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Why World Language Teachers Stay: Teacher Retention in West Virginia, Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The present study investigates World Language (WL) teacher retention and the challenges and opportunities of teaching a WL in a rural state. Data come from ethnographic interviews conducted with 10 participants, current Spanish teachers teaching throughout West Virginia. Through thematic analysis, eight themes emerged: Lack of Exposure to Cultural Diversity, Lack of Qualified Teachers, Toll on Mental Health, Pressure to Defend the Value of WLs, Remaining in West Virginia, Passing on the Love of Language and Cultural Learning, Innovative Pedagogical Approaches, and Strong Professional Support Systems.

Keywords*: World Language Teaching, Spanish, Challenges, Opportunities, Teacher Retention*

Background

West Virginia is well known for its natural beauty and rugged geography, which make it a popular nature tourism destination nationally and internationally. However, it struggles both economically and educationally, most recently receiving a ranking of 48 in both categories from U.S. News & World Report (2024).

Historically, many Appalachian communities have been wary of public education, as they viewed the Church as the primary moral educator, teaching children how to read for the purpose of reading the Bible (Shaw, 2004). It was not until the early years of the 20th century that West Virginians began to send their children to public schools, institutions which were often criticized for their inferior quality. The geography of the state had a detrimental impact as well, both in terms of available educators and adequate attendance. For those children who were able to attend school, "educational attainment beyond the eighth grade was considered exceptional, rather than the norm, until about WWII" (p. 308).

Today, West Virginia faces ongoing challenges, including critically low standardized test scores and a widespread failure to meet benchmarks (West Virginia Department of Education, 2024), limited access to educational resources,

a lack of cultural diversity, and inadequate advocacy for arts and cultural education. At present, there is no state World Language (WL) graduation requirement (West Virginia Department of Education, n.d.), such that WLs are generally viewed as extracurriculars, underfunded and under supported at both the local and state levels. In this context, the job of World Language (WL) teachers is not only critically important but also immensely challenging, encompassing not only providing high quality education with limited resources but also intensive advocacy work within the school and community.

To address these problems, it is important to understand the issue firsthand from the perspective of practicing WL educators throughout the state. The present investigation, thus, seeks to learn from these practitioners, exploring both the challenges and potential opportunities associated with teaching a WL in West Virginia and considering what these mean for WL teacher retention. That is, in teachers' discussion of their job, what particular factors make them want to continue teaching and remain in the profession and what factors are obstacles that need to be addressed in order to better support WL teacher retention. The present investigation contributes valuable data on a very little-studied context, the state of West Virginia, while adding to the global body of research on WL teacher retention, which is also currently quite limited.

Literature Review

Within the US, the WL teacher shortage is well-documented historically and remains an ongoing crisis (Boe & Gilford, 1992; Murphy, DeArmand, & Guin, 2003; Swanson, 2008, 2022). According to a study conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2017), WL was the content area with the greatest teacher hiring shortage: "forty-four states and Washington, D.C., report[ed] that they cannot find enough qualified teachers to meet current needs." In West Virginia, where Spanish is the most common and often only WL taught in schools, there is currently a Spanish teacher shortage in nearly one third of all counties in the state (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Further exacerbating the problem is a critical lack of teacher preparation programs in the state. At present, just two universities in West Virginia offer a bachelor's degree in Spanish Education. Thus, numerous Spanish positions are currently either unfilled or filled by uncertified teachers.

At the national level, Swanson (2010, 2012) cited five major factors contributing to the WL teacher shortage: retirement, attrition, student enrollments, legislation, and perceptions of the profession. In addition, a trend toward increased enrollment in alternative licensure programs at the expense of traditional teacher training programs is well underway throughout the US (AASCU, 2017; Granados, 2017; Kissau, 2020). Such programs typically offer a lower cost, shorter time frame of completion, and lower minimum standards. Together, these factors have resulted in a widespread lack of well-prepared WL teachers in the classroom nationwide and more acutely so in West Virginia.

Given these conditions, developing targeted efforts toward WL teacher retention is critical. Previous research (McConnell & Swanson, 2024) found that higher levels of professional growth, self-efficacy, and autonomy were most essential in helping

avoid teacher burnout and/or a desire to quit. McConnell (2023) identified teacher empowerment and job satisfaction or fulfillment as the most significant supportive factors.

In Burke and Ceo-DiFrancesco's (2022) investigation of the retention of teacher candidates in WL Education programs, professional relationships and collaboration amongst WL professionals in diverse roles to "preserve, promote, and perpetuate WL education for global citizenship" (p.334) was cited as the most important factor. Kissau, Davin and Wang (2019) reported that WL teacher candidates were most motivated by positive perceptions of their own teaching ability and preparedness as well as their potential to positively contribute to society and children's futures. Similarly, in their study of heritage-speaker teachers, Novella and Bustamante (2023) reported that fostering confidence in teachers' own Spanish language skills and providing high quality training in pedagogy and sociolinguistics to help teachers feel competent and well-prepared were essential factors.

