

“I’m Going to Need a Change...”: Understanding a Teacher’s Experiences in a Juvenile Corrections School

Kristin M. Murphy¹

Abstract

Although teachers in juvenile corrections schools face one of the most complicated landscapes in public education, there is a lack of research that provides rich and detailed accounts of teachers’ understandings of their experiences and working conditions. The current research exploring teacher perceptions of their work and working conditions in this unique setting is limited to survey responses to highly structured survey instruments. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of one teacher working in a juvenile corrections school through a series of three interviews. Findings suggest that due to a lack of professional learning opportunities or opportunities for social support and to build relationships with colleagues, the teacher in this study was growing to feel unfulfilled and had intentions to leave the field. The findings highlight the role working conditions play in JC schools and beyond for teacher satisfaction and commitment to their work.

Keywords: teachers; juvenile corrections; professional learning opportunities; listening guide methodology; school working conditions

1. Introduction

Teachers in juvenile corrections (JC) schools work in complicated working conditions that are not experienced in typical public school settings (Gagnon, Houchins, & Murphy, 2012; Houchins, Puckett-Patterson, Crosby, Shippen, & Jolivet, 2009; Mathur, Clark, & Schoenfeld, 2009; Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010). They experience unique difficulties as a school that resides within a correctional facility, which is different from traditional schools in several ways (Houchins et al., 2009; Gagnon et al., 2012). Such schools require daily security procedures and expose teachers to phenomena that can take a toll on teachers’ mental and emotional well-being. First, JC schools are situated in locked correctional facilities where youth are confined and also attend school. Secure care facilities exist for detained (i.e., those awaiting adjudication, or settlement, of their cases) and committed (i.e., adjudicated youth) (Sickmund, 2003). Long-term facilities typically hold youths for nine to ten months and sometimes as long as several years, whereas short-term facilities hold youths anywhere from one to ninety days (Houchins et al., 2010). New students may be admitted and discharged each week and the roster of a JC teacher is subject to constant fluctuation, requiring that they design instruction to accommodate for frequent changes (Mathur&Schoenfeld, 2010). Second, in addition to educational personnel, treatment and security personnel work with students in JC schools. The spectrum of professionals working with youth in JC facilities have been trained to view and respond to student behaviors in a variety of ways that may conflict with each other (Leone & Weinberg, 2010; Meisel, Leone, Henderson, & Cohen, 1998).

¹ Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education and Human Development, 2nd floor, Wheatley Hall, University of Massachusetts Boston, 100 Morrissey Blvd, kristin.murphy@umb.edu ,Telephone: 617-287-4516

For instance, the secure care settings in which JC schools operate often rely on punishment, fear, control, and threat of isolation, as opposed to a school culture that emphasizes proactive and positive approaches to promoting prosocial behavior (Gagnon, Rockwell, & Scott, 2008; Wright, 2005). Thus, in many cases, it is likely that facility-wide priorities related to security and safety may conflict with and take priority over educational concerns, forcing the teacher to delay instruction or academic goals/timelines. Finally, JC schools serve a student population that has significantly higher rates of educational disabilities, mental health disorders, and patterns of antisocial behavior in comparison to regular public school settings. There is an overrepresentation of low-income students with overwhelmingly negative previous experiences in school often resulting in truancy, expulsion, and dropping out (Gagnon & Barber, 2010; Gagnon, et al., 2012; Mathur&Schoenfeld, 2010; Mulcahy& Leone, 2012; Nelson, Sprague, Jolivet, Smith, & Tobin, 2009; Wang, Blomberg, & Li, 2005).

Although students in JC are afforded the same rights under IDEA (2006) and NCLB (2002), JC schools have a long history of noncompliance with policy and only come into compliance in light of reform driven by federal litigation (Gagnon, 2010; Gagnon, Murphy, Steinberg, Gaddis, & Crockett, 2013; Mulcahy& Leone). To complicate matters, many personnel are ill equipped to properly serve the needs of students in JC schools. One study identified that only approximately one-third of facility personnel possessed training about disabilities, despite the fact that this population is overrepresented in JC classrooms (Kvarfordt, Purcell, & Shannon, 2004). In a study comparing teachers in general public schools nationwide, JC school teachers in Florida had less experience, lower rates of certification, and more were teaching out-of-field (Ciftci & Pesta, 2006). When personnel lack disability-related training, and teachers lack certification in Special Education, this can seriously affect instruction and academic progress for students with disabilities and learning impairments (Moody, 2003; Mathur et al., 2009; Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010).

