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VETERAN TEACHERS WHO THRIVE AMID THE CHALLENGE AND CHANGE OF THE MODERN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: UNDERSTANDING THEIR JOURNEY

Wendy A. Youngblood

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VETERAN TEACHERS WHO THRIVE AMID THE CHALLENGE AND CHANGE OF THE MODERN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: UNDERSTANDING THEIR JOURNEY

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Abstract
This qualitative study was designed to explore how experienced teachers who love their work, find value in it, and contribute positively to the work environment sustain their positive mindset in the face of challenge and change in America’s public schools. Since the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and subsequent educational reform measures, schools have turned increasingly to accountability measures around student testing, teacher evaluations, and other perceived metrics of performance. Since the implementation of NCLB, there has been an increase in teachers leaving the classroom due in part to these stressors. This phenomenon has been well documented in the research. Less understood is how and why some teachers not only stay, but thrive in challenging circumstances. This study applies grounded theory methodology to probe how thriving veteran teachers avoid pitfalls such as burnout and demoralization, and instead evolve and grow. All data were collected prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States. In-depth interviews with a nominated sample of ten thriving public school teachers in two states in the Northeast were conducted. Two-cycle coding and analytic memos provided a platform for data analysis, which ultimately led to three assertions. These assertions are that job fit plays a pivotal role in teachers’ ability to thrive over time. Teachers apply intrinsic motivation and signature strengths to self-actualize on the job. In this dynamic, challenge and change are essential for growth toward the highest level of human potentiality, transcendence.
Keywords = job fit, self-actualization, signature strengths, teachers, thriving, transcendence
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VETERAN TEACHERS WHO THRIVE AMID THE CHALLENGE AND CHANGE OF THE MODERN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: UNDERSTANDING THEIR JOURNEY

Presented by

Wendy A. Youngblood, Ed.D.
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DEDICATION

This effort is dedicated first to my parents, Carlton Watkins and Peter Youngblood, who have shown me that life unfolds as richly as you make it. If we seek growth, joy, and meaningful purpose, we can indeed become the best versions of ourselves. Next, this is for Liv and Ruby, core pieces of my heart. You can be all the versions of you that you desire. Give it time and effort—and laughter doesn’t hurt. Finally, this is for Chris. You make everything possible.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Teaching is a demanding profession. Intellectually, emotionally, and often physically, teaching requires both endurance and resilience (Aguilar, 2018; Nieto & Lopez, 2019; Reilly, 2018, Tomlinson, 2018; Veldman, Admiraal, Tartwijk, Minhard, & Wubbels, 2016). Particularly in the last decade, national attention has been focused on teaching and teachers, as discontent with working conditions in America’s public schools has led to widespread teacher protests. The year 2018, saw a “a teacher-strike tsunami” (Van Dam, 2019), as teachers in 11 states struck for better pay, pension security, and better working conditions for students and themselves (Karp & Sanchez, 2018; Wong, 2019). These walkouts—starting in West Virginia and moving through Oklahoma, Kentucky, Colorado, Arizona, North Carolina, California, and other states—encompassed both “red” and “blue” states, spanning the breadth of the country and revealing fault lines deeper than political or geographic divides. The strikes followed years of tension over federal, state, and local government mandates related to education. The crisis in America’s public schools is complex and compelling. Teachers sit at the center of the debate over what to do and how to do it, yet their input is rarely sought by those devising solutions. To be heard, teachers have been forced to raise their voices in protest.

In 1999, the National Commission on Math and Science Teaching (also known as the Glenn Commission) concluded that the “most powerful instrument for change, and therefore the place to begin, was at the very core of education—with teaching” (Kimmelman, 2006, p. 18). Paradoxically, this recommendation influenced only a part of the next wave of federal education legislation. Starting in 2001, the federal government and most states adopted stringent positions and policies around standardized testing (Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2016), moving away from teacher autonomy to a more circumscribed delivery of content (Goldstein, 2015; Ravitch, 2013).
In an effort to improve outcomes for all students, and framing the persistent achievement gap between student groups as the most compelling civil rights issue of the decade (Rice, 2017), policy makers advanced legislation that caused districts to overhaul classroom practices across the country.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) passed by Congress in 2001 and enacted the following year, outlined the federal agenda to make American students more competitive in the global economy (Kimmelman, 2006). NCLB advanced standardized testing as the best way to track student gains in math, reading, and science, with annual testing in grades 3-8. All students—including those whose first language was not English, as well as those with cognitive delays or other special needs—were expected to be proficient in math and reading by 2014. All public schools were expected to improve student scores on standardized tests for every demographic group, a metric called Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). Hallmarks of NCLB included high academic standards for students and attendant accountability by schools. Schools that met AYP in student tests scores—for all demographic groups—were lauded and left alone. Those that did not risked a variety of punitive measures, from public exposure and flogging in the press to a reduction of federal funding and even—in some cases—to privatization. NCLB resulted in an outpouring of condemnation from teachers and school administrators (Kimmelman, 2006), who agreed with the goals of improving student learning, but balked at the emphasis on testing as the best path to achieve or demonstrate this. Further, most teachers disagreed that their efficacy as educators was best understood through student test scores (Ravitch, 2013).

In 2009, the Obama administration updated NCLB through its Race to the Top (RTT) program. RTT was a 4.35-billion dollar fund. States competed for portions of the fund through
grant applications, a structure which preserved decision making power in the hands of the federal government. Keeping intact the priorities of closing achievement gaps and improving student outcomes on standardized tests, RTT specifically encouraged states to harness the potential of big data and innovation, invest in educational leadership, and turn around low-achieving schools (Race to the Top, 2009). Under RTT, states were urged to expand alternative schooling options, such as charters, and to adopt value-added measures as part of teacher evaluations. Value-added measures for teachers are estimates of the effect an individual teacher has on student achievement, whether positive or negative. Value-added measures applied to teachers even outside the tested curricular areas, such as art, music, and physical education, but also history and science. Controversial from the start (Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2012; NASSP, 2019; Ravitch, 2013), value-added measures continue to be employed in teacher evaluations in districts across the country.

During the years of RTT, most states also adopted the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2018), which established guidelines for what students should not only know but also be able to do in language arts and mathematics at each grade level. While this relaxed the stringent and sometimes punitive accountability measures of NCLB, RTT extended the federal government’s role in shaping states’ educational policies and practices. Nonetheless, RTT did provide states the latitude to craft their own “high-quality [plans]” (Race to the Top, 2009, p. 4) for honing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) curricula, for improving the early education (prekindergarten through third grade) of underserved children, and for working more closely with business and industry leaders to determine what “college and career readiness” might look like for students.
In 2015 the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced NCLB, but retained some of the accountability measures, such as annual standardized testing in math and English for third through eighth graders and once for high school students (ESSA, 2015). More “leeway” (Klein & Ujifusa, 2016) was granted to states to select their own rigorous standards and to design their own tests to measure student achievement. In addition, ESSA dispensed with the requirement that teacher evaluations be tied to student scores on standardized tests (ESSA, 2015). Its other provisions called for states to focus more energy on turning around schools in the bottom 5% of performance and to continue to report on achievement of historically underperforming groups of students (e.g., English language learners, students in special education, etc.)

All these federal initiatives—NCLB, RTT, ESSA, CCSS—compelled states and school districts to reflect critically and immediately on the classroom dynamic and on the quantification of student learning. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), also updated under ESSA, explicitly expanded the responsibilities of schools for students with intellectual and other disabilities. Each of these measures increased the movement toward district, school, and teacher accountability in the eyes of the public.

The shift to established statewide curricular standards, most notably the CCSS, provided another level of state-directed change to curricula and practice. Teachers overwhelmingly supported the goal of higher standards for all students (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010). However, teachers remain concerned about unintended consequences, such as a narrowing of curriculum and a disproportionate credit/blame dynamic from both the federal government and the public (Goldstein, 2015; Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2016; Murnane & Papay, 2010; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009).
Since the implementation of these large-scale initiatives, scholars have followed the resulting data, seeking to understand how to promote student achievement. A substantial portion of this work focuses on teachers: their behavior and anticipated student results, their education and preservice training, and the processes by which they are evaluated (DeMonte & Hanna, 2014; Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Zhang, 2017). Teachers powerfully shape student experience, and by extension, student learning. Therefore, to improve student achievement—typically understood as scores on standardized tests—communities of researchers have investigated how to optimize teacher effectiveness (Batelle for Kids, 2010; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). Districts have implemented a number of strategies, including reducing class size, rating teachers using a value-added approach, standardizing curriculum, and drawing lessons from Scandinavia, East Asia, and other success stories (Goodwin, 2018; Ripley, 2014).

Another important corollary to the educational changes of the 2000s was the financial crisis of 2008. From 2007-2009, Americans lost 8.8 million jobs and $19.2 trillion in household wealth (Department of the Treasury, 2012). In most states, federal and state spending on public education was held largely at pre-recession levels, thanks to federal stimulus spending, but some states still have not recovered to pre-recession spending levels (Hackman & Morath, 2018; Karp & Sanchez, 2018; Wong, 2019). Even in states that managed to keep education spending stable, the distribution of money shifted. A Federal Reserve study of the 2009-2010 school year in New York State showed funds were funneled more toward instructional costs, such as salaries and textbooks, and less toward other expenses, such as transportation, facilities maintenance, and student activities (Chakrabarti, Livingston, & Setren, 2015). Teachers had to do more with fewer support staff, delayed infrastructure upgrades, and less professional development but with no abatement in pressure for high student test scores (Perda, 2013; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). The
financial crisis exacerbated trends in teacher turnover and attrition as many districts were forced to operate with flat budgets for years (Hackman & Morath, 2018; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016).

Another dynamic complicating the public school landscape in the past two decades is teachers exiting the classroom. Eight percent of teachers leave each year, and only one-third of those leave for retirement (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Research in this area shows the need for long-term solutions to the problem of instability in the teaching workforce (Craig, 2013; García & Weiss, 2019; Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Podolsky et al., 2016; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016; Torres, 2011). Hardest hit are schools in urban, rural, high-poverty, and high-minority areas, as these schools endure more flux in the teaching and administrative populations (Podolsky et al., 2016; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016).

Since March of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has added another layer of stress and strain on educators and families. Districts around the country moved to online education, which entailed an unprecedented degree of upheaval. The impact of this further disruption on children’s education and on teachers’ professional wellness will undoubtedly be a topic of research in the coming years.

Statement of the Problem

As many researchers have noted, recruitment of teachers is not the problem. Retention is (Ingersoll, 2012; Moeny, 2014; Perda, 2013; Reilly, 2018). Pre-retirement attrition is the leading cause of the nation’s shortage of qualified teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling Hammond, 2017). A 2018 Gallup poll shows that 48% of American teachers are “actively looking for a different job or watching for opportunities” (McFeely, 2018). Of those who left teaching
voluntarily, 60% cited job-related factors, such as a lack of development and limited opportunity for advancement (McFeely, 2018). The 2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey conducted by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Badass Teachers Association (BATs) reveals that educators “find their work ‘always’ or ‘often’ stressful 61 percent of the time, significantly higher than workers in the general population, who report that work is ‘always’ or ‘often’ stressful only 30 percent of the time” (AFT & BATs, 2017, p. 2). Significantly, over half the respondents in AFT/BATs study said they were less enthusiastic about their work than when they started (AFT & BATs, 2017).

Whereas it is useful for policy makers and educational leaders to understand why people leave teaching, it is equally important to understand why other teachers stay and flourish (Fairbanks, et al., 2010; Hargreaves, 2005; Veldman et al., 2016). Moreover, it could be instructive to understand how some teachers thrive despite the challenges they have faced since the adoption of NCLB legislation. Santoro (2018) argues that several legacies of NCLB imperil teachers’ sense of well-being over time. These include not only high-stakes testing with attendant public rankings of schools and teachers, but also an emphasis on the academic, rather than the emotional, development of students (Podolsky et al., 2016; Santoro, 2018; Walker, 2015). To understand how some teachers avoid the pitfalls of burnout and demoralization, it is necessary to go beyond surveys and meta-analyses of teacher attitudes about their jobs and to dig deeply into their stories and into their perceptions about their journeys.

Rationale

The goal of the proposed study is to understand how experienced, admired teachers thrive during an era of so much societal, technological, and bureaucratic change. This qualitative study
sheds light on the promising characteristics—personal and institutional—worth cultivating among current and future corps of teachers and administrators.

For many educators, teaching is a calling. Edelman (1999) likens teaching to parenting: it is “a mission, not just a task or job” (p. 22). People who view their work as a calling often strengthen the organization and help it achieve its aims (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). Teachers enter the profession in response to an inner drive, either to connect with young people, work toward a larger social purpose, or foster the love of their chosen academic discipline. Fried (2001) pinpoints the importance of “this quality of caring about ideas and values, this fascination with the potential for growth within people, this depth and fervor about doing things well and striving for excellence” (p. 17). Hunter (2013) explains teachers of this type “become good at maximizing the best in people to bring out their greatest assets.” Great teachers exhibit these characteristics. The challenge for teachers is keeping the internal fire lit while standing in the rain.

To nurture teachers, these “heroes of the mind” (Fried, 2001, p.6) over time, it is in the interest of organizations and internal leadership to help employees find and sustain fulfillment in their work (Egan, Turner, & Blackman, 2017; Fernet, Trépanier, Austin, & Levesque-Côté, 2016; Wisehart, 2004). Many teachers struggle to maintain the passion they felt as early practitioners (Fernet et al., 2016; Fried, 2001; Santoro, 2018), and the resulting lack of enthusiasm can negatively impact student learning (García & Weiss, 2019; Hargreaves, 2005).

What is it about teachers’ lived experiences that influences whether or not they continue to find fulfillment in their profession? Countervailing evidence about teacher satisfaction levels makes it difficult to draw useful or accurate conclusions about which aspects of their day-to-day experience drain or augment their love of the work. The 2012 MetLife Survey of the American
Teacher reports the lowest rates of teacher satisfaction in 25 years (Harris Interactive, 2013). The survey also indicated that 29% of teachers planned to leave the profession within the next five years. However, the next year, the Center for American Progress discovered that a majority of teachers were happy with their work and believed they operated with a great degree of professional autonomy (Boser & Hanna, 2014). By themselves, these data points cannot capture the entirety or complexity of teachers’ job satisfaction over time. What is needed are in-depth probes into why and how some teachers successfully navigate the challenges of a profession so many others leave (Chang, 2009; Hancock & Scherff, 2010).

**Significance of the Research**

The current study is designed to fill the existing gap in the literature regarding teachers’ understanding of thriving amid the changes of the past two decades. Examining teachers’ experiences in their own voices will shed light on the personal and institutional attributes that enable these individuals to flourish amid restrictive contextual elements (e.g., high-stakes testing, curriculum pacing guides, etc.). Equipped with this insight, district and building administrators can better understand how to keep great—and passionate—teachers in the classroom. Doing so might stem the dual tides of teacher turnover and movement toward administrative roles. Additionally, understanding the characteristics of veteran teachers who still thrive might engender professional development focused on advanced career mentorships, school climate, and adaptive leadership. Most research thus far has been focused largely on the experiences of newer teachers, rather than veterans (Day & Gu, 2009; Han & Yin, 2016).

**Benefits of the Research**

The formation and revision of one’s personal job identity is a “relevant task throughout the entire life course” (Crocetti, Avanzi, Hawk, Fraccaroli, & Meeus, 2014, p. 282). This
research could help extend the career of teachers who are wondering if they can still flourish in the second, third, and even fourth decades of work. Through teachers’ stories of negotiating and adapting to change, readers will make connections to their own lives and career paths.

Understanding how thriving is connected to constructs such as grit, passion, self-actualization, and burnout-avoidance will allow practitioners—classroom teachers, building leaders, and teachers trainers—to be more alert to warning signs and to cultivate habits that correspond to healthy longevity.

Similarly, this study has potential benefits for students. Experienced teachers derive better results from and for students, including academic and non-academic measures, such as higher school attendance rates (Kini & Podolsky, 2016). Moreover, to the degree that teachers feel positively engaged in their work, students have more prosocial behaviors in class (Fernet et al., 2016; Wisehart, 2004). Finally, “teachers’ stories, in one or another way, are also students’ stories” (Coles, 2004, p. xiii) that testify to the experiences shared by millions of people each day in America’s classrooms.

**Key Terms**

1. **Burnout**—a process that occurs when a person experiences enough sustained stress to lose positive emotional engagement in a job that previously held deep meaning. Symptoms include emotional exhaustion, “cynicism and detachment from the job,” and a reduced feeling of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p. 104).

2. **Demoralization**—a “form of professional dissatisfaction [that] derives from teachers’ inability to enact the values that motivate and sustain their work” (Santoro, 2018, p. 43). The moral foundation of this process distinguishes it from the phenomenon of burnout (Santoro, 2018).
3. Passion—a deep-seated pull toward an activity one finds valuable and important, in which one devotes resources, for example, time and energy (Vallerand et al., 2003). The passion is part of one’s identity.

4. Resilience—“the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress.” This definition from Merriam-Webster (2018) is particularly apt for this discussion of teachers working through challenging changes imposed by external entities.

5. Self-actualization—the drive present in all humans to fulfill innate potentialities (Maslow, 1943).

6. Thriving—“the joint experience of development and success” (Brown, Arnold, Fletcher, & Standage, 2017, p. 170). Teachers who thrive enjoy their work, contribute to their professional communities in prosocial ways, and experience a sense of growth connected with their work. Further, they feel their work moves toward a valued purpose or goal.

7. Transcendence—the highest level of human motivation in which a person integrates his full potential into a valued activity whose benefits extend outside himself (Kaufman, 2020a).

8. Veteran teacher—as used in this study, a teacher who has taught in a public school classroom in the United States for at least 18 years, (i.e., since the adoption of NCLB).

**Related Literature**

A preliminary review of literature involves exploring salient themes that support the conceptual framework and preview those likely to emerge from the research (Bryant & Charmaz,
Burnout and demoralization are relevant to any study of why teachers leave or stay in their profession. These two constructs offer competing explanations of the dynamics that leave teachers unmoored from their teaching center. Intrinsic motivation and self-actualization convey why and how some teachers thrive across the arc of their career. As such, these four dimensions form the backbone of the initial review of literature.

**Burnout Theory**

Burnout is an oft-cited cause of teacher leaving (Anthony, 2019; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Perrone, Player, & Youngs, 2019; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999). Even for those who stay in the profession, it looms as a challenge to be negotiated. Burnout is now understood as a well-defined process, not an isolated or instantaneous event (Bulatevych, 2017; Burke & Greenglass, 1989; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Maslach and Leiter (2016) describe the three phases of burnout as “an overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment” (p. 104). Especially prevalent in service-oriented jobs, burnout among teachers has been widely studied (Arens & Morin, 2016; Bulatevych, 2017; Burke & Greenglass, 1989; Friedman, 2003; Lens & Neves de Jesus, 1999; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; O’Brennan, Pas, & Bradshaw, 2017; Santoro, 2018; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999).

Significantly, each of the symptoms of burnout is remediable on its own. In short, a person can recover from burnout if the condition is recognized, especially in its early stages (Santoro, 2018). The number of years spent teaching tends to affect a person’s energy level and susceptibility to burnout (O’Brennan, Pas, & Bradshaw, 2017). Staff perceptions of weak administrative support or lack of safety deepen chances of burnout (Gaines, 2011). In contrast, strong, healthy professional relationships and a sense of “connectedness” (O’Brennan et al.,
2017, p. 172) within the workplace can mitigate these and other stressors that lead to burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Phelps & Benson, 2012).

**Demoralization**

Like burnout, demoralization is a process (Santoro, 2018), though its roots are in the teacher’s professional *raison d’être*: the moral underpinnings that characterize her orientation toward work. Demoralization occurs when a person “has trouble accessing the moral rewards of their work” (2018a, p. 9). This is especially relevant for teachers when the environmental conditions of their work conflict with the teacher’s moral compass. Santoro explains, “teachers’ moral centers are articulated in the work they do” (2018). When the pressure to raise test scores overrides a teacher’s ability to support the emotional needs of vulnerable students, the teacher’s moral center is compromised. Santoro argues that demoralization can look a lot like burnout, but it emanates from a different internal source and, significantly, is much harder to mediate (2018). Unlike burnout, demoralization cannot be addressed through restorative exercises such as mindfulness training or resilience-building activities (Santoro, 2018).

**Self-actualization**

Self-actualization is the process of reaching one’s full potential, of “the individual doing what he is fitted for” (Maslow, 1943, p. 382). As a component of Maslow’s original Hierarchy of Needs (1943), the term self-actualization is applied to the level of human development when a person seeks to be his best, in work, in relationships, or in other dimensions of life. In this way, Maslow suggests that self-actualization is an optimizing of one’s identity, a full integration of the self that is one with the pursuits in which one engages.

More broadly, Maslow’s later unpublished writings show the philosophical implications inherent in the construct of self-actualization. Understanding that each person is different and
that self-actualization leads toward the expression of the fullest self suggests that there is not one best model for a human, and by extension, for a teacher or student (Maslow, 1966, cited in Kaufman, 2018, Nov.). This view of self-actualization invites a more holistic understanding of what “success” or thriving can look like.

Dodd (2001) describes the self-actualized teacher as one who has passed through distinct stages of practice, leading to increased competence and wisdom. In the self-actualization process, teachers refine their use of theory and accept the value of learning from experts. This process is essential for the teacher to fashion a coherent personal philosophy about effective teaching. Teachers who wish to self-actualize need to “see the importance of being lifelong students of teaching” (Dodd, 2001, p. 18). The key to self-actualizing is consistent reflection on practice. Additionally, the ability to fully integrate the self into a pursuit is related to how well the person’s environmental and psychological needs are met (Maslow, 1943).

**Thriving**

Brown et al., (2017) identified 13 versions of thriving in their review of thriving literature. Each definition included the concepts of healthy growth and a holistic, active state of psychological, emotional, and even physical well-being. Thriving is a process which unfolds over time and is characterized by an overall sense of doing what one intends, of doing it well, and of doing it for a valued purpose. It is different from flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), wherein a person becomes so immersed in a specific valued activity that she loses a sense of time. When a person’s identity is mirrored in the focal activity—perhaps an “optimal challenge” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 29)—the conditions are there for thriving and flow. However, flow is an experience of an activity-specific, temporal nature.
In this way, thriving is similar to passion (Vallerand et al., 2003). Vallerand’s dualistic model of passion differentiates harmonious passion from obsessive passion. The former denotes an adaptive capacity that leads one to use resources well, contributes to work/life balance, and enhances an employee’s ability to perform well at work (Trépanier, Fernet, Austin, Forest, & Vallerand, 2013). The latter is a maladaptive capacity, leading to stress, reduced enjoyment, and suboptimal professional results. People who thrive find ways to capitalize on the parts of their profession that fuel them. They manage both internal and external stressors effectively enough to retain their positive energy and love of the work.

The development, articulation, and study of thriving began in the field of gerontology. Recently, scholars have begun to apply its core attributes to other fields, such as psychology (Su, Tay, & Diener, 2014; Wiese, Tay, Su, & Diener, 2018), education (Schreiner, 2010), and sport (Brown et al., 2017). This study extends those efforts through a qualitative approach.

**Intrinsic Motivation**

Intrinsic motivation is “the life force or energy [for] an activity and for the development of [an] internal structure” that supports engagement in that activity (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 8). For those who are intrinsically motivated, doing the focal activity is autotelic, that is, it is its own reward (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). In this case, external motivation is superfluous. Intrinsic motivation theory shows that people need to feel competent, to exercise some measure of control over their lives (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In those circumstances, people are more likely to display interest in what they do and to enjoy it.

People are motivated to enter teaching by a desire to work with children, make a positive difference in the world, or share their love of a content area. The phenomena that keep educators in the classroom or drive them to leave range from the straightforward to the complex. However,
the source of the impetus matters: external motivators such as salary are less likely to keep
teachers in the classroom than internal motivators, such as pride in work and rewarding
connections with students and colleagues (Day & Gu, 2010; Yuan, 2013). Kasser and Ryan
report “success at intrinsic aspirations provides experiences that satisfy basic psychological
needs and thus facilitate growth and well-being” (2001, p. 128).

Hargreaves (2005) notes that early enthusiasm is a hallmark of beginning teachers. These
younger individuals are also more flexible in the face of change. Older teachers tend to fall into
one of two groups: energy-conservers or “negative focusers” (Hargreaves, 2005, p. 974). The
first group is more likely to steward the younger generation of teachers toward positive habits
and away from administrative imbroglios. Finally, veteran teachers who are still thriving serve
as invaluable role models for their younger colleagues (Fried, 2001; Wisehart, 2004).

Thriving is the unifying characteristic for the sample. The goal of the study is to
understand why teachers identified as thriving are able to sustain vibrant and holistic well-being
in their profession, particularly in the face of internal and external factors that can undercut job
satisfaction and lead to leaving the classroom. The current research project builds on the work of
Su, Tay, and Diener (2014), who explored the phenomenon of thriving through quantitative
means, and of Johnson (2019) whose qualitative research examined school environments as
places that foster or limit teachers’ ability to thrive. This study also extends the work of Phelps
and Benson (2012) who sought to understand passion in educators, its relationship to burnout,
and the experience of teachers over a career. This project differs from earlier work in its
narrower focus on teachers’ experience during and since the NCLB/ESSA/Common Core State Standards (CCSS) era.
It is important to note that the data were collected prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States. Had the research occurred during the spring and summer of 2020, it is likely that participants would have emphasized the challenges of remote teaching and staying physically and psychologically healthy. As it is, the study captures teachers’ experiences during the school year just prior to the global pandemic.

**Research Questions**

The present research seeks to address the following questions:

1. Since the adoption of NCLB, to what degree do thriving veteran teachers believe their profession has changed?
   a. How do thriving veteran teachers perceive the changes in their professional culture in the past 18 years?
   b. How do thriving veteran teachers perceive changes in their personal practice in the past 18 years?

2. What are the professional factors that support thriving for veteran educators?

3. What are the personal attributes that support thriving for veteran educators?

4. How do thriving veteran teachers remain deeply engaged and sustain a positive mindset amid ongoing changes and challenges in their profession?
CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The goal of this study is to understand how experienced and thriving teachers maintain their vibrancy and positive outlook in an era of substantial educational change. As described in the previous chapter, the system of public education in the United States has been subjected to pressures from federal and state bodies in an effort to elevate student achievement. Assessment and accountability measures, hallmarks of the NCLB, ESSA, and Race to the Top (RTTT; GovTrack.us, 2020) programs, have impacted what schools prioritize. Teachers have been on the front lines of implementation of these programs. High attrition rates for teachers since these programs began suggests that some teachers chose to leave the profession rather than stay in the new educational reality. Some others, however, not only stayed but have thrived amid the challenges inherent in the new systems.

This chapter connects the goals of the research, the major constructs being explored, and the relevant literature on those constructs. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first builds from the statement of the problem as delineated in Chapter One. In this section I outline the discrete phenomena that contribute to burnout and demoralization. Burnout theory and demoralization theory offer competing explanations of the dynamics that leave teachers unmoored from their teaching center. A review of the research in these two areas will prime the reader to recognize the strategies and affective capacities thriving teachers employ to avoid these undesired states. Section One supports the first Research Question, which asks about teachers’ perceptions of change in their personal mindsets and teaching practices, and in the professional culture within their schools since the adoption of NCLB.

In the second section, I explore some of the personal qualities that sustain teachers through challenges. Given the goals of the research and the choice of grounded theory
methodology, I did not want to superimpose a particular theoretical framework onto the study. Rather, I wanted to uncover teachers’ perceptions and experiences organically. Before data collection began, I reasoned that people who thrive in any professional field would have some degree of intrinsic motivation. Based on my own career as a teacher, I expected thriving teachers would evince passion for their work. As data collection and analysis progressed, it became clear that grit and passion contribute to the mindset of thriving teachers. Therefore, those three constructs comprise the second section of the literature review, as they were added once data analysis was complete (Dunne & Üstündağ, 2020). This section connects to Research Questions Two and Three, which ask about the personal attributes and environmental factors that promote thriving.

In the third section, I examine how positive psychology has contributed to the body of knowledge on how to live a more fulfilling life or combat negative life events—such as experiencing burnout—by focusing on human strengths and potential. Positive psychology is concerned with optimizing human well-being. This section concludes with an overview of how the recent focus on character strengths provides practical guidance that could lead to thriving in the workplace and beyond.

In the fourth section, I include research into the relatively new research area of thriving as a subset of positive psychology. I trace its origins in the health sciences to a more modern application in the workplace. Placing this section here, rather than at the beginning, maintains the chronological structure of developments within the field of positive psychology.
Section One: Burnout Theory and Demoralization Theory

Burnout Theory

Especially prevalent in service-oriented jobs, burnout among teachers has been widely studied (Arens & Morin, 2016; Bulatevych, 2017; Burke & Greenglass, 1989; Chang, 2009; Friedman, 2003; Lens & Neves de Jesus, 1999; Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; O’Brien, 2017; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999). The construct was first identified in the literature by Freudenberger (1989) who characterized burnout as a feeling of frustration or fatigue tied to one’s work. Maslach and Leiter (1997) extended the description, illuminating it as a dire crisis. “Burnout,” they wrote, “is the index of the dislocation between what people are and what they have to do. It represents an erosion in values, dignity, spirit, and will—an erosion of the human soul (p. 17). Burnout is now understood as a well-defined process, not an isolated or instantaneous event (Bulatevych, 2017; Burke & Greenglass, 1989; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Measuring burnout. In 1981, Maslach and Jackson (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996) developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to measure the three dimensions of burnout, particularly in professionals who work in service industries. Then in 1986, Maslach and Jackson adapted the MBI for teachers, creating the MBI-Educators Survey. Like the original, this survey contained 22 items that measured teacher experiences in each of the three domains. Other indices of workplace burnout have been developed, including the Burnout Measure (Pines & Aronson, 1988), the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen & Christensen, 2005); and the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (Demerouti & Bakker, 2007). However, none is used as widely as the MBI (McCormack & Cotter, 2013).
Maslach and Leiter determined the three phases or dimensions of burnout as “an overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment” (2016, p. 104). Exhaustion is the first discernable symptom of burnout, but on its own exhaustion does not signal imminent burnout. Cynicism leads people to distance themselves emotionally from work, and is “an attempt to protect oneself from exhaustion and disappointment” (Maslach & Leiter, 1997, p. 18). The negativity inherent in a cynical outlook undercuts a person’s holistic health (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Feeling ineffective on the job makes people lose confidence, further undercutting the ability to function well. These outcomes are damaging to the individual and to the organization.

**Burnout and the job-person fit model.** As researchers began to apply the MBI to other “high-touch fields” (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p. 103), Maslach and Leiter developed a “job-person fit” model framed by six domains (2001, p. 413). The model assesses the fit or match between an individual and the characteristics of a particular job, as shown in Table 1 below. The domains include workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. The model also pinpoints how mismatches link to one of the domains of burnout. For example, workload refers to the amount of work required by the job. A mismatch typically is depicted as an overload of work or the wrong kind of work for the employee’s skills, leading to physical and/or emotional exhaustion. Control refers to the degree of responsibility and autonomy a person experiences in the work environment. A mismatch occurs when people are responsible for things they cannot control, or when they lack the resources to perform their job. Rewards can be financial or social, such as recognition for work done. A mismatch in this area can be extrinsic, in the case of poor financial compensation, or intrinsic, in the case of little pride felt in performance of the job. Community refers to the sense of connection people feel with others at or through work.
Mismatches reduce the positive feelings associated with healthy connection, and can include isolation or even open hostility. Fairness refers to perceptions of justice and respect in the workplace. Mismatches contribute both to emotional exhaustion and cynicism, each hallmarks of burnout. Values refers to a person’s inner determinants of right and wrong. Mismatches in this area cause ethical conflicts for workers.

Table 1

*Job-Fit Model*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Definition/examples</th>
<th>Evidence of mismatch</th>
<th>Link to burnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
<td>Amount of work required by a job</td>
<td>Work overload, seen in time and/or intensity</td>
<td>Exhaustion: emotional and/or physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Having meaningful input on important components of one’s job</td>
<td>Usually expressed as lack of control; policies that impede autonomy</td>
<td>Exhaustion, cynicism, ineffectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward</td>
<td>Money, expertise, respect; can be intrinsic or extrinsic</td>
<td>Strain on workers; reduced joy at work</td>
<td>Cynicism, ineffectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Sense of meaningful connection with co-workers or students</td>
<td>Lack of teamwork; risk of conflict; reduced synergy; low morale</td>
<td>Cynicism, emotional exhaustion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Justice; a sense of trust, openness, respect</td>
<td>Reduced care for employee welfare; distrust; low morale</td>
<td>Cynicism, emotional exhaustion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Alignment between personal beliefs and core mission of the organization</td>
<td>Low morale; gap between stated mission and actual practice</td>
<td>Cynicism, ineffectiveness, emotional exhaustion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*= Used to identify and remedy workplace burnout (compiled from Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

The six domains do not operate in isolation, and the importance of one domain over another can vary between individuals. The domains, and their relationship to the phases of
burnout, offer a conceptual framework for understanding how and why individuals suffer from burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). They also provide guidance for organizational leaders that wish to address burnout in their ranks.

**Burnout in teachers.** Burnout is still an oft-cited cause of teachers leaving, whether in a transfer to another school or leaving teaching altogether (Anthony, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Maslach & Leiter, 1997, 2016; Perrone, Player, & Youngs, 2019; Vandenberghie & Huberman, 1999). Even for those who stay in the profession, it looms as a challenge to be negotiated (Nieto, 2009).

Burnout springs from the interplay of organizational demands and personal characteristics and perceptions. In 2001, Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter reported that teachers under 40 years old were more at risk for burnout than veterans. Others have found that teachers who obtained their licensure through alternative programs report higher levels of burnout than those who received their credentials through more traditional paths (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Sutcher et al., 2016).

To better understand how individual perceptions, demographic variables, and school environment contribute to burnout, O’Brien et al. (2017) studied high school teachers and paraprofessionals ($N = 3,225$) in Maryland as part of a larger longitudinal study on school climate. Staff in 58 schools completed the Maryland Safe and Supportive Schools School Climate Survey (Bradshaw et al., 2014), the burnout portion of which was adapted from the MBI. Participants were mostly White (82%) and female (67%), and 75% of respondents were teachers. The personal factors studied were staff perceptions of safety, connectedness, and self-efficacy. The school context factors included teacher-student ratio, urbanicity, and suspension rates. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) was used across two levels: individual and within-
HLM analysis at the individual level showed that feeling connected was a significant moderator against feelings of burnout. There were moderate negative associations between burnout and perceptions of connectedness to school ($\beta = -0.31, p < .01$), and small negative associations between burnout and connections to students ($\beta = -0.10, p < .05$), and connections to building administrators ($\beta = -0.10, p < .01$). Analysis of data at the school level showed that suspension rates was the only variable associated with staff feelings of burnout, and the association was slight ($\beta = -0.004, p < .01$). O’Brennan et al. (2017) showed that teachers who perceived they had healthy connections with others and the skills to do their jobs faced less burnout. Researchers also found that teachers who had worked at their schools for four years or more report a greater likelihood of burnout. This multiyear study began in 2012, when the federal Race to the Top (RTT) had just been adopted, spurring states to make standards more rigorous. This could have had the impact of further stressing teachers and administrators. Furthermore, this study involved staff in high schools only, and the results might not be generalizable to the elementary grades, where classes are more likely to stay with one teacher. Additionally, researchers noted the problems inherent with brief self-reports of burnout, and suggested more comprehensive follow-up studies be conducted. Recommendations included professional development to build relationships within multidisciplinary teams to foster the strengths that come with perceptions of meaningful personal connections at work.

Chang (2009) conducted a review on burnout literature written between 1980 and 2009 to investigate how teachers’ judgments can lead to emotional exhaustion. Characterizing teaching as “intensely emotional work” (2009, p. 203), Chang studied how teacher judgments and emotions about student behaviors and teaching tasks can prime teachers for burnout. She proposed that emotional regulation and healthy coping strategies were the most likely mitigators
of burnout-inducing emotional stressors. She reasoned that short-term feelings were navigable, corroborating Santoro’s (2018) assertion that each of the dimensions of burnout is remediable on its own, especially if diagnosed early on. Chang cited the need for more longitudinal and qualitative research in this area, as “existing studies on burnout typically involve one-time survey data,” making it hard to distinguish between a bona fide “erosion of engagement” or “just [the experience of] ‘feelings’ of burnout” (Chang, 2009, p. 197). Chang (2009) points to research in proactive coping (Greenglass, 2002) and thriving patterns (Ford and Smith, 2007) as promising restorative strategies for teachers on the brink of burnout.

Fernet et al. (2016) studied French-Canadian teachers ($N = 589$) in the first three years of their careers to track how school environment factors interplay with teachers’ emotional exhaustion, job commitment, and classroom climate. The purpose of the study was to better understand how autonomous and controlled motivation function for early career teachers, as prior studies “have been based on theories of motivation that focus primarily on intensity, without much concern for form” (Fernet et al., p. 482). Autonomous motivation refers to the drive to accomplish a task because one finds value or pleasure in doing it. Controlled motivation, by contrast, propels action to avoid unpleasant feelings (internal pressures) or to avoid negative consequences (external regulation).

Participants in this study were mostly women (85.7%), with a mean age of 26.4 ($SD = 3.4$) with a mean of 2.01 years of teaching experience ($SD = 0.8$). Researchers administered a variety of scales to assess school environment factors, work motivation, emotional exhaustion, commitment to teaching, and student attentiveness. Researchers hypothesized that emotional exhaustion and work overload would be positively associated with controlled motivation, and that autonomous motivation would be negatively associated with emotional exhaustion. Results
showed that autonomous motivation fell each year, from 98.7% for first year teachers, to 97.4% for second year teachers, and 90.3% for third year teachers. Results from ANOVAs show that third-year teachers reported significantly less autonomous motivation ($M = 5.18, SD = 1.02$) than first year teachers ($M = 5.47, SD = 0.91$) and second year teachers ($M = 5.49, SD = 1.11$) ($F(2, 566) = 5.43, p = .005$). Model fit was ensured by SEM testing, in which high values on a variety of fit indices were obtained.