According to Swanson (2008, 2012), teachers are more likely to remain in the profession when they can use their own unique talents and skills in the classroom. Those who enjoy working with and serving people (social personality style), perceive themselves as expressive and creative (artistic personality style), and those who are naturally inclined toward leadership (enterprising personality style) are the best suited for WL teaching and tend to have a stronger sense of self-efficacy. Taken holistically, this research reveals three primary factors supportive of WL teacher retention: professional support, self-efficacy and confidence in one's teaching abilities, and using one's own talents and skills to make an impact.

Conversely, it is also essential to consider factors detrimental to WL teacher retention. In their study of rural public high school WL teachers in Georgia, Acheson, Taylor and Luna (2016) identified five such factors: "perceived lack of community and institutional support for FL [Foreign Language] teachers, an excessive burden for motivation felt by these teachers, the use of teacher emotion labor to motivate their students, emotional burnout of the teachers, and perceived lack of teacher efficacy" (p. 522). With respect to the last two, the investigators reported that they seemed to be mutually influencing and lead to a downward spiral resulting in job burnout and possible teacher attrition.

The present investigation seeks to explore these issues within the context of West Virginia, in order to discover which particular challenges and opportunities are associated with teaching a WL in the state from the perspective of practicing teachers. Likewise, it endeavors to offer new insights and contribute additional data to existing research to help broaden our collective understanding of the factors associated with WL teacher retention and to help identify corresponding WL teacher retention strategies that seem most effective. The findings of this study, thus, make a valuable contribution to both the relatively limited existing body of research on the topic overall, and to the even more limited research available in the context of West Virginia.

Methodology

The Participants

The 10 participants in this study are WL teachers in West Virginia, who currently teach Spanish across multiple grade levels. Their geographic distribution is varied, with participants teaching in five different counties located throughout the state, two in the northern part of West Virginia, two in the southwest, and one in the mid-eastern region.

All participants are women. With respect to origin, two participants were born in a foreign country, four were born out of state, and four were born in West Virginia. Two are native Spanish speakers and eight are native English speakers. Participants have varying degrees of experience teaching a WL, ranging from early-career to mid-career and veteran teachers. Pseudonyms are used throughout the study to protect the anonymity of the participants (see Appendix A for participant information summary).

Research Questions

This qualitative investigation utilizes thematic analysis of ethnographic interviews to explore the following research questions:

1. What do WL teachers in West Virginia perceive to be the greatest challenges associated with their job?

2. From the teachers' perspective, are there any positive aspects or opportunities associated with teaching a WL in West Virginia?

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were identified and recruited based on existing researcher contacts and networking. Once recruited, each participant selected how they would like to meet for the interview: online via videoconferencing, in person, or via written communication. Two participants selected a nearby location, six participants chose online meetings via Zoom, and two opted for written communication through email. The interviews were guided by a set of predetermined questions (see Appendix B) and then flowed naturally to other associated topics, according to the direction each interviewee took. The average interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio recorded and later transcribed by the researcher conducting the interview. The interview process was guided by the principles of ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1979). In order to develop rapport, the researchers used existing contacts and networking and allowed the participants to select the interview mode and setting. The interview questions were largely open-ended in nature and used as a starting point to inspire a naturally flowing conversation that was largely directed by participants, following the principle that "both questions and answers must be discovered from informants" (p. 84). In addition, throughout the interview, the researcher engaged in active listening and paraphrasing of interviewees' responses, to further clarify and define their responses and correct any misunderstandings.

Data collected from the interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis,

following Braun & Clarke's (2006) method: "familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the report" (p. 87). The first review of interview transcripts involved coding data systematically and identifying potential themes. Themes were then checked to make sure they accurately represented the coded data extracts. Subsequently, a thematic map was generated and themes were more clearly defined and specified, then refined, and/or regrouped, as necessary, with multiple readings. The eight themes that emerged included: Lack of Exposure to Cultural Diversity, Lack of Qualified Teachers, Toll on Mental Health, Pressure to Defend the Value of WLs, Remaining in West Virginia, Passing on the Love of Language and Cultural Learning, Innovative Pedagogical Approaches, and Strong Professional Support Systems. The first four themes were collectively identified as 'challenges' and the latter four themes as 'opportunities.' Themes and interpretations were further validated by member checking through follow-up emails.

Findings

All 10 participants perceived their jobs as challenging and, at the same time, offering positive aspects or opportunities. Although presented here as distinct themes, challenges and opportunities sometimes overlapped and certain aspects of the job may present both a challenge and an opportunity simultaneously. In fact, the practice of interpreting their jobs in this nuanced way, from multiple perspectives, was shared by all participants.

Challenges of Teaching a WL in West Virginia

Lack of Exposure to Cultural Diversity

West Virginia is landlocked, as it is surrounded by five other states, all of which are easily accessible through multiple parts of the state itself. West Virginia is widely rural, traditional in values, and prides itself on its history of coal mining and hard work. For many West Virginian students, this is their family's home, has been for generations, and perhaps will be for generations to come. In especially rural areas of the state with limited access to 21st century necessities like internet or even local shopping districts, some students never have the opportunity to leave. When discussing this issue in her interview, Naomi shared, "For some of my kids, their first time out of the county, let alone their state, was a field trip to [the amusement park] Kennywood." This trip is just under two hours away from where her students attend school every day, in Southern Pennsylvania.