Research has been conducted that sheds light on JC teacher perceptions of their working conditions, using a collection of surveys evaluating attrition, retention, and job satisfaction factors in JC schools (Houchins, Shippen, & Cattret, 2004; Houchins et al., 2006; Houchins et al., 2009; Houchins, Shippen, McKeand, & Viel-Ruma, 2010). These studies are based on Gersten, Yovanoff, and Harniss's (2001) assertion that Special Education teachers who are more satisfied in their working conditions are more likely to remain in their positions. Houchins and his colleagues asserted that JC teachers were likely to face many of the same challenges in their working conditions that special educators did, but that there had been little to no previous research examining the attitudes of teachers in the JC school setting. Across the four studies, teachers reported being generally satisfied with their work; however, their responses also illuminated many of the barriers present in their working conditions. For example, the majority of teachers reported a lack of appropriate support staff, poor relationships with security personnel, a lack of support from administrators, and insufficient contact with parents. Additionally, many teachers believed that they had inappropriate curriculum materials, lack of access to technology, and that less than half of their students were making sufficient progress. Half of teacher respondents indicated experiencing stress due to student behavior "often" or "always". Thus, it is evident based on these findings that teachers in JC schools often feel that they do not have the resources or access to support that is necessary to meet their goals.

Compounding these barriers is the sense of isolation felt by JC teachers. For over twenty years researchers have written about how, amidst their sea of challenges, JC school educators feel isolated from not only each other, but from their colleagues in general public school settings, as well as local education agencies, and state departments of education (Coffey & Gemignani, 1994; Gagnon et al., 2012; Houchins et al., 2009; Mathur et al., 2009; Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010). Given the challenges created by their working conditions and the sense of isolation they feel, it is not surprising that JC schools have high rates of teacher turnover (Houchins, Shippen, & Jolivet, 2006). For example, in 2006, 47% of teachers in Florida left their jobs teaching in JC schools (Ciftci & Pesta, 2006).

2. Statement of the Problem

Although teachers in JC schools face one of the most complicated landscapes in public education, there is a lack of research that provides rich and detailed accounts of teachers' understandings of their experiences and working conditions. The current research exploring teacher perceptions of their work and working conditions in this unique setting is limited to survey responses to highly structured survey instruments. Because survey responses may limit and control participants' responses and not accurately reflect their actual individual perceptions of the phenomena at hand, there has been little to no representation of these teachers' voices.

Thus, there remains a lack of research about the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, skills, and emotional well-being of individual teachers in the JC school setting, a void that more qualitative research on these teachers' experiences in schools may fill.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain an understanding of how teachers understand their working conditions in JC schools. The guiding research question was: How do teachers understand (making meaning of; interpret) their experiences working in the juvenile corrections school setting? This paper focuses on the findings from one teacher out of five interviewed for the broader study.

5. Methods

5.1. Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective guiding this study was Dilthey's hermeneutics (Dilthey, 1976). Dilthey's ultimate objective was to find a way to understand (make meaning of; interpret) human experience in order to understand other individuals. However, he believed that lived human experience was a private phenomenon that others cannot see, and that in order for others to understand, or interpret, another individual's experience, that individual must first express their experience. Language is considered the primary means of access into understanding how people perceive their experiences in Dilthey's conceptualization of hermeneutics (Dilthey, 1976). Because of this, he believed the best way to accomplish such understanding was to begin with a fixed textual expression of the lived experience that can be interpreted, such as a transcribed interview text.

In order to fully comprehend the parts of an individual's experience, Dilthey posited that the interpreter must first examine the whole of the individual's lived experience before interpreting its individual parts, accomplished when the interpreter enters into what is known as a hermeneutic circle. The circle could be compared to approaching the understanding of an experience by first examining it from a bird's eye perspective and then honing in on individual aspects of the experience. Having examined the experience as a whole and then as individual aspects, the interpreter returns once again to the whole of the experience. This return to the "bird's eye perspective" allows the interpreter to arrive at a new, deeper level of understanding of the experience (Tappan, 2001).

5.2. Participant

The findings presented in this paper emerge from a larger qualitative study of five teachers working in juvenile corrections schools. My participant, Ron is an African American male in his early 40s. He has worked as a JC school teacher for approximately 5 years in the Southeastern United States. Prior to his career as a teacher, Ron worked in a variety of different occupations including college athletics, car sales, and real estate. Ron's JC facility serves approximately 120 male juveniles for an average of six to nine months. Ron was recruited through snowball sampling.

5.3. Data Collection

My primary means of collecting data was through participant interviews. I conducted three in-depth semi-structured interviews with each of the five teacher participants. The first interview asked participants to tell the whole of their career life story. In line with the hermeneutical circle, during the second interview we as researcher and participant focused on specific aspects of the whole of the story. Specifically, I asked the teachers to recount memories of significant high and low moments at work that moved and changed them. Additionally, as a means of eliciting further details about their experiences, we spoke about daily routines and interactions at work. Finally, during the third interview, we as researcher and participant returned to the whole of the story at a bird's eye view after paying close attention to various components and details of their story. The third interview also served as a final member check and a time to reflect on a new understanding of the teacher's experience at work. The interview data collected in this study was analyzed using Gilligan's Listening Guide methodology (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003), which posits that each person is comprised of multiple voices and that we must listen for these various voices in order to understand the whole of that person and their experiences. Listening Guide analysis consists of four steps. The first step is listening to the plot.