Results confirmed the hypotheses listed above. Further, hierarchical regressions were conducted to explore the role of experience in the dynamic interplay between school factors and teachers’ motivation types. Using SPSS, teachers’ current teaching year was used to moderate the relationships between school environment factors and work motivation, and between work motivation and teachers’ functioning. Multicollinearity was controlled by mean-centering the variables prior to computation. Job characteristics, such as workload, job control, and recognition, and teachers’ experience (years 1, 2, or 3) were entered in Step 1. In Step 2, the interaction term (job characteristic*experience) was entered. In all, 14 interaction effects were tested, revealing four interaction effects. Experience moderated the relationship between overload and controlled motivation to a marginally significant degree ($\Delta F (3.53) = 3.48, p < .1$). Experience also influenced the relationship between controlled motivation and emotional exhaustion ($\Delta F (3.52) = 7.09, p < 0.001$). Experience significantly moderated the relationship between autonomous motivation and commitment ($\Delta F (3.55) = 80.85, p < 0.001$), and was stronger for teachers with three years of experience (Year 1 $\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001$; Year 2 $\beta = 0.50, p < 0.001$; Year 3 $\beta = .60, p < 0.001$), as reflected in the higher beta values. Based on these results, researchers propose that more work be done to investigate autonomous and controlled motivations for more experienced teachers.
Overall, results show that teachers’ autonomous and controlled motivations operate independently from each other, at least at career start. New teachers’ motivations are more autonomous than controlled, but autonomous motivation declines over the first years of teaching. Autonomous motivations “appear to support teachers’ ability to create a classroom climate that fosters student attentiveness, a climate that is conducive to learning” (Fernet et al., 2016, p. 488). Results could help shape policies geared toward successful induction periods and protocols for new teachers to reduce the likelihood of burnout over time.

**Burnout as an imbalance of job demands and job resources.** In their work on teacher burnout and well-being, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2018) conducted several studies digging into the broad categories of job demands and job resources. Job demands refer to elements that cause stress, reduce motivation, and lead to burnout. Job resources include elements that shore up good feelings about work, such as teacher motivation, strong collegial relations, or the perception of being respected. To understand which particular job demands and resources contributed most significantly to teacher well-being and to the inclination to leave teaching, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2018) gathered responses from a random sample of Norwegian teachers ($N = 760$). Teachers anonymously completed a questionnaire called the Jobs Demands-Research (JD-R) instrument. The mean age for participants was 44, the mean years of teaching was 15.

For this study, the appointed job demands were time pressure, discipline problems, and low student motivation. The job resources selected by researchers were supportive collegial relations, perceived support from school leadership, perceived collective culture among faculty, and value consonance. Value consonance is defined as “the degree to which teachers feel that they share the prevailing norms and values of their school” (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, p.
Value consonance can be reflected in curricular content, school mission, approaches to pedagogy, or other areas. In this study, teacher well-being was measured negatively and represented by emotional exhaustion, depression, and psychosomatic distress. Emotional exhaustion was measured using a Norwegian version of the MBI-Educators’ Survey. Researchers also measured participants’ engagement using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). Finally, participants’ motivation to leave teaching was measured using a Motivation to Leave scale (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016).

Researchers employed confirmatory factor analysis to ensure model fit, then tested two SEM models wherein job demands and job resources predicted variables associated with high well-being, which in turn can predict engagement, or by contrast, intention to leave teaching. Perceived time pressure predicted low well-being more strongly than any other job demand tested ($\beta = .53, p < .01$), such as low student motivation ($\beta = .14, p < .01$). Results showed that 78% of the variance in teacher well-being could be explained by the target job demands and resources.

Researchers reported value consonance had a strong direct and indirect association to higher teacher engagement, which aligns with the precepts of the job-fit model from Maslach and Leiter (1997). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2018) found that for Norwegian teachers, the indirect association was mediated through higher teacher well-being. The researchers noted “value consonance may be particularly important for teachers’ well-being and motivation because teachers are typically driven by values, ethical considerations, and intrinsic motivation” (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018, p. 1269). Consequently, it is important to understand how a
reduction of value consonance can contribute to demoralization, which is discussed in the following section.

This section has examined the foundational work in burnout theory and presented studies that show how burnout research now overlaps with research into job engagement and well-being. Significantly, each of the three symptoms of burnout is remediable on its own. In short, a person can recover from burnout if the condition is recognized, especially in its early stages (Santoro, 2018).

**Demoralization**

Convinced that some sources of teacher dissatisfaction were more complex than burnout, Santoro (2018) locates a more precise reason for experienced teachers leaving the profession. Santoro (2018) conducted qualitative research with teachers (N = 23) who left the profession for moral reasons, and who had more than five years teaching experience. Santoro (2018) asked teachers their beliefs about good work, when they were able to fully live that professional life, and what impeded their fulfillment of doing the good work they envisioned. She concludes that the phenomenon these teachers experienced is distinct from burnout. Demoralization reflects deep or protracted ethical challenges that undercut a teacher’s foundational beliefs and values. For teachers going through demoralization:

> the moral dilemma is not what they should do to be a good teacher, but that they cannot do what they believe a good teacher should do in the face of policies, mandates, or institutional norms. The source of the problem is the dissonance between educators’ moral centers and the conditions in which they teach. (Santoro, 2018, italics in original)

Like burnout, demoralization is a process (Santoro, 2018), though its roots are in the teacher’s professional *raison d’être*: the moral underpinnings that characterize her orientation.
toward work, according to Jennifer Nias (Vandenberghe, 1999). Santoro explains, “teachers’ moral centers are articulated in the work they do” (2018, p. 49). When the pressure to raise test scores overrides a teacher’s ability to support the emotional needs of vulnerable students, the teacher’s moral center is compromised. Santoro identifies harm to students and denigration of the profession as the two main categories of moral concern that lead to demoralization (2018). Harm to students comes through unfair and overly exacting testing regimens, lack of resources, and other factors. Denigration of the profession occurs in myriad ways, from unfair evaluation systems, to public shaming of “underperforming” schools and teachers, to low pay.

Demoralization has a before and an after, wherein teachers can identify a time when they “were able to enact the values that motivated and sustained their work,” (Santoro, 2018, p. 54), which differentiates the phenomenon from disillusionment. A disillusioned person realizes she lacks the capacity or opportunity to achieve a goal; a demoralized person realizes she is no longer able to do what she once did.

Santoro argues that demoralization can look a lot like burnout, but it emanates from a different internal source and, significantly, is much harder to mediate. Unlike burnout, demoralization is rooted in a person’s values. Therefore, it cannot be addressed through restorative exercises such as mindfulness training or resilience-building activities (Santoro, 2018). However, teachers can be “re-moralized” through “meaningful connection with authentic professional community” (2018, p. 12). At the time of the interviews, Santoro judged that 17 of the 23 educators met the criteria of demoralization. However, eight had experienced re-moralization by “[reestablishing] the moral rewards of their work without compromising their core values and ideals about teaching” (2018, p. 10).
Demoralization as a product of the work environment. Qualitative research on
demoralization among teachers in Hong Kong reveals that, whereas teachers’ value centers are
the crucible where demoralization occurs, the causes spring from sources outside the individual.
Tsang and Liu (2016) conducted semi-structured interviews with high school teachers (N = 21)
after a period of large-scale reform in public education. Based on the data, researchers identified
two factors that contributed to teacher demoralization. First is technical disempowerment, which
refers to the teacher’s perception of reduced capacity to control the process of teaching because
of an overly rigid administration. Technical disempowerment is also reflected in teachers’
perceived exclusion from meaningful decision-making processes, such as curriculum content or
pedagogy. Second is cognitive disempowerment, which leads teachers to “misinterpret the
values of their work” (Tsang & Liu, 2016, p. 217). For example, teachers perceived they were
engaged principally in supervision of students, not making a difference in students’ lives.
Further, the decisions of what teachers needed to do was made by educational bureaucrats, not
the teachers themselves. Researchers suggested to reduce demoralization school administrations
might be more inclusive of teachers, communicate more effectively, and foster trust between
building leaders and the teacher corps.

Demoralization as a product of individual and workplace factors. Quantitative
studies have recently shed light on teacher- and school-level contributors to demoralization.
Wronowski and Urick (2019a, 2019b) conducted secondary analysis of data from the National
Center Education Statistics’ (NCES) Schools and Staffing Surveys (SASS) from the 1993-1994,
1999-2000, 2003-2004, and 2007-2008 cycles. These data were drawn from “the height of the
accountability policy era” in the US (Wronowski & Urick, 2019b, p. 10). The first study
explored the factors that might predict demoralization in a nationally representative sample of
schools (~$N = 8,970$ to $10,200$) and teachers (~$N = 46,710$ to $56,350$) across the four survey cycles. SASS sampling incorporates a two-stage clustered design, enabling the study to track individual and school factors that contribute to teacher perceptions of deprofessionalization and demoralization. Teacher perceptions of demoralization and deprofessionalization were the dependent variables in two models. Demoralization variables at the teacher level included teacher worry and stress, as well as perception of administration as supportive or not. School level variables included urbanicity, percent students of color, and perceptions of principal leadership style. Multigroup HLM showed the effect of teacher- and school-level variables on teachers’ perceived demoralization. Over the four cycles of SASS administration, “teachers who had increased perceptions of unsupportive administration ($\beta = .29 - .39$, $p < .001$) had a corresponding increase in demoralization” (p. 17). Researchers noted an increase in the strength of the effect between 2000 ($\beta = .29$) and 2004 ($\beta = .39$), marking the time just before and after adoption of NCLB. Geography and student socioeconomic status (SES) also figured in perceptions of demoralization. Rural schools saw an increase in teacher demoralization ($\beta = .08 - .22$, $p < .01 - .001$), as did schools with lower SES ($\beta = .18 - .45$, $p < .001$). Of note, shared leadership was inversely related to demoralization during the state-level standards-based SASS in 2000 ($\beta = -.06$, $p < .05$) and the SASS conducted in 2004 after adoption of NCLB ($\beta = -.10$, $p < .05$). This suggests that including teachers in meaningful decision-making is related to teachers’ perception that they are incorporating their values into their work.

The second study investigated the extent to which accountability-based practices rooted in NCLB contributed to teachers’ perception of the deprofessionalization of teaching and demoralization as well as their subsequent decision to leave teaching. Data from the four cycles of SASS described above were integrated into a model with the nationally representative Teacher
Follow-Up Surveys from 2007-08/2008-09 and 2011-2012/2012-2013 administrations. TFS responses provided information on accountability practices and teacher intent to leave the classroom. The researchers generated models for two groups of respondents: those who said accountability and assessment practices were a factor in their decision to leave teaching or change schools \( (N \equiv 1100) \) and those who said accountability and assessment practices were not a factor in their decision to leave teaching or change schools \( (N \equiv 1400) \). Researchers employed structural equation modeling (SEM) to track the influence of demoralization on teacher outcomes. Demoralization was operationalized two ways: having less time for instruction due to testing-related tasks and perceiving students negatively because of poor test performance.

Perception of demoralization was incorporated as two latent variables. Multiple confirmatory factor analyses confirmed the fit of a three-factor model of teacher deprofessionalization and demoralization.

In the “accountability” teacher group, worry and stress were a significant predictor of teachers leaving the field (Standardized Estimate = 0.73, \( \beta/Std. \) Error = 5.66, \( p < .001 \)). Among demographic factors for teacher in the “accountability” group, late career teachers were significantly more likely to leave (Standardized Estimate = 0.36, \( \beta/Std. \) Error = 2.16, \( p < .05 \)), as were alternatively certified teachers (Standardized Estimate = 0.60, \( \beta/Std. \) Error = 6.49, \( p < .001 \)). Overall Wronowski and Urick found that analysis of this nationally representative sample showed “a significant relationship between teachers’ disaffection and intent to leave their current position” (2019a, p. 20). The results indicate a “connection between a negative perception of accountability and assessment policies and teacher turnover that is primarily driven by demoralization” (p. 20). The researchers noted that the ensuing process of demoralization
“represents a terminal step in teachers’ response to policy in which hopelessness, feelings of diminished control over their work, and emotional exhaustion” lead to leaving the field (p. 20)

**Demoralization as a product of evaluation practices.** Another aspect of accountability that can lead to demoralization, according to David Berliner, is the teacher evaluation process (Santoro, 2018). This process was the focus of Bradford and Braaten’s (2018) mixed-methods ethnographic study of how teachers construe quality teaching and their teaching practices vis-à-vis summative evaluations. This two-year investigation of middle school science teachers adapting to new evaluation procedures enabled close study of one teacher with 14 years’ experience, a “confident” and “passionate” teacher with National Board Certification, a “strong vision for science teaching, a willingness to try new ideas, and a desire to investigate problems associated with teaching and learning” (2018, p. 49). After participating for a year in her school’s new evaluation program, this teacher showed signs of demoralization, including detachment and cynicism.

The researchers distinguished between evaluation programs that are primarily managerial and those that lead to authentic improvement of teaching and learning. Researchers concluded that teacher evaluations create “dilemmas between accountability and improvement for teachers” (Bradford & Braaten, 2018, p. 56). Evaluation programs rooted in teacher management rather than teacher growth “may amplify the pitfalls of performivity” (p. 56), the antithesis of authentic professional growth. This study emphasizes the essential role of sense-making for teachers as they implement and adapt to new policies. When policies run contrary to teachers’ internal values, they create the conditions for demoralization.
Summary of Section One

Burnout and demoralization are two reasons teachers leave the field, whether those teachers are new or experienced. The studies described here show when teachers believe their ability to do their jobs well is reduced, when their leadership is not supportive, or when their value centers are compromised, they are much more likely to leave teaching. Taken together, these studies highlight how interconnected the dynamics of motivation, personal factors, and environmental factors are to a person’s sustained commitment to teaching. In the following section, I shift from a focus on what can go wrong to a focus on what people do to stave off these threats to thriving.

Section Two: Tools to Sustain Thriving

This study is an exploration into teachers’ lived experiences in the classroom. As a classroom teacher myself, I could draw on two decades of experience observing others and being in the classroom. It is not unreasonable to assume that every professional encounters occasional roadblocks, has bad days, or is temporarily unsettled by an unpleasant interaction on the job.

The constructivist grounded research design of the study (Charmaz, 2006), made it necessary for me to address what Dunne and Üstündağ call “the literature review dilemma” (2020, para. 8). The conundrum stems from the need to be knowledgeable about the literature in relevant fields while maintaining an authentic openness to emergent ideas during data collection and analysis. Thriving is arguably an interdisciplinary concept, drawing in elements of positive affect, job satisfaction, and persistence. For this literature review, I reasoned that people who manage to avoid deeply unsatisfactory outcomes in their work environments, e.g. burnout or demoralization, must have attributes that help them continue through difficulty (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011). Therefore, I include the literature on grit. Additionally, given
thriving’s dimension of sustained positive mindset (as defined in Chapter 1), I decided that it would be useful to review the literature on intrinsic motivation and passion as well. Together, these three constructs—intrinsic motivation, grit, passion—foreground a study of thriving teachers while still allowing me “to privilege the raw data” (Dunne and Üstündağ, 2020, para. 19) of the teachers’ stories told in their own words.

**Grit**

Duckworth (2016) describes grit as the product of passion (or consistency of interest) and perseverance. The quality is a stick-to-itiveness that characterizes the extended pursuit of a valued goal over time.

**Measuring grit.** Duckworth sought to isolate the character component of high achievement, separating it from the cognitive dimension (Seligman, 2011). Based on research with students in academic settings, spelling bee participants, and soldiers in the Army, Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) identified four components of grit: interest, practice, purpose, and hope. Per her model, interest refers to enjoyment of what one is doing. Practice indicates effort toward deliberate work on identified weaknesses and cultivation of strengths. Purpose is reflected in believing the target activity has value and meaning for and beyond the self. Hope is tantamount to optimism, the belief that one can improve with effort. Duckworth’s Grit Scale, a 12-item self-reported questionnaire, measures these components. Noting that people with more raw talent were less gritty than those who applied themselves relentlessly to self-improvement, Duckworth et al., concluded “our potential is one thing, what we do with it is another” (2007, p. 14). Grit does not encompass moral or ethical elements, such as honesty, and might only imply courage.
Grit’s capacity to predict success is not unlimited, however. In a longitudinal study of data from West Point, Duckworth, et al. (2019) examined how cadets’ scores in grit, military achievement, grade point average, and physical tests predicted completion of initiation training and graduation. Researchers analyzed data from nine cohorts of students over ten years. Regression modeling showed that for the initiation training, grit mattered. Cadets whose grit scores were one standard deviation higher were 54% more likely to complete initiation training (odds ratio [OR] = 1.54, p < .001). However, grit was not a strong predictor of lengthier outcomes, such as military, academic, and physical success throughout cadets’ four years. Grit predicted only a small proportion of variance in military (β = 0.10, p < 0.001), academic (β = 0.07, p < 0.001), and physical (β = 0.06, p < 0.001) scores.

Critiques of how grit is measured. Some parts of grit withstand scrutiny more readily than others. For example, the hierarchical nature of the construct has been challenged as a predictor of success. In a meta-analysis of 88 grit studies involving 66,807 individuals, Credé, Tyman, and Harms (2017) examined 584 effect sizes between the two facets of grit—perseverance of effort and consistency of interest—and performance, retention, conscientiousness, cognitive ability, and demographic variables. For this description, k refers to the number of studies included in the analysis. Among demographic variables, grit showed a stronger correlation to age (k = 22, N = 12,349, ρ = .12, SDρ = .04) than to gender (k = 25, N = 18,750, ρ = .05, SDρ = .07) or ethnic minority status (k = 9, N = 15,261, ρ = .01, SDρ = .01), but the effect size remains small. Grit generally increases with age (Duckworth et al., 2007), though one study of German adults showed a curvilinear relationship, with adults over 50 displaying less grit than their midcareer peers (Lechner, Danner, & Rammstedt, 2019). The analysis confirmed that grit as a higher level construct is useful at predicting retention, (k = 10, N = 11,163, ρ = .18,
$SD_p = .03$) and intent to continue with the current employer ($k = 4, N = 519, \rho = .15, SD_p = .00$), which is relevant in professions with high turnover rates.

Whereas Duckworth et al. (2007) indicated that the two facets of grit were equally predictive of success, and more so when used together, Credé et al. found that perseverance was much more predictive than consistency. Researchers called into question the discriminant validity, citing very strong correlations between conscientiousness and grit ($k = 22, N = 18,826, \rho = .84, SD_p = .07$) and conscientiousness and perseverance ($k = 8, N = 4,967, \rho = .83, SD_p = .14$). Researchers concluded that “perseverance is a much better predictor of performance than either consistency or overall grit and should therefore probably be treated as a construct that is largely distinct from consistency to maximize its utility” (Credé et al., 2017, p. 502). These findings suggest conscientiousness could be a characteristic to trace among thriving teachers who have sustained their vigor for work over time. Moreover, interventions to promote grit which use the single higher construct instead of just the perseverance facet might be ineffective (Credé et al., 2017).

Other researchers have found benefits to parsing the measurement of grit into its facets. Not only is the two-facet approach a better statistical fit than the single construct approach (Credé, 2018), but it is also a more accurate predictor of performance in some areas, such as well-being (Disabato, Goodman & Kashdan, 2018) and work engagement (Lechner, Danner, Rammstedt, 2019). The perseverance facet is linked to well-being, whereas the consistency facet is not.

**Grit applied to the workplace.** Grit has been applied to predicting workplace success, defined as achieving career goals. To date, most of the studies draw on small, non-representative samples from outside the United States. For example, a comparative study of small, non-
representative samples from 19 countries showed that, after controlling for cognitive ability and education, grit was related to income (\(-0.06 \leq \beta \leq 0.34\)) and job satisfaction (\(0.02 \leq \beta \leq 0.35\)) in only a few of the countries included (Danner, Lechner, & Rammstedt, 2019).

To understand whether grit can predict career engagement and success in a representative sample of employed German adults (\(N = 2,246\)), researchers analyzed responses to five items from the short Grit Scale and three items capturing conscientiousness. Career engagement refers to working overtime, participating in professional development, and attitudes about lifelong learning. Career success refers to income, job satisfaction, and job prestige. Researchers used two models to test grit as a first-order factor and as a residual factor of conscientiousness. The first model targeted grit as a latent variable to test criterion validity in regards to job engagement and career success. The second model tested the variance of the five grit items, four of which comprise the perseverance facet and are independent of the conscientiousness items. These items included “I am diligent” and “I can cope with setbacks”. A specificity test in the first model showed that for the item “I can cope with setbacks” 85% of the reliable (true-test) variance was grit-facet variance not shared with conscientiousness, underscoring grit’s value in measuring persistence in the pursuit of goals. When viewed as a facet of conscientiousness, grit is a predictor of career engagement (\(0.19 \leq \beta \leq 0.75\)), but it did not outpredict cognitive ability for career success measures (\(0.08 \leq \beta \leq 0.19\)), such as income or prestige (Lechner, Danner, & Rammstedt, 2019). Researchers noted:

Somewhat ironically, the pattern of results was suggestive of a less-than-ideal balance between grit’s effects on career engagement versus those on actual success: The extra hours that grittier people invest in working overtime and participating in CPD courses appear not to fully translate into a higher income or job prestige….Inasmuch as working
overtime can incur costs (i.e., in terms of health risks and work-family conflict), grit’s associations with career engagement may not be unequivocally beneficial. It is plausible to assume that grit influences career success through (sustained) engagement with career goals; thus, it is possible that gritty individuals do reap the benefits of their heightened career engagement in the long run…. Nonetheless, the key message of [this study] is that grittier people are somewhat more successful and certainly more engaged in their jobs. (Lechner, Danner, & Rammstedt, 2019, n.p.)

It may be argued that teaching is different from target-specific jobs such as sales, where “success” may be more readily quantified through salary, prestige, or promotion. To understand where grit falls short as a metric for gauging long-term thriving for teachers, some researchers suggest incorporating the construct of passion (Jachimowicz, Wihler, Bailey, & Galinsky, 2018; Kaufman, 2018, Sep.).

**Intrinsic Motivation**

Intrinsic motivation is “the life force or energy [for] an activity and for the development of [an] internal structure” that supports engagement in that activity (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 8). For those who are intrinsically motivated, doing the focal activity is autotelic, i.e., it is its own reward (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). In this case, external motivation is superfluous. Intrinsic motivation theory shows that people need to feel competent, to exercise some measure of control over their lives (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In those circumstances, people are more likely display interest in what they do and to enjoy it.

People are motivated to enter teaching by a desire to work with children, make a positive difference in the world, or share their love of a content area. The phenomena that keep educators in the classroom or drive them to leave range from the straightforward to complex. However, the
source of the impetus matters: external motivators such as salary are less likely to keep teachers in the classroom than internal motivators, such as pride in work and rewarding connections with students and colleagues (Johnson, 2019). Kasser and Ryan report “success at intrinsic aspirations provides experiences that satisfy basic psychological needs and thus facilitate growth and well-being” (2001, p. 128).

Vallerand (2012) asserts that “the individual is an active organism striving for effective interactions with the environment in the hope of growing as an individual and living a meaningful life” (p. 42). Motivation types are characterized as intrinsic, wherein a behavior is performed because it brings pleasure or satisfaction, and extrinsic, wherein a behavior is performed to achieve reward or avoid punishment (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Research in the field was initially dominated by experimental work in laboratory settings, but it has recently expanded to include field work, especially in the areas of competition, academics, and work (Vallerand, 2012).

**An extension to the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy.** Locke and Schattke (2019) take issue with the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy, suggesting instead a trichotomy of achievement motivation, and sharper definitions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. They point out that the internal/external distinction for the animating source of behavior is inadequate for the dynamic social realities of human life. People’s motivations can overlap. Further, those motivations exist along a continuum from mild to strong. The performance of the activity can range from passive to active. A person can engage in an activity or experience for pure enjoyment, but also to improve at it, whereupon intrinsic and achievement motivation are both engaged, resulting in mixed motivation (Locke & Schattke, 2019). Intrinsic and achievement motivation are separate and distinct.
Noting a lack of research in the area of teachers’ basic psychological needs satisfaction and occupational self-efficacy, Klaeijsen, Vermeulen, and Martens (2017) hypothesized that each would be positively related to intrinsic motivation. Researchers also wondered if teachers’ intrinsic motivation related positively to innovation at their work. In their model the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, referring to autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000), predicted the extent to which intrinsic motivation and innovation were perceived. A sample of Dutch teachers (\(N = 2,385\): \(N = 690\) in elementary level; \(N = 1,414\) in secondary level; \(N = 255\) in vocational education, and \(N = 26\) in special education) completed questionnaires that used existing scales for each of the target domains. Basic psychological needs were measured with a shortened version of the Basic Need Satisfaction at Work Scale. The Interest/Enjoyment scale of the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory was used, as was the short version of the Occupational Self-Efficacy Scale, and the Innovative Behavior Scale (Klaeijsen, et al., 2017). SEM was applied to test the pathways for all models, and fit was ensured using a robust maximum likelihood estimate, due to the multivariate non-normality of the data. Of all bivariate correlations measured, the strongest was between intrinsic motivation and satisfaction of basic psychological needs at work \((r = .53, p < .01)\), and the weakest was between intrinsic motivation and innovation at work \((r = .33, p < .01)\). Standardized regression revealed teachers’ intrinsic motivation related positively to the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs at work \((\beta = .43, p < .01)\) and to occupational self-efficacy, though less so \((\beta = .21, p < .01)\). The strongest effect size was between occupational self-efficacy and satisfaction of basic psychological needs \((\beta = .51, p < .01)\), suggesting that when teachers feel their basic needs are met, “the more they felt confident in their ability to change whenever required” (Klaeijsen, et al., 2017).

Passion
Passion is an essential component to good and successful teaching over a career, as it both sustains and motivates teachers in their work (Day & Gu, 2010). Passion can be expressed in different ways: as a love for academic content, as an ardent commitment to the development of students’ potential, and as an ongoing desire to connect classroom activities to the outside world (Fried, 2001).

**Passion for an activity.** It is important to clarify passion as a construct to understand its role as a motivating force for human action. With this in mind, I focus on Vallerand’s (2008) delineation of passion for an activity. He defines passion as “a strong inclination toward a self-defining activity that people like, find important, and in which they invest time and energy” (2008, p. 1). It is important to recognize that self-defining activities are those that “represent central features of one’s identity” (2008, p. 2), and are not mere hobbies or pastimes (Fernet et al., 2016). This factor differentiates passion from intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which are not part of a person’s identity (Vallerand et al., 2003), and from grit, which is “[not rooted] in any particular activity and instead [reflects] motivational typicality across all activities” (Curran, Hill, Appleton, Vallerand, and Standage, 2015, p. 634).

**The two kinds of passion.** Passion is a psychological factor that enables people “to display a high level of commitment and to remain dedicated and passionate for a specific activity or cause for years, and sometimes a lifetime” (Vallerand, 2008, p.1). Vallerand et al. (2003) conceived the Dualistic Model of Passion, which distinguishes between maladaptive obsessive passion (OP) and the more adaptive harmonious passion (HP). OP is expressed in compulsive and sometimes self-destructive pursuits, such as gambling, sex addiction, or physical activity, where “the activity controls the person” (p. 758). Obsessive passion can result in negative affect when a person is not able to engage in the activity, and can lead to distraction or fixation.
contrast, HP contributes to positive affect and does not lead to feelings of guilt or obsession when the person is not engaged in the passionate activity. Persons with HP are in control of the activity and will stop doing it if it no longer brings positive benefits. Vallerand et al. (2003) developed a 12-item Passion Scale to measure both types of passion. The scale has been validated in a number of subsequent studies (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008; Kim, 2013; Marsh et al., 2013).

**Measuring passion in teachers.** Kim (2013) used the Passion Scale to gauge passion among pre-service teachers in elementary education and to explore the connection between passion scores and beliefs about teaching. Students ($N = 77$) in elementary education completed Woolley, Benjamin, and Woolley’s Teachers Beliefs Survey (TBS) and Hoy and Woolfolk’s short form of the Teacher Efficacy Scale (Kim, 2013), as well as the Passion Scale (Vallerand, 2003). Overall, the preservice teachers scored high in passion overall ($M = 4.73$, $SD = .86$), with HP levels appreciably higher ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.17$) than OP levels ($M = 3.29$, $SD = .98$). Harmonious passion was positively related to constructivist beliefs ($r = .30$, $p < .05$), and little correlation was found between general teaching efficacy ($r = -.17$, $p < .05$) or personal teaching efficacy ($r = .03$, $p < .05$). Hierarchical linear regression analysis showed that harmonious and obsessive passion added 7.8% of the overall prediction of preservice teachers’ beliefs about teaching. It also showed that status in the program, i.e. being in third year versus fourth, was the most significant factor to predict constructivist teaching beliefs in this sample ($ß = -.23$, $t = 2.03$, $p < .05$ for first step; $ß = -.37$, $t = -2.3$, $p < .05$ for second step). Kim concluded that universities should work specifically to sustain and foster preservice teachers’ harmonious passion in the final year of the training program. A subsequent study by Kim (2017) with preservice teachers ($N = 212$) in Seoul, South Korea, confirmed that HP was positively correlated with constructivist
teaching beliefs in the three categories of student engagement ($\beta = .34$, $t = 4.1, p < .001$),
instructional strategies ($\beta = .39$, $t = 4.69, p < .001$), and classroom management ($\beta = .20$, $t = 2.39, p < .05$). Both HP ($\beta = .33$, $t = 4.13, p < .001$) and OP ($\beta = .28$, $t = 3.53, p < .001$) were positively correlated with teacher perceptions of efficacy. The cultural differences between South Korea and the United States in terms of an emphasis on traditional versus constructivist teaching could be a relevant mediating factor in the differences identified here, namely in how obsessive passion correlates positively with perceptions of preservice teacher self-efficacy.

A meta-analysis of 94 studies that used the Passion Scale (Vallerand, 2003) was conducted on the interpersonal correlates to HP and OP (Curran et al., 2015). Over 1300 independent correlations were examined: 654 correlations, of which 317 were bivariate and 337 partial. Half of these correlations were for HP and half were for OP. The variables encompassed cognitive and behavioral domains, as well as attributes of motivation and well-being. Fixed- and random-effects analyses were performed, generating weighted mean correlations. Results of the primary meta-analysis for partial correlation show a large effect for HP in relation to flow ($k = 7$, $N = 2,368$, $\rho = .63$, $p < .01$), deliberate practice of the activity ($k = 5$, $N = 711$, $\rho = .55$, $p < .05$), cognitive-emotional engagement ($k = 5$, $N = 2202$, $\rho = .59$, $p < .01$), intrinsic motivation ($k = 8$, $N = 4513$, $\rho = .48$, $p < .01$), and life satisfaction ($k = 20$, $N = 8575$, $\rho = .47$, $p < .01$). These results demonstrate that HP correlates positively with healthy cognitive and behavioral outcomes, and with desirable well-being attributes and motivation factors. HP was negatively correlated with anxiety ($k = 7$, $N = 1266$, $\rho = -.27$, $p < .01$) and burnout ($k = 15$, $N = 5236$, $\rho = -.47$, $p < .01$). Ten years of studies on passionate engagement in a valued, meaningful activity confirm that harmonious passion “is an enriching motivational force” (Curran et al., 2015, p. 647). Harmoniously passionate people “tend to approach activities with an adaptive pattern of
motivation encapsulated by learning, development and volition” (p. 647). One item that is noteworthy in the American context is that obsessive passion “appears ego-depleting and dissatisfying in settings that value independence and autonomy [leading to burnout], but contributes to psychological energy and satisfaction in settings that value interdependence and subordination” (Curran et al., 2015, p. 649). This conclusion opens the door to consideration of school-based factors such as leadership style and building culture in cultivation of harmonious versus obsessive passion among teachers.

**Passion and teaching modality.** Variations in motivation according to teaching modality can also be better understood through a passion-based investigation. Greenberger (2016) applied the 16-item Passion Scale adapted for teachers (Carbonneau et al., 2008) to university instructors who use face-to-face and online teaching to better understand dimensions of teacher motivation in a distance-learning model. Greenberger’s stratified random sample ($N = 92$) identified as 95% passionate for online instruction according to the scale. The dichotomous variable passion orientation was used to evaluate the association. Passion orientation refers to the dominant passion, per subscale scores, present for each teaching modality. A phi coefficient was used to assess the association between the two dichotomous variables: passion (HP or OP) and modality (face-to-face or online). No significant association was found ($\phi = .07, p = .49$). An analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that when the means of the two groups were compared on the HP dependent variable, there was no significant difference in HP by modality ($F(1,86) = 2.09, p = .15$). Online instructors had slightly higher means ($N = 27, M = 5.90, SD = .91$) for HP than did face-to-face instructors ($N = 61, M = 6.17, SD = .75$). Mean scores for OP were much lower in both face-to-face instruction ($N = 27, M = 3.14, SD = .135$) and online ($N = 61, M = 3.61, SD = 1.4$). Greenberger points out that “perceived psychological distance” (2016, p. 185) can affect
the feeling of community, rapport, and student satisfaction and achievement thereby making the study of passion in online education increasingly relevant as universities employ cost-saving measures in the future.

The paucity of studies on passion in teaching within the United States in the past five years makes this an exciting field to address, especially given the mediating role harmonious passion has on intrapersonal dynamics that lead to burnout. Additionally, as the United States moves toward wider use of online learning during the COVID-19 crisis, more studies about teacher passion in this area could also help education leaders target professional development to support teachers.

**Summary of Section Two**

This section brought to light relevant research on attributes that are likely to sustain thriving in teachers as they face professional challenge and change. The topics examined here—grit, intrinsic motivation, and passion—reflect the researcher’s personal experience as an educator and the initial forays into the literature prior to and during data collection. The constructs in this section will help answer the research questions by either confirming what thriving teachers actually do or do not experience. As such, these constructs provide an antecedent to the conclusions that emerge from the findings.

**Section Three: Positive Psychology and the Emerging Field of Thriving**

To answer the research questions about which factors sustain thriving teachers in the face of challenge, it is useful to consider the tools of psychology. Positive psychology, in particular, may shed light on what those who are perceived as thrivers have in common.
Positive Psychology

Growing out of the post-World War II tradition of humanistic psychology, positive psychology focuses on helping humans achieve their potential. The discipline diverges from its forebears, which emphasized human maladaptation, anxiety, or mental illness. Instead, positive psychology emphasizes the cultivation of human strengths (Al Taher, 2020; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2011). Positive psychology seeks to put the empirical and methodological tools of robust science behind the effort to help people live happier, more meaningful lives. The discipline has grown in the last two decades, as more areas of human behavior are explored through the lens of positive growth. Practitioners of positive psychology investigate a range of topics connected to living a fulfilling life. Table 2 provides a sample of topical domains that are now the province of positive psychology research.
### Table 2

**Overview of Select Topics within Applied Positive Psychology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Literature to Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character strengths</td>
<td>Traits which can be cultivated to make life more meaningful</td>
<td>Peterson &amp; Seligman (2004), Seligman (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drive</td>
<td>Idea that motivation is a combination of autonomy, meaning, and purpose</td>
<td>Pink (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Absorption in an activity, often applied in the study of school and work environments</td>
<td>Hakanen, Bakker &amp; Schaufeli (2006); Seligman (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flow</td>
<td>The state of optimal and total engagement in an activity, sense of time is lost</td>
<td>Csikszentmihalyi (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grit</td>
<td>Perseverance and passionate engagement toward the pursuit of a valued goal</td>
<td>Duckworth (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion</td>
<td>Different types of passion support healthy and unhealthy engagement in activities</td>
<td>Vallerand, et al. (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>The capacity to overcome adversity; often applied after incidents of trauma</td>
<td>Luthar, Lyman &amp; Crossman (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thriving</td>
<td>A perceptible state of physical and psychological well-being extended over time</td>
<td>Nieto (2009); Su, Tay, &amp; Diener (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>A combination of positive emotions, engagement, meaning, accomplishments, and positive relationships</td>
<td>Seligman (2011)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.** Abraham Maslow is sometimes designated the first positive psychologist (Al Taher, 2020), as he drew attention to the need for psychology to open itself
beyond the study of disorder and affliction. However, he was certainly not the first to do so. As president of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1904, William James challenged his contemporaries to think about the fulfillment of human potential (Froh, 2015). Maslow is usually characterized as a humanistic psychologist, though he is credited with coining the term *positive psychology* in 1954 (Al Taher, 2020). His famous hierarchy of needs model of human behavior posited that humans’ needs range from the most basic, such as for physiological and emotional safety, to love and belonging, to self-esteem, and eventually to self-actualization (Maslow, 1950). The model has been adapted to guide perception, decision-making, and evaluation in therapeutic fields, education, and management.

**Extensions to Maslow’s model.** Kaufman (2020a) clarified that Maslow’s initial model is not actually an absolute or unidirectional hierarchy. In the course of one’s life, a person may revisit “lower” needs categories in response to life’s many challenges. Kaufman (2020a) reconceptualized Maslow’s hierarchy as a sailboat, wherein the “boat” is comprised of the needs that help a person feel secure, e.g. safety, connection, and self-esteem. The “sail” houses the needs that, when met, enable growth, e.g. exploration, love, and purpose. The sky in Kaufman’s model incorporates the concept of transcendence, which rests on a secure foundation of both security and growth, [and] is a perspective in which we can view our whole being from a higher vantage point with acceptance, wisdom, and a sense of connectedness with the rest of humanity (2020a, p. xxxiv).