All participants taught a WL in some capacity during COVID-19 and shared how important virtual field trips had become in their cultural instruction during that time period. Some of the cultural experiences currently offered by the participants to their students ranged from extra credit dinners at a local Mexican restaurant to international excursions led by tour groups. For instance, at the time of the interviews, Kelsey was preparing for a group trip to Costa Rica with some of her students. Overall, participants viewed this type of travel abroad as the ideal experience they could offer their students, yet further explained that they simply

do not have access to this type of opportunity. Without adequate support from the school district and with students who are faced with significant economic barriers, many of the teachers have set more reasonable travel goals for their students, focused on an elementary understanding of culture and diversity. Even in a school district like Kelsey's where students have access to traveling abroad, she expressed her struggles with educating her students about the importance of learning other cultures when they do not see the application in their daily lives. Macy commented, "the first thing that [my students] really needed to know was diversity," which speaks volumes to the bigger picture problem: a lack of exposure to and knowledge of other cultures and languages.

For participants located in small, tight-knit communities, this lack of cultural exposure is typical and shapes public mindsets. For Amelia, there is a lack of appreciation for other cultures in her district where "coal is king" to the exclusion of all other cultures and her students embody that mentality. This has led to targeted pushback in the classroom where "We speak American here" became the mantra. Amelia described her community as xenophobic and cited this outsider/insider mindset as a major obstacle to WL learning in her classroom. Amelia's students, along with Cheyenne's, even with their districts located at opposite ends of the state, understood the Spanish language as exclusively Mexican, and the terms were often used interchangeably: anyone who spoke Spanish was Mexican, and the Spanish language was sometimes referred to as speaking Mexican. Macy addressed the same issue when she shared, "If all I've accomplished today is that the students aren't calling all Spanish speakers Mexican, I've made significant progress." Instead of seeing Spanish as having many dialectal variations and being spoken in diverse countries throughout the world, the students associated it with only one Hispanic group, Mexicans. Accordingly, the participants expressed that an important part of their job started with correcting this erroneous idea and getting students to think more broadly about Spanish as a world language.

The participants also cited the importance of sharing their personal travel history with their students. All 10 participants have traveled within the state, with eight having left the country on at least one occasion. The West Virginia natives who traveled outside of the country specifically noted the significance of travel in their youth and how it has affected their current outlook on culture and professional formation. Cheyenne, a member of the military, constantly referred to her service days when explaining to her students that language unlocks completely different experiences overseas. She shared, "Every place that I have ever lived in, I have spoken Spanish." Naomi has traveled to both Nicaragua and Mexico at different times in her language acquisition journey and shares with her students how rewarding it is to see yourself progress in vocabulary and confidence. Daphne lived in Mexico for 10 years as an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher and frequently calls on those experiences to demonstrate to her class that traveling is not as out of reach as one might think. All participants enjoy sharing anecdotes with their students and hope to pass on their excitement and love for cultures and languages, which they emphasize go hand in hand.

Lack of Qualified Teachers

The dire need for WL teachers in West Virginia has produced a situation of inadequate training, in which teachers come to the classroom inexperienced, lacking in qualifications, and with insufficient language proficiency. Many current educators who are well-trained and qualified are now tasked with dealing with the repercussions of the underprepared WL teachers and the WL teacher shortage in general. For example, Naomi's second year of teaching was alongside a long-term substitute teacher who held the position for two years because there were no qualified candidates to fill the vacancy. This substitute was a retired French teacher who came out of retirement to help the school. The students were instead largely taught via worksheets, likely with discrete grammar points and non-open-ended questions that did not allow the students to develop their language fluency. There was no cultural instruction and the students seemingly lost interest in language learning.

A similar situation happened in the case of Macy's son, in which his high school Spanish teacher, a former Language Arts teacher, was assigned to cover the position even though she only held a degree in English and had virtually no background in Spanish. This teacher, likewise, used worksheets to teach and could not provide helpful criticism or cultural insight. Macy commented, "[These teachers'] limited knowledge is going to really affect the learning possibilities of their students." This circumstance also places an unnecessary burden on the educators receiving the unprepared students taught by underprepared teachers. Several participants expressed frustration with this circumstance and said they were forced to dramatically modify their lesson plans to remediate the lack of prior learning. In addition, they said that it is extremely detrimental to the progress of the other students in the class who have previously received Spanish instruction from qualified teachers.

In some cases, like that of Kelsey's coworker, the teacher may have some level of content preparation, while having never officially met certification requirements, yet be allowed to continue teaching in their position. Although this particular coworker was unable to pass the Spanish PRAXIS content exam for eight years, she was still allowed to continue teaching because the position could not be filled by a certified Spanish teacher. This practice of filling the classroom with "warm bodies" is part of the larger systemic crisis of WLs in West Virginia.

For those who are interested in becoming WL teachers, ironically, the higher education system is stacked against them. Within the entire state, there are only two institutions that offer undergraduate degrees in Spanish Education: Fairmont State University and Shepherd University. Furthermore, Spanish B.A. programs (non-education track) throughout the state are facing closures or dramatic reductions, even most recently at the state's flagship Research One university, West Virginia University. These circumstances often result in potential WL teachers leaving the state to pursue their education and Spanish language career elsewhere. For those who do decide to earn their Spanish Education degree in state, other obstacles remain, like small program sizes, limited professors, and pressure to major in fields other than WLs, which often result in these students never actually completing their Spanish degree.