In line with Dilthey's hermeneutics, this calls for identifying the big ideas, the characters and landscapes of the entire story, and seeking to identify the major themes in addition to what is expressed and what is not. The second and third steps hone in on specific parts of the story. The second step, crafting I poems, focuses specifically on the voice of the "I" who is speaking.

Each "I" passage is extracted from the transcript and kept in the same sequence in which they appeared in the transcript. Each phrase becomes its own separate line of the I poem. By creating an I poem, the listener is able to isolate the "I" voice and attend to its unique rhythms and expression that may otherwise get lost in the story (Gilligan et al., 2003). The third step is listening for contrapuntal voices. Contrapuntal voices refer to the multiple voices of the teller. They focus closely on emotions, actions, and/or beliefs that were prominent across interviews. Just as Dilthey's hermeneutic circle returns to the whole story after attending to its various parts, the fourth and final step of the Listening Guide is to return back to the whole of the participant's story and synthesize the findings based on the first three steps of the Listening Guide. The entire process allows the researcher to arrive at a new level of understanding. Our guiding question during the synthesis process was: What have you come to know as a result of this process?

6. Results

6.1. Step One: The Plot

Ron is an African American man in his mid-forties. He has been a teacher for five years, all of them at one JC school in the southeastern United States. During my three meetings with Ron, I made note that he came across as a calm and self-assured man of few words with a simple, routine approach to the way he taught in a JC school. I keep it simple. I keep it simple. I could be wrong, but this is my meat and potatoes version of teaching. Say it how you like it, I'm just meat and potatoes. At the start of our first interview, he told me that he refused to sugarcoat things. He would be telling me the black and white truth about his experiences, even if it came across that he did not do things the "right" way as a teacher in JC: "I do stuff kind of backwards. We all keep our secrets but yeah that's mine. Honestly, I do not do the employee handbook. It does not work for me."

When Ron reflected on how he entered the teaching field, he told me that it was never in his plan to become a teacher. He held a variety of jobs up through this mid-thirties including: coaching college athletics after being a college athlete himself, selling cars, and, just before teaching, he worked in real estate. Ron realized that he needed a new career plan when he witnessed the slow down and eventual crash of the real estate market in 2008. His wife, Mary, had also had been experiencing difficulty finding work. Their long-time friends in town, another married couple named Greg and Lois, suggested that they consider applying for jobs at the local JC facility where they worked. Greg was the director of the corrections facility and Lois was a teacher in the facility's school. Shortly thereafter, Ron's wife, Mary, followed their advice and joined the school as a teacher. Because Ron was underemployed, he found that he visited his wife and friends often at the JC facility:

"It really was not a plan, I was in real estate, doing some investing in real estate and houses and real estate slowed down so that's when I started coming up here just to visit cause I had some down time. Those visits soon led to his decision to become a teacher there. I got talking to the kids inside the facility during my visits and one thing led to another. Finally one day, the director of the facility was kind of like, "Hey, have you thought about teaching?" And I was like, "Really, no, I had not." Probably, a month later after that, I started teaching. And that's kind of how I ended up teaching here. I think this year marks five years."

Ron described his teaching routine as being very consistent and simple over the past five years. He had changed close to nothing about his routine since his first days in the classroom. While he did not describe having many resources, he also did not seem very concerned about it. Ron commented,

"The only things I really have in my classroom are my paper, books, pencils, and a few things on the wall, but there's not a whole lot cause they end up tearing it all up. It's pretty lean. I've heard people complain about textbooks. Would it be more convenient? Yeah. But I go online. You can print worksheets off a computer. People complain that we got these old textbooks. Well I teach history and history ain't changed. The information on WWII is still the same."

Although Ron recently celebrated five years at the facility, he seemed uneasy when he spoke about his satisfaction with the work. He commented frequently about growing concerns of becoming too bored with the work the longer he stayed in the position: “I’m going to need a different type of challenge, whether it’s 100% different or if, you know, if it’s just a certain percent different, but I need to add something. I’m going to need a change.”

6.2. My response to the plot

In listening for Ron’s plot, I began to hear that he was portraying himself as collected and matter of fact when he spoke about his teaching practices in the classroom. I also began to hear a side of Ron that seemed isolated and stagnant in his work. As he reflected on finishing his fifth year, he spoke believing this job was not a permanent aspect of his life.

He felt as though he would have to move on to other work eventually but did not know when or where. He seemed only able to assert confidence in his knowledge that he could not picture himself as a teacher forever. Ron seemed to situate his desire to leave as simply being rooted in boredom. As I honed in on the various parts of Ron’s story, I gained a better understanding of what Ron’s teaching practices and relationships at work were like, and why he was growing bored enough to consider leaving this career.