**Peterson’s Character Strengths model.** Peterson created a model of character strengths as an alternative to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-V; APA, 2017). Through several iterations, the DSM created a taxonomy for recognizing mental disorders, thereby guiding doctors and therapists in providing treatment for pathologies. Widely
used in the United States, even integrated into insurance practices and the function of social
institutions, the DMS perpetuates a symptom-based classification, reflecting an orientation
toward human malady and maladaptation. To Peterson, this approach was limited by the lack of
a meaningful theoretical foundation (Seligman, 2013). Peterson sought more of an “underlying
coherence,” and formulated “a theory of what is good in a human being” (Seligman, 2013,
24:40). For Peterson, “psychological health is the presence of strengths” (Seligman, 2013,
27:07). Peterson created a template of character strengths, but he died after its initial iteration.
Table 3 displays Peterson’s model. The first column lists six core virtues, each composed of
multiple character strengths, which are listed in the second column. The three columns on the
right show “Peterson’s pathologies” (Seligman, 2013, 31:30). Peterson reasoned that a person
exhibiting a trait in one of the three right-hand columns could be more accurately and holistically
treated by building the relevant character strength.
Table 3

*Peterson's Pathologies: Classification of Virtues, Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virtue</th>
<th>Character Strength</th>
<th>Opposite</th>
<th>Absence</th>
<th>Excess</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom &amp; Knowledge</td>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Triteness</td>
<td>Conformity</td>
<td>Eccentricity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Boredom</td>
<td>Disinterest</td>
<td>Nosiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Judgment</td>
<td>Gullibility</td>
<td>Ineffectiveness</td>
<td>Cynicism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love of learning</td>
<td>Orthodoxy</td>
<td>Complacency</td>
<td>“Know-it-all”-ism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>Foolishness</td>
<td>Shallowedness</td>
<td>Ivory tower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Bravery</td>
<td>Cowardice</td>
<td>Fright</td>
<td>Foolhardiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>Helplessness</td>
<td>Laziness</td>
<td>Obsessiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>Deceit</td>
<td>Phoniness</td>
<td>Righteousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vitality</td>
<td>Lifelessness</td>
<td>Restraint</td>
<td>Hyperactivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Emotional promiscuity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>Cruelty</td>
<td>Indifference</td>
<td>Intrusiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social intelligence</td>
<td>Self-deception</td>
<td>Obtuseness</td>
<td>Psychobabbling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Citizenship</td>
<td>Narcissism</td>
<td>Selfishness</td>
<td>Chauvinism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Prejudice</td>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>Detachment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Sabotage</td>
<td>Compliance</td>
<td>Despotism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperance</td>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>Vengefulness</td>
<td>Mercilessness</td>
<td>Permissiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>Arrogance</td>
<td>Footless self-esteem</td>
<td>Self-deprecation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prudence</td>
<td>Recklessness</td>
<td>Sensation seeking</td>
<td>Self-indulgence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-regulation</td>
<td>Impulsivity</td>
<td>Self-indulgence</td>
<td>Prudishness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>Awe</td>
<td>Criticism</td>
<td>Oblivion</td>
<td>Snobbery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Entitlement</td>
<td>Rudeness</td>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Despair</td>
<td>Present orientation</td>
<td>Pollyannaism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>Dourness</td>
<td>Humorlessness</td>
<td>Buffoonery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>Anomie</td>
<td>Fanaticism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reprinted with permission from Dr. Seligman (see Appendix A)

As reported by Seligman (2013), Peterson saw several advantages to a diagnostic and treatment approach rooted in positive psychology. First, his approach was theory-based, unlike
the DSM which is symptom-based. Second, the pathologies are systematically related as Table 3 makes clear: the traits above are either strengths, or the opposite, absence, or excess of those traits. Third, the strengths are universal, meaning they are valued across cultural, religious, and political contexts. Fourth, they do not need a medical model, i.e., a symptom, syndrome, illness. Peterson hoped this model would allow people “to build the strengths themselves as the great buffers against pathologies” (Seligman, 2013, 44:47).

**Seligman’s Signature Strengths model.** In 1996 Martin Seligman became president of the American Psychological Association and made positive psychology the thematic priority of the organization. Seligman’s theory of happiness appeared in 2002 in a book titled *Absolute Happiness*. Seligman (2011) describes how he was dissuaded from titling his book *Positive Psychology* by the publisher, who insisted the title include the word *Happiness*. Unwittingly, this move may have expedited Seligman’s revision of his theory into a more crystalline iteration of positive psychology. As Seligman notes, the word *happiness* “is an unworkable term for science, or for any practical goal such as education, therapy, public policy, or just changing your personal life” (p. 9). In modern parlance the word *happiness* “underexplains what we choose” while simultaneously conveying a “buoyant mood, merriment, good cheer, and smiling” (p. 10), which oversimplifies people’s motivations for thinking and behaving the way they do. Seligman’s reshaped notion advances the idea that “the topic of positive psychology is well-being…the goal standard for measuring well-being is flourishing, and that the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing” (p. 13). See Table 4 for a comparison of happiness theory and well-being theory.
Table 4

Seligman’s Model of Authentic Happiness Theory and Well-Being Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authentic Happiness Theory</th>
<th>Well-Being Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic: happiness</td>
<td>Topic: well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure: life satisfaction</td>
<td>Measures: positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal: increase life satisfaction</td>
<td>Goal: increase flourishing by increasing positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deficiencies:</td>
<td>Advantages:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Language: modern lexicon oversimplifies the central construct (e.g. happiness) to emphasize state of cheeriness/mood</td>
<td>- Addresses human realities: some people find motivation and meaning in accomplishments, not necessarily because that makes them happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Methodology: emphasizes life satisfaction too much, data is usually collected via self-reports which can vary by mood</td>
<td>- Methodology: elements of well-being can be more objectively operationalized and do not rely solely on self-reports</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Seligman, 2011.

When Peterson died unexpectedly in 2012, Seligman led the effort to finish the model begun by his longtime collaborator. To enable the practical application of Peterson’s theory, Seligman helped create the Signature Strengths Test, now called the Values-in-Action (VIA) Character Strengths Survey (VIA Institute on Character, 2020). The six Virtue Clusters, their attendant Strengths, and sample items from the survey are displayed in Table 5. Respondents indicate on a Likert scale whether a statement is very much like me, like me, neutral, unlike me, or very much unlike me. Adding up the corresponding scores for each item indicates the degree to which that strength is developed, or is a signature strength.
### Table 5

*Sample Items from the VIA Character Strengths Survey (VIA Institute on Character, 2020)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virtue Cluster</th>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Sample items from questionnaire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom &amp; knowledge</td>
<td>Curiosity/interest in the world</td>
<td>I am always curious about the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love of learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Judgment/critical thinking/open-mindedness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ingenuity/originality/practical intelligence/street smarts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social intelligence/personal intelligence/emotional intelligence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Valor and bravery</td>
<td>I have taken frequent stands in the face of strong opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perseverance/industry/diligence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Integrity/genuineness/honesty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanity &amp; love</td>
<td>Kindness &amp; generosity</td>
<td>I have voluntarily helped a neighbor in the last month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loving &amp; allowing oneself to be loved</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Citizenship/duty/teamwork/loyalty</td>
<td>I work at my best [as] part of a group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fairness &amp; equity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperance</td>
<td>Self-Control</td>
<td>I control my emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prudence/discretion/caution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Humility &amp; modesty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>Appreciation of beauty &amp; excellence</td>
<td>In the last month, I have been thrilled by excellence in music, art, drama, sport, science, or mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hope/optimism/future-mindedness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spirituality/sense of purpose/faith/religiousness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forgiveness &amp; mercy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Playfulness &amp; humor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zest/passion/enthusiasm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample items reprinted with permission (see Appendix B).
Summary of Section Three

This section discusses the origins of and developments within the field of positive psychology. The mission of positive psychology is to help people recognize and develop innate strengths to improve the quality of their lives. As the next section outlines, applied in a work setting, the tenets of positive psychology offer clues to thriving over a long career, even in a changing and sometime tumultuous climate.

Section Four: Developments in Research on Thriving

Much of the existing literature on thriving comes from the fields of gerontology, health, and psychology (Brown, 2015; Cohen, Cimbolic, Armeli, & Hettler, 1998; Norlander, Von Schedrin, & Archer, 2005). Cohen et al. (1998) note that definitions on thriving vary, and the condition is usually used to define a hoped-for return to health after a crisis. Merriam-Webster defines thriving as “characterized by success or prosperity” (n.d.). The verb thrive is defined as “to grow vigorously; to gain in wealth or possessions; to progress toward or realize a goal despite or because of circumstances, often used with on, [e.g.] thrives on conflict” (n.d., italics in original). The third usage of thrive is mostly closely aligned with the understanding sought in this study. To further dimensionalize thriving, it is useful to see that synonyms include flourishing, prosperous, busy, lively, alive, healthy (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Thriving as a Response to Trauma

Some of the health science research on thriving offers insight into the construct. Cohen et al., (1998) indicated the early years of quantitative research on thriving were “fraught with methodological and conceptual challenges” (p. 333), linked to participant self-reports, variation in construct definition, and time elapsed between the trauma and the participant’s reflection. In Cohen’s conception, thriving is “stress-related growth” showing “the positive effects of trauma”
for individuals and communities (p. 333). His group developed and applied the Stress-Related Growth Scale (SRGS) the same year the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) was released. The SRGS featured questions about how a specific, recent negative event had impacted their coping skills, relationships, and life philosophy. Cohen reported “the results from factor analytic studies of these thriving scales reveal a unidimensional solution for the SRGS and a multidimensional solution for the PTGI” (1998, p. 327). Cohen also noted many studies on thriving completed in the 1990s (e.g., Cohen, 1998; Park et al., 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) featured participants who were late adolescents and undergraduates, “who for the most part have not yet experienced severe life stressors” (1998, p. 328).

In the work of Norlander, et al., (2005) thriving is understood as a return to healthy function after a trauma or difficult event. Norlander et al. (2005) studied the links between affective personality type, coping processes, and response to personal trauma in Swedish men from two professional groups, policemen and dairy workers (N = 90). All participants identified a significant trauma in their lives and the amount of time elapsed since the trauma. Participants completed a variety of inventories to measure perceptions of personal growth; attitudes toward risk-taking and flexibility; perceptions of stress and energy; mood, and coping strategies.

Findings showed persons with high affective capacities experienced positive transformational coping, which made them more likely to thrive years after the traumatic event. On the other hand, low affective and self-destructive affective types experienced negative transformational coping, leading to mere survival or even succumbing to the despair of the trauma. Respondents who scored highest on the PTGI had high scores for both positive and negative affect. Those whose scores placed them in the self-actualizing personality group scored second highest on the PTGI and showed low negative affect. Norlander et al., posited:
“One explanation may be that the high affective types may invest both their high positive and high negative affect in order to mobilize positive transformational coping, thereby thriving, whereas the self-actualizing types, used to an already high level of functioning, respond with homeostatic coping, i.e., recovery.” (2005, p. 113).

**Thriving as Active, Holistic Well-Being**

In an effort to differentiate professional thriving from post-trauma return to health, I offer a more comprehensive description of thriving. Thriving refers to a holistic, active state of wellness. Su, Tay, and Diener call thriving “positive functioning at its fullest range—mentally, physically, and socially” (2014, p. 256). It is a process which unfolds over time. Thriving is a state of being that extends with intermittent peak experiences; it characterizes an overall sense of doing what one intends, of doing it well, and of doing it for a valued purpose.

Thriving is more than eudaimonic well-being, which refers to an overall psychological well-being. Gabardo-Martins & Ferreira (2018) align with Deci & Ryan (2000), writing that eudaimonic well-being “goes beyond happiness because it is related to self-realization” (2018, p. 1574.) In this vein, Seligman (2011) distinguished five elements of well-being: pleasure or positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. He called the combination of these qualities *flourishing* (Seligman, 2011).

Looking to expand upon existing measures of psychological well-being, Su, Tay, and Diener (2014) instead applied the term *thriving* to a blend of positive mental, physical, social functions. To measure “a broad constellation of psychological well-being” (Su, et al., 2014, p. 255), they developed the Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT) and the Brief Inventory of Thriving (BIT). The CIT measures has seven dimensions: positive relationships, engagement, mastery, autonomy, meaning, optimism, and subjective well-being (Su, Tay, Diener, 2014).
Each of these dimensions has subscales, listed in Table 6. Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Tested across five samples of demographically diverse American adults (N = 3,191) over four months, the CIT and BIT displayed good internal consistency with a Cronbach’s alpha ranging from .71 to .96. Test-retest reliability for the BIT was high (r = .83) and for the CIT subscales was good (r = .57 -.81). The CIT showed convergent and discriminant validity with established instruments. Researchers found that both the CIT and BIT showed concurrent and predictive validity in measuring for physical and psychological health indicators. They recommended the instruments be applied outside the health and wellness domains into fields such as education. Table 6 shows how the CIT is organized into categories and subscales. The table also includes sample items.
### Table 6

**Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT) Categories and Subscales**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of Thriving</th>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Sample Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship</strong></td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>There are people who appreciate me as a person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>I pitch in to help when my local community needs something done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>I can trust people in my society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>People respect me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>I often feel left out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>I feel a sense of belonging in my community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement</strong></td>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>In most activities I do, I feel energized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mastery</strong></td>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>I get to do what I am good at every day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Learning new things is important to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>I am achieving most of my goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>I can succeed if I put my mind to it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-worth</td>
<td>What I do in life is valuable and worthwhile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Autonomy</strong></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Other people decide most of my life decisions.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meaning</strong></td>
<td>Meaning &amp; Purpose</td>
<td>I know what gives meaning to my life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Optimism</strong></td>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>I have a positive outlook on life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subjective Well-being</strong></td>
<td>Life satisfaction</td>
<td>My life is going well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive feelings</td>
<td>I feel happy most of the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative feelings</td>
<td>I feel negative most of the time.*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Items marked with * are reverse scored. (Su, Tay, & Diener, 2014) Reprinted with permission (see Appendix C).*

In the past decade, research has appeared that strengthens the claims that the CIT and BIT are useful in measuring thriving (Duan, Guan, & Gan, 2016; Wiese, et al., 2018). To confirm the structural validity of the CIT and the BIT, Gabardo-Martins and Ferreira (2018) conducted a study of Brazilian adults ($N = 801$). Researchers translated thriving as “positive psychological functioning,” (Gabardo-Martins & Ferreira, 2018, p. 1575) because the more literal translation...
into Portuguese is the word prosperity, a nuance which diverged from the researchers’ intention. Gabardo-Martins and Ferreira (2018) found that individuals who thrive “enjoy greater satisfaction with their lives, more optimism as to the future, improved self-worth, and greater flourishing” (p. 1584). For example, life satisfaction was correlated positively with engagement $r = .51$, learning $r = .49$, and meaning $r = .57$, and negatively with control $r = -.34$. Similarly, optimism was correlated positively with engagement $r = .39$, learning $r = .38$, and meaning, $r = .46$, and negatively with control $r = -.31$. Researchers determined that thriving “cannot be regarded merely as an indicator of happiness or satisfaction, but rather as a more wide-ranging construct encompassing characteristics associated with life satisfaction, self-evaluations, optimism, and flourishing” (Gabardo-Martins & Ferreira, 2018, p. 1584). Further, these findings corroborate the work of Duan, Guan, and Gan (2016) and Su (2014) among Taiwanese adults.

Thriving in Relation to Flow and Passion

In some respects, thriving overlaps with the construct of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), wherein a person becomes so immersed in a specific valued activity that she loses a sense of time. When a person’s identity is mirrored in the focal activity, perhaps an “optimal challenge” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 29), the conditions are there for thriving and flow. However, flow is an experience of an activity-specific, temporal nature.

In this way, thriving is similar to passion (Vallerand et al. 2003). Vallerand’s dualistic model of passion differentiates harmonious passion from obsessive passion. The former denotes an adaptive capacity that leads one to use resources well, contributes to work/life balance, and enhances an employee’s ability to perform well at work (Trépanier et al., 2013). The latter is a maladaptive capacity, leading to stress, reduced enjoyment, and suboptimal professional results. People who thrive find ways to capitalize on the parts of their profession that fuel them. They
manage both internal and external stressors effectively enough to retain their positive energy and love of the work.

**Chapter Two Summary**

As described in Chapter One, public education in the United States has undergone tremendous change since the adoption of NCLB in 2001. The high attrition rate among teachers is due in part to burnout and demoralization. This study is designed to uncover what factors or commonalities enable teachers who thrive at work to remain in the field despite the changes and challenges they have faced. To support this truth-seeking process, I employed grounded theory methodology. Therefore, the review of literature shows constructs one might reasonably assume any dedicated professional would have over time: intrinsic motivation, grit, and passion. Each of these constructs might feature in the participants’ stories, either in how they characterize their travails or their assets. Finally, the field of positive psychology specifically focuses on the development of an individual’s strengths and the cultivation of human potential. Within that domain, a subset of research has focused on thriving within health fields, and is starting to be applied to other professional contexts. This study of thriving teachers seeks to delineate what factors underlie and support thriving in a work environment that has undergone so much upheaval. This is especially relevant to the current period, where COVID-19 has upended even more of the teaching and learning landscape. Whereas data were collected prior to the outbreak, the topics presented in this chapter can help teachers and administration understand the dynamics of thriving through challenge and change.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study is intended to investigate the experiences of veteran teachers who continue to thrive in an era of changes in priorities and practice in American public schools. The experiences of educators who leave teaching have been well documented, both by scholars and in the popular press. Given the dearth of qualitative research about teachers who successfully navigate the challenges imposed by federal law, state statutes, and district and building policies, this study seeks to understand the personal and professional factors that sustain teachers who are seen as thriving in their work. This study is guided by the core question of why some teachers continue to thrive over time in a profession that sees so much attrition.

This chapter is divided into sections that explain the background of the researcher, the choice of research design and methods, nomination and sampling procedures, and instrumentation protocols. Subsequent sections contain descriptions of data collection techniques, including decisions regarding the cessation of data collection, and of data analysis.

Background of the Researcher

I am a public school teacher with 25 years of teaching experience in New England and abroad. I earned teaching certification through a state-run alternative certification program in 2000. As such, I entered the classroom in 2000 with 5 years of teaching experience overseas but condensed formal training. At almost 30, I was older than most beginning teachers. Initially, this non-traditional background shaped my perspective-development regarding school practices, such as curriculum mapping and evaluation procedures. I was ambivalent about these elements of institutional management: I recognized that they could provide cohesion and foster accountability practices, but could also limit teacher agency and creativity. I watched as the schools in which I taught moved incrementally toward standardized procedures having to do
with issues such as school safety, teacher evaluations, and an emphasis on generating ever-higher test scores as the most broadly recognized marker of student achievement.

After more than a decade of teaching, I found my morale low and questioned how to recapture the love of teaching that had animated my first years of practice. In observing other teachers—both in my school and through national and international professional programs—I noticed some experienced teachers who continued to flourish on the job, with no diminishment in enthusiasm or commitment. The current study is born of my desire to understand how some teachers avoid the pitfalls of burnout, apathy, or ineffectiveness, and instead remain satisfied—even thriving—in their work. The specific questions guiding this study are:

1. Since the adoption of NCLB, to what degree do thriving veteran teachers believe their profession has changed?
   a. How do thriving veteran teachers perceive the changes in their professional culture in the past 18 years?
   b. How do thriving veteran teachers perceive changes in their personal practice in the past 18 years?

2. What are the professional factors that support thriving for veteran educators?

3. What are the personal attributes that support thriving for veteran educators?

4. How do thriving veteran teachers remain deeply engaged and sustain a positive mindset amid ongoing changes and challenges in their profession?
Research Design and Research Method

A qualitative approach is best suited to answer the research questions. Qualitative research is necessarily interpretative and inductive (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). To understand the underlying dynamics of thriving teachers’ experiences, I turned to grounded theory as both a research design and method. The central tenets of grounded theory are an iterative study design, purposive sampling, and adherence to a system of analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

In grounded theory, the researcher studies a particular social phenomenon through a purposive sample of participants. The data is collected, then analyzed through a process of coding and memo-writing. Preliminary codes are compared to others within and across data sets. Data collection and analysis continue until saturation is reached, at which point no new salient codes can be identified. From the codes, the researcher generates categories, which are in turn combined or collapsed into themes. Then the researcher ascribes meaning to the results in the form of a theory based on the themes that emerge from analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

I adopted Charmaz’s (2006, 2017) model of “constructivist grounded theory,” because it emphasizes that theory construction is an active and interpretive process of the researcher, whose experiences and ontological framework necessarily shape the process and outcome. The current study embraces her “[explicit assumption] that any theoretical rendering offers an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it” (2006, p. 10, emphasis in original).

In embarking on this study, my goal was to understand why a sample of thriving teachers has maintained a positive orientation toward their work amid so much externally-imposed change. The statement of the problem outlined in Chapter One indicates that burnout and
demoralization contribute to teacher attrition in the United States. Accordingly, those two constructs offer a point of departure for a conceptual framework for the study. Similarly, people who enjoy their work to the extent that others perceive them as thriving might also have high intrinsic motivation and/or be in a process of self-actualization. Early research made me attuned to these “sensitizing concepts” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 17) as possible theoretical explanations, but I recognized they were “a place to start, not to end” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 17, italics in original).

For Charmaz, grounded theory allows one to “break the data apart and really look at it closely, rather than just pulling it together,” (2017, 6:45), because the method is comparative, interactive, iterative, and abductive. In referring to abductive, Charmaz explains the grounded theorist “may come up with some surprising findings, and then have to think of all the possible theoretical explanations for these findings, and [then] subsequently have to go and check” (2017, 3:48). Therefore, the research design required the literature review to be conducted after data analysis was complete. I found this model particularly appealing, as it was best suited to capture any thematic coherence in my participants’ responses, in short, to answer the research questions.

In acknowledging the researcher’s inevitable subjectivity, constructivist grounded theory calls for reflexivity and disclosure (Charmaz, 2006). The description of my background helps provide this. Additionally, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process to log thoughts and concerns. An explanation of the journal’s role is included in the Trustworthiness section at the end of Chapter Five.

A visual overview of the design of the study is in Figure 1.
In grounded theory research, sampling cannot be random; it must derive from a “tentative theoretical category”, in this case thriving (Charmaz, 2017, 4:19). Therefore, I used a nominated sampling protocol to identify 10 veteran high school teachers in two states in the Northeast who are perceived as thriving in their fields. This range offers the best balance between depth of data and breadth of human experience (Creswell, 1998). For the purposes of this study, nominated teachers have at least 17 years of classroom experience at the time the researched commenced, in April 2019. This study looks specifically at the experiences and perceptions of veteran teachers,
because they have navigated a series of challenging policy shifts since the advent of No Child Left Behind. That legislation and its successors changed the level of in-class or in-building autonomy and performance indicators for many teachers (Wills & Sandholtz, 2009).

I used a reputational case sample of teachers whose professional demeanor and zest for teaching were admired by a colleague. The process is displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 2. Process of identifying and contacting nominated sample of thriving veteran teachers

Participants were nominated by members of a cohort of fourth-year doctoral students \( n = 24 \); mean years teaching = 14.1) in an Instructional Leadership program at a New England university. Using the doctoral cohort members to nominate from among their colleagues ensured a strong degree of discernment for the professional and affective qualities that make an admirable teacher.

To elicit the nominations, I contacted cohort members via email, asking them to think of a veteran colleague who fit the following criteria: a teacher she would like her own children to have; a teacher who adds value to the school community, and a teacher who appears to love coming to work. Additionally, the teacher had to have at least 17 years of in-class teaching experience, in line with adoption of the No Child Left Behind legislation. The specific criteria are displayed in Table 7. Together, and for the purposes of this study, these elements comprise the attributes of a thriving teacher, aiding in the delineation of boundaries necessary for sample coherence (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).
### Criteria and prompts for nominations of teachers perceived as thriving

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion for Thriving</th>
<th>Prompt to Nominator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived as skillful teacher</td>
<td>• Someone you admire, e.g.,&lt;br&gt;  o You would like your children to be in his/her class&lt;br&gt;  o You think of as a good teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived as contributing to holistic school mission (i.e., not just in classroom)</td>
<td>• Someone who adds value to the school/professional community, e.g.,&lt;br&gt;  o Sets a good example professionally, shows leadership (official or unofficial)&lt;br&gt;  o Is supportive of colleagues&lt;br&gt;  o Uses skills and experience to better school community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived as one who clearly loves the work</td>
<td>• Someone who clearly likes teaching, e.g.,&lt;br&gt;  o Usually has positive affect at work&lt;br&gt;  o Has affection and respect for students&lt;br&gt;  o Sees her work as having deep value</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seven cohort members responded to the initial email for nominations. Several follow-up mechanisms were used to contact nominators, including texting and social media. In total, 10 cohort members identified colleagues as thrivers. Some nominators submitted multiple names, and I asked those individuals to select the single best fit for the criteria. Because there were multiple cohort members working in the same school or district, I decided that selecting only one nominated teacher per school district would give the broadest lens to thriving educators’ experiences. Cohort members working in private schools did not submit names for consideration, because they believed their professional contexts had not been affected by federal and state educational mandates in the same way the public schools had been. In email
discussions and in consultation with the dissertation advisor, I affirmed that public school teachers were the best target for this study, to explore the degree to which NCLB, CCSS, standardized testing, and district-directed teacher evaluation protocols impacted teachers as factors in their work.

Nominators represent both urban and rural schools in Southern New England and New York, spanning primary and secondary levels, and a range of school demographic profiles. Where possible, care was taken to gather a diverse sample, e.g., school size and location, gender, age, subjects taught, years teaching, teaching as first or second career, etc. Seven of the 10 nominated teachers are female. Nine participants are Caucasian; one is Latina. Nine hold advanced degrees, and some hold multiple degrees and professional certifications (e.g., bilingual education). Due to the criterion that all participants have at least 17 years of teaching experience, six of the educators interviewed were in their 50s and early 60s.

As a further component of gate-keeping, I asked nominators to include a brief statement to describe each nominee. These descriptions, usually a short phrase or a few adjectives, allow another layer of information as to how and why the nominators perceive the individual as thriving. Table 8 depicts the study sample with the nominator’s comment, descriptive information about each participant, and their teaching context.
Table 8

Description of Participants, Listed Chronologically by First Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Years teaching</th>
<th>Grade &amp; subject taught</th>
<th>School district*</th>
<th>Nominator’s description</th>
<th>Teaching as second career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3rd grade</td>
<td>Small suburban</td>
<td>Quiet</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>High school (HS) English</td>
<td>Large suburban</td>
<td>Passionate, creative, reflective</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3rd grade</td>
<td>Midsized urban</td>
<td>Passionate, learner, energetic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Kindergarten, regular &amp; special education (SpEd)</td>
<td>Small suburban</td>
<td>Vibrant, calming force, exemplary role model</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>HS English</td>
<td>Midsized suburban</td>
<td>Passion for the job, excellent teacher</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>HS transition specialist, SpEd</td>
<td>Midsized suburban</td>
<td>Inspiring, thoughtful</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>HS math, engineering</td>
<td>Midsized suburban</td>
<td>Passionate, supportive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Pre-K SpEd</td>
<td>Large urban</td>
<td>Sees child as individual, strong leader, passionate</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murph</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Middle school (MS) math/history</td>
<td>Large suburban</td>
<td>Innovative, organized, collaborative</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>MS science/history</td>
<td>Small suburban</td>
<td>Makes learning applicable to real world; energetic, loving</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*School district size according to MDR Education (Hance, 2019).
Participant Profiles

Ruth

In starting the research, I was concerned about attracting a surfeit of extroverts. I worried that nominators might be drawn to big personalities. So I jumped at the chance to interview Ruth, who was described as “quiet” by the person who nominated her (personal communication, Apr. 15, 2019). She has taught third grade in the same school for over 30 years. Tall, trim, and athletic, Ruth has short white-blond hair, a friendly smile, and vividly clear blue eyes. She has an even gaze that calms, and she laughs readily. Ruth gives her full attention when listening; her body language and facial focus suggest she shuts out distractions to focus on the speaker. I found myself thinking that her students must love receiving such complete attention. At 60, she has an air of energy about her, with quick hand and facial movements, and a complete lack of pretense. She wears no make-up and minimal jewelry, broken-in blue jeans, and wool socks. Ruth lives with her husband, dogs and cat in an old farmhouse, their three adult children live in the region. After one interview she takes me to one of the barns to meet her sheep and their new lambs. She frequently mentions hiking and the outdoors, it is easy to see she loves that part of her life. I find her to be modest and down-to-earth. Ruth is quick to draw others in for praise, noting that any successes she has are the result of team efforts. She is also forthcoming about struggle, both in her home and work life. Science is her favorite subject to teach, and she loves to help students “find discovery and confidence” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019). She relays that, in retrospect, she began forming her philosophy of education as a young student:

In high school I actually started to think about why I liked some classes more than others. Why do I like anatomy and physiology versus chemistry, which I could not stand? I
liked them because I could visualize, touch, relate to…understand, you know, the way the
muscles work. And that’s really cool. (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019)

With this in mind, Ruth says she infuses her classes with as much hands-on discovery learning as
time allows. Unlike some other teachers, Ruth does not teach summer school. For her, summer
is sacred time for herself and family, for spending time outside.

Adam

At 41 years old, Adam is the youngest person I interview. He has taught English and public speaking for over 20 years in the same school in rural New York. He is very cordial, and his manners are old-fashioned in a way that speaks to his upbringing in an inclusive, tight-knit Italian family. He gestures broadly for me to sit down for our first interview, as though I am his guest. Adam has a big personality, a shock of dark hair, and a sonorous voice. He appears to be a natural storyteller. The person who nominated him described him as “passionate, creative, and reflective,” and each of these characteristics is readily apparent as he speaks. (personal communication, Apr. 16, 2019). I found myself thinking that Adam must captivate his students. He seems wholly occupied by the stories he recounts, and the listener cannot help but become absorbed. He speaks in great gushes of words. Adam has animated hands that fly as he speaks, and it is easy to see him as a high school baseball coach calling signs, a role he held for many years. Gestures punctuate his responses, as do the names of his students. He sees them in his mind’s eye as he answers questions. Adam is quick, with a sharp wit and a wide vocabulary. His eyes cast about as he talks, though he gives the impression of looking inward as much as outward. There is ambition in his aspect—he is on a path of discovery, and describes himself as “obsessed with learning” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019). Adam is involved in an impressive range
of projects, including producing a podcast, conducting seminars at selective cultural events, and hosting community events in the town where he teaches.

Adam shows very strong self-awareness. He makes an effort to recognize and qualify comments that could be construed as bragging, like a man working to break an undesired habit. Adam seems wholly energized by his work. He does not teach summer school, using that time on personal projects or spending it with family. His wife—“the love of my life”—is also an educator, and he has two school-aged children (Interview 2, Apr. 26, 2019).

Elena

The person who nominated Elena described her as “passionate, a learner, and energetic” (personal communication, Apr. 24, 2019). She laughed often during our conversations. Teaching is a second career. She has two master’s degrees, and certifications in bilingual education and Teaching English as a Second Language. Like Ruth, Elena has taught third grade for over 20 years. She teaches in a Title I school in upstate New York, a context she embraces “because the kids need you a little more” (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019). Approaching 60, she wears her thick dark hair in bangs. Her dress is casual and tidy, and she carries a handbag with a whimsical cartoon character on it because “it’s fun” (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019). The handbag suggests a willingness to do what she likes out in the open, to be authentically herself in ways small and large. Elena is self-deprecating, but her comments seem rooted more in modesty than in an inability to see her own worth. One wonders if she has a history of being underestimated, because her affect is reserved. It quickly becomes apparent there is steel under the gentle exterior. Several times she expresses frustration with teachers who “coast” on old lessons, not revamping lessons or curriculum to challenge their students, or who do not personalize instruction to help struggling students learn (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019). Similarly, she shows
impatience for administrators who “don’t really know what’s going on in the building” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019).

It becomes clear that teaching sits at the center of Elena’s life. She delights in talking about her students, as her smiles and laughter demonstrate. She chooses to teach summer school or write curriculum each year. She has two children in high school and has been married for 30 years. I am aware of how generous she is with her time: she drove over an hour to meet me for each of our three summer interviews, arriving early each time.

**Barbara**

Barbara is in her early 60s, trim and short with a wide and ready smile. A birth-to-three, pre-kindergarten, and kindergarten teacher for over 30 years in the same school, she teaches in the suburban Connecticut town where she lives. She has an advanced degree in Special Education, and she believes this training helps her be a more effective teacher for all students. The person who nominated Barbara describes her as a “vibrant yet calming force and exemplary role model” who shows “outstanding professionalism and intuition” (personal communication, Apr. 16, 2019).

Barbara keeps her wiry dark hair pulled back into a short ponytail, befitting a busy, energetic person. We meet at her house where she shows me the substantial home improvement projects she is doing: repainting rooms and her outdoor deck. Her attention strays occasionally to her big dog, and one can tell he is the baby now that her two children are grown. A very warm person, Barbara talks easily and lovingly about her summer school students. Our interviews are in the afternoon after summer school ends. She says it is her “favorite type of teaching,” repeatedly mentioning how much fun it is to spend time with the young students there with no prescribed curriculum or testing (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). She describes herself as the teacher
who asks for the most challenging students because “you just fall in love with them” (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019). On two of my visits, she shows me photos of the students and their work, including a video sent by a parent of one of Barbara’s students reading a book as a homework challenge. Barbara’s eyes crinkle as she smiles, handing me the phone to watch the student proudly read a few pages. She describes moments like these as her real rewards.

Barbara is a strong advocate of play-based learning, despite the fact that in her eyes “it is much more work than people think. But it’s all worth it” (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019). She explains that children learn many important social behaviors through play, such as negotiating through conflict, empathizing with others, and collaborating for the good of the group.

Teaching was a second career for Barbara, who found that health care was not the right match for her. She is the daughter of Italian immigrants, and she has been married for almost 40 years.

Michelle

In her mid-to-late 40s, Michelle is athletic and petite, with a runner’s build. The person who nominated her cited her “passion for the job, and excellence in teaching” (personal communication, Jun. 29, 2019). In conversation, she is frank and direct, with a hearty cascading laugh. If she were a girl, one might describe her as “bubbly”. She exudes energy in a down-to-earth way. In shorts and a t-shirt, no make-up, hair in hasty ponytail, she seems entirely devoid of artifice.

Michelle grew up in a civically active family in urban Connecticut, and the themes of social justice and civic awareness are apparent as she describes her vision of public education. The goal of contributing to a vibrant democracy comes up frequently as she speaks. She sees
education through this lens, a pathway to foster engaged, capable citizens who can steward the health of the republic for another generation.

Michelle also came to teaching as a second career, when she decided that medicine was not for her. Over 25 years she has held a number of roles in three school districts: as a middle, high, and night school teacher and as a content coach. She relays that this experience gives her increased empathy for students, especially those who struggle with traditional education. She says teaching night school had a lasting effect and made her a better teacher. For example, she strives to make her curricular choices and instruction demonstrably relevant for her students. Like the other teachers in this sample who came to teaching as a second career, she believes those extra years in the workforce gave her more confidence. As a result, she perceives that classroom management has been “easier for [her] than for some of [her] colleagues” (Interview 1, Jul. 12, 2019).

Michelle’s passion is literature and writing. She also reflects on the importance of a healthy building culture for students and teachers, citing the debilitating effect of toxic relationships between district leaders and teachers.

We meet at her busy house, and each time she has a plate of food out, as though she is hosting a guest, not an interviewer. Her two children are navigating the spaces between middle and high school, with sports and social demands, and her husband’s job frequently keeps him away from home. We sit at the kitchen table, stacked high with papers and books. She is spending the summer developing curriculum for a new literature course, and her excitement shows in her face. By our last interview, she will learn that administrative changes will lead to that course being assigned to a colleague. Michelle is disappointed, but generous in passing along all her planning to the less experienced colleague.
Gloria

At 60 years old, Gloria has the air of a fashionable Earth mother. Her long hair is transitioning from light brown to gray. Her accent is pure New York, and her voice has a low timbre which draws the listener in. She laughs at the end of almost every sentence, giving the impression she is an optimist at heart. The nominator described her as “thoughtful and inspiring” (personal communication, May 5, 2019). Gloria has been teaching for almost 40 years, mostly in special education, and working as a regional transition coordinator for students with disabilities in New York state. She develops, implements, and oversees programs that help developmentally or cognitively delayed students gain life skills and find employment. Like three of the other nominees, Gloria comes from a family of teachers; both her mother and daughter are educators. She lives in the house in which she grew up, and it is readily apparent that family is at the center of her life, with children’s toys in the living room and back yard, and a long dining room table where she still hosts family dinners every Sunday. When I comment on the work required to prepare large weekly meals, Gloria laughs, “yes, but the joy that it brings is exponentially more than the outlay of energy” (Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019). She has two children, one grandchild, and was divorced several years ago.

For our first interview, she greets me in a dress with make-up and jewelry. I am surprised because I know Gloria has just returned from teaching summer school. I realize this is what she wore to work, even in the July heat. The students in her class this summer are significantly delayed in their development, mostly non-verbal. She speaks of them with love, but she regrets being unable to do any actual teaching. This summer, she says, is not as much fun as it usually is.
Gloria is tremendously knowledgeable about special education law and support services, both vocational and educational. Several times I ask clarifying questions about the acronyms associated with local, state, or federal programs for students with special needs. Not only does Gloria explain what each means and how it is implemented in her area, but she also knows the individuals who represent the agencies, the point persons for families to contact. She designs and hosts informational programs for parents about state and district laws and regulations about special education and transition programs in New York. She performs these services outside of her contract demands and without remuneration. When I ask why she does so much extra work, she repeatedly responds, “It’s the right thing to do” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019; interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019). Gloria returns often to the notion that she has knowledge that others need, and that she is motivated to help families of students with special needs access the tools and services offered by the state.

Elijah

At about 60, Elijah is tall, and his dark hair is receding. On the summer mornings we meet, he is trimly dressed in shorts with a belt and a collared shirt tucked in. The nominator described him as “ambitious, collaborative, driven,” but these are not characteristics that jump to the fore as we sit down to talk at his home in mid-July (personal communication, Apr. 23, 2019). Elijah is mild, friendly, and a bit reserved. Thus far, I have talked mostly to gregarious teachers. He is less so, but has a quiet charisma. His vocabulary and sentence structure bespeak a very robust education; I would bet he is a voracious reader. Indeed, I learn later that he has undergraduate and graduate degrees from one of the nation’s most prestigious universities.

Elijah is thoughtful; he thinks before speaking. We talk about listening, its centrality to who he is as a person, a family member, a colleague, and a teacher. He teaches math and engineering at a suburban Connecticut high school, his second school in a career that spans 25
years. One of the reasons he likes teaching, he explains, is that “it keeps [him] young” (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019). Prior to teaching, Elijah earned a Master of Business Administration degree and owned a business. That experience influences his teaching, he believes, because he wants all types of learners to be able to live independently and find work that is satisfying to them.

Elijah explains that his earlier business successes afford him the freedom to teach for the love of teaching. He shares that he does not have the pressing financial concerns that some teachers face, which lets him focus on doing good for the community through his work as a teacher. He elaborates, “The difference I make is sometimes with dollars, donating to important causes. But more important, I use my talents and skills to help kids learn to solve problems. That’s how I can best give back to my community” (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019). He, like all the teachers I interviewed, seems highly aware of how the socio-economic conditions of the community impact his work.

Elijah has a matter-of-fact vision about education. Students should learn to solve problems, because the utility of that skill transcends any individual class and translates into better preparedness for independent living. Elijah lives in the community in which he teaches, has been married for 40 years, and has three adult children.

Rosa

Rosa recently turned 60, and she has lived in suburban Connecticut for 25 years. At just over five feet tall, she presents as a mild-but-tough woman. When I meet her in a café in early August, she does not smile for the first 15 minutes. I realize later she had just finished teaching summer school and had not eaten all day. This first impression—of a woman not to be trifled with—remains indelible throughout the interview sessions. She speaks in the quick cadence of
Queens, New York, punctuated by eruptions of high-pitched laughter. This quality makes her engaging to talk to, and the initial reserve she showed quickly transforms into animated and warm responses to the interview questions. She uses her voice as a tool: lowering the register, drawing out a word for emphasis, repeating key phrases. These strategies reflect an experienced teacher in special education who knows how to capture and keep a listener’s attention.