Amelia, a West Virginia native who attended college out of state, emphasized

the need for West Virginia to make the pathway to becoming a Spanish teacher much more accessible. Naomi, likewise, commented on the issue, but from a different perspective, stating that holding a Spanish Education degree in West Virginia is so rare and the demand so high, that it results in an almost guaranteed job opportunity: "[A degree in] Spanish Education...that's an instant job! You can walk into any classroom across the state right now and be hired." In fact, the participants lamented the fact that it is commonplace for vacancies to remain unfilled for years at a time, shedding light on the gravity of the state of the WL crisis in West Virginia.

Toll on Mental Health

Mental health also emerged as an important theme in this study, with all participants reporting difficulties managing their work/life balance. Amelia and Daphne, for instance, spoke about feeling overwhelmed as a two-person department responsible for educating a large number of students. Although they are still infinitely passionate about their jobs, they oftentimes put themselves in the position of constantly bringing their work home and grapple with feelings of burnout and overwhelm.

In addition to their heavy workload, many participants live with constant apprehension about the possibility of layoffs. Three participants spoke at length about their departments competing with other arts programs like music, art, and creative writing for limited resources in the face of schoolwide budget cuts and layoffs. In her first teaching position in West Virginia, Amelia was approached by her administration with the news of her layoff. In order to save money, the school district decided to implement a completely online Spanish program administered through West Virginia Virtual School. This would require the labor of only one teacher with no WL training to "monitor" students who were learning asynchronously. Ironically, having lost her job at the school, Amelia applied to work for the West Virginia Virtual School and ended up teaching the exact same students. This case illustrates the high level of adaptability required by the job of teaching a WL in West Virginia, creating a climate of constant uncertainty and instability.

In her district, Naomi was teaching in an innovative program model in the middle school. This program allowed WL instruction to happen at a much younger age and was reportedly a great success. However, despite these positive results, the program was terminated and Naomi was forced to change districts to find a new job. Kelsey, likewise, lost her job due to a program cut. Even after relocating to a nearby county, her work situation remained difficult. In her new school, Kelsey was in a department of two, with class sizes ranging from 20 to 24 students per class and her colleague was an underprepared WL teacher. In her second year, the class sizes increased to 34 to 36 students per class, and she simply could not keep up with the workload. In addition, she was expected to teach a range of Spanish classes across multiple grade levels with only one planning period. Unlike other subjects, especially at the secondary level, WLs in West Virginia are typically taught by departments or units of one to two teachers who cover all levels from beginning to advanced and often teach six distinct course preparations.

Some WL teachers, like Bethany, are faced with an even more demanding workload, as they must accommodate English as a Second Language (ESL) students,

or more appropriately called multilingual learners. Bethany found herself creating two separate lesson plans, so that she could challenge her Spanish speaking ESL students in the Spanish classroom, rather than having them follow the general curriculum. She shared, "It's heartbreaking, because I know why [the guidance counselors] put [those students] here. They know that I can speak Spanish here and help those kids, but what am I supposed to do when I have 20 ESL kids a day and an entire student body to teach?" This excessive workload can, thus, take a heavy toll on the WL teachers' mental health, leaving them exhausted.

Pressure to Defend the Value of WLs

When discussing classroom management and the challenge of motivating students, all participants stressed the foundational lesson that must be taught within the first week: convincing students of the importance of learning a WL. A common question asked by students on the first day was "Why do I have to learn Spanish?" Similarly, the participants shared statements like "We speak American here" and "I've got Google Translate," are all too common amongst their students. Multiple teachers emphasized the importance of "getting buy-in" from their students at the beginning of the school year and said they have learned that their actual language teaching can only be successful if students are invested from the beginning.

For many participants, the inclusion of culture in their selling points is usually what intrigues the students enough to invest in learning the language. These educators report dedicating a great deal of time and energy to developing highly interactive cultural lessons that keep the students motivated and eager to learn the next topic; they feel an intense pressure to create a highly marketable class each day to ''sell" the value of WL learning to students.

In fact, some participants felt obligated to sell the value of WLs as comparable to that of other areas like STEM, to students and colleagues alike. Because WLs are encouraged so strongly by high school counselors, specifically for students who express a desire to attend college, many participants raised the issue of students feeling like they are obligated to take them. Daphne refers to this problem as "the only saving grace" for WL teachers: the administration places a value on maintaining WLs because it is a college entrance requirement. However, many schools in the state have begun prioritizing other types of coursework, including Advanced Placement and dual enrollment courses in other subject areas and fine arts courses, adding unnecessary competition for WLs and increasing the pressure of selling WLs to students.

One of the main ways in which teachers address the importance of WLs in their students' future is by emphasizing the value of WLs in the workforce. Amelia discussed how she likes to remind her students that Spanish can be used in many fields, maybe even especially so in some popular fields in which students plan to work. For example, Naomi's father works for Mon Power, a local electric utility company, and he wishes that he would have taken more Spanish classes in high school because the company's tree-trimming crews oftentimes speak mainly Spanish and very little English. For students who may be interested in other professional fields, she adds, "If you're a doctor, your patient isn't seeing you because they're having a good day. Wouldn't it be nice if you could say, 'Hello, how are you?' in their native language?"