6.3. Step Two: I-Poems

In this section, I present two I-poems crafted directly from Ron’s interview transcripts. Each poem is followed by a response describing what I gleaned about Ron’s understanding of his experiences teaching in JC schools.

I-poem one: I’ll tell them

I’ll tell them they need to get their pencil, paper, and book.
 I’ll tell them the pages on the board and they’ll have a seat and
 I either have them start reading out loud, or
 I’ll read to them.
 I’ll tell them what notes to write or if we’re doing definitions, what definitions to write.
 I answer questions throughout the class period but for the most part,
 I’m just trying to keep them busy
 I’ll tell them to turn in their work at the end of class cause once they turn it in, and there’s 20 minutes left,
 that’s when they start talking and getting loose and it’s just hard to keep the class in line
 I’ll just tell them to keep everything until the hallway calls and says, “Hey it’s time for them to line up to go to
 their next class.”
 I’ll tell them that’s when they turn in their work.
 I try to keep class the same, to not start switching it up. They can’t handle a whole lot of change.

The act of isolating I-statements revealed Ron’s authoritative and highly prescriptive approach to teaching his students. His interactions with students appeared very one-sided in nature. The majority of the lines began with, “I’ll tell them,” and each line revealed a way in which Ron worked to meet his top priority for each instructional period: remaining in full control of the students from the time they entered the classroom until they left.

I-poem two: I’m not going to do this forever

I’m not going to do this forever,
 I do know that.
 I might at some point get into management,
 I said I wasn’t going to get back into management.
 I’m going to need to make changes at some point
 I’m probably going to end up getting a little too content,
 I’m good for now.
 I might move over to the operations side of things.
 I won’t be teaching 10-15 years from now,

I am pretty sure of that.
 I just can't.
 I mean
 I've never done anything for that long.
 I mean,
 I was in the car business for a long time,
 I know I'm going to need a change.
 I mean, a different type of challenge,
 I need to add something cause otherwise,
 I'll end up just getting content.
 I'll get bored.

I isolated this portion of Ron's interview to craft a second I-poem because it stood in contrast to the prescriptive and all-knowing attitude of Ron in the classroom revealed in the first I-poem. When Ron spoke more broadly about the future of his career, his confidence and self-assured nature wavered significantly. He stumbled in his speech often and stammered as he repeatedly said, "I mean" as he ruminated on potential options for future work. The only time he utilized a confident "I know" statement was in support to assertions that he would not teach forever.

6.4. Step Three: Contrapuntal Voices

Voice of coach

In listening to Ron as he spoke about his teaching practice, I heard him repeatedly liken his pedagogical practice to his former work as a coach. Every day at school was a solid and predictable routine much like regularly scheduled football practice. He spoke about having consistent goals and expectations for all of his students regardless of their backgrounds and any perceived impairments they brought to the classroom. Some of my kids will say, "Well I'm bipolar," and I'm like, "I don't buy into it, which I should, but I don't buy into kids telling me that they're bipolar or have anger issues and all that. Everybody has issues, stop using that as an excuse."

He viewed the students as his players and his job as one to provide rigorous training, tough love, and no excuses. As new students entered his classroom for the first time, he assimilated them into the team culture and values. You pretty much have to train the kids to do what you want them to do, meeting your expectations. Education is not high on their list, so if it's not high on the list, the first thing you gotta do is get some order in your class because otherwise they're not listening to you whatsoever. It takes some time to get them to know what I expect but all of a sudden I have them telling the new students, "Hey you come in this class, Ron deals with these behaviors but here's what he doesn't deal with."

Once students were members of his class, Ron expressed that his philosophy was that he would help those that wanted to be helped. If students were not ready or willing to work, he focused his energies elsewhere, explaining, "If you're not going to do work, sit down and be quiet and take a zero like a man." What Ron primarily cared about in his work was positioning himself as a mentor to his students. Ron explained:

"Honestly, I hope that my students will get something out of what I do. I mean they have to get some education, but I do spend more time on mentoring cause the majority of the time when they get out, it's not going to matter so much if they got an A in class or B in class, or a D in class. It's not going to be their issue. Their main issue is staying out of trouble, not doing stupid stuff. So that's, my thing, just talking to the kids. Some will listen and some won't but all you can do is talk to them."

The emphasis that Ron placed on mentoring rang particularly true for his relationships with his most challenging students. Ron told me about how most of the students would enter the facility, meet him for the first time, and proclaim that they hated him. Over time and with tough love, Ron reported that most of the students grew to respect and care for him:

"Especially if you're one of the worst kids, my philosophy really goes back to my days of coaching sports. I will pretty much borderline abuse you when you come into my class. And then if I see you picking on kids and cussing them out, I terrorize you until you break. I'll call them every name I'm not supposed to. Once those kids that are the worst have been here for awhile I break them. About two, three, four months in, they might get kicked out of somebody else's class and you know what? They'll want to come to my class. I broke them."