Very petite with olive skin and brown eyes, short curly hair, Rosa softens as she talks about her students—"my kids"—even those from long ago (Interview 1, Jul. 30, 2019; Interview 2, Aug. 13, 2019; Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019). It is evident her professional life has been colorful, interspersed with triumphs and painful moments. She laughs deeply, head shaking and tears welling, relaying stories of her work in various rehabilitation and detention facilities, group homes, hospital wards, and self-contained special education classrooms in New York City and large midwestern cities. Rosa has been injured by students, called to hospital bedsides, and even threatened with physical assault. These stories pepper her recollection of a three-decade career working with extremely challenging learners. There is no bitterness in her voice, only empathy, humor, and love. In fact, the nominator singled Rosa out as “child-centered (sees each child as an individual), a strong leader, and passionate about working with children and families” (personal communication, May 7, 2019, parentheses in original).

There is something irrepressible about Rosa. If I were to describe any of these participants as a force of nature, she would be the one. She is quiet, like a storm brewing, then very direct and focused. I find her to be extremely knowledgeable about special education law—both theoretical and applied—cognitive theory for developmentally delayed youth, and personnel management. I decide she is probably fearless and a formidable advocate for her students.
Rosa’s religious faith is at the core of her identity. She chose a faith-based college for undergraduate after primary and secondary education in religious schools. She rises early each morning to read her Bible and reflect on her intentions for the day. Rosa has three adult children and two grandchildren. She is one of two divorced persons in the participant sample. Her 30+ years of teaching in three states have been with all ages of a high-needs special education population.

**Murph**

The first thing I notice about Murph is that he does not conform to my subconscious profile of an elementary school teacher. In his early 40s, he has short dark hair, is boyishly handsome, and has the physique of someone who works out regularly. We meet in a coffee shop in the blue-collar town where he lives with his wife, also an educator, and their two children who are in middle and high school. Murph explains he has always known he wanted to be a teacher and never seriously considered another profession.

The nominator described Murph as “innovative, organized, and collaborative,” and through our interviews many examples of these traits emerge (personal communication, Aug. 23, 2019). He shows the polite focus of someone who listens carefully and takes questions seriously. Candid and relaxed, Murph talks at length about his growth as an educator and how he continues to seek growth. He enjoys the learning that has come through the integration of technological tools into education. He laughs that his colleagues tease him as “the golden boy,” because he troubleshoots technology problems regularly for them (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019). Murph prides himself on his communication skills, which he believes are essential for the demanding parents in his district. He also reflects on mistakes in his career, and how the lessons learned from them affect his decision-making now. Each teacher interviewed mentioned the
topic of learning from mistakes, but for Murph a few episodes seem to have shaped him. He says he learned early in his career not to be insubordinate to administrators, and he seems to have empathy for his younger, more impetuous self. When he reflects on his own journey teaching, it suggests his awareness of everyone being on a journey. I imagine he must not judge his 10-year old students too harshly as they navigate the spaces of fifth grade.

Murph also muses on the expectations of parents and taxpayers for public schools and teachers. He contrasts the high levels of parental involvement in the affluent district where he teaches with those in the town in which he lives, where parents are less likely to ask about state tests, Common Core standards, assistive technologies, etc.

Murph’s responses to interview questions show him to be pragmatic, principled, and highly professional. He has taught fifth grade for over 20 years, first in the rural South, and for over 15 years now in a prosperous Connecticut suburb. The only thing he dislikes about his job is the commute, as he spends over two hours a day—sometimes three—in traffic.

When we meet, Murph shares that he has just started a second graduate degree. He is the only teacher I interview who talks about eventually wanting to move to administration. After two decades in the classroom, he is starting to feel ready for new challenges.

Val

It takes a long time to connect with Val. When we finally do, I see how rich it is to get another voice from middle school. We meet at her house on chilly January mornings. Her home is cozy, neatly kept, and quiet. She explains that home is a place for her to recharge, a sanctuary. In her early 60s, Val has dark wiry hair, hinting at her Sicilian heritage. She is dressed against the seasonal chill. She wears bright red lipstick, giving her the air of just having gotten ready for company. Thoughtful in her choice of words, Val is open about her humble upbringing, her
roots in Catholic school, the place of faith in her life. She has a bit of the actor’s drama when she gets involved in a story, almost as if there are stage characters waiting to burst forth from within. She speaks quietly for the most part, humbly, looking down at her hands, turning her rings meditatively. Val is open about feeling doubt early in her career, especially when she was passed over for a full-time teaching position. She frames this in connection to work ethic and faith, however. She talks about how “honored” she felt to be recommended by colleagues for the position she eventually got teaching middle school (Interview 1, Jan. 10, 2020). She fixes me with a look: “When I got hired, I put on Cinderella, and I watched it. It had such deep, rich meaning for me” (Interview 1, Jan. 10, 2020). Val explains the fairy tale is a reminder to look for the joy in any situation, to keep working hard, and to have faith.

As we talk, occasionally some aspect of a question stirs her, and her voice rises, arms gesticulating for flair. Indeed, the nominator selected her because Val is “fun, joyful, [and] makes learning applicable to the real world” (personal communication, Sep. 21, 2019). Val loves teaching science, because it allows her to share her passion for problem-solving with students.

Val came to teaching in her early 30s after working in other fields. At this point, she has been a classroom teacher for over 20 years in public schools near the city in which she grew up, with several additional years teaching in the Catholic school she attended as a girl.

Despite Val’s age, it is easy to see the earnest young girl within. There’s a clear desire to do one’s best and have it acknowledged. She speaks repeatedly about “blooming where you’re planted”, about doing one’s best, and having integrity (Interview 2, Jan. 18, 2020; Interview 3, Jan. 25, 2020). Her job, as she sees it, is to model that ethos for students on a daily basis.
Data Collection, Instrumentation, and Timeline

Ensuring Informed Consent

I received IRB approval in March 2019 to move forward with the study (Appendix D). Subsequently, I emailed the teachers nominated by my doctoral cohort colleagues, explaining the purpose of the study and offering the opportunity to participate (Appendix E). I attached the letter of consent for the teacher’s review (Appendix F). Potential participants and I exchanged emails and text communications to determine a time and locale most convenient for them. Prior to the first interview with each participant, I reiterated the purpose and goals of the study. Their signatures attest to voluntary participation, per ethical protocols (Miller & Boulton, 2007).

Data Collection Choice and Link to Study Goals

Charmaz believes “intensive qualitative interviewing fits grounded theory particularly well…because it is open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted” (2006, p. 28). According to Seidman (2013), “the primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution or process is through the experiences of the individual people [who] carry out the process” (p. 10). With that in mind, I collected data using Seidman’s (2013) in-depth interview model, which is described at length below. In-depth interviewing is well-suited to “highlight the compelling in the experiences of everyday life” (p. 126).

In this study, the research goal is to better understand thriving over time and in the face of change. Research Question One is designed to unearth which changes and challenges have resonated with teachers and to what degree those forces were perceived as disruptions. Research Question Two targets workplace factors that sustain or erode thriving for teachers. Research Question Three turns attention to personal characteristics that might aid a teacher in managing change in a way that sustains thriving. Research Question Four invites teachers to explore how
they remain deeply engaged and invested in a field has experienced so much tumult. Together the research questions provide a working yet fluid structure for organization and analysis of the data (Seidman, 2013).

Using the conceptual frameworks of burnout, demoralization, self-actualization, and intrinsic motivation described earlier as a starting point, I employ elements of both tight and loose design (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) to derive the benefits of anticipatory theming, while also allowing themes to emerge from participants’ responses (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Interview questions focus on the teachers’ perception of thriving, its variation over the course of their career, and how teachers find joy and fulfillment in their work lives. As Krefting (1991) points out, “the key…is to learn from the informants rather than control for them” (p. 216).

Here I listened for indicators of burnout and demoralization as participants shared their stories. However, I did not use these terms in the questions, which allowed me a heightened awareness of how the participants talked organically about their teaching journeys. What the participants did not say about their lives in and out of the classroom informed the analysis almost as much as what they did say.

I followed the protocol from Seidman (2013) to structure and design the interviews. As such, I conducted a series of three in-depth interviews with 10 teachers. As the interviewer, I was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The in-depth interview method is “most appropriate…to understand the experiences of others” (Seidman, 2013, p. 5). I created three interview instruments (Appendices G, H, & I). The interview questions themselves are “an instrument of inquiry” and are constructed to support investigation of the research questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016, p. 813; Miles, Huberman &
Saldaña, 2014). I created an alignment matrix (Appendix J) to ensure alignment between the research questions and the interview questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

The semi-structured interviews follow a rough chronological framework, though individual responses sometimes drift into the focus of a subsequent interview. The first interview focuses on what factors brought the teacher into the profession, and how the participant understands that journey. Sample questions include, *What were you like as a student? Do you think that influenced your approach to teaching later on? What were some meaningful lessons about good teaching that you learned early in your career?* The second interview is crafted to elicit the teacher’s understanding of her work currently. Sample questions include, *Can you describe a typical day in your current work life? What do you love about your work? For you, how is teaching different today than when you started?* The third interview is designed for the teacher to reflect on the meaning of what has been shared so far (Seidman, 2013). Sample questions include, *What qualities does a person have to have to do this job well? How does teaching fit into the other parts of your life? Thinking about all you’ve shared so far, why do you stay in teaching?* Notably, “reconstruction of experience adds to its meaning and leads to increased perception of the connections and continuities of the activities in which [teachers] are engaged” (Dewey, 1916, pp. 76-77). Taken together, the three interviews guide the participant from their experience as a young person, through the early years of teaching, and into the present work context.

Depending on the responses of individual participants, and reflecting the nature of semi-structured interviews, follow-up questions varied from individual to individual. Together the three in-depth interviews allow for context-specific follow-up questions and extended responses
(Seidman, 2013), such that other themes could emerge during interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In Table 9, the timeline outlines the procedures followed in collecting data.

Table 9

*Timeline and Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Steps</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spring 2019</strong></td>
<td>1. Obtained permission to begin data collection from the Institutional Review Board at Western Connecticut State University.</td>
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<td>2. Contacted nominated individuals to elicit interest in participating.</td>
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<td>3. Discussed letters of consent with participants, including a written summary of the research proposal and assurance of confidentiality for all participants. Obtained consent for participation.</td>
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<td>4. Began interviews.</td>
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<td><strong>Summer 2019</strong></td>
<td>1. Continued to reach out to nominated participants.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Continued interview cycles (i.e., 3 interviews per participant).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Generated typed transcripts of each interview from recordings.</td>
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<td>4. Offered member checking, wherein respondents read through the transcribed interviews to verify the accuracy of content (Miles, Huberman, &amp; Saldaña, 2014).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Summer &amp; Fall 2019</strong></td>
<td>1. Completed interviews with participants 1-9.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Completed typing and review of transcripts for accuracy.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Began first cycle coding—including axial coding—process.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Generated first data displays concurrently as coding progressed.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Captured potentially salient themes after interviews in informal jottings, designed to inform the next iteration of the data display.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6. Used data mapping for visual representation of relationships between and among coded items and categories.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>7. Organized and analyzed data in time- and case-ordered matrices, where applicable (Miles, Huberman, &amp; Saldaña, 2014).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Winter 2019-2020</strong></td>
<td>1. Continued data analysis by collapsing codes across cases, where appropriate.</td>
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<td>2. Generated and refined categories from codes.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Conducted code-checking with advisor.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Generated themes from categories.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Spring &amp; Summer 2020</strong></td>
<td>1. Reported findings.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Extended literature review, per salient constructs (e.g. components of thriving, self-actualization).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Wrote discussion to share evaluation of findings.</td>
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I conducted all interviews in person. I kept a reflexive journal to log personal reflections and challenges that arose with interviews, settings, themes, and other aspects of the interview and data analysis process (Appendix K). The journal assisted with bracketing to mitigate the influence of any prior assumptions I might have held (Tufford & Newman, 2010). For example, I realized after the first three interviews that I began the research with subconscious assumptions about teachers’ feelings toward NCLB. Notes in the reflexive journal sharpened my awareness to remain neutral in tone and phrasing during the interviews, particularly regarding follow-up and clarifying questions to avoid influencing participants as they answered.

All interviews were recorded using two digital devices: my phone and the talk-to-text feature on my laptop (Appendix L). For the first 10 interviews, I verified the transcript starting with the text generated on the laptop. I listened to the voice recordings made via the phone applications, Rev.com (REV.com) and Otter (Otter Voice Notes). I conducted the first five interviews and the last four using the Rev application. I transcribed by hand eight of the interviews conducted through Rev.com and used the paid transcription service for one. On average, it required approximately seven hours apiece to generate the transcripts by hand. Due to the slow pace of this method, I changed to the Otter application while interviewing the third participant. The Otter application automatically generated a transcript, which was useful as another level of verification for response accuracy. Transcript generation through Otter saved time, reducing the transcription process for each interview to approximately two hours. In an effort to keep research expenses to a minimum, I changed back to the Rev transcript tool after reaching the limit for free use of Otter. In total, nine of the 30 interviews were conducted using the Rev application, and 21 were conducted with the Otter application.
The three-interview technique allowed for structural and topical coherence while providing space for individual experiences and reflections. By embedding constructs of burnout, demoralization, self-actualization, and intrinsic motivation, I imbued the interview questions with both exploratory and confirmatory features (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) relevant to the study of teachers who thrive over an extended time. In other words, teachers might have described their work in ways similar to those I anticipated. On the other hand, teachers might have described their experiences in entirely different and novel terms. Flyvbjerg (2006) points out that awareness of this possibility is central to qualitative inquiry, particularly case studies. His work shows that in-depth case studies often reveal the limitations, what he calls “falsifications”, of the researcher’s suppositions prior to the study. Flyvbjerg explains:

According to Campbell, Ragin, Geertz, Wieviorka, Flyvbjerg, and others, researchers who have conducted intensive, in-depth case studies typically report that their preconceived views, assumptions, concepts, and hypotheses were wrong and that the case material has compelled them to revise their hypotheses on essential points. (2006, p. 240).

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data collection occurs simultaneously with analysis (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The following sections elucidate the process pursued during the course of the current study.

The Transcription Process

Transcribing the interviews allowed me to engage in the initial stages of analysis, including developing consistency in noting syntax, applying punctuation, and using text formatting options. Seidman (2013) explains that transcribers must pay attention to syntax, such
as gestures, meaningful pauses, emphasis, and laughter, which all potentially hold subjective meaning for the participant. I used parentheses to note pauses, laughter, and sighs, and to capture emotional elements such as sarcasm, annoyance, or pride, where applicable. Similarly, as the transcribing process extended, I became consistent with using punctuation within the transcript texts. For example, question marks were used only for actual questions, not rhetorical ones. This tactic helped distinguish between commentary and questioning on the part of the participant.

Another initial analytical technique was developing consistency in text formatting. I distinguished between my speech and that of the participants by highlighting my words in orange font. Seidman (2013) describes this technique as a useful step in assuring that the interviewer maintains an optimal talk-to-listening ratio. I applied this strategy in the early stages of transcribing and coding (Appendix M). When I changed to printing the transcripts as captured by Otter, I reviewed each page for accuracy of speaker identification and phrasing (Appendix N). As a final step, I scanned the pages of each transcript to verify that the participants did the vast majority of the talking, roughly 80-85%. This desirable ratio was achieved for all thirty interviews.

As I became used to the transcription process, some time-consuming practices were streamlined or abandoned altogether. While transcribing the first three recorded interviews, I applied font colors such as pink, red, and blue to mark words or passages that seemed noteworthy. However, as the data set grew in size, nuance, and complexity, I realized that the initial color choices were too narrow for the unfolding data. I began instead to use bold formatting to mark especially interesting text. This change to bold text allowed coding and category development to proceed in a more organic way, mitigating the chance that early codes
might acquire outsized influence in later data analysis. In a few instances, I used red text to signal a compelling statement, so it would be easy to find later. These decisions effectively separated the transcription process from the coding process for the remainder of the study.

**The Coding Process**

Charmaz describes coding as “the process of defining what the data are about” (2006, 43). Per Saldaña, a code is “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based…data (p.4). Charmaz refers to a code, specifically in the initial coding process, as “an analytic handle” (2006, 45) for a segment of data. Codes help the researcher recognize and track ideas through data sets, large or small (Appendix O).

Once the interview transcripts were generated, they were printed and grouped by participant into individual binders. This step was necessary to organize the data, as each participant’s responses generated an average of 100 pages of text. As a newer researcher, I followed Charmaz’s (2014) technique of initial coding for the first two interviews. However, as the data set increased, I turned to follow Saldaña’s (2016) model for two-cycle coding structure with analytic memos. This model gave me the combination of flexibility and guidance that felt most useful.

**First-cycle coding.** Saldaña prescribes first-cycle coding followed by techniques to organize the codes, then second-cycle coding with further meaning-making steps thereafter. In first-cycle coding, the researcher reads each transcript carefully and selects types of codes that fit the goals of the research question and the style of the researcher. After reading through the first two transcripts, I decided to use descriptive, initial, process, and in vivo codes while becoming familiar with the data (Saldaña, 2016). I stopped using descriptive codes after the second
transcript, because those codes were not useful to my analytical goals. During first-cycle coding I relied primarily on initial coding, going at first line by line, then sentence by sentence, generating “tentative and provisional codes” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 115) about the data. As the corpus of data grew, my I began to see patterns and repetition, and some codes became linked in my mind, such as “love kids” and “happy.” First-cycle coding was done using highlighters, colored pens, and sticky-notes. Initially, the codes and sticky-notes were placed directly into the transcripts. Soon this method became untenable due to the volume of notes generated. Therefore I completed coding with sticky notes and my own notes in the margins of each transcript. I signaled potentially important words, phrases, and ideas with underlining and starring so potentially salient passages would be easy to find later if needed.

In first cycle coding, I also applied in vivo codes, which use the participant’s own language and are particularly appropriate for “studies that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 295). I occasionally combined in vivo and various affective codes, such as a value or emotion code, e.g. optimism or happiness, onto a single sticky-note. Where applicable, I used process codes, expressed in “gerunds…to connote observable and conceptual action in the data” (p. 296), e.g., enjoying change, loving to learn. During this process, I began recording the in vivo codes both in the margins of the transcripts and on a sticky-note with the participant’s pseudonym, interview number, and transcript page number. This assisted with the audit trail later as I discussed the formulation of codes, categories, and themes with my advisor.

During the first and second cycles of coding, I occasionally reworded codes to improve fit for the research question. Charmaz advises rewording codes for fit according to “the degree to which they capture and condense meanings and actions” (2006, 48). For example, I reworded the initial codes of reading books, learning with podcasts, and taking classes to the more
inclusive role of personal learning for Research Question One B, *How do thriving teachers perceive changes in their practice?*

Throughout the process of analysis I used the constant-comparative method to generate new categories or refine existing ones as they emerged from the most recently coded interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As analysis progressed and codes began to solidify through constant comparison, I moved to a dual-coding strategy, writing down one of the first cycle codes described above, e.g. process code, and then writing down the salient in vivo language—the transcript datum—on a sticky note. This strategy was the most practical for the steps required in later stages of analysis. These sections of text captured the nuance, range, and variety of participant experiences and feelings that fed into the codes, including those that became axial codes. All told, I generated 758 sticky notes during first-cycle coding. Table 10 shows the breakdown of codes by question through two cycles of coding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>First cycle: Initial, in vivo, process codes</th>
<th>Second cycle: axial codes, category &amp; subcategory development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duplicates</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discarded</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>758</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**From data to codes to categories.** After coding all the data, I gathered all the sticky notes on several tables. I collected six large white foamboards and taped an index card with one research question to the top of each. I used a sixth board to catch any data that were compelling
but perhaps outside the research questions. I sorted the sticky notes, affixing each to the board for the question to which it pertained, e.g., the code “engaging in self-care” to Research Question Three, *What are the personal attributes that promote thriving?* This allowed me to eliminate 81 sticky notes as duplicate ideas and 124 as not pertinent enough to the research questions. For example, the in vivo code “will not take admin or coaching position unless it’s a blended one” (Michelle, Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019) repeated the idea of preferring the role of teacher that had been better expressed in other codes.

Table 11 depicts a sample of first-cycle coding for Research Question Four. The code-to-category-to-theme pathways for each Research Question are presented in Appendices P, Q, R, and S.
Table 11

*Example of First-cycle Coding Technique for Research Question Four*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID info*</th>
<th>Data samples</th>
<th>Code (subcodes in parentheses)</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ba 3, 2</td>
<td>“You just fall in love with your students every year”</td>
<td>Loving children</td>
<td>Fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gl 1, 25</td>
<td>“I just always, you know, I always found my job, most parts of my job, fun. That part of it [having breakthroughs with kids] was fun.”</td>
<td>Watching kids grow</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mu 1, 37</td>
<td>“I mean, if you can’t have some fun, what’s the point?”</td>
<td>(Joking with kids is) fun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Va 1, 13</td>
<td>Brought in boombox for testing week “and to see their teacher dancing, I always enjoy dancing, and you know, I could be a clod, but I enjoy doing it…and we were enjoying ourselves now”</td>
<td>(Being myself) in a fun way</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ro, Ba, Ele, Gl</td>
<td>Summer school “is so much fun”; “it’s the kind of teaching I love to do”</td>
<td>Teaching summer school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad 2,43</td>
<td>“If I’m thriving at all, it’s because I actually like to teach”</td>
<td>I love my job</td>
<td>Intrinsic Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ele 1, 33</td>
<td>Job satisfaction doesn’t come from the salary, “it’s the work. I love it.”</td>
<td>Work is the reward</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gl 1, 30</td>
<td>“I always knew I wanted to teach”</td>
<td>Always knew</td>
<td>Match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mu 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ele 1, 13</td>
<td>“So I think I was made to teach”</td>
<td>Works for me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad 4, 3</td>
<td>“There’s a part of me that likes to perform”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gl 2, 57</td>
<td>“I stay because I like what I do. It’s a good fit…so I stay (laughs)”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* = ID info refers to the first two letters of the pseudonym, interview number, and transcript page number, e.g. Ba 3, 2 = Barbara, interview 3, p. 2.

**Analytic memos.** Saldaña (2016) identifies a step of organization and analysis in the coding process between the first and second cycles. In this step I wrote analytic memos to reflect
on the totality of each participant’s transcripts and the codes I had applied during the first cycle of analysis. In the analytic memos, I worked through the three transcripts in sum, musing on patterns and anomalies within the data. The analytic memos allowed me to revisit the exchanges which in some cases had been conducted months before. In effect, the memos served as my within-case analysis technique. In writing the memos I reflected on the meaning of the codes generated through initial, in vivo, and process coding. I grouped and collapsed codes within the three transcripts, rendering codes more concentrated. I handwrote the memos, which enabled me to devise and apply meaning-making systems with changes to lettering, e.g. capitalization, letter size, or symbols such as starts, exclamation points, or arrows. For example, the analytic memo for Michelle’s three interviews is six handwritten pages in purple ink. The word Relationships is written at the top, capitalized and underlined three times. This was a helpful signal that the relationships were an important theme for her in the third interview. This particular page is marked with arrows to indicate connections between ideas, some causal, some correlative. One section has been outlined in yellow highlighter, as it shows an unexpected larger idea about an irony Michelle identifies within parenting and teaching, i.e., “that your basic job is to make yourself less and less necessary” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). For a sample of an analytic memo, see Appendix T.

Analytic memo writing was a fundamentally important step in the reflection process, as it gave me a chance to immerse myself anew in one participant’s data set. I attempted to limit myself to three pages for each, avoiding descriptive summary and focusing on the meaning of the codes instead. In a few instances, such as with Michelle’s example above, my memos were longer because I was starting to see categories and potential themes emerge, and I wanted to capture the web of connections and possibilities that was unfolding before me.
**Second-cycle coding.** Due to the time-consuming nature of data-collection and analysis, memo-writing and second-cycle coding sometimes happened concurrently for different sets of data. Once the analytic memos were complete and new codes drawn from them, I code mapped the data—now all on sticky notes—to provide structure and meaning. For a photo of one display board with codes mapped, see Appendix U. Due to the iterative nature of data analysis, sticky notes were grouped and repositioned frequently as part of the meaning-making process (Saldaña, 2016). This step allowed for granular analysis of the data, and for nuance in understanding how participants felt about the topics in question. Ideas that were repeated in different language were piled together to show frequency of occurrence, but later discarded once categories were established. Mapped codes were then collapsed into categories to reveal trends and their relative characteristics (i.e. pervasiveness, intensity, etc.). For the last three interviews, conducted four months after the previous 27, the researcher used the constant-comparative method to generate new themes or refine existing ones as they emerged from those last coded interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In the second cycle of coding, I applied axial and pattern codes to the mapped data (Charmaz, 2006). Per Saldaña (2016), axial codes denote “categories around which others revolve” (p. 55). I used bright blue sticky-notes to designate axial codes, as part of determining which codes and categories were most salient to the research questions. (Appendix V). Some of the axial codes later became categories themselves; others were collapsed with other codes into categories. I continued to work with the existing categories and codes, looking for patterns in the data. The use of pattern coding, a form of “meta codes” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 235), helped in the effort to attribute explanatory meaning to repeated codes or categories. Pattern codes also helped
bring to light thematic similarities and differences in cross-case analysis, e.g. *love of working with children* or *the importance of self-care*.

Throughout the entire coding process, I applied Seidman’s (2013) advice to “err on the side of inclusion” (p. 121) when uncertain about what to mark as potentially useful within the transcripts. As part of the initial coding, some concept codes emerged, as I “[assigned] meso or macro levels of meaning to the data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 119), such as *motivation* or *work-life balance*.

After second-cycle coding, I checked categories against guiding constructs, such as burnout and self-actualization. However, where relevant, I remained attuned to the possibility of new constructs emerging, such the importance of relationships to these participants. A visual display of the coding process from data to the development of themes, and finally to an assertion, is detailed in Figure 1 below. In this way, visual displays of codes, categories, and themes also informed the subsequent literature review process (Onwuegbuzie & Weinbaum, 2016).
I attempted a variety of concept mapping styles to determine how ideas fit together as I moved toward final assertions. For me, iterating graphic displays of the interrelation of ideas was an important but somewhat tricky elusive step. One early version shows how I fit themes under larger constructs such as “mindset,” trying to tie in signature strengths as well (Appendix W). However, this model misses intrinsic motivation, among other important factors. Another early version emphasizes intrinsic motivation and signature strengths, but it entirely misses other
essential elements of the findings (Appendix X). However, generating these models helped me understand the deficiencies therein and helped me move toward a more complete final model.

**Chapter Three Summary**

In this chapter I outlined how this study was designed and conducted. I began by describing my background as a teacher with over 20 years of experience in public school classrooms in the United States and abroad. I generated four research questions to guide the study. Due to the dearth of quantitative studies with veteran teachers who continue to love their work, I selected grounded theory research design. This choice enabled me to position teachers’ experiences at the center of my study. I used nominated sampling, wherein I asked cohort members my doctoral program to share the name of a colleague who fit the criteria for thriving. The criteria were determined by me. I conducted three in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten teachers nominated in this way. I recorded and transcribed the interviews, then analyzed the data through iterative rounds of coding. Writing analytical memos helped me synthesize data within and across cases. I generated codes, which I collapsed into categories, then into subthemes and themes. I employed concept mapping strategies to understand how ideas within the data fit together. From an analysis of the themes and review of literature, I formulated three assertions. This process will be described in detail in the following chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF DATA AND EXPLANATION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to ascertain what factors allow experienced and thriving public school teachers to remain deeply and positively engaged in their work in the face of so much change and challenge since the advent of No Child Left Behind. Change can be difficult to navigate, both for leaders and those on the front lines. I wanted to uncover what a particularly vibrant, engaged cohort of veteran teachers had to say about their experience during this era of large-scale modification. To that end, I used grounded theory research design and method. To collect data, I applied Seidman’s (2013) method of in-depth interviews with a nominated sample of experienced teachers identified by a colleague as “thriving” at work. The interviews were conducted from April 2019 through January 2020. The coding began in May 2019 and continued through March 2020.

To structure the investigation, I created four research questions:

1. How have changes since the adoption of NCLB impacted teaching?
   a. How do thriving veteran teachers perceive changes in their professional culture in the past 18 years?
   b. How do thriving veteran teachers perceive changes in their personal practice in the past 18 years?

2. What professional factors sustain thriving for veteran teachers?

3. What personal attributes sustain thriving for veteran teachers?

4. How do thriving veteran teachers remain deeply engaged and sustain a positive mindset amid changes and challenges in their profession?

Research Question One emanates from the Statement of the Problem which prompted this study, to wit, public school teachers in the United States leave the classroom at an alarmingly
high rate (Craig, 2013; García & Weiss, 2019; Ingersoll, 2012; Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Perda, 2013; Podolsky et al., 2016; Reilly, 2018; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016; Torres, 2011). This question is written neutrally to invite teachers to share their perspectives about their teaching journey, leaving it to them to characterize how they experienced the changes. In other words, whereas I may have anticipated that teachers would speak in terms of stress or discomfort, I used Research Question One to ask about how this sample of teachers has perceived and experienced change. More specifically, one component question targets perceptions of changes in the professional culture, while another addresses changes in participants’ teaching practices.

Research Question Two invites teachers to talk about the conditions and context of their work environment. This question is designed to elucidate how teachers feel about their work atmosphere and protocols. It invites teachers to reflect on leadership, evaluation practices, community resources, and other external factors that could either strengthen or enfeeble a teacher’s propensity to thrive.

Research Question Three focuses on personal attributes, because I wanted to find out if there are particular personality traits, beliefs, or aptitudes that support thriving in teachers. These teachers were identified because a colleague believes the teacher enjoys her work, is good at her job, and adds value to the building culture. This question is designed to highlight what personal characteristics, if any, thriving teachers have in common.

Research Question Four presupposes that thriving teachers are doing something right. After all, they have stayed in the work since large-scale federal, state, and even district level initiatives were implemented to improve student outcomes. Not only have they stayed, but they have also remained deeply engaged in their work. This question seeks to explore the dynamic
between what thriving teachers have experienced, what they believe, who they are, and why they continue to work with commitment and positivity in the face of challenges.

**Data Analysis**

After the data were collected, I transcribed the recorded interviews by hand. I followed Saldaña’s (2016) model of first and second cycle coding, with steps in between to synthesize and reevaluate the data using analytic memoing. In first cycle coding, I generated initial, process, and in vivo codes directly onto the transcripts. Saldaña (2016) calls these methods part of the “coding canon” (p. 55) of grounded theory, making them a good fit for this study. Between first and second cycle coding, I created analytic memos of each participant’s three interviews based on first cycle coding, wherein I reflected on the meaning of codes in context. This process helped me consolidate codes, and facilitated my recognition of within-case and cross-case categories (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2016). Analytic memo writing also helped me refine the language of the research questions to better reflect participant experiences. For example, I replaced the word understand in Research Question One with the word perceive. I realized teachers were speaking more about what they had experienced, and then reflecting on their understanding of it. I needed the word perceive to invite the direct recollection of memories first, making the inquiry more precise.

Following Saldaña’s (2016) model, during second cycle coding, I relied on focused coding to draw out thematic similarities between the cases. I went back into the transcripts and recoded several sections of data, generating axial codes that refined or confirmed categories based on first cycle coding and the analytic memos (Saldaña, 2016). Next, I used a lengthy and iterative process of code-mapping for each research question to collapse axial codes into categories, define categories more sharply, and generate themes from those categories. Finally, I
created and refined diagrams to demonstrate the relationship between codes, subcategories, categories, and themes. These steps enabled me to generate thick, rich descriptions of participants’ responses. As a result, the data are sufficient to answer the four research questions. A synthesis of the answers to the research questions led me to formulate assertions about thriving in the field of teaching (Saldaña, 2016).

Chapter Four begins with a presentation of the findings for each research question. The discussion starts with a visual representation of themes and subthemes that comprise the findings for that question. At the end of each section, the research question is answered. Then I incorporate ideas from positive psychology as a model of how the research questions can be integrated into a composite framework. Next, I indicate what the cross-case analysis illustrates about the environmental factors, personal attributes, and perceptions thriving teachers share. Finally, I conclude this chapter by presenting assertions based on the answers to the research questions and insights generated through the cross-case analysis.

**Research Question One Findings**

Research Question One asks, *Since the adoption of NCLB, to what degree do thriving veteran teachers believe their profession has changed?* To answer this question, it is helpful to look at both what might have changed at the school level and in the teacher’s personal practice. Perceived changes in the professional culture of teaching.

The first of these is guided by the question, *How do teachers perceive changes in their professional culture since the advent of NCLB?* In the context of this study, professional culture refers to the teachers’ work environment, including operational protocols, expectations, and building culture within their schools. An analysis of data reveals the emergence of two main themes. First, results show an emphasis on student safety, physical and psychological, that is
more pronounced than 18 years ago. Second, these participants describe increased demands placed on schools and teachers, tied chiefly to standards-based curricula and student performance data. Table 12 gives an overview of the themes, subthemes, and categories that emerged from the analysis of Research Question One, with a focus on their professional culture.

Table 12

*Themes, subthemes, and categories for subset of Research Question One: How do thriving veteran teachers perceive changes in their professional culture in the past 18 years?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased emphasis on student safety</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased demands placed on schools and teachers</td>
<td>Changes as a result of NCLB</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changes as a result of CCSS</td>
<td>Working with data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Using experience to apply reform measures on the ground</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme: Increased Emphasis on Student Safety**

Almost every teacher in the sample refers to the priority of student safety at school. This is not surprising, given that this geographic region experienced a horrific school shooting less than a decade ago. Ruth says a “major change [is in] security in the building and procedures connected to security” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). Reflecting that sentiment, Val sees her role as a protector of students’ psychological and physical well-being:

Number one is to make sure that children are in a safe environment physically, but also emotionally, that we’re protecting their safety all around. That’s number one. That’s number one with me as a teacher. (Interview 1, Jan. 10, 2020)
Noting that high schools can be fraught socially for students, Adam has an “intentional practice” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019) of creating a safe psychological space for his literature and public speaking students. He says, “I literally try to make the classroom a positive experience. I’m trying to make school a better place for my students” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019).

Elena notes that the emphasis on student safety can have learning benefits for children too. “Emotional safety” (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019) for students during the school day is a hallmark of her third-grade classroom. She says she has high class participation, even among struggling students, because together they create “a safe space,” an environment of “no judgment” in her class (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019).

Some teachers refer to the emphasis on physical safety for students, ruefully acknowledging that so many safety drills are now routine in schools. This is very different from the past, when the same safeguards were not in place. Ruth recalls with a laugh taking her third graders on a field trip around the year 2000:

I look back and go, oh my gosh, I can’t believe we did that. Like I remember taking a field trip, I mean the safety stuff, and there’s such a different focus now on things we’re allowed to do and not allowed to do. I remember taking a group of kids to [a local] quartz and garnet mine. [We let] just kids run around, [there weren’t] even bathrooms, like they’re peeing in the woods. But we were getting garnets, and they were so cool. (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019).

Ruth says the increased emphasis on building safety has reduced her ability to be spontaneous, to prop her classroom door open, for example, or have parents drop by to help with a project. She agrees that student safety is of paramount importance, but she says she does not like teaching with a locked door. “It doesn’t feel as welcoming,” she offers (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). For
context, it is important to remember these interviews were conducted in the region where a horrific school shooting occurred in the early 2010s. School districts throughout the region initiated strong safety measures in the aftermath of that tragedy.

To review, thriving teachers note the increased emphasis on student safety compared to the beginning of their careers. They perceive student safety as applicable to the students’ physical and psychological well-being.

**Theme: Increased Demands Placed on Schools and Teachers**

Unanimously, teachers in this sample believe the demands placed on them have increased in the past 18 years. Many teachers cite the weight given to standardized curricular guidelines, and students’ scores on standardized tests, as drivers of heightened expectations. Also, teachers report that tracking of student assessment data is now a more central component of their work.

In public education Michelle believes “the pendulum has swung away from balance to uniformity” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019). The problem is that “students are not uniform, neither are teachers,” she remarks with wry laughter (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019). Both Michelle and Rosa show concern about a reduced appreciation for what they see as “the heart of teaching” (Michelle, Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019; Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019; Rosa, Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019), meaning the emotionally responsive craft of teaching, as opposed to the science of it. Other teachers allude to this concept—Barbara and Ruth, namely—but do not use these exact words. Michelle expresses concern that people find the art form “quaint but not important” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019). She says the current emphasis on quantifiable metrics steers teachers away from:

having that sort of reflective capacity and that flexibility to be responsive…and feeling that you have the freedom and are even encouraged to respond to the kids in front of you
in the moment, and not be worrying about, ‘how am I going to quantify this?’ (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019)

Elijah suggests this shift may have deleterious effects on how students understand their central role in the school experience:

So many rules are changing in terms of the laws and in terms of less responsibility on the part of the kids and more responsibility on the part of the teachers. And that’s becoming a less fair thing to see. And how do you engage kids so they recognize that they’re the biggest part of success or failure? (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019)

Elijah is frustrated by the transference of so much responsibility to teachers, because he thinks it undermines the cognitive and social growth students get by engaging with challenges.

**Changes incurred as a result of adoption of NCLB.** Younger teachers, i.e., those under 45, do not report an experience of adjustment to their classroom practice after the implementation of NCLB. For example, at age 41 Adam perceives there was “not much impact on my teaching” because of NCLB (Interview 2, Apr. 26, 2019). However, veteran teachers in their 60s, particularly those who came into teaching directly from collegiate training, recall the transition to teaching in the era of NCLB with mixed feelings. Gloria hesitates, “I almost feel like [NCLB affected us] like in a negative way, sometimes” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019). She perceives NCLB’s effect as making her teaching “more prescriptive, with more test-based measures” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019). Working in a transition program, she believes “that’s not how a lot of the kids that I work with learn or do well” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019). In the beginning of the rollout, she continues, there was a lot of pressure on teachers and schools to show performance or risk punishment, “so [that pressure] can lead to falsification of data”
(Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019). In her work context, the inauthenticity of those measures “was a big problem for me” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019).

**Changes incurred as a result of adoption of CCSS.** Teachers in this sample express a consensus around one factor connected to the Common Core Standards: there is a “huge difference in expectations now,” according to Barbara, Murph, and Ruth (Barbara, Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019; Murph, Interview 2 Aug. 31, 2019; Ruth, Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). Analysis of data show that thriving teachers understand and value the goals of the CCSS. They caution against the uniformity of expectations placed on students, particularly around the pacing of curricular units. Ruth speaks for the group: “use the standards as a framework, that’s fine. But one size does not fit all. Some kids need to be pushed, and some need more support” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). She underscores her faith that all children in her class are learning, but the pace of demonstrable performance growth is an inauthentic indicator of student potential.

Teachers note the need to adjust to the ripple effect caused by adoption of the standards, particularly in mathematics. Murph, Elijah, Val, and Ruth in math and science, but also Barbara in kindergarten, bear witness to “expectations [being] moved down” (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019). Murph explains, “what we used to teach in sixth grade has been moved down to fifth, and so on” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019). Whereas he says his school adjusted well to this due to a purposeful plan of slowly integrating changes to curriculum, he is aware not all schools did so.