Similarly, Macy likes to ask her students what they want to be when they grow up, and if their answers include any interactions with people, she stresses the importance of speaking another language to create stronger interpersonal relationships.

Daphne, who has worked as an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher in Mexico, pointed out the dramatic difference in motivation between her Mexican students, who saw the immediate value and importance of their second language, and her West Virginian students: "[The Mexican students] know what learning English can do for them. That's their way out, that's their way to a whole new life, if they want it to be... it's not the same for our kids [in the US]." Instead, Daphne has experienced discouraged students who would prefer to use class time to complete homework for other classes, rather than participating and communicating with their classmates. Similarly, Cheyenne, having lived in many countries throughout the world during her time with the military, lamented the lack of value for bilingualism in American society at large and saw addressing this issue as one of her primary responsibilities as a WL educator. She commented, "Monolingualism is a disease, but it can be cured."

Opportunities Associated with Teaching a WL in West Virginia

Remaining in West Virginia

All participants interviewed in this study hope to remain teaching and retire in West Virginia. Some have decided to remain in state circumstantially; children and marriages are among the most popular reasons. However, others could live and teach elsewhere, including in other states which pay significantly more and offer a potentially higher quality of life. Yet, they have chosen to remain in West Virginia because of their love for the state, their desire to be vessels of intercultural and interlinguistic exchange, and their conviction that this is a place where they can make a strong positive impact.

All participants expressed their love for the natural beauty of West Virginia and the sense of community it provides. At the same time, they see a need to connect this sometimes-isolated state with other World cultures and languages. These participants recognize that there is work to be done not only in their schools but far beyond the walls of the classroom. Nadia, who was born and raised in Costa Rica, says that it brings her great joy to educate West Virginians about her native language and culture. "I want them [the public] to know that we bring the world to West Virginia." This intercultural exchange is rich and beneficial to rural states like West Virginia, who can share their native Appalachian culture in return. Nadia says that this provides the foundation for her teaching: "I embrace their culture first, then I share mine." To the extent that students can view their classroom learning as a mutual cultural exchange, they will be more willing to share and find connections between cultures.

Samara and Amelia share similar sentiments and experiences. Samara, who was born in Venezuela and has worked in many different states, currently resides in the rural town in West Virginia where she met her husband. When asked if she would teach anywhere else in the country she responded, "My students are here in West Virginia, so I will be here in West Virginia." Amelia, who currently works as a teacher

in the same high school from which she graduated, affirms: "I intentionally want to be here. I have made the conscious choice to be *here*." Their steadfast commitment to dedicating their careers long term to teaching a WL in West Virginia is evident. Although participants often acknowledged the fact that their job could be easier in a more urban setting with more diversity, they all have intentionally chosen and invested in West Virginia and their students.

Passing on the Love of Language and Cultural Learning

All participants shared their own personal stories of a passion for language teaching that developed in their youth and the ways in which they were inspired by their own teachers. For example, Naomi's original focus in her undergraduate studies was American Sign Language interpretation. Because of her flexible schedule, she decided to take a Spanish class and was so inspired by her professor that she decided to complete an entire bachelor's degree in Spanish. Amelia also discovered her love for education at an early age. She initially thought she would like to be a math teacher, but after her first Spanish class in high school, her plans changed completely. She felt immediately more inspired by Spanish, joking, "Why build imaginary bridges in math class when I can build a real bridge to some place amazing and eat delicious food."

Participants expressed a strong desire to share this passion for languages and pass it on to their students. They hoped to serve as language learner role models for their students. Since none of the participants grew up bilingual, they appreciate the difficulty of learning a second language and feel that they provide inspiration for their students that acquiring a second language is possible with hard work. Amelia likes to remind her students that she is from the town in which she teaches, so she can directly relate to their cultural journey and linguistic experience: "I went from being the free lunch kid to the kid who traveled the world, and language is how I got there." She tells her students that she is living proof that this language acquisition journey is very possible and uses this personal connection to empower students to envision themselves as future Spanish/English bilinguals. Samara discussed her own difficulties coming to the United States of struggling to adapt to the culture, understanding different accents and dialects, and fully acquiring the language. These personal experiences inspire Samara's pedagogical approach of teaching her Spanish classes 95% in the target language. She explains that she implements this approach because she understands the value of being completely immersed in the language and the feeling of empowerment that comes with being able to succeed in that context. She asserts, "[Students] hear English all the time! My classroom might be the only place they hear Spanish. When I invite you to my classroom, I expect you to speak in Spanish."

These teachers further inspire their students by recognizing their hard work and dedication and connecting them with experiences outside the classroom. Cheyenne reminds her students that "if you are tired after [World] Language class, you are using your brain." She acknowledges the sustained effort language learning takes and encourages her students to see it as a worthwhile investment. Samara provides her students with numerous extracurricular opportunities, for instance the Hispanic Honor Society, which hosts cultural festivals and events for Spanish students at

neighboring schools. She has also recently been offering her students the chance to take the Seal of Biliteracy test, a nationally recognized exam. Of the 20 students that took the test last academic year, 18 passed.