Ron believed that he tried his best with his students. He gave them the structure and tough love he believed they needed each day. He was also keenly aware that he was unable to get through to every student, and not every student that entered his classroom would experience a favorable outcome. He described having learned to appreciate successes when he saw them, no matter how big, small, or seldom they happened. In those moments of success, he knew he had done something right:

“The powerful moments are those few times we happen to run into somebody who left the program and they’re not locked back up. Something as simple as that, that they’re in school or they have a job, especially after it’s been a year or two since they’ve left and they’re like, “No I’m doing good, haven’t gone back to jail, got my life in order, working here, and I’m going to school.” That’s pretty impactful because that doesn’t happen very often.”

Voice of grit

As Ron reflected on the work he did with his students and the few and far between successes, I began to hear a second voice: the Voice of Grit. While the Voice of Coach illuminated the ways in which Ron believed he ran a tight ship at work, maintained full control, and was able to reach most of his students, he also spoke about unpleasant aspects of his work. He portrayed his JC school as a tough, gritty place where not just anyone could be successful as a teacher. Consequently, he had strong opinions regarding who was appropriate for work in this setting:

“For me, you have to have a nasty streak. You can work in a public school but it probably wouldn’t be a great fit. You got to have an edge here. To me, whether I’m right or wrong, you have to have an edge. This made being a teacher in JC tremendously different than a more traditional public school teaching position, from his perspective. He felt that it would be nearly impossible for the same person to be appropriate as a teacher in both JC schools and more general public school settings. For the most part, you’re cut out for this type of job or you’re cut out for a job in the public school system, or you might not be cut out for teaching anybody, but for you to do well here, that’s different than being able to work in the public school system. And most teachers in the public school system, they’d come here and would be like, “Oh hell no!” This is a different type of kid, you know. They cuss you out, fight every day, this that, and the other. Teachers don’t have to deal with that in the regular school system because students know they’re suspended if they act that way. Or they’ll get sent to alternative school because the public school won’t deal with that behavior. But here, that’s it. You see that every day. These kids aren’t going anywhere. Oh no, you’re teaching a different type of kid here.”

He recalled watching a steady stream of teaching staff come and go from the JC school. He believed this stemmed from the fact that most of them had unrealistic expectations about what work was like in JC. In fact, the only time that I heard Ron speak about co-workers was when he talked about how frequently they complained about the conditions at work or the ways in which he felt they were inappropriate for the job:

“I see a lot of people begin complaining here in this job. They complain about textbooks and materials. They complain about discipline. To me, if you’re that person, I’d grit my teeth and I’m like, quit complaining! Look out the window, there’s a barbed wire fence. That’s a reminder, if you forget, that you work in a jail.”

Ron asserted that he never complained about his work. His attitude was that if you chose to work in JC, you should expect that the conditions were going to be poor. He believed that if you wanted better working conditions and more resources, you should work in a more prestigious school setting. If you chose to work in a JC school setting, Ron believed that you probably were not “good enough” to be working in a different type of school. In listening to the Voice of Grit, it seemed that both the students and teachers in JC schools were forgotten about and unimportant to the rest of society:

“A lot of people, they get twisted about what it’s like to work here and you got some people in this school that are prima donnas, and I think, if you’re this damn smart why don’t you go to Columbia to teach? If you’re working here teaching, obviously you qualify to work here to teach, not at Columbia, or Oxford, so quit acting.”

Ron also spoke specifically about the grit associated with the JC student population. Although Ron portrayed across interviews that he felt competent and confident in his teaching ability, he still believed that this was one of the toughest populations. He believed teachers needed to adjust their expectations related to student behavior in JC:

“These students will just destroy you. I see it all the time. ...Some people, they’re like, “Hey my students won’t be quiet. Will you come tell them to be quiet?” My reaction is, come on. You can’t work here if you’re that person. You can’t work here. I mean it, you won’t last here, put it that way. If you’re that person, I guarantee you are either thinking about quitting, or you’re currently looking for a job or they’re going to run you away, but you’re not going to be happy. I’ve never seen it work.”

The one time during the interview that Ron got emotional was when he recounted a challenging moment that had just occurred at school. He told me about a student that experienced great success during his time in JC: “He did real well in the program, was qualified to work in the kitchen, and qualified for off campus visits, and was very respectful, always did his work. Three days after he was released, he was shot and killed in a gang-related incident while trying to purchase a gun illegally.” Tears welled up in Ron’s eyes as he told me the story: “I mean that’s one of those situations where you would have never guessed it. But he was a gang member and you would have never had known. Real, real nice kid.”