Elena mentions a different ripple effect occasioned by public backlash to state testing in her district. As opposition to CCSS-based testing rose, she noticed a change in the test-taking population:

A lot of kids were opting out [of state tests], and the ones that were opting out were all the bright ones. The parents were like ‘No!’ and I was like, there goes [sic] all my high
scores. But in the end, I’m like I don’t care. That doesn’t reflect what kids know.

(Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019)

However, she encourages her students to take the test, regardless of her lack of faith in it to accurately demonstrate their learning. “I want them to take it,” she says of her third-grade students, “because I want them to experience it.” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019). She explains the long-term value she sees in taking tests of this kind:

They’re going to be taking tests all their life, so it’s kind of like a double-edged sword, I tell the parents. Am I in favor of [the tests]? No. Do I want them to take it? Yes. Just to see how they can do. And to feel that pressure. (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019)

This stance reflects Elena’s belief that students can grow by encountering adversity, by engaging in challenge for the sake of challenge. In her eyes, that is a valuable life lesson for her students.

Barbara construes the impact of CCSS adoption differently. She believes the CCSS has ushered in the practice of having uniform expectations for student achievement, particularly around the pace of skill acquisition and content mastery. She says the problem is, “the bar has been raised automatically, [compared to] the expectations of kindergarten from when I started” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). She has faith “kids will become readers, just maybe not on the aggressive timetable the CCSS is using” (Interview 2, 2019). After all, she says with a smile, “they’re little people, and they need to learn in a way that’s fun for them” (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019).

Many teachers note that adoption of the CCSS has made the content of their courses fuller, to the point they find it difficult to get complete their curriculum during the school year. Barbara continues, “phonics becomes just another thing we’re trying to push in. We’re pushing in so much stuff that we’re not doing it at our best. We’re just trying to get it done” (Interview 1,
Jul. 8, 2019). Still, she makes room for the content she believes is valuable. “Pretend play is very important in class for children to develop social skills, such as problem-solving and cooperation” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). Play, as touted by Barbara’s mentor Nancy Carlson Page, an advocate for early childhood teaching at developmentally appropriate levels, is “so much more appropriate than some of the things that we do today” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). Barbara’s conviction in the power of play to teach important life skills prompts her to work extra hours. She wants to make sure play stays a central feature of her kindergarten team’s curriculum.

Murph approaches the change with a measured tone. He acknowledges “teaching is much more structured now than 20 years ago.” In his view, years ago “you had more flexibility and more time. You had a curriculum, but you could really kind of veer” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019). Today, he says, “there’s a lot more pressure now, you know, to get the standards covered and to assess everything” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019).

**Working with data.** Analysis of the transcripts shows that teachers find the emphasis on data-tracking to be a “massive change” in their jobs (Ruth, Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). Murph expresses the ambivalence several participants relayed about the collection and application of student data. “I’m definitely, you know, on the fence about all the data. We have too much data. But if you use it the right way, at least the way I look at it, I’m thinking about…one kid in particular” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019). The data helped reveal the student’s deficiency in a particular skill set. “Had I not done that, I don’t know if I would have picked up on it as early as I did. You know what I mean? So, it was pretty cool” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019).
Murph demonstrates a pragmatic approach to data collection and his yearly evaluations. Linking his student performance goals to the data he plans to collect reduces the time he spends recording data:

Then this way at least I’m spending my time wisely, where at the end of the year or midyear, I’m not sitting down for five hours writing some report that doesn’t mean anything anyway. But yeah, I can’t spend all my time on that. You know, I can’t. So I found the data piece to be good, because I’m still dealing with my kids’ information I need to have for them anyway. You know, but this way, the work I’m doing fulfills everything right now. (Interview 3, Sep. 7, 2019)

**Using experience to apply reform measures on the ground.** When the CCSS were introduced, Murph reflects, they “really shook up the curriculum” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019). Thinking back to her early years in the classroom, Ruth recalls, “there was a lot of loosy-goosy freedom in [teaching] when I started. There is a lot less of that today” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). Val appreciates the coherence and structure that the CCSS and Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) have given the science and humanities curricula at her middle school:

Years ago when I began we [teachers] were all…everybody was kind of doing their own thing….Now it’s becoming more [clear and focused], and it’s helping me personally, helping me be creative, because it really shows where the children are [relative to] performance expectations. (Interview 2, Jan. 18, 2019)

The scaffolding of the standards from grade level to grade level “really helps,” she says, because it “gives us more of a focus…and [allows us] not to overdo a standard [because] it’ll come back” (Interview 2, Jan. 18, 2019) in the next grade’s curriculum.
However, a few teachers push back against the CCSS, in implementation, if not in concept. Michelle believes the CCSS “was a good idea in general, but the rollout or the implementation was really poorly handled” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019), as schools were rushed into testing for which teachers and students were not ready. She asserts that standards set by the CCSS “were more complicated and cumbersome than necessary” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019).

Kindergarten teacher Barbara thinks it is important to qualify some parts of how schools and districts integrate, for example, the goal of having a “high bar” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019) for all students. She does not disagree with the premise but cautions that requirements to meet a high bar can be inauthentic, especially for the youngest learners or those just acquiring English-language proficiency. Barbara mulls over the ramifications of a standardized curriculum for her kindergarten charges. “We’re going to differentiate,” she confirms, “let them go at their own pace” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). Her tone sharpens, expressing frustration, “but not really because we want everyone to read at a certain level at the end of the school year” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). NCLB, she continues, “kind of made it seem like everyone needed to be in the same place” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). However, having the same expectations for all students at the same time is not differentiation, she intones. She says there is a “huge difference in expectation now with the Common Core Standards” (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019).

Elena admits she ignores some district-based curricular directives “for the good of the kids” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019). She believes the standardized science units, for example, lack the depth and choice she feels students deserve. She explains, “I create my own materials on the side, and we use those” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019). Making her own units, built around district-supplied units, helps her adhere to the letter of the law but be responsive to the needs and interests of the students in front of her.
Michelle points out that student achievement data, such as her school gathers now, is not a panacea for understanding “the story” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019) behind student learning. “I don’t have an aversion to data,” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019) she insists:

Numbers don’t scare me. And I do think they can tell us things. I don’t think [data] can tell us everything, and I don’t think they can tell us enough of the important stuff. The administration needs to put numbers into language as well; they need to make it into a larger narrative that teachers understand. (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019)

Michelle is quick to point out that an emphasis on data tracking has a down side as well. Data can be misapplied, such as when some teachers “play the game” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019) with their year-end evaluations and student data. She acknowledges that teachers design and evaluate student assessments to optimize the opportunity to demonstrate student growth for their annual evaluations. Elijah extends that thinking, “it’s like putting the fox in charge of the henhouse,” for teachers to gather and analyze the data for their yearly evaluations, because “it's not a realistic thing” (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019). He believes there are better ways of finding out if teachers are effective, such as “asking the kids who their good teachers are” (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019). Their feedback, “even the outliers,” (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019) he adds, is helpful. “I want to hear that one, [and] I want to try to adjust” (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019).

Barbara says of tracking data for Student Learner Outcomes (SLOs), a key component of teacher evaluations in her state, “that’s the stuff that puts me a little over the edge….To me that stuff, it’s just BS, because we’re great teachers. Like, why do we have to keep proving we’re great teachers?” (Interview 3, Jul. 30, 2019).

In some districts, adoption of the CCSS and NGSS has raised other concerns for teachers. Two teachers indicate there can be a financial burden on them when districts change curricula to
adjust to new standards, as happened in their districts. For the two teachers with high populations of students receiving free-and-reduced lunch services, some changes to curriculum are tantamount to unfunded mandates. Elena is upbeat about her ability to adjust to these demands, “because I have a good network of parents who help out” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019). She recalls having to ask parents for supplies and to spend her own money for science materials, but says several of her colleagues are fed up. “A lot of times lack of funding affects a lot. If there’s no money to buy materials that you need. If [district leaders] expect you to do things, but then don’t give you any support to be able to do it, it affects teachers’ attitudes” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019). Elena has been able to adjust due to a resourceful approach, tapping into the social capital she has developed with her students’ parents.

To summarize, the data show the teachers in this sample recognize their jobs have changed in the past 18 years. The teachers report that the adoption of NCLB and CCSS, as well as other societal shifts, have heightened the expectations placed on them. Some of those changes are described with the language of frustration, others with ambivalence. Still, teachers in this sample are able to compartmentalize those issues when characterizing their feelings about the job. Murph captures this sentiment at the end of our second interview: “because even with all the things that I just complained about, at the end of the day, it’s still a great job, you know, and the pros definitely outweigh the cons. You know?” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019).

**Perceived Changes in Personal Practice**

Research Question One is also designed to uncover how teachers feel their own teaching has shifted in the past 18 years. This portion of the inquiry is guided by the question, *How do thriving veteran teachers perceive changes in their practice since the adoption of NCLB?* In the context of this study, a teacher’s practice refers to habits, tasks, priorities, and decision-making
connected to instructing students and fulfilling other professional responsibilities. Every participant reported that teaching has changed substantially since 2002, and there is consonance in the ways they discussed the evolution of their teaching practice. This question prompts teachers to reflect on how they adjusted to watershed moments in education, such as the adoption of NCLB, CCSS, and the IDEA. Table 13 relays the themes, subthemes, and categories connected with data analysis for this question.

Table 13

Themes, subthemes, and categories connected to subset of Research Question One

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop systems to manage workload</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjust to work within new requirements</td>
<td>Reflect on pedagogical practice</td>
<td>Reflect on increase in testing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respond to increase in identification of students needing special services</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apply personal learning</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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Two themes emerge from an analysis of interview transcripts. First, teachers have developed systems over time to manage the workload and changes in requirements. These systems include communication, organization, and application of a rich pedagogical tool box. Second, teachers have adjusted to work within new school requirements set forth in federal legislation and state education guidelines. Such adjustments include working to meet the needs of an increasingly heterogeneous learning community. As part of these adjustments, thriving teachers report applying technology and educational research in their practice more than in the
beginning of their careers. Many of these changes are understood in a both positive and negative light by participants. Some of the changes draw universal praise from these thriving teachers, whereas others elicit either weary resignation or outright censure.

**Theme: Thriving Teachers Develop Systems to Manage Workload**

Teachers in this sample formulate ways to accomplish the various functions of their job, particularly regarding those functions that can lead to complications or crisis. Results of the study show the systems encompass communication, particularly with parents, organization, and pedagogical practice.

**Communication.** The data reveal that thriving teachers perceive communication to be a staple skill for interacting with students and parents. Data are insufficient to report on communicating with colleagues and administration, as no teachers describe having cultivated systems for communicating with those groups.

Results of data analysis show that thriving teachers believe communicating with students is important for students’ emotional and academic well-being. In some instances, this communication is about performance expectations, specifically when children are falling short of where the teacher thinks they should be. Ruth feels “to have a responsive classroom,” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019) she needs to talk to students one-on-one when their performance falters.

Several teachers describe communication as a two-way street with students, emphasizing that communication is also about listening to kids. Ruth, Elijah, Michelle, and Adam, and Val all state this emphatically. Adam begins each class by checking in on the personal lives of his students, “taking the temperature of the room, getting to know more about their lives” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019). He applies this information immediately, in tailoring examples while teaching, and in pairing students for group work or for feedback circles. Encouraging openness
with students can have broader implications as well. By regularly asking students to share their opinions, Michelle says she realized “how much representation matters to my kids” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019) in literature. Therefore, she pressed her department to review the Language Arts curriculum with this goal in mind.

With regard to communicating with parents, thriving teachers say it is important to be proactive and rooted in student performance data. Teachers of younger students add that consistency of timely reports to parents helps establish a shared base of information, which can lead to more trust between the teacher and the parent. Rosa sends daily updates to the parents of her pre-kindergarten special education students, “and the parents appreciate that” (Interview 2, Aug. 13, 2019). She has devised a system to make the updates personalized to the child’s goals and objectives, and efficient for her to complete, though she still averages three hours a night of paperwork.

Ruth has learned over time to have healthy “kid-centric conversations with parents” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). “When I talk to parents about pre-tests,” she offers, “I emphasize progression” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). She adds that even so, “I know there are students who are not ready for the end-of-module test” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). When parents want a complete picture of their child’s progress, Ruth tells them to contact her directly, as report cards only convey a slice of the child’s experience. She recounts:

I tell my parents at the beginning of the year the best way to get information about how your child learns is to talk to me. Email me, I will talk to you about your child. I will talk to you about what they know, what we’re working on. We will set goals together. But if you just look at your report card, it’s not going to tell you a whole heck of a lot. (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019)
Ruth’s district engages in standards-based reporting, and she feels parents want supplemental information to get a full picture of their child’s learning.

Similarly, Murph describes himself as “very available” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019) to parents in his district. Working in a high-income, high-pressure district, he says sometimes “parents are in your face, but I’ve gotten good at dealing with that” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019). He also believes that parents should know what happens in the classroom “to advocate effectively for their kid’s education. There’s a whole chain reaction,” he observes, “if parents don’t understand how the [educational] system works” (Interview 3, Sep. 7, 2019). Children whose parents do not understand how special education works, for example, might not get the services to which they are entitled. Murph says he sees “a huge disparity” (Interview 3, Sep. 7, 2019) between the districts in which he works and lives, because in the former parents are more involved. As a result, the entire school system is held to stricter account for performance and support than the district in which he lives, where parents are less involved.

Murph sees that technology, such as notifications in Google Classroom, “can freak parents out,” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019) so he has developed ways to reduce those stressors. With this, he feels parents know what happens in his classroom. Similarly, Ruth, Elena, Barbara, and Gloria communicate either daily or weekly with their students’ parents, sending home news updates about individual performance and class activities. It is worth noting these five teachers, like Rosa, all work in elementary and/or special education contexts, which might also account for the frequency of communication to parents.

After so many years as a transition specialist for non-typical learners, Gloria recognizes her services are part of a larger picture than just the classroom. “People need to know what
services are available,” (Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019) she avers. She sees parents as her
“constituents” (Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019) too in this regard, not just students.

**Organization.** All teachers report that another crucial system to develop is organization
within the professional domain. They agree that organization does not have to look the same for
everyone, but that teachers must have a system. In talking about organization, teachers in this
sample distinguish between paperwork and time, which necessarily overlap.

Five teachers specifically reference their structural organization: how they group and
archive units of study, and how they have adapted their organizational patterns into the digital
space. Elena says she groups curricular units into folders, which gives her structure for the next
year. However, she does not rely solely on old lessons; they “can get stale” (Interview 2, Jul. 1,
2019).

Rosa draws a distinction between types of organization to show the range of practice that
can still enable teachers to manage their workload, even thrive. She laughs as she spells out the
difference between “organized-organized,” “disorganized-organized,” and “disorganized”
(Interview 3, Aug. 30, 2019). In the first model, a teacher’s desk might be clear, and school
materials clearly labelled and ordered chronologically, for example. This type of organization,
she says, “is easy for everybody to see” (Interview 3, Aug. 30, 2019). The next type,
“disorganized-organized” is more challenging for an outside observer to decode:

and it might just look like a mess on the desk, but if you know what everything is and
where to find it, you’re organized in your own way. You might have a slightly harder
time than an organized person, but you’ll be alright in the end. (Interview 3, Aug. 30,
2019)
The last model is simply disorganized, rendering the teacher unable to function effectively, according to Rosa. The same tenet holds true for data collection, she says. A teacher must develop systems to be “organized enough to have that data piece. It doesn’t matter what it looks like as long as you understand it, can apply it, and can adjust your instruction. You need some form of a structure” (Interview 3, Aug. 30, 2019). She says the data can be “tick marks on a sticky note, or notes on the back of a pad, so long as you get it and can use it” (Interview 3, Aug. 30, 2019). In conducting teacher and paraprofessional training over the years, she has cautioned novices to develop their own systems and stick to them.

Teachers also evince a variety of ways of organizing their time. Some teachers in the sample talk about optimizing their discretionary time during the school day. Third-grade teacher Elena gets to school when it opens, which is 90 minutes before she has to be there, “but then I leave right at 3:30 when we’re allowed” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019). She makes it a priority to “use school time very well” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019). For example, she usually grades her papers during lunch so she can give them back to students by the end of the day. In her view, this makes classwork more meaningful for students. It also reduces her workload at home. “I am very much a schedule person,” (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019) she declares, indicating how this characteristic shapes her organization of the students’ day. “Personally, I think kids thrive on schedule and on structure with freedom in between, like choices but structure. Especially kids who don’t have it at home” (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019). She shares how her personal life shaped this perspective:

I didn’t feel strong in organization growing up, and so I make sure that the kids know how to organize, know how to study, know how to use a book for information, that kind of stuff. These are big skills. (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019)
On the other hand, Rosa prefers to arrive just before school starts, then do the bulk of her “technical side of teaching,” (Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019) e.g. updating student learning plans, at home. She stays until 6:00 p.m. on Fridays to get her room and plans ready for Monday, “so I can hit the ground running” (Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019).

Fifth-grade teacher Murph explains how he has learned to manage time well, saying he is naturally “very organized” (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019). He adds, “I’ve also been doing the same thing for, you know, 15 years, so I’ve got a system down,” (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019) one he keeps fine-tuning. For gathering data for his yearly evaluations, Murph explains a recently-developed system:

So what I started doing last year was I just created a kind of like living Google doc that I would just add to all year long, and that was my growth plan. I never actually had to like sit down and really bang out a huge report, you know? My administrator loved it, because it was less work for him. (Interview 3, Sep. 7, 2019)

**Theme: Thriving Teachers Adjust to Work Within New Requirements**

The data show that changes to guidelines and laws at the national and state levels precipitated changes in practice for teachers. However, not all teachers felt impacted to the same degree by these changes. Principally, the variation in response aligned with the number of years teaching, as described in the following sections.

**Reflecting on pedagogical practice.** Teachers in the study indicated the ways their pedagogical practices have changed since the adoption of NCLB, CCSS, and IDEA. Six of the teachers interviewed did not have strong feelings about NCLB and spoke with equanimity about its goals to raise student achievement and school accountability. Many agree with the sentiment Murph expresses, that “No Child didn’t affect my teaching practice, because I came in with it.
It’s all I’ve ever known” (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019). Michelle admires the intentions of NCLB to close learning gaps for historically marginalized groups of students, but she disagrees with how the measures were implemented and the “overreliance on test data to gauge student learning. So much testing has led to an impoverishment of the curriculum in many areas” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019). Gloria, Barbara, and Ruth, who have each been teaching for over 30 years, also express a more measured assessment of NCLB. Ruth says, “I think when NCLB came through, definitely the pressure was higher on students…which was probably not a bad thing entirely, because we needed to be reined in a little bit” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019).

However, the three see NCLB as the precursor to more rigid assessments that take time and energy away from creative projects. After interviews with Ruth were concluded and we had moved on to other topics, chatting casually, she returned to the topic of NCLB’s impact on her teaching.

You know you asked about how NCLB has affected my teaching. The bottom line is this, when things get too much, or when things don’t make sense, I go in my room and I shut the door, and I do what needs to be done….Do what you know is right as a person for that group of kids looking up at you. Do your best. Take in what you can at the moment [regarding state or federal initiatives]. Then close the door and do what you know how to do. (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019)

Many teachers report more of an effect on their practice from their state’s adoption of curricular standard guidelines. With the CCSS and NGSS emphasis on student inquiry, Elena says she operates “more as a guide versus a lecturer” in recent years (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019). Likewise, Val calls her role “a facilitator” (Interview 1, Jan. 10, 2010) for her fifth-grade science students for the inquiry-based units she designs and implements. Elijah sees the same trend in
his teaching style in high school math and engineering classes. Now there is “less lecture. Class is more interactive, there’s more questioning, more groupwork, more discovery” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019) as his district has adjusted to CCSS and other state initiatives.

Some teachers reveal their concept of good teaching has shifted with experience and reflection. Elena remarks that now she understands “if you do too much instructing, you’re not giving them that opportunity to think, to express themselves” (Interview 2, 1 July 2019). She believes this is especially important for her third-graders, because “you’ve got to teach them how to do that young, because if not, when they’re older, they shut down, and they’re not as outgoing [as learners]. And it stifles them” (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019).

Elena indicates she has had to assume more direct control over some portions of her students’ education in the past ten years, though she links this more to shifts in society, not to state standards. For example, she has made project work entirely classroom based:

I don’t give any projects for home…because I’ve tried the projects. Like I used to do a monthly book report. And the parents would be like, I’m tearing my hair out because they wait ‘til the last minute. And like I said, half of them come in looking like the parents did it. I’m like, what’s the point? It’s not their words and their writing, I can tell. It’s not their project. So I’m like, forget it. They’re not learning anything. So everything’s done in school. (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019)

On the other hand, some teachers point out that there is a negative underbelly to some of the current trends in education. For instance, both Ruth and Adam remark that inquiry can sometimes feel phony if it is not born of authentic interest from students. All the preparation for testing means “there’s less time for project-based learning,” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019)
bemoans Ruth. Further, she argues at the heart of standardized curriculum and expectations for students:

You know, every child is not the same. Every child shouldn’t necessarily be able to do [a particular skill at a particular time]. I think it’s a great goal, I think it’s a great framework to work toward, or to talk about where kids are related to those common core standards. But you’re going to have kids that are ready for the fourth-grade standards in third grade. You’re going to have kids that, you know, are mastering the second-grade standards in third grade. Yes, we can teach those standards, and we can hope that most of our students will be able to master those standards, but it’s ridiculous to think all of them will. (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019)

Regarding preparation for standardized tests, teachers interviewed who work in the most affluent districts acknowledge “a lot of pressure” around scores, according to Murph (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019) and Barbara (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019). If faced with the choice between doing a fun social studies project or preparing his fifth-graders for the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) test in math, Murph says, “I have to go with math. Scores matter” (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019). However, several teachers state specifically that they “do not teach to the test” (Barbara, Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019; Elena, Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019; Michelle, Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019; Val, Interview 2, Jan. 18, 2020).

**Reflecting on increased testing.** Most teachers express resignation or even a “really strong antipathy,” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019) according to Michelle, to the pattern of high-stakes testing adopted over the past two decades. Particularly with teachers of the youngest children, there is pushback about the amount of testing required of students and teachers. Barbara conveys her exasperation:
[at] the immense pressure I think teachers feel with having to show that your scores are high, even at a kindergarten level, and that everything is data-based…And even though we can be vocal about [our disapproval], the scores are still the scores. (Interview 3, Jul. 30, 2019)

Murph waxes philosophical when he thinks about his relation to standardized tests over time. His first teaching job was at an elementary school in the rural South. In 2001, he recalls, “that job was when I first got a taste of the testing and how the whole system works. Thing is, down there, they just really weren’t very effective with it” (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019). He implies this was probably due to the newness of the initiative but also to his lack of experience as an educator. In his school, leaders tried to incentivize student participation and performance with “all the gimmicks” (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019), such as pizza parties in the classroom for perfect attendance during test week. He remembers being sharply at odds with an administrator who wanted content taught at a particular pace and in a specific way. In considering this example, Murph says it is clear he did not yet understand the bigger picture of how testing and data collection can affect student growth and district resources. Now, after so many years in the classroom, he understands how to work within district expectations regarding testing while retaining his own teaching style. “I teach math,” he points out:

I mean, if there’s math skills that I know they need to have to be prepared for the SBAC, and then, you know, even if it’s not the right time to teach it, you know, I’m still going to, I’m going to throw it out there, that’s gonna help boost their scores. (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019)

For Murph, the solution is to practice his craft with integrity, helping his students learn the material they need.
You know, make sure your kids are ready [for standardized tests]….But if there’s any wiggle room at all, in the way that I can do it, or change or whatever, without, you know, compromising what I’m supposed to do, then I’ll do it that way, rather than drawing attention to myself. (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019)

Only one person in this sample teaches advanced placement (AP) courses. Elijah says he feels insulated from the brunt of pressure around standardized test scores and the attendant accountability. When asked if standardized testing has impacted his teaching, he shrugs I don’t [think so]. Fortunately, because of the level that I’ve been teaching, in the honors and APs, for so long, I have never had to have an administrator come up and say, ‘You know, you got to get your test scores up.’ And in the end, the schools I’ve been teaching, you also had high scores just in general. So we’ve been fortunate. (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019)

When asked if he feels relief in not having to worry about his students’ standardized test scores, he immediately responds, “Oh yeah!” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019).

Adam, an English teacher, feels that even though his is a tested content area, he is under far less pressure than his high school colleagues who teach math. “The math curriculum,” he ventures, “is a sprint. I would not be a teacher, I can tell you that point blank, if I had to sprint like that” (Interview 3, May 9, 2019).

Responding to increase in identification of students as needing special services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed by Congress in 2004 and amended in December 2015. The goal of the IDEA is to “[improve educational results for children with disabilities…to [ensure] equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals living with disabilities” (IDEA, 2004).
While not the specific focus of this study, special education figures in participant responses about thriving teachers’ adjustments in their classroom practice over the past 17 years.

Gloria, the transition specialist, notes that in her 30 years of experience, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) “are more academic now, not just functional” (Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019). She is more confident and comfortable with the language and legalities of IEPs, and she knows how to advise children and families but also younger teachers and administrators. She sees this as a boon for the students with whom she works, because they get a more well-rounded education. She is better able to help families get the services to which they are entitled. Further, she guides newer administrators in navigating the sometimes-complex dimensions of IEPs, district resources, community resources, and special education law (Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019; Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019).

Teachers in this sample agree they see more inclusion of special needs students into mainstream classes. Barbara observes that, compared to 30 years ago, students in her kindergarten classes “are now much more accepting of students with special needs, as it should be” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). Teachers also see more students getting support services, which is important in working toward mastering content and skills. However, most teachers report incurring hefty paperwork obligations as they track data for individual students in addition to the regular data collection. Teachers say tasks of reporting on student behavior, for example, cut into teaching and preparation time.

Ruth sighs, “I can’t tell you how many Conners rating scales I fill out in third grade,” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019) referring to the Conners Comprehensive Behaviour Rating Scale (Pearson, 2020). The Conners scale is a tool used to understand academic and social behaviors in children, often in exploring a possibility of attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit
hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in a school setting (Johnson, 2019). The time required for completing these forms is a frustration for Ruth: “so that’ll take me probably 20 minutes, maybe 25 minutes, on one kid, times 5, 6, 7 times a year! So that’s extra. I have a bunch in my bag right now to fill out” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019). Apart from the time issue, Ruth is worried about her third-graders and the increase in anxiety she sees, because “a little third-grader should be happy at school” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019). Ruth says she is saddened by this trend. “There should not be so much anxiety in third grade,” she laments (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019).

Applying personal learning. Many teachers share that personal learning has helped them adjust to changes in the workplace. Ruth laughs that teachers “coming out now are way more educated than I was” in 1990 (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). She clarifies, “I didn’t really consider research in my early years, ever” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). She talks about applying John Hattie’s research on teacher behaviors that impact student learning. “I use his ideas all the time,” she says (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). “I think my administration is definitely paying attention to research and trying to bring in best practices based on research, which I think is fantastic” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). For example, Rosa brings up several of Maslow’s books as we talk. Three teachers reference the influence of Lucy Caulkins’s reading strategies. Likewise, Barbara’s independent reading on play centers informs how she advocates for resources, leads as a colleague, and teaches her kindergarten students. It is easy to see this is a group that reads about pedagogy and then puts that learning into action.

Some teachers, such as Adam, Val, Barbara, and Michelle, say they are better able to reach students because of independent learning in their content area over the years. Adam has many ready examples, quoting a variety of authors and TED speakers in the course of the conversations. He explains, “Because of the learning I have been doing these past ten years, I’m
a much better teacher, deliverer of information, presenter” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019) now. In his view, the constant exploration in his content area enriches the students’ learning experience, because he “immediately incorporates” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019) ideas into his classes from podcasts and readings. In a similar vein, Val’s teaching responsibilities span science and social studies in her fifth-grade classroom. She believes the independent learning she does as a teacher is an “extension of [her] natural curiosity” (Interview 2, Jan. 18, 2020). Whether she’s preparing a science lesson, reading about Dr. James Ballard finding *The Titanic* on the ocean floor, or attending a seminar on student engagement with Dr. Marie Alcock, Val says she pursues outside learning to better her teaching repertoire.

Some thriving teachers perceive their learning as less in their content area and more in the technology domain, investigating and experimenting with new digital tools to help students learn and colleagues teach. Murph confirms, “I love the technology stuff. I mean, up and down. I’m the impromptu tech guy everybody comes to” (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019).

Finally, changes in pedagogical practice are for some teachers a reflection of introspection and personal growth. Michelle describes a difficult internal conversation over several years about what literary texts to teach to her sophomores and juniors. She says she was struggling with how to be “an advocate for my students who are underrepresented, and [I was] going too far in trying to be politically neutral” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). For example, she was struggling with whether and how to teach texts such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Catcher in the Rye*. She sees her decision to act as one rooted in courage. “I’ve gotten bolder in that department and learned to see it as it’s not political. It’s about equality. And it’s about the kids in my class who need to see windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). These metaphors for students seeing themselves and others in literary works help explain
Michelle’s justification for challenging the choices of texts in her department. She feels this evolution of perspective reflects learning about herself applied to the classroom.

To review, the development of systems to manage professional responsibilities and developing strategies to work within changing school requirements are the two themes that emerge in analyzing the data for the second part of Research Question One. These two themes underscore the tendency of thriving teachers to be diligent, flexible, optimistic about their ability to meet challenges, and excited by the prospect of personal growth.

**Answer to Research Question One**

When taken together, the themes that emerge show that teachers believe their jobs have changed substantially since the inception of NCLB. Teachers indicate that adjusting to changes has not been easy, nor has it been impossible. To withstand the upheavals brought on by federal and state initiatives, thriving teachers devised personal systems to manage new expectations. They adjusted by continuously learning in connection to their work. Areas of frustration surface around threats to what they perceive as good teaching, but these frustrations do not derail the teachers in this sample. In short, in response to challenge and change, thriving veteran teachers stay the course with resolve and a deep commitment to their students’ learning.

**Research Question Two Findings**

In crafting the research questions for this study, I surmised there were likely environmental or contextual characteristics within schools to support thriving over time and amid change. Hence, Research Question Two asks, *What are the professional factors that support thriving for veteran teachers?* For the purposes of this study, the term professional factors refers to building leadership, colleagues, and other school- or district-specific pieces such as curriculum and resources. Analysis of the transcript data shows the emergence of two main themes. First,
thriving teachers feel professionally and personally supported by building leadership—here synonymous with the term administration. The data show teachers in this sample believe they can exercise some degree of autonomy professionally, which they describe as an extension of trust and respect from their administrators. The data show many of these teachers feel supported personally by their administrators, which they believe also contributes to thriving. Second, many teachers believe their colleagues act as important support systems, in the form of early mentors, ongoing collaborators, or friends. These themes, and their subthemes and categories, are depicted in Table 14.

Table 14

Themes, subthemes, and categories connected to Research Question Two

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Category</th>
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<tr>
<td>Good leaders support them</td>
<td>Professional support</td>
<td>Foster autonomy</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Support professional growth</td>
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<td>Support teachers during conflicts with parents</td>
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<td>Good colleagues support them</td>
<td>As mentors</td>
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<td></td>
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Theme: Teachers Believe Good Leaders Support Them

According to Adam, “one of the more polarizing things” in his 20 years of teaching is how people define good leadership (Interview 3, May 9, 2019). He says a good leader “recognizes who their people are, what their skill set is, and either gets obstacles out of their way or helps them be their best self” (Interview 3, May 9, 2019). Teachers in this sample generally
agree that building leaders—department heads, assistant principals, and principals—can enhance teachers’ ability to sustain a positive mindset on the job. When asked if principals should be physically present in hallways and classrooms, Michelle answers vehemently “oh my gosh! Yes!” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). She feels administrators should be instructional leaders for teachers and students (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). However, a few teachers qualify this conclusion, noting that ultimately the teacher is the most pivotal component of a healthy, vibrant classroom.

Professional support. Data reveal teachers’ belief that good leadership makes them feel supported as they perform their professional roles. This perception of support is important for thriving teachers as schools adjust to the challenges already described in this chapter. Several teachers suggest that the best administrators were formerly in the classroom, because they understand teachers’ needs (Michelle, Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019; Gloria, Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019; Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019). On this point, Gloria is emphatic: having experience as a classroom teacher “definitely helps” a person be a more effective administrator, “for sure. For sure it does” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019). Murph endorses this point of view, “I think the best administrators are the ones who can put themselves back in the classroom and remember what it was like and make decisions through that angle” (Interview 3, Sep. 7, 2019). This thinking mirrors teachers’ reports that empathy is important in building good relationships with students and parents.

Michelle says even experienced teachers benefit from good leadership. “Having a good administrator makes everything easier,” she maintains, “because they’re constantly giving you reasons to remember why you’re doing what you do” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). And, she remarks, teachers’ workloads have only increased in the last 17 years. “It’s easier to manage and
handle [the workload] if you have a sympathetic and supportive administrator, because I’ve been in schools where they are not and where they are” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019). Michelle describes the different trajectories she has seen play out in recent years as demands on schools have increased. She recalls working in a nearby district, when “highly toxic leadership” chalked up resistance to new mandates as “teacher laziness” (Interview 1, Jul. 12, 2019; Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019). She contrasts that against the school where she now works, where leadership responds with “an ‘I know this is asking a lot, how can I help? attitude’,” which she feels is more conducive to workload management and positive building culture (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019).

Rosa says she has “always felt supported” teaching in three states and in multiple levels of education (Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019). She can cite only three instances across a 30-year career of not feeling supported. In talking about those episodes, it becomes clear they are still painful to her.

As teachers talk about their experiences over the past 17 years and ruminate on the characteristics of good—and not-so-good—leadership, they focus on the concept of a teacher’s feeling of autonomy in the classroom. Other issues emerge as well, such as administrators supporting them in the face of parental pressures. Not all teachers in this sample currently experience the kind of administrative support they feel is most beneficial, but they all draw on recollections of effective leadership to explain what has helped them thrive over the years.

**By fostering autonomy.** Adam signals why the feeling of autonomy is so important for new teachers. The integration of freedom and support is essential for building confidence and skill. During his student teaching, he worked with a veteran who “gave me so much autonomy and so much support, and when I messed up, he told me. And we were off and running”
Several teachers point out that having a sense of autonomy to make and implement decisions is about more than classroom logistics.

The data show teachers believe increased autonomy reflects the trust their administrators have in them as professionals. Gloria thinks “trust is important” (Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019). “If you have an employee that you can trust to do the right thing, then you don’t have to micromanage,” which enables the teacher to work more autonomously and frees up the administrator for other duties (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019). Good leaders “give direction if needed and let go, like let people do their thing. You have to trust, and if there is a problem you deal with it” (Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019). Adam imparts, “I think I do well in situations where I am trusted” (Interview 2, Apr. 26, 2019).

Adam shares a recent interaction with a colleague, wherein he was surprised to learn that his colleague expressly did not want more autonomy on the job. Adam says his assumption was that all teachers would want maximal autonomy and was jarred by this unexpected pronouncement. “I’m the complete opposite,” he explains. “The amount of freedom I have in [my courses] is boundless,” underscoring that he has “pure trust from the administration,” and “the results [from students] have been working” (Interview 2, Apr. 26, 2019). Murph adds that he feels trusted by his administration as well. “I’m not micromanaged. I mean, you know, my administrators…trust me that I’m going to do what I’m supposed to do. As a result, they’re not [monitoring me]. But they are supportive” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019).

Ruth understands that school leaders face challenges which might limit the extent to which they actively foster autonomy among teachers. “I think administrators want to be able to give you some of that freedom if they know that you’re not going to be reckless with it, or you are still covering what’s in the curriculum.” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019). She says, “deep down
I know my principal wants me to do things [that are creative], to engage kids. He’s okay with ‘put the curriculum aside if you feel like you need to go with this, go with it’” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). Ruth says she appreciates the autonomy to do this, and she construes this as the building leadership having faith in her (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). Ruth suggests that administrators can promote thriving in more people by expanding the autonomy they afford. “There’s a lot of talent out there,” she prompts, “and it does not all look the same. So it’s important for administrators to realize that implementation of curriculum can look different, and that’s ok” (Interview 3, Apr. 28, 2019).

The data also show teachers perceive their autonomy as an indication that their administrators respect their work. Elena observes:

That’s one thing I liked about [my former] principal. If she saw that the kids were learning and they were happy, she left you alone. So you kind of had that freedom to do kind of what you wanted. So that I liked.” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019)

Rosa believes sometimes the autonomy accorded by leadership is more a tacit indication of respect for the teacher’s skill, not an overt declaration. In her capacity as a pre-kindergarten special education teacher, Rosa manages up to ten paraprofessionals in addition to her 20 students. Each of these adults needs training, supervision, feedback, and assistance in carrying out the students’ specialized programs. Rosa does all of this herself, and has for many years. She says, her new administrators “really don’t understand how challenging it is to manage nine people plus all the other things you do” (Interview 2, Aug. 13, 2019). She acknowledges that the previous administration accepted any requests for equipment, training, or other resources “because they knew if I asked for it, I needed it. I wasn’t asking for myself, it was for the kids” (Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019). In this regard, she feels the new leadership does not yet have the
well of experience to confer the same respect—and attendant autonomy—on her as the former ones had.

**By supporting professional growth.** Murph smiles and shrugs, “I truly respect and love my administrators,” because he feels they nurture his talent, allow him to innovate, and give him actionable feedback (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019). “I don’t always get the answer I want from administration, but they’re always willing to listen….I know I’m never in trouble,” he reasons (Interview 3, Sep. 7, 2019). Murph receives “meaningful” feedback “multiple times a year” from his administrators (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019). He does not construe the evaluation process as a dressing down or critique. Rather he believes:

They’re going to help me do something better or they’re going to validate something I’m doing, you know. It’s not like they come into my room and here’s the Grim Reaper trying to knock me down. If anything, you’re excited when they come in, because you’re kind of like showing off what you’re doing….And the feedback is positive and constructive. (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019)

In Ruth’s mindset, administrative feedback and support “motivates you, that’s all. Thank you, somebody noticed I’m working hard, yay! Good, let’s keep doing that. I mean, it just makes you feel good” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). Changes in administrative responsibilities have led to a marked decline in informal feedback for Ruth over the past 10 years. She sees fewer and fewer administrative pop-ins, with “less noticing good things that are happening because they have to be, you know, so formal about their observations (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). Overall, she perceives her administrators as hardworking and well-intentioned, but “stressed and fragmented” due to the tasks they are juggling (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). Fundamentally says
Gloria, “administration needs to understand all teachers’ (especially new ones’) days, to help them with minutiae, because the days are so demanding” (Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019).