Innovative Pedagogical Approaches

Despite the numerous challenges posed by their current teaching situation, participants chose to respond with a positive perspective. All expressed that they viewed their challenging teaching circumstances as an opportunity to innovate and inspire their students and design highly engaging and motivating lessons and activities. The teachers in this study were very eager to share their examples of creativity and flexibility in fulfilling state standards and meeting the unique needs of their students.

Naomi, for instance, designed her innovative program, beginning in the 6th grade, to incorporate her students' immediate interests. She commented "these kids just desperately wanted to know stuff, and that was a fun problem to have." Naomi responded to this circumstance by designing lessons based on student questions and topics of interest that they brought to the classroom. This, in turn, further fueled student curiosity, with many of her students avidly working outside of the classroom, reading ahead to come prepared with new questions each class.

Other participants shared their teaching philosophies and innovative pedagogies. Kelsey's teaching philosophy "you can't make the kids care, but you can make it fun," and her integration of interdisciplinary collaboration are central to her teaching practice. She incorporates field trips into each of her cultural units, for instance dinner at a local Mexican restaurant, as a way for students to have a real-world connection and experience of what they are learning in the classroom. Similarly, Cheyenne has expanded upon this idea by setting up an interactive cultural lesson in which her students take cooking classes at a local Mexican restaurant, learning to cook traditional dishes, while reviewing Spanish commands and kitchen vocabulary. Nadia motivates her students by teaching them to play chess in Spanish, incorporating vocabulary necessary to play the game, numbers and letters, etc. Cheyenne uses science experiments to review commands and learn science vocabulary in Spanish.

Strong Professional Support Systems

For these WL educators, strong support systems are essential to their ability to persevere in the face of difficulties. For example, when asked what was necessary for WLs to be cultivated in West Virginia schools, Amelia offered three Ts for success: "Time, trust, and tons of support!" All participants expressed that the reason they value support so highly is because of their own personal experiences surviving with little to no support in the past. They noted a need for support on different levels—professional, intellectual, and interpersonal, and shared the ways in which they reached out for and connected with these types of support. The participants in this study were already professionally connected on many levels, for example, several had attended or had at least heard of the cultural concerts hosted by Samara. The majority of participants were also involved with the WVFLTA (West Virginia

Foreign Language Teachers Association), a state-created organization geared towards supporting a unified coalition of educators who promote the study of WLs within the state. In fact, four of the participants currently serve on the executive committee. On an interpersonal and intellectual level, Daphne and Amelia work together at the same high school, sharing their successes and struggles, while pursuing professional development opportunities together. As a department of two, their dependence on each other exceeds typical workplace expectations. They encourage each other to grow professionally, for instance through their current plan to work towards their National Board certification together, reminding each other to take downtime and breaks.

Another source of interpersonal support for these participants has come from their school community. Naomi shared her story of the overwhelming support she received from colleagues when she found out her son had been diagnosed with cancer. During that time, the principal of her school personally came to her house to mow the lawn and fellow teachers donated PTO days, so that she could still receive her salary and pay the bills. Naomi commented: "Some administrations describe their schools as families, but I know that isn't true. But my school... they really are family."

Bethany and June found support and community in returning to higher education, although they were initially nervous because they were nontraditional students. Both began their careers as substitute teachers who frequently found themselves covering Spanish classes. And, although both had taken the language in high school, they knew their minimal background was insufficient for the students they were supervising. Separately, unbeknownst to each other, they would both find themselves at Fairmont State University at different times in their lives to earn their degrees. June shared, "It can feel lonely sometimes [at my school] because I'm the only World Language teacher... That's why I enjoy taking my class so much with Dr. Guglani and my classmates because I don't feel alone." It is especially important for educators like Bethany and June to find support in their developing careers because of the unique challenges posed by their nontraditional transition into the field.

Discussion

Participants' perspectives and comments related to these themes provide valuable data on the current state of WL education in West Virginia. They offer insight into the specific factors that are supportive of and detrimental to teacher retention, revealing some factors unique to West Virginia, while confirming the findings of other previous investigations on the topic, thus making an important contribution to the existing body of research.

Participants' discussion of the lack of qualified teachers shows the profound impact that the teacher shortage has had in West Virginia. It highlights, in particular, the extreme measures that schools in economically disadvantaged states such as West Virginia take in order to maintain basic staffing and "coverage" of WL education. Sutcher, Darling-Hammond and Carver-Thomas (2016) point out that while such "short-term solutions may temporarily curb the fear of empty classrooms…they can often exacerbate the problem over the long haul," critically undercutting the academic achievement of the most disadvantaged students who are being educated

in high-poverty settings. Participants' comments on the lack of qualified teachers also shed light on multiple types of repercussions that might not be immediately obvious. Not only does the lack of qualified teachers negatively impact the students and their education, but also fellow teachers and colleagues who must take on the added burden of teaching to an impossibly wide range of proficiency levels within a single classroom and provide instruction ranging from remediation to enrichment. This added burden, no doubt, negatively contributes to the overall toll on these WL teachers' mental health.