Ron had to break the news to his students and it startled him to see how detached the students were in the wake of this news: “I mean they were upset, because you know, a lot of them knew the kid. But after like twenty minutes, they’re on with their day. They’re so far detached from a lot of things. Plenty of other bad things happen to them throughout their lives, so that just adds on to the list.” I noticed that Ron was able to move on to other topics of conversation in our interview quite quickly after sharing this emotional story, as well. It made me wonder if subconsciously he had to learn how to move on from difficult things just like his students because they were such a common occurrence in his work.

6.5 Step Four: Returning to Ron’s Whole

The fourth step of Ron’s Listening Guide process is to return to the whole. What have I come to understand as a result of this process and what evidence supports my understanding? I reflect once more on the guiding research question: how do teachers understand (make meaning of; interpret) their experiences working in the JC school setting? In the case of Ron, one of the most striking aspects of his story was not what he said, but rather what was left unsaid. First, he spoke very little about his colleagues. The only times he spoke about them was when he reflected on how inappropriate they were for work in JC schools. He never spoke about positive relationships or collaboration with co-workers. Additionally, Ron did not speak once about the school administration. Perhaps unknowingly, Ron positioned himself as a teacher in isolation that performed the same routines day in and day out. Second, although the majority of what Ron spoke about was within the context of how different JC schools and students were from traditional schools and students, he never spoke about any sort of training that he or other staff could or did receive prior to or during their tenure in JC. He had a very black and white attitude of individuals either being appropriate for the setting or not, end of story. Perhaps Ron’s inability to imagine remaining in JC schools for much longer was due to the fact that his experiences there were characterized as an experience in isolation and stagnation. He had not developed collaborative relationships with colleagues or administration, and had not engaged in any meaningful training that would push him to try new innovations or view his work or students from different perspectives. Instead, he felt like he had mastered the work and his chief concern was growing bored in the profession if he remained in the JC classroom for much longer.

7. Discussion

It was very clear that Ron prided himself in his mentoring skills and the tight, consistent teaching routine he had in place for instruction. He was especially proud of his mastery of these skills in light of what a difficult setting he perceived JC to be for a teacher. Although the JC school setting was not for everyone, he believed that he had possessed the skills and disposition necessary to be effective there. After completing his Listening Guide, a strong question that emerged for me was the tremendous potential that may have been lost as a result of the fact that Ron never had the chance to develop and grow as a teaching professional. Based on his account, there was no emphasis on collaborative relationships among colleagues in his school, no opportunities for meaningful professional development, and a lack of resources beyond old textbooks and worksheets from the Internet.

How might Ron, the proud Coach and mentor, have been motivated by the successes that would likely have emerged as a result of these opportunities and resources? Instead of being someone with minimal expectations for himself, his colleagues, and his students, and confident he would soon leave for other work, his outcomes may have been different. He may have become a longstanding teacher leader in JC schools.

Teachers in JC are put in some of the most difficult situations and for all kinds of reasons have the least support in figuring out how to teach in this setting (DelliCarpini, 2008; Kvarfordt, Purcell, & Shannon, 2005; Mathur et al., 2009; Mathur et al., 2010). Furthermore, most teachers come into this unique setting with little to no related prior experience or training for JC schools. What they do bring with them are preconceived expectations about the work, their colleagues, and their students. School leaders in JC schools should carefully consider the results of this study in order to develop meaningful professional learning opportunities to support their teachers. Professional learning opportunities can serve as a vehicle to support teachers and empower them with academic and behavioral management strategies to effectively support their students. In order for professional learning opportunities to be meaningful and the innovations to be sustainable, school leaders must first understand where incoming teachers are starting from in terms of their expectations for the work. Second, professional learning activities must be designed with the school's unique contextual factors in mind (Bryk et al., 2010; Klingner, Boardman, & McMaster, 2013). School leaders should offer setting-appropriate collective professional learning opportunities focused on (a) effective instructional strategies and (b) facility-wide positive behavior management strategies.

First, teachers need access to, and support in implementation of, appropriate instructional strategies and knowledge on how to adapt materials as needed for the JC setting in the core academic subject areas (DelliCarpini, 2008; Gagnon et al., 2012). Previous research has revealed that teachers in JC schools rarely use effective instructional strategies for students with disabilities and perhaps unsurprisingly, they do not feel confident about implementation either (DelliCarpini, 2008). This study further illustrated those findings. It became clear that a common challenge for the group of teachers in this study was that they needed support in organizing and implementing instruction in this challenging instructional context. Furthermore, it became clear that it made a difference when all teachers in a school possessed a shared understanding of instructional strategies across classrooms. Second, evidence from this study supports recommendations from scholars that education and security personnel participate together in professional learning opportunities focused on addressing student behavior and safety issues through a system-wide plan such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Gagnon et al., 2012; Horner, Sugai, Todd, and Lewis-Palmer, 2005; Houchins et al., 2006). A growing body of research indicates promising results stemming from PBIS implementation in JC schools (Nelson et al., 2009; Nelson, Jolivet, Leone, & Mathur, 2010).