Not all effective leadership has to come from the building principal, especially in larger schools. Elijah feels the feedback from his high school department chair is more useful than building-level administrator’s. “[The math chair] is more on top of things…he’s given me some good advice” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019). His building principal “is fabulous” and “gets thrilled by the lesson plan…[and becomes] caught up in the fun of the mathematics” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019), but does not offer much in terms of pedagogical insights.

**By supporting teachers during conflicts with parents.** For this seasoned group of educators, parent conflicts do not figure prominently in our discussions. As explained earlier, the teachers in this sample have developed systems of communication to build relationships with parents in support of their students’ learning. However, sometimes conflicts still arise. Data show that teachers perceive good leadership as important in mitigating tense situations with parents. Barbara remembers a particular meeting where a parent “reamed me out at a PPT,” and the principal stopped the meeting (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). “The principal said, ‘Don’t you ever speak to one of my teachers like that again. Please stop,’” she recalls, “and that meant the world to me” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). The principal’s loyalty and professionalism in the moment reflected her own dedication to the work, and Barbara appreciated the public declaration of support.

Murph feels like his administrators “have my back,” which he says is “one thing I love about my job.” “As long as I do my job, and I do my part, they’ll back me before they back a parent against me,” he remarks (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019; Interview 3, Sep. 7, 2019).
Teachers feel good leaders support them personally. Thriving teachers understand that support from their leadership can cross over into the personal sides of life too. Whereas teachers do not mention this dynamic as frequently as they comment on perceptions of professional support, for a few teachers the personal support they felt was meaningful. Adam feels he owes a debt of gratitude to the principal: “He hasn’t made me a better teacher in the traditional way.” He’s has “discovered and uncovered, if you will. He has let me blossom, be me…be more me” (Interview 1 Apr. 25, 2019).

Ruth recalls a school day 20 years ago when she received a call from her eldest son’s school nurse. The boy had a fever and had to be picked up right away. Ruth’s administrator, herself a parent, was “extremely supportive, and having that support really helped a lot. And she’d be like, ‘Go, we will get someone to cover your class.’…Having that support system was huge” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019). This theme was echoed by all the parents in the sample.

Overwhelmingly, teachers in this sample say they understand the pressure that school leaders face, from personnel management, to teacher evaluations, to budgetary stresses, to scheduling headaches, and emphatically, to test scores. “I’m really empathetic,” says Ruth, “I just can’t believe what they are doing, so I think they have a lot less time as well.” Bemoaning the “time constraints for all of us…[due to] the data collection, the safety pieces, the meetings…there’s just so much [on administrators’ plates],” she continues (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). Like Murph, Elijah, Barbara, and Michelle, Ruth describes her administrators as “fantastic. I think their job is more overwhelming than I can even imagine” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019).

Most teachers in this sample seem relaxed about evaluations. Barbara does not think they matter for her personally, after so many years in the classroom. Murph professes, “I don’t care
what my ratings are” because the professional learning “has become a progression” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019). Michelle underscores this perspective: “Evaluations have never been stressful for me,” she asserts.

I don’t sweat over exemplary and proficient and that kind of thing very much. As long as I know I’ve left it all on the field, I can look at where my kids started and where they ended up, I’m fine with that. (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2010).

Val feels strongly motivated never to receive a less-than-stellar rating in her annual evaluation: “oh my God, I don’t ever want to be a developing teacher…that’s just unacceptable, right, unless you’re not doing your job” (Interview 2, Jan. 18, 2020). Her story provides an exception to the pattern of healthy support and autonomy represented by other participants. Val says with her newly instated administrators “there’s never any positive feedback, not that we’re looking for tooting the horn. But we’re only hearing the things that we’re not doing right” (Interview 2, Jan. 18, 2020). This dynamic has reduced Val’s joy at work in the past year. She and colleagues “feel like we are deflated balloons,” which is a new challenge for her (Interview 2, Jan. 18, 2020). Gloria shares her irritation over having to confront her evaluator once with a list of professional accomplishments, student data, and other information to have her evaluation rating revised to reflect her work more accurately (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019).

A few teachers feel administrators could be more effective in supporting good teaching with a few modifications to current practice (Gloria, Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019; Val, Interview 2, Jan. 18, 2020). The most frequently cited suggestion is for more low-stakes, casual pop-ins by administrators. In Adam’s eyes, quick drop-ins by the principal convey much more than the formal evaluation process, because “they’re authentic...[it] captures you in your natural habitat” (Interview 2, Apr. 26, 2019). Elena’s new principal “cuts and pastes feedback on our
evaluations,” which is “not very meaningful” for her as a professional (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019). She believes it would be helpful to have the administration facilitate her observing other third grade teachers, “because you learn so much when you watch other people teach” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019). Finally, Adam pinpoints another way school leaders could support thriving for teachers and students. Regarding administrative dictates, Adam says he needs a reason. He has no time or patience for caprice. “There’s a thread here…which is like, I need a justification. The time is too precious: my time, my colleagues’ time, my students’ time, for us to be chasing the wrong rat.” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019)

**Theme: Teachers Feel Colleagues Support Them**

Data show that thriving teachers feel their colleagues play a role in helping them grow as professionals and maintaining a positive mindset. Within this theme, three main ideas emerge when the data are closely analyzed. First, thriving teachers are grateful for the guidance they received from colleagues early in their careers. Second, thriving teachers appreciate the collaboration that occurs between colleagues and associate collaboration with better instruction. Third, for some teachers, colleagues provide a valued social connection during the workday.

**By acting as mentors.** Many teachers mention the pivotal role of certain colleagues that mentored them early in their careers. Ruth recalls two influential colleagues, “phenomenal mentors” with very different styles, but who were good friends and worked with Ruth to help her acclimate to life in a third-grade classroom. They “helped me navigate the stresses of being a new teacher” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). Ruth says she adopted and adapted different parts of those teachers’ skills sets in carving out her own style. “I got a lot of positive feedback [when I
had my colleague’s child in my class)” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019). She senses she became more inclined to do project-based learning when collaborating with colleagues.

Gloria, who like Ruth has been working for over 30 years, appraises the role of colleagues as sources of inspiration and mentorship, “I think throughout all my years, not just my early years, there's been a number of people that I look at and I say, that's a good teacher” (Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019). She believes new teachers benefit from “being able to see good examples of veterans when you are new,” both in terms of how to organize and “relating to kids” (Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019). She feels she learned the protocols of special education, including the parts that are legally binding, “more from colleagues, not much from formal training” (Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019). Now nearing the end of her career, when I ask Gloria if her colleagues regard her as an expert, she hedges and laughs, “maybe…maybe” (Interview 2, Jul 29, 2019).

Elijah also recognizes that, even for experienced teachers, colleagues can still impart practical lessons, such as “when to be strict, when to loosen up” (Interview 1, Jul 25, 2019).

**By working as collaborators.** Barbara continues to build and refine lessons with her kindergarten team which has been together for 15 years (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019).

For Rosa, connecting with colleagues sat at the nexus of professional responsibility and social rapport. While working as a special education teacher in a middle school in a midwestern city, Rosa reports she saw “pushback from regular education teachers to special education. [The regular education] teachers didn’t understand my kids, so I had to make relationships with the regular education teachers” (Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019). Rosa conveys that doing so helped build a more cohesive working relationship between the regular education teachers, resulting in better support for the students she assisted. She says good colleagues “make connections that
foster trust,” which promotes follow-through with students and facilitates truly collaborative teaching (Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019). Along the same lines, Gloria states that good colleagues “let people know if you think something is not right….You help each other with kids in mind” (Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019).

Rosa, Elena, and Ruth all emphasize that “good colleagues share” materials and ideas (Elena, Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019; Rosa, Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019; Ruth, Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019). Michelle extends this idea, stating that good colleagues are “reassuring, sharing, and open.” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). She says a good collegial relationship ideally should be “so comfortable that it’s free of judgment…just like you want each other’s help” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). Murph says good colleagues are “flexible, respectful, and mindful” of each other’s needs (Interview 3, Sep. 7, 2019). He uses the word teammates interchangeably with the term colleagues, which in part might reflect the school jargon that he is part of the fifth-grade team. However, it also suggests a mindset of ongoing collaboration. Indeed, Murph says before embarking on a spontaneous activity, he asks himself how his actions might impact his teammates (Interview 3, Sep. 7, 2019). He gives the example of a time he wanted to reward his fifth-graders for a job well done. He offered the last 20 minutes of the day for extra recess, forgetting that that was also time allotted for a colleague to provide extra reading help for students who needed it. He notes that he apologized to his colleague, the reading interventionist, and vowed to be more cognizant in the future. “Little things go a long way. Then if colleagues know that you’re thinking of them, then that counts a lot” (Interview 3, Sep. 7, 2019).

Colleagues also can be sources of inspiration: “I work with really bright, great teachers,” Val says, “and I’m not going to say it’s intimidating, but it can be. They’re very smart.”
Val, knowing that her colleagues are educated and accomplished pushes her to do her best.

By being a social support. Elijah explains that for him, “happiness is community” (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019). “My department now is a really special group of people, and also [in the town where I worked previously]” (Interview 1, Jul. 25, 2019). He says being part of a mutually rewarding social support system at work often comes down to common sense and good manners: “I think it has a lot to do with your personality. If you’re a nice person, people like you, they’re gonna support you. If you’re a jerk….,” (Interview 1, Jul. 25, 2019). He raises his eyebrows, tilts his head and smiles a bit, as though to say, “maybe not so much.”

Val says simply, “I see colleagues as cheerleaders for each other” (Interview 1, Jan. 10, 2020). Michelle agrees, “your colleagues get it, on your best day, on your worst day, they get it” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). For teachers who have problems with self-doubt or perfectionism, she relays, this kind of support is especially valuable (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). She says, “if I didn’t have a small tribe, I don’t think I could do it,” implying the demands of teaching might be overwhelming without her social support at work (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019).

Rosa is grateful that the paraprofessionals she supervises support her capacity to have 30 minutes of down time during the school day. She works in a self-contained room, but takes lunch in a separate setting. “My staff are very good to me,” she shares, “in that they really try to protect that space” (Interview 2, Aug. 13, 2019).

Responses to this question vary according to teachers’ ages and family contexts, i.e., who has young children at home versus grown children. Michelle speaks to this point. In her current role, Michelle’s colleagues are mostly older or younger than she:
But there’s like one or two [sic] that are [in the same life stage as I], and that is huge too. Because your colleagues are also the people you talk to about how much your job is sucking you away from your personal life. And they get that too. (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019)

Michelle believes this support system “is really important [because that colleague] understands that push and pull, and again, the self-doubt. Am I putting too much of myself into this [job] and not leaving enough of me for me and my family?” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019).

**Answer to Research Question Two**

Research Question Two asks, *What are the professional factors that promote thriving for veteran teachers?* Data analysis shows two major themes emerging. First, thriving teachers believe that building leadership plays an important role in their capacity to thrive. Good leadership makes a teacher feel supported professionally, and personally in some cases. They thrive on the trust, respect, and resultant autonomy when leadership sees teachers in their authentic spaces. Second, thriving teachers feel supported by their colleagues. They believe good colleagues share ideas and materials. Each teacher reported they experienced valuable mentorship from a colleague early in his or her career. Overall, the professional factors that support thriving are about the people and policies that help teachers operate at their full capacity, fostering professional self-esteem, growth, and positivity.

**Research Question Three Findings**

The sample for this study was purposive; nominators selected colleagues who best fit the designated criteria around thriving. Research Question Three asks, *What are the personal attributes that support thriving over time for veteran teachers?* For the purpose of establishing clarity, an attribute is “a quality, character, or characteristic ascribed to something or someone”
A careful analysis of the data shows commonalities between the participants who thrive in a changing, challenging school environment. Four themes emerged from the data, and they are depicted in Table 15 along with their subthemes and relevant categories.

First, thriving teachers enjoy relating to people—both students and families—with purpose and understanding. This theme is supported by three subthemes: teachers recognize the importance of empathy, listening, and patience. Second, the thriving teachers in this sample maintain habits of self-care, paying attention to their physical, spiritual, and other personal needs. Third, data show these thriving teachers are intrinsically motivated. In this capacity, they are attracted to certain factors of their job, namely that it provides variety and staves off boredom. They are also motivated to work because the job satisfies internal needs, such as the need to work with a clear purpose, and to be busy and challenged. In so doing, teachers find they sometimes reach a flow state with their students. Finally, and most ubiquitously, thriving teachers exhibit flexibility at work, which they believe is singularly important.
Table 15

*Themes, subthemes, and categories connected to Research Question Three*

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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy relating to people with purpose and understanding</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Reduced potential for workplace boredom</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>Supports student learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Patience</td>
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<td>Maintain habits of self-care</td>
<td>Exercise</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Knowledge of self</td>
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<td>Are intrinsically motivated</td>
<td>Enjoys the variety inherent in teaching</td>
<td>Likes working with clarity of purpose</td>
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<td>Believes teaching aligns with internal predispositions</td>
<td>Believes teaching fulfills need to be challenged</td>
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<td>Likes to be busy</td>
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<td>Believes teaching invites a satisfying flow state</td>
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**Theme: Thriving Teachers Enjoy Relating to People with Purpose and Understanding**

The first part of this section reports on teachers’ characteristics that foster what seems to be at the heart of their motivation, namely the desire to work with children. At the most basic level, Ruth encapsulates the sentiment expressed by all teachers in this sample: “I mean, I really want to work with kids” (Interview 1, Apr. 16, 2019).

**Empathy.** On granular level, the data indicate thriving teachers empathize with the young people and adults they encounter, reinforcing connection through the shared experience of
teaching and learning. Michelle sees empathy at the core of her work. “I want my students to feel connected to the learning in a way that’s meaningful for them” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). Several teachers draw on their own experiences as learners to guide their teaching. Elena uses her experience as an English-language learner to empathize with the challenges faced by her third-grade students, a population increasingly made up of non-native speakers of English. “I struggled a lot. I had to work a lot harder than other people. I was always in reading support, and I found it very boring and not helpful,” she recalls (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019). She continues:

So because I had those struggles, in teaching I make sure that I’m more visual. I repeat things in different ways…like I know how they feel, so I don’t want them to feel like they can’t do it. So I adjust and I’ll repeat…and they feel, like, safe to be able to keep plugging away. (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019).

For Ruth too, empathy is fueled by her experiences as a young student. “It should be fun to be a kid,” she states (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019). Remembering herself as a student, Ruth shares that she did not enjoy the “read-the-text, take-a-test approach” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019). “I liked science, I liked movement, I liked the outdoors,” she explains, “now I’m just a little more empathetic for some of the kids that don’t fit [the traditional approach]” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019). Recalling her initial years as a teacher, she “wanted to fix the bad parts of education and keep the good parts” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019). With this in mind, she embeds her lessons with choices for students, with as much hands-on learning as possible. Elena concurs, “I have to learn by doing,” so she makes her lessons as hands-on as she can (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019).
Elijah recognizes his teaching as shaped by his experiences as a student also. For him, the moments that resonate are about the impact a teacher can have. He remembers being embarrassed and dismissed by a teacher who did not see Elijah’s potential. “I was so upset by him, I dropped out of the sciences for a year,” Elijah remembers, shaking his head (Interview 1, Jul. 25, 2019). Elijah reconnected with the sciences, and ended up studying engineering at an Ivy League college, but the incident stayed with him. “As a teacher, [that episode] influences how I work with kids” (Interview 1, Jul. 25, 2019), making him more deliberate and thoughtful in how he communicates, especially when he encounters student behaviors that are difficult to manage. Murph agrees, noting that he was a “good student academically, but I was not always good behaviorally” (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019), inviting disciplinary action from his school and parents. Now as a fifth-grade teacher, he can see himself in students who occasionally act out: I mean, sometimes you gotta give kids some slack. The way I handle [undesirable behavior] is definitely a result of who I was and who I am. I’d rather pull a kid aside and talk to them, you know, level with them, rather than rule with the iron-fist mentality. (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019)

When asked about a low moment in her career, Michelle offers an example of a lesson she learned as a first year about the primacy of empathy. She describes stopping class and yelling at a student who was repeatedly misbehaving, of taking him to the hallway and reprimanding him loudly enough for others to overhear. Her voice drops as she reflects on the experience, of how she felt afterward. “I remember feeling that feeling in the pit of my stomach, like what I did was wrong. And I should not handle it that way. And at the same time, teachers are human”, she adds (Interview 1, Jul. 12, 2019). She continues:
I got a call from the parent. I just didn’t realize that something so small could have such a big impact on a kid, and how humiliated he felt, and how he didn’t want to come back to my classroom, and how devastating that was. I remember feeling like ill about it. And like not being able to sleep thinking, this kid is no longer comfortable in my class, and I created that feeling. And it was horrifying. But such a powerful lesson to get early on.

(I Interview 1, Jul. 12, 2019)

Rosa finds empathy is also important to extend to the parents of the students with whom she has worked throughout her long career in special education. She recalls the aftermath of being injured by a middle school student who attacked another child as part of a gang vendetta. In the court proceedings that followed, the boy’s mother refused to allow the boy to apologize to Rosa, which is the only consequence Rosa asked for the child. For Rosa, that example marks an extreme case in her journey to be more fully empathetic to parents. “I’ve learned not to be judgmental. That has taken practice” (Interview 1, Jul. 30, 2019). Citing another extreme episode from her career, she mentions she was once sued by a parent. “I wasn’t held culpable, it wasn’t anything I did….But I felt like that was…that was the biggest growth piece for me, was I’m really trying to understand parents, to see things from their point of view” (Interview 1, Jul. 30, 2019). For children with behavioral difficulties, she says:

The school’s always yelling at [the parents]. The school is always telling them what they did wrong, you know. So by middle school, you couldn’t even make a connection with those parents. And that’s when I realized this is where the gap is. (Interview 1, Jul. 30, 2019)

Rosa introduces the concept of “giving grace” (Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019), something she practices with administration, colleagues, parents, and students when needed. The way she
sees it, grace is a blend of respect and patience, “the same level of respect and openness that you would want for yourself.” (Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019). She has learned to give grace in contentious situations as a manifestation of empathy and optimism. She cautions:

If your ego won’t let you give grace, it’s going to be hard for you. You’re going to automatically think, you know how hard it is to deal with families. You’re going to have an adversarial relationship. And you know, my parents are hard. They are still dealing with internalized grief. They had a typically developing baby with all its strengths, and then that development [stopped and receded]. They’re wondering, what’s going to happen? You’re the first person in the structured school setting that they deal with….And you know, will my child be successful? How will they learn? What will their future look like? I mean, they have all those questions. What they don’t understand is that everybody has those questions, everybody feels that way about their child. But they know their child is at sort of a disadvantage….So you need [to be able] to give grace. (Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019)

**Listening.** Several teachers in this sample report that listening is fundamental to establishing a shared purpose and understanding in education. In preparing for our final interview, Ruth jotted down what she calls “the big lessons” she has learned from experimenting over 30 years with different types of approaches and reactions. The last item on her list, written in all capital letters, is “LISTEN TO KIDS” (Interview 3, Apr. 28, 2019). She elaborates:

It’s really important to make time to listen to kids individually. I think that helps to build relationships with them…really listening to kids and letting them know that you really do want to problem solve and listen to them and help them work through the things that they’re working through. (Interview 3, Apr. 28, 2019)
Elijah’s personal attention to the value of listening is mentioned in the Participant Profile section in Chapter Three. He believes listening is essential for good teaching. Some dispositions are innate and cannot be taught, he reasons, such as liking to be with young people (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019). However, he counters, “I think listening you can teach. Listening carefully is probably the single-most important factor in successful teaching, that [teachers] hear what the kids are saying so they can interpret it and respond appropriately” (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019). Elijah says he uses listening in his math classes to target students’ misapprehensions during instruction and to give them room to work through the problem solving process independently.

He also sees listening as an important part of being a good colleague. “Listening, again, is a big part [of that relationship]. And it’s not just, you know, the curriculum …that you’re listening about. You’re listening about their lives, you know, everything that’s going on” (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019). When asked about what makes good teaching, Elijah responds, “the two things that stand out the most are listening and asking good questions. Those are the two things that make the best teacher along with your natural, kind of like wanting to be in the classroom” (Interview 1, Jul. 25, 2019).

When she considers what makes a good teacher, Val thinks for a minute, then offers “it’s knowing the needs of your students individually and honoring them” (Interview 3, Jan. 25, 2019). Doing this requires “a lot of going around and listening to them” (Interview 3, Jan. 25, 2019), including taking in their body language. She emphasizes listening as an academic skill as well. In her fifth-grade science classes, she models “active listening” and “accountable listening” (Interview 2, Jan. 18, 2019) to elevate the quality of student interaction in group work. She recognizes listening as an essential method of data collection and accountability for students and for herself as a teacher.
**Patience.** Each teacher in this sample mentioned having or applying patience as an element of their practice. Elijah connects patience to listening. He clarifies:

I know people who are not patient who feel they have to jump into the conversation before the other person has finished speaking. And when you do that, you’re just hearing what they’re saying. And so I think the other person feels uncomfortable, like you’re not really caring, really listening. So patience and listening go hand-in-hand. (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019)

Elijah calls himself “naturally patient” (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019) but identifies wait time as a challenge within his teaching practice. He says extending wait time is his target area for improvement in the coming year.

Elena believes patience comes with maturity. She entered teaching as a second career. “Since I already had a lot of years in education and life, I kind of was more aware and…more patient with kids and colleagues. And that was good.” (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019). Michelle, Dawn, Gloria, Murph, and Barbara also cite having patience as a bedrock trait for teachers, especially those who want to connect with all children and want to stay in teaching for their careers. When asked what qualities a person needs to do the job well, each listed patience first.

Data analysis reveals this sample of thriving teachers enjoys relating to children and families with purpose and understanding. To do this, teachers report using empathy, being attentive listeners, and drawing on patience.

**Theme: Thriving Teachers Maintain Habits of Self-Care**

Rosa states plainly, “the first rule of thriving is taking care of yourself” (Interview 1, Jul. 30, 2019). To this point, results indicate thriving teachers engage in self-care as part of a daily or weekly regimen. Some teachers pursue physical self-care through exercise, while others focus
more on spiritual self-care. For one teacher, each of those activities is an important part of her life. Still other teachers report self-care through spending time with family or getting “down time” to spend on hobbies.

**Exercise.** Several participants report that exercise is part of their daily routine. On school days, Murph wakes up at 4:30 a.m. and works out in the gym in his basement. He watches the early morning news while running on the treadmill for half an hour. Then he lifts weights. “I don’t meditate or anything like that, you know,” he ventures, “so that’s my time to get myself right. For that one hour, hour and a half, I’m not thinking about anything” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019). He continues, “that’s my time to zone out. No one is bothering me. I’m not thinking about anything. So for me, that’s important” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019). After the workout, his thinking transitions to the day ahead, and he is “in full go mode” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019).

Ruth exercises in an early-morning boot camp once or twice a week and runs in the afternoon when her knees are not bothering her (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019). She jokes with her third-grade students, “you guys better watch out, I had boot camp this morning! I’m energized already! C’mon, wake up in our morning meeting!” (Interview 1, Apr. 18, 2019). Michelle’s experience is consistent with Ruth’s take. “The exercising days actually help,” says Michelle (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019), who runs regularly, and sometimes goes to the gym before 5:00 a.m. where she sees a lot of teachers, she laughs. “I’m more clear on those days, even when I have to stay up late to grade” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019). Murph, Ruth, and Michelle all identify as morning people. Murph consistently works out in the mornings; Ruth and Michelle stagger their exercise with other responsibilities, fitting in their workouts where they can.
**Spirituality.** Three participants indicated that their religious faith plays an active role in how they take care of themselves. Another early riser, Rosa, spends an hour each morning reading her Bible and engaging in meditative prayer. She says:

> On a typical day, I get up at 5:15 and...read my Bible, having quiet time. I can’t start my day without it, so I get up early to do that. Other people get up early to exercise. I get up early for that. (Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019)

Rosa indicates that her faith has helped her navigate particularly challenging times in her career. When I ask if her to expound, she says she has “absolutely absolutely absolutely” leaned into her faith to get through tough times (Interview 1, Jul. 30, 2019). “I don’t think I could do my job unless I had as much faith as I have, my faith in Jesus Christ,” she explains. “It gives me a place to unpack difficulties. It gives me a place to be easy on myself. It gives me a place not to feel completely responsible [for everything],” she ventures (Interview 1, Jul. 30, 2019). Several years ago, sensing that she was on the brink of work-induced exhaustion, Rosa changed how she worked:

> [Now] I refuse to work seven days a week. So I pick Saturday or Sunday to not work….I didn’t always do that. I used to work seven days a week, and it was like, I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be able to do this. (Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019)

Coming to this decision was a lengthy process and “a step of faith,” Rosa explains:

> Actually, I really prayed about it. God just said to me, you need to have a Sabbath. On the seventh day, I rested. Why would you think that you can’t…don’t need a rest? So pick a day, a Sabbath day. So I picked a day. (Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019)

Val, who is “not a morning person,” explains that her morning routine involves meditating or saying prayers in bed, then using a phone app with a daily Bible verse and
Christian-themed music as she gets ready for school (Interview 2, Jan. 18, 2020). For her, this is a way to enrich life by “taking time for [myself]…I need what I call [Val] time” (Interview 2, Jan. 18, 2020). Ruth too says that faith plays a part in her self-care, though there have been times:

When I really had to struggle to carve out time for myself. But I’ve found I am at my best when I can do that. So whether it’s running…or even you know faith, going to church, saying a prayer….It’s an important thing, especially through times of challenge to be able to have a spiritual place to go. (Interview 1, Apr. 18, 2019)

Elijah and Adam indicate that they grew up in families that practiced cultural components of religion, such as observing major religious holidays and traditions. However, the data do not show that the other participants construe spirituality as an active component of their self-care.

**Knowledge of self.** For Gloria, self-care means spending time with loved ones. When I ask her about how she rejuvenates after a draining week on the job, she replies, “I think my way of doing that is being with the people that I love and the people that I care about” (Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019). She hosts her family and friends each weekend for a large meal, which is part of her restorative process. She describes herself as “not somebody who is trying to get to the gym….I prefer being with people…so I think that fuels me” (Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019). Elena also tailors her self-care. After a busy day at work, she says “I need 10 minutes to just unwind” to deal with home life, “because I’m on all day” (Interview 3, Jul. 3, 2019) “It’s important to establish a routine at home…because it… gives you energy throughout the week,” she confirms (Interview 3, Jul. 3, 2019). “I just relax reading books,” she continues, “like last year I read 52 books” (Interview 3, Jul. 3, 2019). Meanwhile, Murph focuses on the need for sleep for him to be his best self. He says, “If I can be in bed by 9:00 at the latest, I’m happy….I lay [sic] down
and I’m out, just exhausted. So tired. I need sleep. I need sleep. I need sleep” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019).

All teachers of elementary-age children describe their work as exhausting or tiring. Ruth tries to explain her recovery process, “I really feel like I need the summer to…heal…?” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). She pronounces the last word with an upward inflection, tilting her head as if to air the word and thereby judge its fitness to her sentiment. She continues, “And people go, ‘like what do you mean, heal?’ No, I need to heal,” she affirms.

I need to get this class out of my head. I need to relax. I need to take care of myself. It’s an exhausting job. I love it, but it’s exhausting. It’s hard. I need to focus on totally different things to be able to bring my best self again to my work. That’s the way I feel after a vacation, even a short vacation. (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019)

For Gloria, self-care also has an ethical dimension. She describes a formative experience in her first year of teaching in a residential facility for students with special needs. She witnessed a colleague strike students, and as a new teacher, she said nothing, despite feeling traumatized, confused, and guilty. Reflecting back, Gloria believes self-care also encompasses recognizing one’s boundaries, “the places you won’t go, and having a sense of certainty about that, like, I won’t cross this line” (Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019). With more experience and confidence, she became more resolute in her conviction that she needed to stay true to her core ethics. “I was going to be damn sure that the right things went on in my room,” she says emphatically (Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019).

However, self-care remains a challenge for some participants. Rosa explains, “I’ve learned to prioritize it. I didn’t always, but I’ve learned to. I’m not really good at it, to be honest with you” (Interview 3, Aug. 25, 2019).
Theme: Thriving Teachers are Intrinsically Motivated

Intrinsic motivation is “the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequences” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 56). Review of the interview transcripts shows a clear pattern that thriving teachers derive satisfaction from their work, which in turn propels them to engage in it with gusto. Data analysis reveals this theme is supported by two subthemes. First, thriving teachers find enjoyment in the ever-changing nature of the work itself. They report liking the variety they experience each year, because it obviates boredom and helps support student learning. Second, thriving teachers report their work satisfies internal predispositions, such as working with clarity of purpose. Data also show these teachers enjoy being busy and challenged, which their work consistently affords them.

Enjoying the variety inherent in teaching. Participants in this sample identify aspects of their jobs that are particularly enjoyable. They indicate that variety is a source of positive stimulation.

Reduces potential for workplace boredom. Thriving teachers recognize and enjoy the variety they perceive in their daily and yearly work. Specifically, they appreciate how this variety keeps them from experiencing boredom on the job. Transition coordinator Gloria shares, “one of the things I like about my job, it could be almost anything [on a given week]. I love the variety” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019). Her job requires classroom work, direct oversight of work programs, and the creation of informational materials and presentations for students and families. For her, the variety of tasks is a source of richness within the work. “I like to multitask,” she explains, “[and] I have the freedom, there’s [sic] so many different aspects to what I do, that I have the freedom to do this for a bit, that for a bit, etc.” (Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019). Rosa agrees, “I need variety” (Interview 1, Jul. 30, 2019). She does not construe the changes imposed
by new building and district administration as burdensome, but rather as positive stimulation. “I like the changes. I learn something new. I feel like if they didn’t force change, I would be the same. And I’d be stuck” (Interview 2, Aug. 13, 2019).

Noting that her state’s and district’s curriculum for third grade has shifted repeatedly in her 23 years of teaching, Elena offers a sanguine assessment: “I love that every day is different,” (Interview 3, Jul. 3, 2019). She laughs that in all this time, she has had “no cookie-cutter years” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019), because of shifts in district priorities, in-building responsibilities, and the yearly turnover of students. Like the other teachers, she says variety in her days and over the years allows her to escape the pitfalls of sameness. “[Doing the same thing every day] would be boring and mundane, and I don’t like being bored,” she explains. (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019).

Gloria concurs: her job is “not the same boring thing day after day,” which is part of its enduring attraction (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019). Rosa, who like Gloria works in Special Education, laughs: “I didn’t want to be bored. Special Ed is never boring. I don’t care what you do, I don’t care where…think about it. It’s never boring” (Interview 1, Jul. 30, 2019).

**Supports student learning.** Some teachers see variety as a tool in their pedagogical practice. For example, Barbara works with her colleagues to create and implement a wide range of supplementary curricular units to foster play, cultivate fine motor skills, and build community in her kindergarten classroom (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019). These extra units need to be integrated into the required grade-level standards, but the teachers do this “because it’s so much fun” (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019). She elaborates:

> Like we do a lot of events. We have a fall festival where the kids dress up in their costumes, and they do fall activities. We celebrate the 100th day of school….
celebrate Valentine’s Day, Groundhog’s Day, anything we can celebrate at the end of the year. We have a beach day.” (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019)

She sees variety emerging during the school day as well, which can be helpful to her students. “So if I’m doing a lesson,” she offers, “and it’s bombing, I’m going to stop the lesson”:

And it might be bombing because I just don’t have their interest, or they’re super tired in the beginning of the year. And so I want them to love to come to school in the very beginning of the year. If I see them all like, you know, lying down, I’m going to say ‘let’s play!’ or ‘let’s bring the Play-Doh out, you know, because you want them to feel the next day that ‘I want to come to school.’ And that’s what they do. (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019)

Michelle incorporates variety into her high school pedagogy as well, for much the same reason. When asked to clarify why she thinks it’s important to “shake things up from time to time,” Michelle responds, “I think that things can get stale. And what works with one group [of students] is not necessarily going to work for the next” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019). She believes when teachers open their curricular choices and extend variety in content and approach, “we can be more responsive to students” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019). Elijah operates on the same principle. “Recalibrating [lessons] is a big part of…making the work interesting for students,” but it is also fundamental to making the job interesting for himself (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019).

Elena maintains the same approach in her third-grade classes, where she alters the topics of student projects each year. “And this is where I like third grade,” she explains, “I can vary it….It’s nice to vary [the research]. And then I keep learning too.” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019). When she and students make new discoveries together, “everybody’s face lights us at the same time, including mine!” she laughs. “That’s what I like, and it keeps you going, because if not it
would be a boring job if you just did the same thing.” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019) Also, making changes allows her to tailor instruction to the students in front of her. “If it’s a really high or higher class where I can give them more, I’ll give them more. If it’s a class where I know they struggle and need more support, I’ll take pieces out,” she reasons (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019).

**Aligns with internal predispositions.** These participants say teaching also speaks to components of their individual character, which though similar to the predilections described above, is more specific to traits within each person. Teachers convey how the topics below are fuel for their professional motivation.

**Working with clarity of purpose.** As outlined earlier in this chapter, teachers are committed to their jobs for reasons ranging from helping students grow to ensuring a healthy democracy. In terms of intrinsic motivation, the data show this sample of teachers has clarity of purpose; they know their *why*. Adam says, “if I’m thriving at all, it’s because I actually like to teach….I take the job incredibly seriously” (Interview 2, Apr. 26, 2019).

In talking to Adam about the components of good teaching, he flips the question to illustrate a point. When he is involved in interviewing prospective teachers, he usually asks them why they are interested in teaching. He notes that many respond they love the content, e.g. reading and writing. Here he seizes upon the main point:

> If you love the content, that’s not going to be enough. It’s not sustainable. The kids will break you down if that’s your bedrock principle. So the fact that I love to read and write is helpful, but it’s not enough. (Interview 3, May 9, 2019)

Taking the logic a step further, he warns, “I think you’re going to get burned out….you can have pockets of success, but it’s incredibly kid-dependent: ‘I have a good class this year, I didn’t have a good class this year’” (Interview 3, May 9, 2019). Adam shares that his motivation is about the
students first and the academic content second (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019). For him, this distinction is a clarion call for teachers who are struggling. A teacher has to love working with students first.

The main driving purpose—the overriding *why* for these thriving teachers—is to help children develop as capable humans and thinkers. Regarding the number of American teachers who are dissatisfied with their jobs, Adam postulates, “people who are frustrated don’t think a lot about their *why*” (Interview 3, May 9, 2019). Gloria opines good teachers “have to have a passion for wanting to help the next generation,” whatever that might look like in a given teacher’s context (Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019). In Michelle’s view, helping teens become confident and independent is her overriding purpose. “Finding meaning in what they’re doing,” she details, “and you know, discovering where their strengths are and maximizing those, and discovering where their weaknesses are and working on those.” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019). And if a teacher has a bad day, a bad week, or a bad year, remarks Adam, “if your mindset is self-improvement, you’re not going to blame the kids” (Interview 3, May 9, 2019).

Elijah points out that pursuing this purpose—albeit one with clarity—is not an overnight process. To illustrate he shares a vignette about a newspaper reporter who is asked by an admirer how long it takes to become good at the craft of writing. The reporter answers that it takes one’s whole life, because we are all constantly drawing on our years of experience to practice our respective crafts. As we accumulate experience and stay dedicated to the task, we improve our ability to perform the way we intend. “And so every day there’s going to be new stuff that I’m going to learn about my students, about how to work with them, about how to help them” (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019). This perspective, emblematic of many stories shared by this
sample of teachers, recalls Duckworth et al.’s (2007) version of grit, or the combination of consistency of interest and purposeful perseverance.

Barbara reveals that extrinsic factors such as high evaluations hold far less importance than knowing one has done one’s best. Commenting on annual reviews with her fellow kindergarten teachers, she shares what motivates her:

I think that we’re all great teachers, and we work hard. And I don’t think however we get evaluated…is going to make a difference to any of us, because we all are going to be hard workers and love what we do. I feel like it’s a piece of paperwork. And it’s a little bit time consuming. And I think when you have teachers that are motivated and have a passion for teaching, are going to work really hard to get our kids to benchmark….We’re competitive, but not against each other. We want our kids to have great scores, but we also want kids to be happy. (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019)

Musing on what the last few years of her career might hold after 33 years in the classroom, Ruth indicates she is still driven more by her desire to keep learning and growing as a professional than by the salary increases that accompany credit accrual. She reveals:

What I really want to learn is how to work best with kids who are dyslexic. I can’t get that at [the local university]…it’s annoying, because I can get it [in a major city two hours away]…and I could bump up on the [salary] scale, but I want the learning. I don’t want to have to sit in a class and I already know this, or I just have to do the paperwork. (Interview 1, Apr. 18, 2019)

Ruth has decided the learning is more important than the degree, so she plans to take a certification program, even though she has to pay for it herself and will not receive graduate
credit for it. “That’s not really what’s important to me right now although [the pay increase] would be nice” (Interview 1, Apr. 18, 2019).

For Barbara, Adam and others, clarity of purpose fuels their drive to put in more hours, craft new lessons, and find ways of reaching their students in a meaningful, powerful way. Barbara chuckles talking about how her family still chides her:

I’ve been doing the job for 30 years [and my husband says] ‘why do you work so hard still—I think you’re a seasoned teacher. Why do you spend so much time?’ Because I want to be the best all the time at what I do. I want to be a great teacher. (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019)

Adam reveals this is what he thinks about as he commutes from home to work. For him, “there’s not a day that goes by that I’m not reflecting on how I could be better” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019). Despite his high annual evaluation ratings, he explains he never stops trying to get better. “I still think I need to grow, and that drives me as well,” (Interview 2, Apr. 26, 2019). His sense of purpose—of mission—imparts an urgency to his teaching and conception of time in the classroom. “You have to take alarm at some point. So how can those 40 minutes in my room be as positive as they can while there’s still some rigor and some learning happening,” he asks rhetorically (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019). Unlike many of his colleagues, Adam says he wants 90 minutes for each class, not 40, because there is so much important work to do.

For Adam, clarity of purpose is important beyond the four walls of his classroom. He believes his entire building and even district would benefit from increased attention to this component. “The situations that frustrate me in a nutshell are when we don’t have clarity on our why and how” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019).
Several teachers speak specifically to the notion of challenge as part of what they love about their job. In fact, they have purposefully sought challenging assignments to satisfy an internal need. Teaching special education helped Rosa fill that need. “I think one of the biggest things that helped me is that I was always changing. Because I have this need to have these challenging kinds of experiences. And because of the special ed degree I could do that” (Interview 2, Aug. 25, 2019). She recognizes this as an important feature of her professional identity:

I need a challenge. Everybody can teach…not to be rude, but everybody can teach a very smart, gifted kid….But when you teach a special ed kid, there are so many other factors, so many things you have to do. There’s so much analyzing the data, you know. Is it this? Is it that? Teasing out what’s important. So to me, it’s a constant…like a brain challenge that I really really need. That’s important to me. (Interview 1, Jul. 30, 2019).