When reflecting on the toll on their mental health, participants cited heavy workload and lack of job security resulting from the relative lesser importance with which their subject area was treated by administrators as their primary stressors. Both aspects have, likewise, been noted in research on WL teaching in other rural contexts. For instance, Swanson and Huff (2010) cite "feelings of excessive work" as a factor in teacher attrition, with teachers reporting feeling overwhelmed by their heavy workload, which similarly required them to teach multiple preparations and subject areas and/or mixed classes of native Spanish-speakers and non-native Spanish language learners. WLs being treated as subject areas of lesser importance also emerges as an important theme, in particular as a result of the prioritization of core subject areas over all other subject areas by administrators and school districts (Acheson, Taylor & Luna, 2016; Swanson & Huff, 2010).

The participants' discussion of their students' lack of exposure to cultural diversity echoes previous research, in particular the connection between geographic isolation and negative attitudes toward other languages and cultures (Acheson, 2004), as well as the ideology of valuing English above and/or to the exclusion all other languages (Acheson, Taylor & Luna, 2016). These findings are not particularly surprising, given the unfavorable sociopolitical climate in West Virginia and the US at large. In recent years, West Virginia, has proposed anti-immigrant legislation related to sanctuary cities and e-verification of employees and in 2005 made English the official language of the state. At the national level, English-only groups, such as English First, ProEnglish, and US English, have pushed similar legislation to make English the official language of the United States, while outlawing the use of languages other than English in government business. Such measures are founded on ideologies that view ethnic languages as problems or threats, often motivated by "ethnic paranoia," for example, the belief that "Spanish is taking over in the U.S.A." (Crawford, 2004, p. 62).

Teaching in this particular context, characterized by a lack of cultural diversity and pervasive negative attitudes toward other cultures and languages, participants clearly perceive their role as defenders of WLs and their comments convey the extent to which they felt compelled to "sell" the WL and to convince students it is valuable. Accordingly, these teachers felt a strong burden to generate and maintain a high level of motivation and enthusiasm in showing students the value of Spanish in their future career paths and using culture to get them excited and engaged. Acheson, Taylor and Luna (2016) observed this same phenomenon in the teachers in their study: "These teachers perform deep acting in response to their acceptance of the burden to motivate their students, generating positive emotions and energy with the intent that their enthusiasm will spill over and infuse their students" (p. 530).

Yet, faced with this myriad of challenges, the teachers in this study do not seem to ignore them, but instead to acknowledge them, seek to understand the associated implications and face them head on. This undoubtedly accounts for the high degree of success they have achieved and their strong intention to continue teaching a WL in West Virginia. In response to the challenge of motivating their students, participants drew from their own talents and skills to impact student learning. They highlighted their abilities to provide intercultural and interlinguistic exchange, connecting the geographically isolated state of West Virginia with other world cultures and languages, and to serve as language learner role models for their students, as all grew up monolingual themselves and had to work to learn their second language. In addition, participants enjoyed integrating a wide variety of extracurricular activities in their teaching that aligned with their own talents and interests, including cultural festivals, dances and concerts and interdisciplinary lessons/field trips carried out completely in Spanish, such as cooking lessons at a local Mexican restaurant, chess matches, and science experiments. These data bear out Swanson's (2008, 2012) finding that teachers who can use their own particular talents, skills, and personality styles in the classroom are more likely to remain in the profession.

Furthermore, participants clearly recognize their need for support and their willingness to acknowledge it and seek it out are undeniably essential to their ability to continue in their careers. Participants emphasize the importance of strong professional support systems for WL teachers and identify different types of support that are needed—professional, intellectual, and interpersonal. They cite the specific sources of support they have connected with, including cultural opportunities, the state WL teachers' association (WVFLTA), professional development undertaken with colleagues, their school communities, and higher education. It is evident that these teachers highly value support and see it as an indispensable factor in their success and desire to remain in the profession. This is consistent with previous research, in particular the finding that higher levels of professional growth (McConnell & Swanson, 2024) and teacher empowerment (McConnell, 2023) are strongly associated with helping avoid teacher burnout and/or a desire to quit. Likewise, it is corroborated by research in WL Teacher Education Programs that emphasizes the importance of professional relationships and collaboration (Burke & Ceo-DiFrancesco, 2022) and high-quality education/training (Novella & Bustamante, 2023) in WL teacher retention.

Implications and Conclusions

The rich qualitative data provided by this investigation shed light on the full experience of WL teaching in West Virginia, encompassing the greatest challenges and opportunities and providing detailed descriptions from the perspective of practicing WL teachers. The findings are consistent with previous research, while highlighting some factors and circumstances unique to the state of West Virginia. The data, in particular, reveal the factors that are most strongly supportive of WL teacher retention in this context—teachers' ability to integrate their own unique talents and skills in the classroom and their efforts to seek out and obtain professional, intellectual, and interpersonal support. They also expose specific concerns and obstacles that need to be addressed to better support WL teachers and improve the

experience of WL education for all.