Although JC schools operate within broader corrections facilities, education and security seldom receive collective training. Consequently, the punitive priorities and approaches favored by security personnel often clash with those favored by education personnel (Gagnon, Rockwell, & Scott, 2008; Leone & Weinberg, 2010; Nelson, Jolivet, Leone, & Mathur, 2010). To further complicate matters, both education and security personnel often possess little knowledge about effective behavior management practices (Houchins et al., 2004) and security personnel, often required to hold no more than a high school diploma, possess little to no knowledge about disabilities nor do they understand how disabilities may affect behavior (Kvarfordt et al., 2005; Nelson et al.). The magnitude of these issues is reflected in the turnover rates in JC facilities. In one study, approximately twenty-five percent of new hires resigned from their positions within twelve months of their hire dates (Matz, Woo, & Kim, 2014), and this is not including those employees who have not yet quit but have intentions and/or are actively planning to resign (Wells, Minor, Lambert, & Tilley, 2016).

In order to facilitate cohesive and effective JC school operations, education and security personnel must participate in collective professional learning opportunities (Houchins, Shippen, & Murphy, 2012; Gagnon et al., 2012; Leone & Weinberg, 2010). The professional learning opportunities that school leaders offer must be designed to occur over a sustained period of time and allow for interactive learning among colleagues and with experts. This in turn allows time for the development of collegial relationships, to ensure that all personnel are operating under a shared understanding and innovations are being implemented with fidelity, and to increase the likelihood that the new practices will be sustained over time (Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010; Nelson et al., 2010).

8. Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, the participant did not craft his Listening Guides narrative independently. As the researcher, I played the primary role in the construction of the final narrative, which may have altered their interpretation of his work experience in unintended ways (Lewis, 2008). Second, the small sample size limits the generalizability of findings to other JC school teachers. Finally, this study was limited by the participating teacher's ability to verbalize his understanding of his experiences. The depth and breadth of understanding that teachers chose to reveal and were able to share was out of my control. Rich descriptions were provided to allow readers to judge for themselves the degree to which the findings are applicable to other teachers and contexts.

8. Conclusion

This study contributes in-depth knowledge of how one teacher understands (make meaning of; interpret) his working conditions in JC schools. Only a small number of previous studies examined factors pertaining to teacher job satisfaction and attrition in JC schools; this was the first study to directly engage in a qualitative manner with teachers about their daily experiences in the JC classroom. Without appropriate opportunities for professional learning and time to develop collegial relationships, teacher experiences and the ways in which they engage with colleagues and students may suffer. Ultimately, their commitment to their work may be seriously affected. Findings from this study increase our understanding of JC teacher experiences and emotional responses to their working conditions.

This new knowledge offers implications for policy makers and school leaders alike and the ways in which they support teachers working in JC schools and choose to build working conditions in their school communities. The stakes are high. The prospects afforded to teachers in JC schools for continued opportunities to learn alongside their colleagues and foster meaningful relationships with them may be the key to satisfaction and commitment to their work, and improved experiences and outcomes for the children in their classrooms.

References

- Brown, L. M. & Gilligan, C. (1992). *Meeting at the crossroads*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J.Q. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ciftci, S. & Pesta, G. B. (2006). *Florida's juvenile justice teachers: Qualifications and retention* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <http://criminology.fsu.edu/center/jjeep/research-pubs-presentations.php>
- Coffey, O. D., & Gemignani, M. G. (1994). *Effective practices in juvenile correctional education: A study of the literature and research, 1980-1992*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. The National Office for Social Responsibility.
- DelliCarpini, M. (2008). Creating communities of professional practice in the correctional education classroom. *The Journal of Correctional Education, 59*, 219-230.
- Dilthey, W. (1976). The development of hermeneutics. In H. Rickman (Ed. & Trans.), *W. Dilthey: Selected writings* (pp. 246-263). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge, University Press. (Original work published 1900).
- Gagnon, J. C. (2010). State-level curricular, assessment, and accountability policies, practices, and philosophies for exclusionary school settings. *Journal of Special Education, 43*, 206–219.
- Gagnon, J. C., & Barber, B. R. (2010). Characteristics of and services provided to youth in secure care facilities. *Behavioral Disorders, 36*, 7-19.
- Gagnon, J. C., Houchins, D. E., & Murphy, K. M. (2012). Current juvenile corrections professional development practices and future directions. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 35*, 333-344.
- Gagnon, J. C., Murphy, K. M., Steinberg, M. A., Gaddis, J., & Crockett, J. (2013). IDEA-related professional development in juvenile corrections schools. *Journal of Special Education Leadership, 26*, 93-105.
- Gagnon, J. C., Rockwell, S., & Scott, T. M. (2008). Positive behavior supports in exclusionary schools: A practical approach based on what we know. *Focus on Exceptional Children, 41*(1), 1-20.
- Gersten, R., Yovanoff, P., & Harniss, M. K. (2001). Working in special education: Factors that enhance special educators' intent to stay. *Exceptional Children, 67*, 549-567.
- Gilligan, C., Spencer, R., Weinberg, M. K., & Bertsch, T. (2003). On the listening guide: A voice-centered relational method. In P. M. Camic, J. E. Rhodes, & L. Yardley (Eds.), *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design* (pp. 157-172). Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association.
- Houchins, D. E., Puckett-Patterson, D., Crosby, S., Shippen, M., & Jolivette, K. (2009). Barriers and facilitators to providing incarcerated youth with a quality education. *Preventing School Failure, 53*, 159-166.