Barbara smiles as she considers some of her past students who posed particular behavioral challenges. “Part of my problem,” she grins, “is I love the challenge. Like up to this past year, I was like ‘bring them on!’” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). “I love the challenge,” she insists:

You feel like you make a difference. I mean, when you see the change in the child, that tough child, you know, the one that just uses hands to talk and whatever, and all of a sudden is the most kind and respectful little guy, helping another little friend in the playground. That’s just so rewarding. I think. (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019)

Murph relays that satisfaction and challenge are inextricably linked for him as well. “I think that, you know, everything I’ve ever accomplished or been proud of, or anything like that, it’s always been a result of being challenged and working hard through it” (Interview 3, Sep. 7, 2019). When I ask him if that dynamic holds true for work, he responds, “I think so. Yeah. I
mean, I think that’s important. I think that, you know, people who are always looking for the easy way out, I think aren’t going to be satisfied” (Interview 3, Sep. 7, 2019). He offers a specific example of pedagogical practice that he associates with challenge: “I love the actual act of explaining, of giving different examples, trying to hit [a concept] from another angle. I like that challenge” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019).

Val agrees that challenge is part of what makes teaching fifth-grade science and social studies fun. “I enjoy what I’m doing. It’s very challenging…we are developing curriculum…so it’s exciting, with the time constraints” of getting students prepared for state tests (Interview 3, Jan. 25, 2019). “I want to go home [each day] knowing I tried my best” (Interview 3, Jan. 25, 2019).

Keeps a person busy. Data also indicate teachers appreciate that their work allows them to stay busy. Teachers in this sample characterize being busy as desirable. “I’m not someone to just sit home and do nothing…and I don’t have a ton of outside hobbies,” explains Gloria (Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019). “I like to be busy….I like to keep moving” shrugs Elena with a smile (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019). After Elijah sold his business, he started working in real estate which was remunerative but unfulfilling in some ways. He joined teaching in part because, as he told his wife, “I can’t sit around in my pajamas collecting rent checks…have no work ethic for my kids. They won’t know what work is like” (Interview 1, Jul. 25, 2019).

Invites a flow state. To a person, teachers in this sample talked about the feeling of time flying for them while at work. This was true at all levels of instruction, from pre-kindergarten to high school. It was also true for the school year itself, where “you turn around and it’s March or April, and you’re like, where did the year go?” (Ruth, Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). Adam says he “[gets] so into the lesson, I look up and we have two minutes until the bell. The kids feel it
too—we’re just so in it together” (Interview 2, Apr. 26, 2019). Murph recounts a similar phenomenon:

[Teaching social studies in fifth grade] is a blast. It’s like…story time every day, you know, and if you can do it in a way where you can engage them, you know, especially the kids who come in, you know, ‘I hate social studies,’ so boring for them. Then they leave you saying, ‘Wow! That was like one of my favorite classes!’ Like that’s cool, you know? I miss it in the minute, the clock flies. You know, it’s not the kind of job where you’re, you know, paying attention to what time it is. I mean, like you go in at eight, [then] it’s three o’clock, and you don’t even know where the day went. (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019)

The immersion of the self completely in a valued activity is what Csikszentmihalyi (2009) terms flow. The downside to this phenomenon, however, was hinted at by Elena. “We get really into what we’re doing. But sometimes there is not enough time in the day for everything,” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019), she observes, shaking her head, so a flow state for the teacher might impede coverage of curriculum. Teachers say they have to be mindful of time—cutting lessons down sometimes—to meet their curricular obligations.

**Theme: Thriving Teachers Prize Flexibility**

When asked about the characteristics necessary for good quality teaching or longevity in the field, all teachers indicate flexibility is essential. Elena explains this is true for in-class teaching, where “you’ve got to always be on your game and ready to switch it up” (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019). Michelle seconds this notion. She relates, “being responsive and flexible in the moment is probably the most important thing that teachers can learn” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). She believes parenting and teaching night school helped her understand this.
The turn toward more testing, social and emotional learning, and identification of students with learning challenges has made the job more demanding, according to Adam. The result is that teachers have to be more flexible today than in the past. He says, teachers who “yearn for the good old days are likely to burn out,” because they can’t adjust to the new normal. “It’s a Sisyphean set-up,” he summarizes, and “that mindset is a recipe for disaster” (Interview 3, May 9, 2019). Murph concurs. Whereas most of his colleagues are able to practice the requisite flexibility to meet the bureaucratic, intellectual, and emotional roles of their job, not all are. He explains:

People who are extremely rigid with their teaching and their thought process will struggle…if they last in the profession. In the last two decades with the way things have changed, you can’t make it, or you will be miserable or stressed out. (Interview 3, Sep. 7, 2019).

Elena sees the same pattern in her district. Teachers “have to be flexible because the curriculum keeps changing and the demands keep changing. If you’re not flexible you’re not going to last” (Interview 3, Jul. 1, 2019). Even after 33 years in the classroom, Ruth still sees the need to practice flexibility in her thinking. Echoing Elena, Ruth says:

You have to be open to change because things change constantly. You have to be flexible. When I say open to change, often administrators will say ‘we’re going to try things this way.’ And you go, ‘but wait a minute, this works really well this way.’…And instead of resisting right away, I try now listening a little. What’s the philosophy, or what are we…where are they coming from? Usually then I’ll try it. (Interview 3, Apr. 28, 2019)
Michelle feels flexibility in thinking is tantamount to flexibility of operations, e.g. schedules and curriculum. Because she started teaching later in life, at almost 30, she says her life experience outside the classroom changed her approach regarding expectations of herself and her students, allowing her to be more flexible.

I wasn’t looking for perfection or for being the one with all the answers all the time. It helped me take more risks, be more innovative, more creative, less afraid of failing, and to encourage kids to kind of be that way [in their writing]—to not expect sort of the carbon-copy “good student” out of every kid. (Interview 1, Jul. 12, 2019)

**Answer to Research Question Three**

Research Question Three asks, *What are the personal attributes that support thriving for veteran educators?* Four themes emerged clearly from the data. The first is thriving teachers love to interact with their students, and they tap into empathy, patience, and listening to relate with purpose and understanding. Second, teachers take care of themselves. The job is taxing, and teachers underscore the importance of having meaningful time for themselves. Third, thriving teachers are intrinsically motivated. They enjoy the variety of experiences that keep boredom at bay. They feel that teaching satisfies something fundamental within them, such as the need for challenge, the desire to work with clarity of purpose, and the total absorption they experience on the job. The final theme is teachers recognize the essentiality of flexibility, which they have learned to apply well in their professional lives. These qualities showcase how teachers draw on their innate and cultivated qualities to meet the demands of their work.

**Research Question Four Findings**
The final research question is, *What factors help thriving veteran teachers remain deeply engaged and sustain a positive mindset, amid the changes and challenges in education in the past 18 years?* Table 16 shows the connected themes, subthemes, and categories.

Table 16

*Themes, subthemes, and categories connected to Research Question*

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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Category</th>
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<tr>
<td>Doing something of value;</td>
<td>Benefits to students</td>
<td>Helping students develop skills for life</td>
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<td>“What’s more important?”</td>
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<td>Teaching students to solve problems</td>
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<td>Teaching students interpersonal skills</td>
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<td>Benefits to society</td>
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<td>Benefits to self</td>
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<td>Job brings happiness</td>
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Analysis of the data reveal three main themes to explain the factors that sustain these thriving teachers throughout their careers amid so much change in education. First, these teachers believe their work has deep value. Next, they believe that the job is a good match for them as individuals. Finally, overall their work brings them happiness. Each of these themes houses subthemes, all of which are explained in the sections below.

**Theme: Doing Something of Value; “What’s More Important?”** (Gloria, Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019; Ruth, Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019).

Every teacher, regardless of subject or age group taught, expresses the belief that the work has value. All teachers emphasize the benefits to their students, while some also described societal and personal benefits. To do this job well, reflects Michelle, “you need a lot of belief that what you’re doing is so vitally important, that it’s worth everything that goes along with it” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019).

**Benefits to students.** All teachers believe the work they do is beneficial to students. Teachers report their work helps their students strive toward their intellectual, interpersonal, and civic potential.

**Helping students develop skills for life.** The intellectual benefit to students of a good education is obvious, according to the participants. Reflecting the CCSS emphasis on skill development, the sample of teachers spoke mostly in terms of the skills and aptitudes they try to cultivate in students across subject areas and grade levels. Across the board, participants emphasize social skills as much as cognitive ones. When asked about what brings her job satisfaction, Michelle answers, “kids [feeling] confident, independent, and finding meaning in what they’re doing, and you know, discovering where their strengths are and maximizing those, and discovering where their weaknesses are and working on those” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019).
In a similar vein, Adam enjoins “almost everything I do stems from ‘how can I get Zak or Sheila to be excited about the lifelong learning process?’” (Interview 2, Apr. 26, 2019). He continues, “if I had to boil down what I’m trying to do, it would be habits of mind and teaching them how to think. Listening, speaking, thinking, writing, reading are all life skills” (Interview 2, Apr. 26, 2019).

Participants also speak in terms of preparing their students to adapt to the expectations around them. Rosa, who works with developmentally delayed pre-kindergarten students, conveys the importance of designing the learning space with this progression in mind. When students leave her and arrive in elementary school, they are meant to sit at tables and desks for much of their learning time. She shares her logic this way:

> It takes my children on average a longer time to learn new skills, so I try to think of minimizing the amount of new skills they have to learn. So if you always sit at a table, then you always sit at a table, then you always sit at a table. If I let you sit on the floor for two years, and then you go to kindergarten and you have to sit at a table, now they have to teach you to sit at a table. Because my kids get sort of stuck, and they’re sort of rigid. So I just try to make my room—even though it’s for 3-year-olds, as close to what their next experience is going to be. So I teach them for their next experience.

(Interview 2, Aug. 13, 2019)

In her words, this type of planning serves to make the students’ education more “relevant” (Interview 2, Aug. 13, 2019).

**Teaching students to solve problems.** In his role as a mathematics and engineering teacher, Elijah sees his work as imprinted with intrinsic and enduring benefits for students. He offers:
I like to think I’m teaching kids how to solve problems. In general, I’m getting them accustomed to recognizing that you’re not going to know the answers….Any pieces of equipment we might use today, you know, will be [obsolete] in the future. You’re really teaching kids how to deal with problems that don’t even exist today. I have to teach them the methods to be able to approach problems and solve problems. (Interview 1, Jul. 25, 2019)

Similarly, Ruth, who teaches third grade, explains the growth she sees when students follow their own curiosity. She elucidates with a recent example:

Today I was doing partitioning shapes. We were learning about the area of rectangles and floor plans, [and the kids asked to measure] the gym and the playground. I said great. I said, I’m on recess duty, we’ll take it out there and somebody will get the clipboard. So that type of thing I love, making the learning real. Kids love it. They get excited about it, and [the concepts] stick. The learning sticks. They make the connections. They see it, they do it. (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019)

“Lifetime learning,” Ruth continues, is not “about the curriculum. It’s about getting answers to your questions” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019). A majority of teachers in this sample reports that helping students become better problem solvers is at the core of why they find their work valuable.

**Teaching students interpersonal skills.** Data reveal that helping students develop strong intrapersonal skills is an also important feature of teachers’ sense of the value of their work. Whether students are in pre-kindergarten or high school, the teachers interviewed believe in teaching and modelling healthy social skills. As Ruth explains:
you can’t begin to learn the curriculum if you can’t…if you don’t have a community of learners that can figure out how to get along with everybody. I think it’s really important to show them how to respect everybody and their thinking. (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019)

High school English teacher Adam echoes this sentiment, adding “teaching kids to communicate effectively is the bedrock of what I do” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019). For Barbara, who works with the youngest learners, many of whom are identified as needing special education services, the purpose is even more basic. She perceives that more students are entering school without basic interpersonal skills, such as looking at an adult who says hello, or answering back, hello or good morning. Those skills increasingly have to be taught in her class. She explains, “we’re teaching kids to be kind and respectful….It’s so rewarding when you help a kid toward appropriate behavior” (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019).

**Benefits to society.** All teachers expressed that their work contributed to a societal improvement. Whereas most comments focused on the benefits derived by the students individually, some teachers also mentioned the benefits to society that occur when students are capable of living independently and participating in civic life. Elijah speaks for the group when he alludes to the legacy he is building, “in 25 plus years of teaching [mathematics], I’ve had, I don’t know, 2500 kids, so maybe some of them will also do something good for society” (Interview 3, Aug. 20, 2019). He smiles hopefully as he describes this ambition for his students’ future.

In a different vein, Rosa is aware that her expertise and professionalism relieve some of the burden of care for economically disadvantaged families with children with significant delays in development. In this way, she recognizes that her work is part of what holds society together. “The whole idea of our program is that these children will not be in the same [situation as their
parents], will not be in poverty” (Interview 2, Aug. 13, 2019). Rosa teaches summer school every year to provide continuity of care for her non-traditional students, to help them develop cognitively and socially. All teachers in this sample, especially those who work exclusively with students with special needs, report a conviction that society is best when all people—in this case, students—can live their lives with connection to others and with dignity.

**Helping students function independently in society.** The importance of preparing students to live independently is especially evident among special education and high school teachers. “The kids I work with,” Gloria explained, “can either be in day programs or [can be] independent functioners,” referring to students who move through the services of her special education transition programming (Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019). When they get the support and training they need, “it’s good for the kids and the community, meaning the taxpayers” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019). For example, Gloria recalls a young man in one of her job-training programs:

> Seeing the work that team of people did, and how successful the kid was…for a kid that you would never think would be…one of my boys who on paper has a 44 IQ, and now has a job in housekeeping [in a local hospital]. So he was a kid that would have ended up in a day program, probably not being productive. And now he’s a working member of society. (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019)

For Gloria, the job training this young man received benefits society as much as it benefits him, because he now contributes to the functioning of a community organization and the local economy, rather than being principally a recipient of taxpayer aid. Gloria adds, “My life philosophy is that we’re put on this earth to make a difference and help other people” (Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019). In other words, when that help contributes to a student’s full participation in society, the whole community benefits.
Gloria, Adam, and Elena all represent the point of view that the role of education is to help students get jobs, to function independently. In preparation for productive work, even the youngest learners need to learn basic habits, Barbara believes, such as how to clean up after themselves. She instills this habit with her kindergarten students in their play centers. Rosa agrees, citing her insistence that her developmentally delayed preschoolers carry their own backpacks out of the classroom as they walk to buses. She laughs that the parents marvel at their child’s display of independent behavior, performing tasks the child refuses to do at home. Rosa relates that her high expectations for student performance are developmentally appropriate: “I tell the children, ‘I won’t ask you to do something you can’t do.’ And they know I mean it, and they do the job themselves” (Interview 2, Aug. 13, 2019). She stretches her students’ habits of independence at whatever level of cognitive or physical ability they currently display.

**Building a better democracy.** For Michelle, the benefit to society is evident in students who come to understand social justice, historic patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and the power of informed civic participation. This goal is an animating force in her work with high school students. “Education,” she explains, “has the potential to be the great equalizer. It can open doors to people who have more barriers than others for whatever reason” (Interview 1, Jul. 12, 2019). For her, education is about more than gaining job skills and aptitudes. “I don’t want to make workers. I want to make people who are well-rounded and empathetic, and who can solve big problems and think big thoughts” (Interview 1, Jul. 12, 2019).

Barbara explains how the move toward mainstreaming special education students in classrooms promotes a spirit of inclusivity that resonates beyond the classroom walls. She elaborates:
I feel that kids need to learn about each other in like, looking back at [the 1980s and 1990s], that kids were afraid of [disabled] kids. And now it’s like, it so much more accepted as it should be. You know, because we’re all similar and different from each other. (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019).

**Benefits to self.** Results indicate thriving teachers perceive that they benefit on a personal level from their work.

**Growth through learning.** The data show that teaching fosters personal growth as well, which is an ongoing source of satisfaction. As Val explains, her experience of teaching “is being a constant student” (Interview 2, Jan. 18, 2020). Adam underscores this sentiment: “I’m obsessed with learning” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019). Educators distinguish between the types of growth they experience, some citing the intellectual rigor of the courses they teach which demand constant learning. Whereas this sentiment appears more in the responses of high school teachers, middle school and elementary teachers speak of the professional growth they experience in staying current with educational research. In this vein, the data indicate teachers believe they have become better educators through consistent reading, reflection, and practice. Some participants believe their teaching journey has made them a better person overall, whether as a family member, community member, or as an individual.

**Intellectual growth connected to the content taught.** The data show that teachers perceive their jobs as contributing to their intellectual growth. They continually learn new content and skills as part of their independent research, lesson planning, and curriculum development. Elijah reports enjoying the intellectual challenges associated with teaching engineering and advanced mathematics courses. He explains:
I’m a big believer in, you know, still going to school for things. I mean, it was only a few years ago that I went to school to learn to teach the engineering. And before that it was, you know, to go to school to learn AP calculus and going to school to learn AP statistics.

(Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2020)

He eschews the “efficiency” of teaching the same content in the same way each year, “It’s pretty dull…for the kids too, because they pick up on it right away. So you have to every year learn and enjoy and change it up a little bit. Better teachers are more actively involved in that” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2020). For Elijah, learning more is not only intellectually enriching, but the extra learning also fortifies his teaching.

Michelle agrees that her work as a high school English teacher is intellectually demanding, and she appreciates that. She explains even after 20 years, “I still love the work it makes my brain do. I still love learning new stuff” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). Almost all teachers report reading on their own about developments in their content areas or emerging theories of pedagogy. To a person, the data show these teachers view intellectual stimulation associated with independent education-based learning as a positive dimension of their work.

**Making me a better teacher.** Some teachers believe their work has value in part because they recognize they are now more skilled at helping the young people with whom they work. Michelle reflects, “there was a time [early in my career] when I was more worried about how I performed than how my kids performed” (Interview 1, Jul. 12, 2019). She laughs wryly about “the weird irony of both teaching and parenting: your basic job is to make yourself less and less necessary” (Interview 1, Jul. 12, 2019). This thought is echoed by Ruth, who discerns the same parallel in the roles of teaching and parenting. “In many ways, teaching is just like parenting,” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019) she observes. Michelle reports that over time she realized that being
a good teacher means “being student-centered. The focus is not on your expertise, but on their growth. Responsiveness is important, not having a scripted outcome that is the same for every kid” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019). As part of building authenticity with students—which every high school teacher says is essential for effective learning—Adam believes it is important to “be a practitioner of what you’re teaching” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019). In pursuing this route, he has generated a wide repertoire of writing styles and samples, interviews and podcasts. He says that broadening his practice as a reader, writer, and speaker has helped him differentiate instruction and connect with students more effectively.

Similarly, Murph, has broadened his technology skills in an effort to meet the instructional needs of his fifth-grade math students. For him, what started as an effort to remediate students has become an integral, even fun, part of his teaching. He explains that he enjoys making instructional videos, and can anticipate which discrete skills might need the reinforcement of a new video. He says his growing archive of videos helps him answer student questions efficiently as they arise. “I’m more like in the moment responding to them, how to help them,” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019) he states, compared to earlier in his career when he would design a new lesson for the next day to address student questions. In his view, his adaptation to and application of technology has improved his ability to teach more of his students effectively. Ruth sees how the technology demands of teaching ties to her mission to cultivate a class community of shared learning. She adds laughing:

I probably wouldn’t have investigated [Google Slides] on my own. As I tell the kids all the time, you know, they are constantly teaching me as well. We’re teaching each other….Oh my gosh, it’s amazing what you can learn from an 8-year old! (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019)
Making me a better person. A few teachers assert that their work as a teacher has helped them cultivate qualities that extend their humanity. Teaching, they report, fosters empathy and connection. As such, they have the feeling of becoming a better person. For Gloria, the bottom line is that teaching aligns with her life philosophy. “My theory on life is like you’re put on this planet to kind of help other people,” (Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019) she explains. “What better way to do it than working with kids and families?” (Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019)

Theme: A Good Match

Teachers nominated to participate in this study perceive that this career is a good match for their interests and concept of who they are. In fact, a recurrent subtheme is that being a teacher is an identity for these participants. Repeatedly, participants refer to their profession as something a person is, not just something a person does.

Identity. Several participants report they had always known they would pursue a career in education. Murph, Elena, Barbara, and Rosa indicate that even as children they knew they felt pulled to teaching. Murph alludes to a concept from Malcolm Gladwell’s book Blink (2007). He paraphrases Gladwell’s tenet, “if it feels right, it’s right,” likening the gut instinct knowledge to his understanding from his teen years that teaching would be the career for him. He continues, “That’s what I always wanted to do, I’ve never deviated from it” (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019).

Barbara echoes the sentiment, “I knew right away like when, you know, when you’re little. I remember vividly at four or five years old saying that to people: I’ll be a teacher, teacher, teacher” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). However, concerned about the low salary for teachers at the time, Barbara tried her hand first in the medical field for a few years. She shares, “I made decent money. But I was like, I think it was like, not for me, I want to work with kids. So I got my
master’s and I moved to Cambridge” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). She has stayed in teaching for three decades, because as she says, “it’s in my blood and my veins” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019).

Likewise, Elena grew up wanting to be a teacher but was persuaded by her parents to pursue architecture instead, something they viewed as more prestigious, she explains. Elena dutifully earned a master’s degree in the field. When she could not get hired for the work for which she was qualified and was relegated instead to the pool of support staff, she decided to pursue her first love, even though it meant starting all over again. Graduate school in education, she discovered, was easy for her, “a piece of cake. It all made sense to me” (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019). Looking back, she asserts, “it was like I was made to teach” (Interview 1, Jun. 29, 2019).

In terms of self-perception, Gloria sees herself as a teacher first and foremost. “It’s my identity,” she affirms (Interview 1, Jul. 16, 2019). In a later interview she returns to the topic of teaching as her identity. “Yeah,” she says, “it’s so much of who I am, that it’s hard to disconnect from other pieces [of my life]” (Interview 3, Aug. 26, 2019). She laughs that she has holes in her memory as she ages, but not about work. “I feel like [the job] is a big part of my life…it’s not just a job, you know. I want to make sure that people are helped and get what they need” (Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019). She believes being a teacher is entirely central to her sense of self. Michelle agrees. When she took time off to be at home with her two young children, she felt “off…I didn’t feel fully myself when I wasn’t teaching” (Interview 1, Jul. 12, 2019). Murph echoes this, noting that even in his personal life “you’re never really not being a teacher, I guess” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019).

One teacher’s comments suggest a causal relationship between the subthemes of identity and match. Adam, a high school English and public speaking teacher, repeatedly references the
concepts of authenticity and fakeness. He intimates that his work allows him to be completely
himself, which makes the job a good fit for him. He shares a recent exchange with his wife that
altered his perspective on his identity vis-à-vis his goals in the classroom:

Maybe I’m great at creating an environment, making it emotionally and physically safe,
letting each individual be themselves, letting them be the best version of themselves.
Still, I’m worried I’m only getting ‘optimal performance’ from some students. Then my
wife says, ‘No, your superpower is creating an environment where people can be safe and
be themselves and be curious. And years from now they’ll remember that environment
so they can be lifelong learners.’ (Interview 2, Apr. 26, 2019)

Adam states that this new interpretation aligns with his need to be authentic for his
students, “radically transparent,” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019) he calls it. He trusts that, in being
wholly himself in the classroom, he will “light the fire” (Interview 2, Apr. 26, 2019) that will
burn long after students leave his school.

Match. Other thriving teachers from this sample characterize the job less as an identity,
and more something they do that meshes well with their personality, aspirations, and evolving
lives. Adam and Ruth discovered in college that teaching was a practical career, and during
student-teaching, found that it corresponded well to their personalities and aptitudes. Adam
remembers, “I didn’t know I wanted to be a teacher until the first day of student teaching….It
was life-changing” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019). He shares that his education classes had not
conveyed the vitality and immediacy of interacting with students, but that he “thrived off that
[dynamic] immediately” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019). Working with his mentor, he says, “was a
perfect fit” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019).
Ruth, two decades older than Adam, extends her view across a wider arc of experience. She explains, “I am so thankful that I have been a teacher. It’s been a great career” (Interview 3, Apr. 28, 2019). She points out that she has been able to work despite fluctuations in the economy, which she relays has not been true for many of her friends in other fields. Importantly, she could be home with her children over the summer. She also conveys it was good for her children to see her work hard, to see her struggle and grow through her work outside of the home.

Murph expresses another dimension of being a good match for teaching: thinking that one performs the job well. He explains:

Teaching is what feels right. It’s probably what I’m good at. Because even early on when I wasn’t necessarily a very good teacher—I was inexperienced—I was still good at it. And what I mean by that is the relationships with the kids, the energy, the enthusiasm. That’s always been there. (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019)

For the teachers in this sample, job satisfaction comes not from the salary or kudos from colleagues or leadership. Instead, as Elena points out, “It’s the work” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019) that she loves. When asked to quantify the match, e.g. is it an 80% good fit for your life?, Elena responds emphatically, “it’s 100% the right fit!” (Interview 3, Jul. 3, 2019). Adam believes “something about [teaching] clicks with my style or my strengths perhaps” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019).

Val talks in more spiritual terms when she characterizes why teaching feels right to her. She regards the journey as a personal mission for her life. “[Teaching] is an honor,” she explains. “It’s an honor, and I treat it as a ministry. We’re all called in life” (Interview 1, Jan. 10, 2020). For Val, teaching is answering that calling, being the person she was meant to be.
Theme: The Job Brings Happiness

The data show that thriving teachers love what they do. This finding is supported by three main subthemes, each distinct but closely related. Even though these words are part of common parlance, it is worthwhile to define them here to help distinguish between them. The first subtheme is love, the feeling derived from relationships, most vitally with students, but also with colleagues. Love is defined as a “strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties” (Merriam-Webster, 2020). The second subtheme is fun, “what provides amusement or enjoyment” (Merriam-Webster, 2020) characterized by a shared positive energy in the teachers’ work experience. The third subtheme is joy, defined as “the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires” (Merriam-Webster, 2020). In this case, joy is the result of watching students grow intellectually and personally. These subthemes are expressed by every teacher, though the degree of emphasis on one or another varies.

Love. Per the data, love is at the core of thriving teachers’ perceptions of their job. Every teacher describes some facet of their work using the word “love”. Despite myriad professional frustrations identified by teachers, the overriding feeling expressed about their job is they love doing it. Third grade teacher Elena reveals that this love is rooted in many parts of the job. She says she stays in teaching, now in her third decade, “for the kids. Something I just love. I love the learning. I love the exploring. I love…that every day is different. I like the interaction with the kids. Yeah. I like the variety of my day” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019).

Relationships. The bedrock of teachers’ positive feelings about their job, as revealed by analysis of the data, is relationships with the people with whom they interact. Teachers most prominently discuss relationships with students as a source of well-being. Many also mention
relationships with colleagues as a positive component of their work, though collegial relationships consistently figure as less central to their love of work as the relationships with students.

**Students.** The data show that teachers derive the most satisfaction in their professional contexts from their relationship with students. Each teacher—throughout all three interviews—affirms that relationships with students are what make the job feel rewarding. They also share that positive relationships are important for student learning. Further, for some teachers, positive relations with students mitigate the effects of some of the tedious or stressful parts of the job. Ruth shows that spending time with her third-grade students helps her manage the parts of the job that are less enjoyable. In describing why she stays in teaching after 30 years, she explains, “I love it. Yeah. I love it. I really truly love it. I’m looking forward to going back tomorrow. I’m not looking forward to finishing my plans tonight, but I’m looking forward to seeing my kids tomorrow” (Interview 1, Apr. 19, 2019).

In one interview, Rosa illustrates how her feelings for her special needs pre-kindergarten students buoy her in the face of everyday challenges, such as personnel management or problems with technology. In pivoting from discussing job challenges to what she loves about her work, she smiles, “I love the kids. I mean, I love my students. I don’t…the good days, the bad days, the days where I feel like I’m not really accomplishing anything, I just love my kids” (Interview 2, Aug. 13, 2019).

Barbara points out the benefits of parents knowing their kindergarteners are loved at school. She feels when parents understand there is love in the classroom, they trust the teacher more:
The most important thing I think for parents is for them to know that you love their child, even if their child is the most challenging child in the world. You know? That’s…you know, you do love them all, you know, seriously, you fall in love with them….Yeah, well, good teachers do. (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019)

Additionally, data analysis reveals that teachers perceive the learning experience to be enhanced by positive relationships between themselves and their students. This phenomenon is consistent across elementary, middle, and high school contexts, according to these thriving teachers.

Michelle shows how the relationships with students can in fact benefit the teacher. “I love the energy that I get from the young people that I work with,” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019) she explains. “Their depth and compassion surprise me on a regular basis” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019). Elena reflects that her love for her third-grade students is stronger now than when she started teaching. “They just love you,” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019) she muses with a smile. “They just want to hold your hand all the time and hug you. And I get little hands in my hands, and I’m like [she makes a gesture of love, shoulders raised in a squeeze, eyes squinted shut]….And they love that. It’s all about the kids” (Interview 2, Jul. 1, 2019).

Elijah, the high school math and engineering teacher, captures how daily exchanges with students are particularly fulfilling for him:

I can’t think of another job that I would enjoy as much as I’m enjoying this. I certainly enjoy every day getting up and going in and seeing the kids and listening to them and them making me laugh and my trying to make them laugh. (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019)

Adam believes relationships sit at the center of the learning experience. He always starts his public speaking and English classes with interactions about his students’ lives. He notes
other teachers “get down to business” and see that as “respecting the purpose” of school. “I see it as just the opposite,” (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019) he declares. He elaborates:

At the end of our days, I feel like it’s a human journey where education is a big piece of it, and that’s a piece I take totally seriously. But are we in it together? Is it a relationship? Or is it, ‘I need to make sure I fill you with information’? (Interview 1, Apr. 25, 2019)

He cites the educator Rita Pierson’s admonition: “Kids don’t learn from people they don’t like” (Pierson, 2013). According to Adam, real learning happens only after a healthy relationship is formed between students and teachers. Murph finds this to be true in his experience as well. Teaching fifth graders was engaging from the start, he reports, when asked what he was “getting right” when he first started teaching. He thinks a moment and responds, “the kids, yeah, the relationships….I mean, I was just so excited, and they were excited….And I guess I was just interested in them, you know, and they were interested in me” (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019). Gloria sees in her work that the daily demands of paperwork and other bureaucracy can impede the cultivation of relationships:

Like I’ve said, [real teaching] is based on the relationship [between teacher and student]. And sometimes you can’t even get there, because there’s [sic] so many ridiculous things you have to make sure you’re getting to that may or may not be necessary. (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019).

Results indicate that teachers derive deep satisfaction from interacting with their students, but also of watching them grow as people. This is especially true among teachers of younger students. Third grade teacher Ruth beams, “There’s a lot to love. I mean I just love to see kids grow. I love to see them excited about their learning” (Interview 2, Apr. 25, 2019). Fifth grade
math teacher Murph explains, “If you’re teaching, you’re being a role model. You’re impacting these kids in different ways. But I mean, you’re really just getting to know them, that’s pretty cool to me. You’re witnessing a year of their life” (Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019). When asked to describe a “best moment” in teaching, Murph thinks for a minute, then likens the classroom atmosphere to a family gathered at the holidays. He says:

I’ll just kind of sit back and look around the room at every individual kid, and I think to myself how cool it is to be able to get to know all those kids, whether I like them or not.

(Interview 2, Aug. 31, 2019)

The description of students reaching or fulfilling their potential is most clearly evident in the data from teachers of older students, those in middle and high school. Whereas all teachers speak about student growth as a phenomenon they love watching, the middle and high school teachers characterize this growth in terms of students reaching their potential. Michelle enjoys watching her high school English students experience what she calls “the Peter Parker stage” (Interview 1, Jul. 12, 2019), referring to the fictional young man who realizes he has the superpowers of Spiderman. “I love seeing them discover what they’re capable of,” she relates (Interview 1, Jul. 12, 2019).

Almost all teachers specifically report loving when students have breakthroughs in understanding. Elijah encapsulates this experience in a memory he shares from a decade ago:

I love the excitement when the kids get what you’re doing, when they see things kind of like for the first time. I remember one girl in particular, who was doing a difficult proof [years ago] in a geometry class. And to get to where you needed to go, you kind of had to make things more difficult. First, it looked worse. As you work your way through the proof, and then things sort of like melted away. And I just remember one girl said,
‘That’s so beautiful.’ I turned around and looked at her. And it was, you know, that moment when they see something…kind of like putting the last piece of the puzzle into the puzzle itself. And that’s kind of a thrill. I like that a lot. (Interview 1, Jul. 25, 2019)

Elena adds that this feeling is even stronger now than when she started teaching third grade. “I love the kids. I love working with the kids. I love seeing their excitement, their participation, and when they get it [gasps and smiles]. I love it. Yeah” (Interview 3, Jul. 3, 2019). For her, guiding students through new learning is a source of deep satisfaction.

**Colleagues.** About half of teachers also reported that relationships with colleagues is a source of happiness. Elijah explains in contrast to the business world:

In general, teachers are like nurses or maybe social workers. They’re just good people, they, their nature is to want to help others. And so you’re just surrounded by really great people. That actually makes your work environment really nice. (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019)

For him, the positive atmosphere created by his collegial relationships is important to his overall enjoyment of the job. He says he works:

in a community of people that I really enjoy working with and being with. That’s just, it’s, it’s huge, because you go in and you smile, and you make each other laugh, and you share your home experiences as well as your classroom experiences. (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019)

Having positive colleague connections can also help sustain a teacher during stressful times. At work, Michelle describes how important it is to “find your people” (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019):
If you don’t have your people then it becomes almost impossible to keep any passion alive. You’ve got to find people who inspire you, and who you know, who you can connect with, even if you don’t agree with them, who are just like ready to shake things up from time to time and try something new. (Interview 2, Jul. 26, 2019)

She talks about how being assigned to a new professional learning community (PLC) for the next year is feeding her passion and helping her avoid the risk of “slipping into automaton mode” (Interview 3, Aug. 24, 2019) in her lesson design and instruction. A few teachers report that their colleagues sustain them through crises. Barbara has worked with the same kindergarten team for ten years. For her, it’s a “great team, we all work well together” (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019).

**Fun.** Data analysis also indicates that thriving teachers perceive many aspects of their work as fun. The term fun arises most frequently among special education teachers who teach summer school. These teachers imply that the more relaxed atmosphere in summer school is a key element in that dynamic. However, all teachers mention that working with students is fun.

Most data collection occurred during the summer months, and several teachers are engaged in teaching summer school or have been in previous years. As such, the topic of summer school surfaces in discussion with four teachers. All teachers who teach summer school for elementary and special needs students describe the experience as particularly fun. They associate freedom and play with summer school, distinguishing it from the standard school year with its attendant responsibilities, e.g., of data collection and administrative meetings. Barbara relates, “It’s so much fun. I get to do the kind of teaching I love to do. It’s fun” (Interview 1, Jul. 8, 2019). Rosa elaborates on the association between perceived autonomy and fun in the context of summer school:
In summer school I don’t have…I don’t do updates in summer school. I just have a maintenance program. The lessons are more quote-unquote free spirit, because I’m not getting observed with Marzano, so I can kind of like do fun lessons, like Christmas in July, and things like that. So I get to have fun in summer school with the kids. So I do have fun in summer school. (Interview 1, Jul. 30, 2019)

Three teachers explain they enjoy the challenges their work imposes. For them, problem-solving is part of what makes the job fun. Rosa shares how differentiating instruction for her 20 pre-kindergarten special needs students offers a challenge she perceives as fun:

And you know, I get a variety [of students in my class], so I have kids who are hyperlexic, they read. I have kids who read. I have kids who have trouble, you know, matching a dog with a dog. So I have a range of kids. So that for me makes it really exciting, because you have to figure out…for me that’s the fun part. You have to figure out, how do you teach the same lesson to that group of kids, because my kids, they’re not homogeneously grouped. (Interview 2, Aug. 13, 2019)

Murph identifies the fun he has with students as his reason for staying in the job, as does Elijah. Amid the demands of testing preparation and project work, Murph says levity and camaraderie are essential. “I mean,” he grins, “if you can’t have some fun, what’s the point?” (Interview 1, Aug. 25, 2019).

As mentioned previously, for some teachers the concepts of fun and love necessarily overlap. As the definitions of those terms indicate, there is a commonality of connection between people that brings a good feeling. Kindergarten teacher Barbara pinpoints this nexus: “Teaching is so much fun. In what other job do you feel so loved? Seventeen little kids, bright eyes, smiles, and they love you unconditionally” (Interview 2, Jul. 11, 2019). In a subsequent
interview, Barbara considers another angle of fun for teachers, “you have to have fun, enjoy what you’re doing, because it’s a lot of work!” (Interview 3, Jul. 30, 2019). Gloria echoes this statement, “I just always, you know, I always found my job, most parts of my job, fun. That part of it [having breakthroughs with kids] was fun” (Interview 1, Jul. 15, 2019).

The data show that overall, thriving teachers perceive their work as fun. Each interview unearths aspects of work that are difficult, or even unpleasant. However, thriving teachers emphasize that the fun outweighs the rest.

Joy. Many teachers mention the word joy when describing their work, all in relation to working with students. In particular, those teachers who work with the youngest learners, pre-kindergarten through third grade, specifically reference joy in describing good moments at work. When talking about what she has learned about teaching, Ruth explains her perspective like this: “Find the joy—that’s been my motto the last couple of years” (Interview 3, Apr. 28, 2019). She elaborates:

[I am] making sure I am intentionally planning learning activities that will help kids to feel good about their learning, and help me feel good about guiding them through their learning, even in the confines of the curriculum. I still think we can find joy. (Interview 3, Apr. 28, 2019)

More broadly, transition coordinator Gloria says teaching “is where my joy comes from,” (Interview 2, Jul. 29, 2019) in part because she does not engage in many outside activities. She says she feels socially, intellectually, psychologically connected to and invested in work. For her, this is a source of joy. For high school English teacher Adam, joy at work is even more basic. For him joy occurs “when I’m in front of the students” (Interview 2, Apr. 26, 2019)
Answer to Research Question Four

Data analysis pertinent to Research Question Four, *How do thriving veteran teachers remain deeply engaged and sustain a positive mindset amid the changes and challenges in education in the past 18 years?*, leads to the emergence of three themes. Teachers perceive their work as having deep value; they are matched well to their jobs, and they love the work. Teaching, as they experience it, benefits students and society on several levels, and also benefits them personally. These thriving teachers understand the work both as a reflection of their identity and as a good match for their personalities and aptitudes. They have found a balance between their strengths and the demands of the job. Finally, these participants love many aspects of their work, including relationships with students and colleagues, the freedom they experience in summer school, daily problem-solving on the job, and the work they do with students. Whereas they are aware of the pitfalls that can lead to burnout and demoralization, they are sanguine about their own teaching pathways.

