The purpose of this research study is to gain an understanding of the experiences that school principals go through as they attempt to move teachers to choose to voluntarily exit a school district.

Approximately four to 12 school principals across the state will be solicited for interviews about their experiences and will take part in this study at the University of North Dakota. Your participation in the study will be involved for approximately seven months, from November 2012 until May 2013. There is an initial interview as well as a follow up interview over the first two to three months. However, there may be a need for additional follow up questions as the data is reviewed. Each interview will take about one to one and a half hours.

Research methods

Each interview will be recorded with your permission. The recordings will be used for transcription and analysis. All names and schools will be given a code or pseudonym on the tapes. You will be asked to tell your story or stories about a teacher or teachers that you have convinced to resign or retire from your school. The transcriptions will be done by the researcher or a professional typist. In all cases the identity of the school and all the participants will be coded. After the research work is completed, the recordings will be stored in a locked cabinet, separated from the signed consent forms and other data, for a period of three years. At the end of the three years all data and forms will be shredded and the recordings deleted.

Following the interviews the recordings will be transcribed and analyzed for topics and themes. The data from those topics and themes will be used to develop the themes of principals' perceptions of voluntary teacher exit. Throughout the interview process principals may choose to not answer any question or stop the interview if they should choose to do so without any penalty or consequence.

There may be some risk from being in this study. The process of gaining teacher agreement to resign or retire is considered by some to be an emotional and/or stressful experience. Reliving that experience may cause some discomfort or distress. Should you feel the need to discuss your feelings about this study, you may contact a mental health care professional of your choosing at your own expense.

Benefits of the study

You may benefit from this study if the sharing of your story allows you to review the situation and talk about the experience and helps you make additional personal or professional meaning from it. However, it is my hope that in the future, other people might benefit from this study because of the data obtained and the sharing of that data with other school principals and administrators.

You will not have any costs for being in this research study. The researcher will come to your location at a mutually agreeable date and time for the interviews or if distance and time prohibits that face-to-face contact, interviews by phone or other electronic means such as Skype may be used. There is no compensation for participating in this study other than opportunity to help others understand the process of voluntary teacher exit. There will be a small token of appreciation given to the principal by the researcher for participating in the study and sharing their time, expertise, and experience.

The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

Confidentially

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published no individuals, principals, or place names will be identified. The study record may be reviewed by government agencies and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. As indicated earlier, confidentiality will be maintained by means of pseudonyms for all subjects as well as the school name and location. All teachers involved in the principals' stories will also be protected in the same manner.

If we write a report or article about this study, we will describe the study results in a summarized manner so that no person, school or community can be identified.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect any current or future relations with the University of North Dakota

If you should decide to leave the study early, we ask that you contact the researcher prior to any pending visit so that we might note for our records the reason for leaving, which will also be kept confidential.

Who to contact

The researchers conducting this study are Barry Lentz and his advisor, Gary Schnellert. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact Barry Lentz at (w) 701-746-2360 during the day and at (c) 701-740-9574 after hours. Gary Schnellert may be reached at 701-777-3584.

If you have questions regarding the rights of a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North

Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff or you wish to talk with someone else.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to allow district principals to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subjects Name: _____

Signature of Subject

Date

Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent

Date

Appendix C

NDCEL Monthly Newsletter and Listserv Participant Appeal

Principals:

Have you convinced a teacher to leave your school system

without going through the full dismissal process?

Barry Lentz, Principal at Valley Middle School in Grand Forks is seeking potential interview subjects for his doctoral dissertation. The focus of the research project is on school principals' perspectives of the process of convincing teachers to voluntarily resign or retire from their teaching positions rather than go through a full school board dismissal. Subjects will be interviewed twice over a period of three months with each interview approximately an hour to an hour and a half. Where possible interviews will be conducted face-to-face; however, should time or distance be an obstacle, phone or electronic means such as Skype may be employed. Dates, times, and places will be mutually determined. All interviews will be kept confidential, with all names and locations changed to protect the confidentiality of all parties. This research is conducted under the supervision of, and meets the requirements and guidelines of, the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board. If you would be willing to share your experience and perhaps help other principals better understand the process that worked for you, or for further information, please contact Barry at (w) 701-746-2360, (c) 701-740-9574 or email barry.lentz@gfschools.org.

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