- Houchins, D. E., Shippen, M., & Jolivet, K. (2006). System reform and job satisfaction of juvenile justice teachers. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 29*, 127-136.
- Horner, R. H., Sugai, G., Todd, A. W., & Lewis-Palmer, T. (2005). School-wide positive behavior support. In L. Bambara & L. Kern (Eds.), *Individualized supports for students with problem behaviors: Designing positive behavior plans* (pp. 359-390). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Houchins, D. E., Shippen, M. E., McKeand, K., Viel-Ruma, K., Jolivet, K., & Guarino, A. (2010). Juvenile justice teachers' job satisfaction: A comparison of teachers in three states. *Education & Treatment of Children, 33*, 623-646.
- Klingner, J. K., Boardman, A. G., & McMaster, K. L. (2013). What does it take to scale up and sustain evidence-based practices? *Exceptional Children, 79*, 195-211.
- Kvarfordt, C. L., Purcell, P., & Shannon, P. (2005). Youth with learning disabilities in the juvenile justice system: A training needs assessment of detention and court services personnel. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 34*, 27-42.
- Leone, P. E., & Weinberg, L. (2010). *Addressing the unmet needs of children and youth in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems*. Washington, DC: Center for Juvenile Justice Reform.
- Lewis, D. (2008). Using life histories in social policy research: The case of third sector/public sector boundary crossing. *Journal of Social Policy, 37*, 559-578.
- Mathur, S. R., Clark, H. G., & Schoenfeld, N. A. (2009). Professional development: A capacity building model for juvenile correctional education systems. *Journal of Correctional Education, 60*, 164-185.
- Mathur, S. R., & Schoenfeld, N. (2010). Effective instructional practices in juvenile justice facilities. *Behavioral Disorders, 36*, 20-27.
- Matz, A. K., Woo, Y., & Kim, B. (2014). A meta-analysis of the correlates of turnover intent in criminal justice organizations: Does agency type matter? *Journal of Criminal Justice, 42*, 233-243.
- Meisel, S., Henderson, K., Cohen, M., & Leone, P. (1998). Collaborate to educate: Special education in juvenile correctional facilities D. Hammitt (Ed.). In *Building collaboration between education and treatment for at-risk and delinquent youth* (pp. 59-72). Richmond, KY: National Juvenile Detention Association.
- Moody, B. A. (2003). Juvenile corrections educators: Their knowledge and understanding of special education. *Journal of Correctional Education, 54*, 105-107.
- Mulcahy, C. A. & Leone, P. E. (2012). Ensuring that they learn. In *Handbook of Juvenile Forensic Psychology and Psychiatry* (pp. 541-551). New York, NY: Springer.
- Nelson, C. M., Jolivet, K., Leone, P. E., & Mathur, S. R. (2010). Meeting the needs of at-risk and adjudicated youth with behavioral challenges: The promise of juvenile justice. *Behavioral Disorders, 36*, 70-80.
- Nelson, C. M., Sprague, J. R., Jolivet, K., Smith, C. R., & Tobin, T. J. (2009). Positive behavior support in alternative education, community-based mental health and juvenile justice settings. In G. Sugai, R. Horner, G. Dunlap, and W. Sailor (Eds.), *Handbook of positive behavior support* (pp. 465-496). New York, NY: Springer.
- Sickmund, M. (2003). *Juveniles in court*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Tappan, M. (1990). Hermeneutics and moral development: Interpreting narrative representations of moral experience. *Developmental Review, 10*, 239-265.
- Wang, X., Blomberg, T., and Li, S. D. (2005). Comparison of the Educational Deficiencies of Delinquent and Non-delinquent Students. *Evaluation Review, 29*, 291-312.
- Wells, J. B., Minor, K. I., Lambert, E. G., & Tilley, J. L. (2016). A model of turnover intent and turnover behavior among staff in juvenile corrections. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 43*, 1558-1579.
- Wright, R. (2005). Going to teach in prisons: Culture shock. *Journal of Correctional Education, 56*, 19-38.