With respect to lack of exposure to cultural diversity, one potential solution may be to explore the integration of service-learning in WL courses to help improve students' attitudes toward the Spanish language and Spanish-speaking cultures. For instance, Guglani's (2016) research found that service-learning was beneficial in helping students transform their perceptions of the Latinx community and themselves as language learners and adopt more positive perspectives. A wide variety of service-learning sites and experiences could be considered, according to the language proficiency level of students and the particular Latinx population of the community, for instance ENL (English as a New Language) tutoring in local schools or volunteer work at a local community organization. Implementing service-learning in this way would help to reduce the direct burden on the teacher to convey the value of World languages and cultures by integrating support from the community to illustrate the immediate relevance and application of WL learning in a real-world setting. This source of support would, in turn, strengthen teacher retention.

Findings regarding the critical state of the WL teacher shortage in West Virginia and lack of value and institutional support for WL as a subject area point to a glaring need for change at the systemic level to education policy and implementation, in particular. The data gleaned from this investigation could be used to support advocacy and lobbying efforts directed toward revising existing legislation, especially reassessing state standards and requirements to prioritize WL coursework and reforming State Education Department policy and implementation. Above all, the latter should entail better support for existing WL teacher education programs and/or creating new ones throughout the state, as well as improving access to these programs by providing online options and alternative formats, thus creating more manageable pathways to teacher certification provided by accredited, high quality WL teacher education programs. Currently, the most important work in this area is being undertaken by the WV Advocacy for Languages TEAM, an affiliate of the West Virginia Foreign Language Teachers Association (WVFLTA) that directly dialogues with and engages officials in a variety of contexts, including state legislators and WV State Board of Education members. The findings of this study were most recently presented at the annual WVFLTA Conference, such that the Advocacy TEAM may use them in upcoming campaigns and a West Virginia Department of Education official attended the presentation, as well.

The challenges and opportunities uncovered in this study also provide a valuable resource to inform WL teacher training at both the initial and continued professional development levels. Directly integrating the exploration of these common challenges and how to navigate them into the curriculum of WL teacher preparation programs and professional development opportunities, preferably in early career, is essential in adequately preparing WL teachers to succeed, avoid burnout, and remain in the classroom. Another fruitful direction for curriculum development could involve identifying teacher candidates' individual talents, skills and personality traits that are best suited for WL teaching and integrating these directly in course assignments, for instance in the writing of teaching philosophies, unit/lesson plans, classroom management plans, etc. In addition, these data support the potential value of high-quality mentorship programs that might partner successful practicing WL teachers,

like the participants in this study, with teacher interns and novice teachers to provide real-world experience in how to navigate the day-to-day challenges in the classroom. Lastly, the findings of this study clearly highlight the importance of professional support and reveal a need to connect teacher candidates early on with professional support networks, including local, state and national organizations, to best meet their professional, intellectual, and interpersonal needs.

Given the limitations in generalizability, these findings would be well complemented by additional quantitative research that includes a larger participant pool and random sampling of WL teachers working in different types of schools, communities and geographical locations throughout the state. Because the participants are all women, including different genders would be beneficial, as well. Furthermore, the data here could be supplemented with interviews conducted with students, parents and/or administrators to consider the topic from a diversity of perspectives. While additional research of this nature is essential to supporting WL teacher retention, it must be combined with real-world, practical action, most importantly expanded advocacy efforts and revision and improvement of teacher training programs, in order increase the pool of well-trained WL teachers, while at the same time integrating built-in systemic sources of professional support necessary to ensure the success of currently practicing WL teachers.

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Appendix A

Participant Information

Pseudonym	*Place of Origin*	*Native Language*	*Age Range*	*Teaching Experience*
Macy	WV	English	31-35	Mid-Career
Cheyenne	MD	English	51-55	Veteran
Nadia	Costa Rica	Spanish	46-50	Mid-Career
Amelia	FL	English	41-45	Mid-Career
Bethany	OH	English	31-35	Early-Career
Naomi	WV	English	51-55	Veteran
Kelsey	WV	English	26-30	Early-Career
Daphne	NC	English	41-45	Mid-Career
Samara	Venezuela	Spanish	51-55	Veteran
June	WV	English	26-30	Early-Career

Appendix B

List of Interview Questions

1. Where are you from originally? If you aren't from West Virginia, what brought you here? If you are, what encouraged you to stay in the state?
2. How does your own background help you connect to your students? How do you negotiate these differences in the classroom?
3. What made you interested in becoming a World Language teacher?
4. How do you connect with your students in motivating them to learn a World Language?
5. What has been the biggest challenge of being a World Language teacher in West Virginia?
6. What is your personal background with the World Language that you are teaching?
7. How did you learn the World Language that you are teaching?
8. What are the backgrounds of the students you teach (i.e. socioeconomic, ethnic, linguistic, household background, etc.)? How do you navigate these different backgrounds in the classroom?
9. Do you feel like you receive adequate resources and funding to do your job properly? If not, what are you missing?
10. Do you feel like your administration values the importance of World Language education? Your community? Your colleagues?
11. Does your school allow/fund extracurricular activities like studying abroad?
12. Where do you see yourself in five years? Do you think you will find yourself in the same position?
13. What are the biggest stressors of being an educator?
14. Tell me about your teaching experience so far and what experiences you have had.
15. What question do you think would be a good question to ask that people don't typically ask of World Language teachers? What do you wish people knew about being a World Language teacher in West Virginia?