**Composite Findings**

To recap, the purpose of this study is to understand how thriving teachers, who might have succumbed to the difficulties of sustained systemic change in public education but did not, have maintained their deep engagement and positive sense of commitment. This section is comprised of three parts which synthesize the answers to the four Research Questions into three assertions (Saldaña, 2016). The first section shows how self-actualization—being one’s best self—is a process which can unfold through one’s professional activity. The second part demonstrates the relationship between the research questions and teachers’ signature strengths, which are activated in the protracted process of self-actualization. The last part extends the discussion on self-actualization into its most recent iteration, based on Kaufman’s (2020a)
interpretation of Maslow’s later writings. Together, these parts lead to three final assertions that form the composite findings from this study.

**Part One: Self-Actualization Through One’s Work**

Based on the findings for Research Questions One, Two, and Three, it becomes evident that these thriving teachers exhibit the characteristics of a self-actualized person, at least in their professional lives. The discussion which follows lays out the nature of self-actualization and allows the reader to see more precisely how the stories above reflect that phenomenon.

**Teaching as a Form of Self-Actualization**

Self-actualization is the process of reaching one’s full potential, of “the individual doing what he is fitted for” (Maslow, 1943, p. 382). As a component of Maslow’s original hierarchy of needs (1943), the term self-actualization is applied to the level of human development when a person seeks to be his best, in work, in relationships, or in other dimensions of life. In this way, Maslow suggests that self-actualization is an optimizing of one’s identity, a full integration of the self with the pursuits in which one engages.

More broadly, Maslow’s later writings show the philosophical implications inherent in the construct of self-actualization. Understanding that each person is different and that self-actualization leads toward the expression of the fullest self suggests that there is not one best model for a human, and by extension, for a teacher or student (Maslow, 1966, cited in Kaufman, 2018, Nov.). This view of self-actualization invites a more holistic understanding of what “success” or thriving can look like.

Norlander et al., (2005) found that self-actualized individuals have less stress, higher energy, adapt more readily to change, and have more coping strategies than those who are not self-actualized. Individuals who self-actualize have “better chances to ‘thrive’ after a negative
event,” such as a medical or psychological trauma (Norlander et al., 2005, p. 107). Rosa’s practice of extending grace, even after getting injured and sued, is a manifestation of how a thriving teacher returns to form after a traumatic event. Similarly, negative events early in the careers of Gloria, Adam, and Elijah helped those teachers clarify personal boundaries for ethical conduct.

Dodd (2001) describes the self-actualized teacher as one who has passed through distinct stages of practice, leading to increased competence and wisdom. The stories shared by teachers in this sample confirm this conclusion. In the self-actualization process, these teachers have actively pursued learning in their content areas and in emerging pedagogical, cognitive, and behavioral theory. Teachers who wish to self-actualize need to “see the importance of being lifelong students of teaching” (Dodd, 2001, p. 18), as Barbara, Murph, Michelle, and Elijah all acknowledged. The self-actualization process is advanced by the teacher fashioning a coherent personal philosophy about effective teaching, one which gets revisited and tweaked or solidified over time. The key to self-actualizing is consistent reflection on practice, which each of these thriving teachers demonstrated. Additionally, the ability to fully integrate the self into a pursuit is related to how well the person’s environmental and psychological needs are met (Maslow, 1943).

It is my contention here that self-actualization is not a final and static state, but a more dynamic level of self-becoming that can exist within and across the various dimensions of one’s life, for example in one’s relationships with family members, with physical fitness or spiritual health, with one’s professional life, etc. I contend that it is possible to slip out of and back into a self-actualized state, depending on how fully one dedicates the self in pursuit of the desired goal.
I also contend that people in this sample share the quality of having had experiences of self-actualization in, through, and because of their work as teachers.

**Part Two: Teaching as a Place to Employ Signature Strengths**

When the answers to the Research Questions are examined in light of positive psychology, particularly the construct of well-being, other patterns emerge. As the findings for Research Questions One and Two readily demonstrate, to confront the challenges they face in the workplace, these teachers draw on internal assets such as love of learning, perseverance, and a desire to make a positive contribution to the world. These are people who demonstrate well-being at work, perhaps even because of their work. Seen through Seligman’s (2011) version of the Signature Strengths taxonomy, it becomes apparent these teachers manifest specific virtues and strengths to cultivate and then sustain thriving. A cross-case analysis reveals that the most frequent signature strengths manifested in the transcript data. The findings to each research question were reviewed again, including a comprehensive review of the analytic memos, for evidence of the 24 signature strengths. To provide a coherent structure, I identified teachers’ signature strengths. Next, I organized them by relevant research question and theme.

(Selgman 2011) states that when a person tests for signature strengths, the top five scores are the most important. Here I included the teachers’ top six strengths, as the difference in frequency between the fifth and sixth was negligible. Per the cross-case analysis, the signature strengths for these thriving teachers are:

- Hope/optimism/future-mindedness
- Citizenship/duty/teamwork/loyalty
- Integrity/genuineness/honesty
- Playfulness & humor
- Perseverance/diligence/industry
- Zest/passion/enthusiasm

It is worth remembering that Peterson and Seligman (2004) grouped the 24 signature strengths into six virtue clusters: wisdom and knowledge; courage; humanity and love; justice; temperance, and transcendence. Of the top six signature strengths demonstrated by these teachers, three are within the virtue of transcendence, two within courage, and one within justice. Table 17 shows the most commonly displayed signature strengths, the virtue clusters, and data points to illustrate how the strengths were expressed by the participants.
Table 17

*Top Six Signature Strengths of Thriving Teachers as Found by Cross-case Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virtue</th>
<th>Signature Strength</th>
<th>Data samples</th>
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| Transcendence        | Hope/optimism/future-mindedness          | “You have to increase independence for kids….We have to make sure that kids are ready for the real world.” Gl3  
“|                      |                                           | “I believe in inspiring kids to greatness.” Mi2  
“|                      |                                           | “I really love working with young people and having such a tangible front row seat to our future.” Va3  
“|                      |                                           | “I have learned that people are so good. There are so many good teachers out there.” Ru1  
“|                      |                                           | “I want kids to love to learn, to question and wonder and explore, and be right and wrong. It’s normal. It’s human. We all make errors, and you learn from them, live from them, and move on. Yeah, no, I love it.” Ele2  
“|                      |                                           | Talking about students with difficult behaviors, Adam paraphrases Abraham Lincoln: ‘I do not like this man. I need to spend more time with him.’ Ad2 |
| Playfulness & humor  | You have to have fun. You have to have fun, enjoy what you’re doing because it’s a lot of work. Ba3  
|                      |                                           | “It’s part of my personality where I let them know things about me, probably sometimes way more than most teachers do, you know, but I feel like it’s fun.” Mu1 |
| Zest/passion/enthusiasm | “I think [I’m motivated by] a passion for wanting to help the next generation.” Gl3  
|                      |                                           | “I love it. I love it. I really truly love it. You know, I’m looking forward to going back tomorrow.” Ru3  
<p>|                      |                                           | “I can’t imagine what my day would be like not going into work and seeing all the smiling faces and making a difference in children’s lives….Every year I love my class.” Ba3 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courage</th>
<th>Integrity/genuineness/honesty</th>
<th>“At this point in my career…maybe I care less about my administrators and what they think and just care more about doing the right thing for kids and families. So if they ask me to do something, I really try to steer it back to what’s right for kids and families, because that’s why we’re here, and not just to fill [data] holes.” Gl3</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>“[My kindergarten team] is just very true to ourselves…we could make it a lot easier on ourselves and get off that treadmill by letting go of play a little bit…but we won’t do it.” Ba3</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“One of my core values is honesty in the classroom.” Ad2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perseverance/industry</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I do a lot of work at home…like right now I really should be writing a newsletter for tomorrow….I know it’s going to take a while, I’m pretty tired, been up for a long time. I really don’t want to do it, but I know it will be beneficial, I know my parents will appreciate it.” Ru2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I feel like, with all the expectations on our shoulders, I feel like we still kept [play-centered learning for kindergarten students]. It’s great for little kids, but it’s more work for us. But we still don’t want to let it go….even though things are challenging, and we choose to put more on our plate, we’re still keeping it fun. And that’s what makes me happy. Just making learning still fun for kids.” Ba2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Citizenship/duty/teamwork</td>
<td>“You can’t begin to learn the curriculum if you don’t have a community of learners that can figure out how to get along with each other. I think it’s really important to show [my third-graders] how to respect everybody and their thinking.” Ru3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Good teaching means you’re part of a team.” Ro1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“There is a responsibility going both ways…and these reciprocal relationships strengthen the community….I tell [my students], ‘next to my family, you are the most important thing in my life.’” El1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Ruth = Ru2 & Ru3; Barbara = Ba2 & Ba3; Gloria = Gl3; Murph = Mu1; Elena = Ele2; Adam = Ad2; Rosa = Ro1; Elijah = Eli1; Val = Va2; Michelle = Mi3. Number indicates interview in which data point occurred, e.g., Ru2 = Ruth’s interview #2.
Maslow’s original hierarchy of needs suggested that self-actualization was the most advanced stage in human motivation. The three strengths within the transcendence virtue cluster hint at the limits of self-actualization as a construct to understand thriving. New interpretations point to an even richer and fulfilling form of motivation. To understand the dynamics that sustain thriving teachers, it is worthwhile to examine transcendence as it relates to self-actualization.

**Part Three: Transcendence**

Maslow’s later writings show that his idea of human motivation continued to evolve. By the time of his death in 1962, Maslow was espousing the notion of transcendence as the highest level of human motivation, the fullest realization of the self (Kaufman, 2020a). Transcendence differs from self-actualization because it incorporates altruism, selflessness, and concept of peak experiences which occur in the pursuit of becoming a better person. Kaufman’s depiction of transcendence uses the metaphor of a sailboat, where the body of the boat incorporates safety, connection, and self-esteem (2020b, shown in Figure 4). Those constructs contribute to a person’s feeling of security, per Kaufman’s model. The sail affords the ability to move, or to grow as a human being. The sail represents the triad of exploration, love, and purpose. When a person harnesses the power of these attributes in life, she is then positioned to pursue transcendence (Kaufman, 2020a).
For Kaufman, transcendence “rests on a secure foundation of both security and growth, [and] is a perspective in which we can view our whole being from a higher vantage point with acceptance, wisdom, and a sense of connectedness with the rest of humanity” (Kaufman, 2020a, p. xxxiv). In Kaufman’s extension of Maslow’s transcendence theory, then, humans are engaged in a process of becoming a whole person, a “best self” (2020, p. 260). He explains, “we each have best selves—aspects of who we are that are healthy, creative, and growth-motivated—that make us feel most connected to ourselves and to others” (2020, p. 260). Moving toward transcendence means more than acknowledging flaws. It means accepting them genuinely and wholly as we pursue self-betterment and growth. Kaufman notes that Maslow’s final writings speak specifically to this.

**Summary of Findings**

Employing the sailboat metaphor, the findings from Research Question One show that thriving teachers have sturdy boats. Their experience and technical acumen—not to mention
tenure—give them a sense of safety professionally. Their relationships with students and colleagues reinforce the strength of this platform. Each teacher enjoys the work and feels good about his or her ability to meet day-to-day challenges, but all are quick to acknowledge the diligence and energy required. The findings from Research Questions Two, Three, and Four indicate that teachers have strong sails as well. These teachers are curious about the work and dedicated to learning. They share a mindset of continuous growth toward a valued goal. Overwhelmingly, they believe in the purpose of their work.

A synthesis of these findings leads to three assertions (Saldaña, 2016). First, veteran teachers who thrive amid change and challenge are self-actualized. Second, thriving teachers employ signature strengths to achieve and maintain the “fit” between themselves and their jobs. And third, many of these teachers are able to thrive in part because of the challenge and change in their professional lives. The relationship between the findings, literature, and assertions is displayed in Figure 6.

Answers to Research Questions were considered in terms of the relevant literature, which then led to assertions, as depicted by the yellow arrows. Answers to the four Research Questions are arranged in a column along the left margin. Each answer is color coded to indicate how it links to the relevant literature and subsequent assertion. For example, the answer to Research Question One, outlined in green, is that teaching has changed substantially in the past 18 years. Teachers draw on resolve, ingenuity, and their commitment to student learning to adjust to the evolving landscape. Green arrows connect this answer to relevant research, represented by boxes in the center column, namely to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943), Maslach and Leiter’s job-fit model (1997), and Seligman’s work on signature strengths. The resultant construct is that teachers are motivated to adjust to change as they work toward a healthy balance between the
demands and resources within their job. In this pursuit, these teachers draw on their signature strengths. In this example, teachers who adjust and draw on their signature strengths confirm all three assertions, as shown by the yellow arrows moving right toward the column of yellow assertion boxes. In other words, teachers who are flexible and committed to their students are able to navigate the challenges and changes they face on the job.
Answers to Research Questions

RQ1
Teaching has changed substantially in the past 18 years. Adjusting has been neither easy nor impossible. Teachers draw on resolve, ingenuity, and commitment to student learning.

RQ2
Positive work relationships that increase a teacher’s professional capacity and support her emotionally promote thriving. Leaders contribute by fostering autonomy based on trust and respect.

RQ3
Thriving teachers draw on innate and cultivated qualities, such as self-care, interpersonal skills, intrinsic motivation, and flexibility to meet the changing demands of their jobs.

RQ4
Thriving teachers believe their work matters beyond themselves. They feel it is a good match for their skills, talents, and personality. They love what they do.

Research

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943) suggests people are motivated to self-actualize.

Maslach & Leiter (1997) “job-fit” model, where job demands are in balance with job resources

Signature strengths help people navigate difficulties (Seligman, 2011)

Kaufman’s sailboat model of transcendence shows humans are motivated even beyond self-actualization, given a stable base and the desire to grow into their potential.

Assertions

Assertion 1
Veteran teachers thrive in part because of challenges and changes in their professional lives.

Assertion 2
Thriving veteran teachers employ signature strengths to achieve and maintain job “fit”

Assertion 3
Veteran teachers who thrive amid challenge and change are self-actualized and moving toward transcendence.

Figure 5. Pathway to Assertions
Chapter Four Summary

To summarize, the challenges and changes of the past 18 years may represent choppy seas for teachers, the swells of which have caused so many to leave the classroom. However, for these teachers, challenge and change are the wind. Without the difficulties of adjusting to new teaching demands, higher expectations for student demonstration of learning, and more widespread inclusivity of all learners, these teachers might have experienced less growth, less ability to fully unfurl their sails. A savvy sailor knows how to use her signature strengths to make the most of the journey.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was prompted by the desire to understand how teachers who thrive at work have managed to do so during the past two decades. As described in the Statement of the Problem, an alarming percentage of teachers in the United States leave the field in the first five years (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016; Torres, 2011; Walker, 2015). This trend has been exacerbated by a number of stressors that are part of the accountability practices ushered in by NCLB and reinforced by the adoption of the CCSS, and other state and district protocols. Low pay, teacher strikes, and now in the summer of 2020, calls to return to school during the COVID-19 pandemic, showcase the tension in which American teachers work. Teachers leaving is expensive for districts, bad for children, and financially and psychologically disruptive to the lives of the individual teachers (Craig, 2013; García & Weiss, 2019; Hancock & Scherff, 2010; Ingersoll, et al., 2016; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Perda, 2013; Podolsky et al., 2016; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016; Torres, 2011). Therefore, scholars have investigated ways to reduce the chief causes of teacher leaving, including burnout and demoralization (Anthony, 2019; Arens & Morin, 2016; Bulatevych, 2017; Chang, 2009; Friedman, 2003; Gaines, 2011; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Moeny, 2014; O’Brennan, Pas, & Bradshaw, 2017; Perrone, Player, & Youns, 2019; Santoro, 2018; Tsang & Liu, 2016; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999; Wronowski & Urick, 2019b). This work is increasingly important as we enter the new territory of extended remote learning across the country.

Still, there are those teachers who manage not to succumb to the negative pressures and vicissitudes of change. This is what I wanted to understand better. Somehow certain teachers
are able to perform well, enjoy the journey, and maintain a positive outlook, even while adapting to policies with which they might not agree. This study aimed to uncover what factors—environmental or personal—support thriving for veteran educators. The purpose of this chapter is to examine more deeply the major ideas that emerged from the study and to introduce a model that grew out of the interrelationships among these ideas.

This chapter contains a summary of study findings organized by research question, followed by commentary on each of the three assertions. Next I discuss the implications of the assertions for education practitioners and for researchers. I introduce and explain a model for job fit based on the composite findings of the study. After that, I submit thoughts on the limitations of the study. Finally, I make suggestions for further research and offer a conclusion.

**Overview of the Research Process**

To understand how experienced and thriving teachers continue to flourish in the face of so much change and challenge, I conducted a qualitative study of public school teachers in two states in the Northeast. The study was guided by these questions:

1. Since the adoption of NCLB, to what degree do thriving veteran teachers believe their profession has changed?
   a. How do thriving veteran teachers perceive the changes in their professional culture in the past 18 years?
   b. How do thriving veteran teachers perceive changes in their personal practice in the past 18 years?

2. What are the professional factors that support thriving for veteran educators?

3. What are the personal attributes that support thriving for veteran educators?
4. How do thriving veteran teachers remain deeply engaged and sustain a positive mindset amid ongoing changes and challenges in their profession?

**Research Question One**

*Since the adoption of NCLB, what do thriving veteran teachers believe has changed in their work?*

I used a two-pronged approach to unearth the changes that stood out to teachers regarding the environment within their schools, as well as in their personal teaching practice. I wanted to know if thriving teachers would reference the same factors that lead some teachers to quit the profession, and if so, how they would frame those topics. I used these questions to guide this portion of the study:

- *a. How do thriving veteran teachers perceive changes in their professional culture in the past 18 years?*
- *b. How do thriving veteran teachers perceive changes in their personal practice in the past 18 years?*

**Research Question One Results**

Teachers in this sample believe teaching has undergone substantial change since the implementation of NCLB and subsequent reform measures. Within their professional culture, teachers underscored a heightened emphasis on student safety and increased demands on teachers and schools. Those demands include a workload of planning and paperwork that keeps them constantly busy within a more test- and data-driven culture. Teachers indicate the most noticeable changes are tied to standardized curricular guidelines, such as the CCSS and NGSS, more so than the NCLB. This distinction is due in part to the age of the participants. Those in their 40s started teaching at the same time NCLB practices were incorporated into their districts.
and were thereby professionally conditioned in the “new” atmosphere of test-based accountability. Older teachers report that NCLB led to a reduction in teachers’ ability to be creative and spontaneously reactive to students, at least initially. Teachers report that adjusting to new guidelines and mandates has not been easy, but nor has it been beyond their reach.

In their personal practice, teachers report that flexibility has been central to their ability to change with a changing system. Teachers have developed systems of communication and organization to manage their more complex workload. Also, they have adjusted to work within the new requirements by reflecting on their pedagogical practices and fitting their most valued lessons in and around the testing regimen. They have become more attuned to differentiating instruction as identification of students with special needs has increased, and they have sought out and applied independent learning on pedagogy, psychology, and their content areas. In doing so, these thriving teachers demonstrated they are adept at adjusting to change.

Research Question One lays out some of the job demands teachers have encountered since 2002, when NCLB accountability practices started to become mainstream. Whereas this study does not—and cannot—encompass all changes in public education, the answer to this question showcases some of the challenges teachers have faced. As recently as 2018, Skaalvik and Skaalvik found “teacher well-being was more strongly related to job demands than to job resources” (p. 1264), which suggests that a teacher’s ability to manage demands is of paramount importance. The teachers in this sample have avoided the “major mismatch between the nature of the job and the nature of the person who does the job” (Maslach & Leiter, 1997, p. 9), which may be why they continue to flourish at work.
**Research Questions Two and Three**

The previous question illuminates what thriving veteran teachers perceive as important changes in their fields in the past 18 years. Research Questions Two and Three focus on the environmental and personal factors that sustain thriving teachers amid so much challenge. Respectively, Questions Two and Three ask, *What are the professional factors that support thriving in veteran teachers?* and *What are the personal attributes that support thriving in veteran teachers?* It is reasonable to assume that school leaders—and children and families—want teachers who exhibit a vibrant and sustained well-being at work.

**Research Question Two Results**

Teachers in this sample say that feeling supported and connected to others on the job is important. The two themes that emerged from data analysis were that good leadership makes teachers feel supported professionally and personally, and that positive relationships with colleagues are meaningful and beneficial. Both themes have positive relationships at the center, though for slightly different reasons. Thriving teachers in this sample agree that good leaders are active and present in the school building. To these thriving teachers, leaders who know what is happening in the classroom can then interact with the teacher from a place of authenticity and respect. That dynamic is a precursor to trust, which then leads to increased perceptions of autonomy, a signal that the building administration trusts the teacher to make good decisions. Colleagues can also enhance thriving over time, whether as mentors, collaborators, or social support. Teachers in this sample did not convey that their personal social lives are rooted in their school lives. Indeed, many of the participants’ work friends have retired or moved to other schools. However, they all signal that over the years there have been colleagues whose formal or
informal contributions helped to manage tough situations, explore new in-class possibilities, and have a laugh at the end of the day.

**Research Question Three Results**

Results to this question show that personal characteristics are tremendously important for teachers who continue to thrive in the face of challenge and change. A nexus of shared traits emerged, including enjoying meaningful connections with people, maintaining habits of self-care, being intrinsically motivated, and exhibiting flexibility. Some of these characteristics are innate, while others have been carefully cultivated. Each of these attributes can be displayed differently. One person’s self-care is an afternoon run; another’s is early morning meditation with a Bible verse. What matters to these teachers is that they have learned that self-care is a starting point. Without it, they cannot bring their best selves to the classroom.

Obviously, the professionals in this sample work with students whose ages range from 3 to 21. To make and sustain meaningful connections, the teachers employ empathy, listening, and patience. These characteristics are fundamental to supporting student learning, according to this sample. Also, these teachers are motivated far more by breakthroughs in student understanding than by salary or external accolades. They report working late at night and on weekends to give students meaningful feedback and to keep parents well informed. Thriving teachers regard these as the tenets of professionalism. Whereas these tasks may not be always enjoyable, teachers report they are necessary to good work. Each of these teachers has a clarity of purpose that propels action through the repetitive and time-consuming paperwork portions of the job.

**Research Question Four**

The final research question investigates how teachers continue to thrive over time. To review, the question asks, *How do thriving veteran teachers remain deeply engaged and sustain*
Posing this question draws together job demands, job resources, and teachers’ personal characteristics and behaviors to illustrate how thriving teachers effectively manage their professional lives.

**Research Question Four Results**

To answer Research Question Four, I examined the themes that emerged from careful analysis of the data. These were that veteran teachers are able to sustain thriving because they believe they are doing something of great value, that the job is the right fit, and that the job brings them happiness. Irrespective of level taught, these thriving teachers believe what they do matters. They construe the value mostly in terms of what students gain by getting an education. This study confirms findings by Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2015) that teachers’ job satisfaction coexists with intermittent levels of exhaustion and the need for applying coping strategies.

Some responses varied by the teacher’s expressed belief in the purpose of education. For example, transition specialist Gloria emphasized the role of education in helping special needs students find employment and function independently after high school. Others, such as high school English teacher Michelle, emphasized the social justice dimension that public schools can promote within society. Still others, such as third grade teachers Ruth and Elena and high school math teacher Elijah, underscored how school imparts lessons in problem solving that students use for a lifetime. In this way, it was clear that teachers in this sample see value in the life lessons they teach in addition to the academic lessons. Research has found that people may be able to tolerate greater workload if they value the work and feel they are doing something important, or if they feel well-rewarded for their efforts, and so an intervention could target these areas of value and reward (Maslach, Leiter, & Schaufeli, 2001).
It is worth noting that thriving teachers feel their profession suits them as people, and for teachers “fit matters” (Johnson, 2019, p. 24). Some teachers, however, talked about their job as something one is, not just something one does. Whereas this finding has been documented before (Edelman, 1999), it was interesting to see this group express the sentiment so vigorously.

**Assertions**

The last step in the data analysis process is to generate assertions based on the findings (Saldaña, 2016). To this point, I developed three assertions which are explained in the following section.

**Assertion One: Veteran Teachers Thrive in part Because of Challenge and Change in Their Professional Lives**

Kaufman’s sailboat model of transcendence is a sound metaphor for the structure of human motivation. In this model, stability is suggested as the boat sitting atop water. The sail aloft in the air is the zone that represents growth. This depiction of wind connotes that movement—as transcendence—is possible, even likely for the sailboat. However, in its current form the depiction risks conveying a stasis of unactualized potential: a boat intact but adrift, directionless. Certainly that is not the case for the thriving teachers in this study. Kaufman’s intent can be more sharply and accurately conveyed with the addition of wind to the model. Based on the findings of this study, the wind represents challenge and change, animating forces that propelled these teachers to tap into their signature strengths to overcome the hurdles of disruption in education over the past two decades. After all, a boat can sit on calm waters without stirring. When the wind is high and the waters active, a sturdy craft and a knowledgeable sailor can capitalize on these dynamics to optimize motion. The same is true for teachers in the face of challenge. Challenge and change initiate growth, because one must apply
skill and experience to adjust to new conditions. Teaching without responding to change means teachers are less likely to unfurl their sails completely. The “wind” is necessary to fully implement the strengths of the craft, as shown in Figure 8.

*Figure 6. Adaptation of Kaufman’s (2020b) Sailboat Model of Transcendence. Original artwork by Andy Ogden. Wind visual added by the author of this study.*

**Assertion Two: Thriving Veteran Teachers Employ Signature Strengths to Achieve and Maintain Job “Fit”**

Returning to Kaufman’s sailboat model of human motivation, signature strengths form parts of the boat and the sail. Teachers in this sample have a solid, intact metaphorical boat and sail, which are the preconditions for self-actualization in their professional lives (Kaufman, 2020a). The boat represents stability, a foundation of physical and psychological safety. Teachers’ traits of self-care and positive professional self-esteem act as planks in this structure. Valued connections with students and colleagues, and a sense of mutuality fortify the boat
(Kaufman, 2020a). The sail represents the capacity for growth. Teachers’ signature strengths of exploration, love, and clarity of purpose lend themselves to a capacious canvas of potential. Fashioning their signature strengths to the demands of the job helps the teachers achieve job fit, the “ideal ecology for the human being” (Kaufman, 2020a, p. 152). The growth that occurs as a result of the work experience enriches the person in the rest of her life. “For most of us,” Kaufman attests:

the greatest source of growth, energy, and wholeness comes about when our agentic drive to realize the deepest part of us is harmoniously integrated with our drive to have a positive effect on others….We tend to be most happy, persistent, productive, and high-performing when we both feel self-determined and are motivated to make a positive impact. (2020a, p. 170).

The teachers in this study fit Kaufman’s description. A cross-case analysis of thriving teachers’ signature strengths using the template developed by Seligman (2011) showed the six strengths most frequently displayed by all ten teachers:

- Hope/optimism/future-mindedness
- Citizenship/duty/teamwork
- Integrity/genuineness/honesty
- Playfulness & humor
- Perseverance/diligence/industry
- Zest/passion/enthusiasm

These signature strengths buoy thriving teachers on a regular basis, and they are especially important in times of difficulty, such as when new testing or evaluation protocols are implemented. Of course, teachers also expressed other signature strengths, such as love of
learning, curiosity about the world, and fairness. These signature strengths foster growth too, expanding the symbolic sail to navigate choppy waters that arise in the teacher’s life. Peterson initially grouped the 24 signature strengths into six value clusters (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Of the six strengths listed above, three—hope/optimism/future-mindedness, playfulness & humor, and zest/passion/enthusiasm—are all part of the Transcendence value cluster. While it may be a semantic coincidence, it is interesting that nearly half of the most prominent signature strengths employed by thriving teachers are components of what he called Transcendence.

Assertion Three: Veteran Teachers Who Thrive Amid Challenge and Change are Self-Actualized and Moving Toward Transcendence

These individuals were nominated to participate in this study because of their skill, vibrant positivity, and substantive contribution to the school culture and mission. Whereas this study cannot assess or comment on an objective realization of the teachers’ potential, it can be inferred from the data that these teachers feel they are working toward their potential. Professionally, they are self-actualized. In 1950, Maslow wrote:

What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization. The desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for [a person] to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become everything that one is capable of becoming. (“Basic Needs” chapter)

Reexamining Maslow’s later writings, Kaufman noted that the hierarchy of needs should be understood as integrated (2018a; 2020a). That is, a person must always attend to the boat as well as to the sail. A leaky boat is not seaworthy, much the way a person who loses meaningful personal connections at work may cease to thrive until meaningful relationships can be regenerated. In the same vein, thriving teachers cannot be motivated solely by purpose, if for
example they stop experiencing growth or love. They need to have a full integration of the elements of boat and sail to embark on their voyage.

Based on the data generated during this study, I can reasonably infer that none of these teachers would say he or she had stopped growing professionally. They all continue to learn within their content domains and to experiment with new pedagogical techniques. Each is animated by the desire to improve for the benefit of students. This animating impetus is reflected in Maslow’s revised model for human motivation: transcendence (Kaufman, 2020a). Transcendence is distinct from self-actualization, because it is rooted in a communally valued purpose, doing activities that matter for humanity and are also conducive to personal growth. In fact, Kaufman calls self-actualization “merely a bridge to transcendent states of being” (Kaufman, 2020a, p. 218). The healthy integration of the whole self is “the healthiest form of transcendence,” becoming “a harmonious part of the whole of human existence” (Kaufman, 2020a, p. 218). The individual eclipses the confines of his or her own reality in the performance of activities that benefit others or serve a higher purpose. The purpose itself is energizing.

Implications of Assertions

There are a number of implications for educators and researchers, based on the assertions developed in the course of this study. Here the term educators refers to people in leadership, training, and mentorship roles, and to classroom teachers at any stage of their career. Implications for researchers are aimed at advancing our understanding in any future studies of thriving, job fit, work-related transcendence, or similar fields of inquiry. Table 18 shows how the assertions generated here can be applicable to school principals, teachers, and researchers.
Table 18

**Implications of the Research for Educators and Researchers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assertion</th>
<th>Implications for Leadership (e.g. principals)</th>
<th>Implications for Teachers</th>
<th>Suggestions for Researchers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help teachers regard challenges as chances for growth.</td>
<td>Practice active self-care during times of intense change.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emphasize support, collaboration, and process over immediate results.</td>
<td>Implement strategies (e.g. collaboration) to manage workload associated with change and challenge.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use language of growth-through-challenge with students.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thriving veteran teachers employ signature strengths to achieve and maintain job “fit”.</td>
<td>Administer strengths test to staff; have staff identify and reflect on signature strengths.</td>
<td>Cultivate strengths to deal with work-related challenges.</td>
<td>Test job fit model through qualitative or quantitative study of teachers at different stages of their careers, different contexts of challenge (e.g., higher job demands, lower pay).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Incorporate signature strengths into evaluation protocols in adjustment to strengths-focused work culture.</td>
<td>Help students understand and apply their signature strengths.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Build a strengths-informed curriculum.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veteran teachers who thrive amid challenge and change are self-actualized and moving toward transcendence.</td>
<td>Become better informed about transcendence, peak and plateau experiences to help teachers recognize elements of healthy transcendence.</td>
<td>Engage in “Growth Challenges” (Kaufman, 2020a) to focus personal growth toward integration of full self in reaching potential professionally and personally.</td>
<td>To better understand transcendence in teachers, develop tool to measure peak and plateau experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conduct “Growth Challenges” (Kaufman, 2020a) with staff as to build capacity to become fully realized at work.</td>
<td>Incorporate concepts of peak and plateau experiences into discussions with students about their learning.</td>
<td>Create intervention to increase frequency and value of peak and plateau experiences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Together the three assertions seem to suggest that thriving is really about job fit. Figure 8 shows how job fit can be achieved and maintained. Starting with the boxes on the top left and right, one can trace how an individual and a job intersect. On the left, the box labeled Personal Resources denotes the various intelligences, aptitudes, life experiences, and other personal qualities and ambitions each person possesses. The results of this study indicate for this sample of teachers, intrinsic motivation and signature strengths are decidedly important. When these traits are applied professionally—as indicated by the right-facing arrow—a person is able to meet the demands of the job, which for this sample of teachers is summarized by the term Workload. Another factor in the job demands part of the model is challenge and change at work, represented by the left-facing arrow. The black arrow in the center points down from the centered box, labeled Fit. Fit is achieved when a person’s resources are in balance with the demands of the job. Whereas periodic imbalances may occur, they do not destabilize the system. When an overall balance is achieved, the person exists in a state of self-actualization in their work role. As explained previously self-actualization is not a permanent or fixed state. Rather, it appears to be a state of fulfilled potential to which one can return over and over. On the outside, that looks like thriving at work, characterized by Diener, Su, and Tay (2014) with positive relationships, full engagement in valued activities, feelings of mastery and autonomy, finding meaning in life, and an overall sense of optimism and well-being. On the inside, achieving the “fit” described in this model feels more like transcendence, as described by Kaufman (2020a). Building on Maslow’s model, Kaufman (2020a) offers guiding principles to transcendence. For example, he believes people should accept their whole selves and not reject or dismiss perceived shortcomings. To pursue transcendence, Kaufman also suggests people
believe in their abilities to fulfill their potential. He urges people not to bury or defer inner conflict.

**Figure 8. Job Fit Model**

The dimensions of thriving constructed by Diener, Su, and Tay (2014) and the steps Kaufman (2020a) outlines reflect the stories told to me by the teachers in this sample. This job fit model is the result of this study of ten thriving veteran teachers, but it could be extrapolated to other professional fields or pursuits. Where there is a balance between the demands of the job and the personal resources an individual brings to that job, the groundwork is laid for fit. To cope with challenges and changes that occur, the individual engages both intrinsic motivation
and signature strengths. Applied over time, this alchemy leads to episodes of self-actualization in the work role. On the outside, this looks like thriving as categorized by Diener, Su, and Tay (2014). Inwardly, the individual may be on the path toward transcendence as conceived first by Maslow, then reconfigured by Kaufman (2020a). More study would need to be done to investigate this possibility.

**Trustworthiness**

To optimize the research, analysis, and evaluation processes for trustworthiness, a number of safeguards were put into place. These include credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability (Krefting, 1991).

**Credibility**

What Krefting terms “truth value” (1991, p. 215), Lincoln and Guba (1985) term “credibility.” In designing the study, I followed well-established research protocols. I facilitated credible interviews by connecting in a professional and congenial way with participants. I established my authority to conduct the study in the researcher biography section. I gave ample time for full responses, using follow-up questions as needed to clarify or extend answers. Additionally, I attempted to make interviews as convenient as possible for participants, offering to come to people’s homes or to meet in public spaces, per the participant’s preference. Six rounds of interviews were conducted in participants’ homes; four were in coffee shops or local eateries of the participant’s choosing. Per the recommendation of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Seidman (2013), I also spent a lengthy period of time with each participant.

I aligned interview questions in a matrix with the research questions to ensure that the information gathered was the information sought (Appendix F). I offered participants the chance to review interview transcripts as a way to optimize “accuracy of representation” (Krefting,
This process of member checking allowed participants to clarify passages or make known any concerns about meaning or intent. The member checking process can be open to distortion by a respondent who wishes to censor answers. Consequently, I was prepared to code disputed passages in the transcripts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), but none surfaced.

After the transcription process, and during the data analysis process, I listened to recordings in the car and on walks, especially as part of the cross-case analysis, when the data began to blur together. Listening to the transcripts multiple times was useful, due to the extended time between the first interviews (April 2019) and the last stages of data analysis (April and May 2020). I also appreciated reconnecting with the human stories the participants shared. As I listened, I was reminded of facial expressions they made as a moment of surprise, delight, or disappointment was revealed. In the later stages of second cycle coding, I often went back to the analytic memos and original transcripts to examine whether the initial codes reflected the spirit of the categories into which I was collapsing the code. I wanted to make sure that in collapsing codes into categories, I was not venturing afield of the speaker’s words and context. Reviewing the data so thoroughly conferred confidence that no salient themes were overlooked in the analysis process.

In a few instances, I contacted participants by email after the interviews were complete. This was done to fill in missing data points, as with number of years taught (see Table 8). Only one participant asked specifically to have transcripts shared with her electronically. Even so, I made the transcripts available to every participant for confirmation.

To contribute further to trustworthiness, I consulted regularly with my dissertation advisor to assure that procedures were conducted with fidelity. Dr. Baum has decades of
experience in qualitative research and has served as a dissertation advisor many times. These consultations ensured consistency of coding, categorizing, and theming.

**Transferability**

Transferability means the degree to which findings can be generalized to a wider population. Careful tracking of the nomination protocols for this sample makes this study useful for researchers looking to apply this process with a different demographic. Using a nominated sample was helpful to establish the within-group likeness of thriving. Thick descriptions of the participants inform the reader of the personal values and professional contexts in which they work (Geertz, 1973). I indicated the degree to which the participants were representative of teachers, both through “dense background information” (Krefting, 1991, p. 179) in the participant profile section of Chapter Four and in the Limitations section below. Using thick descriptions in journal writings illuminated the particular contextual factors unique to each participant (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Therefore, it will be easier for outsiders to understand both the subjective and universal nature of each teacher’s story, and thus, identify the degree to which findings are transferable.

**Dependability**

Dependability, which Krefting called “consistency” (1991, p. 217) refers to the reliability of qualitative findings. In this case, the interview structure, with anticipated probes for certain questions, provided a level of coherence to the participants’ responses. However, outliers or anomalies were also recorded faithfully and sought to be understood in context. As such, new questions were introduced to understand the particular circumstances or thinking that generate novel or unique responses. I noted idiosyncratic segments or moments in interviews, as these unexpected data points prompted new lines of questions or coding in some cases (Saldaña,
2016). Conducting the cross-case analysis also gave me the opportunity for code-recode verification, enhancing the dependability of findings. A rigorous audit trail was conducted during several meetings with my doctoral advisor to ensure fidelity to all parts of the data collection and analysis processes (Koch, 1994). She reviewed my coding technique, analytic memos, iterations of code-to-category tables, and the conceptual fidelity of the categories, themes, and findings to the research questions and assertions made thereupon.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of the study and conclusions drawn from it. It is intended to reduce researcher bias. Thorough interviews, high-quality transcripts member checked and coded by me enhanced the confirmability of the data. An audit trail supported confirmability as a factor of trustworthiness (Koch, 1994; Krefting, 1991). Also, my journal, coding, and memoing were used to show evidence or absence of bias in interview process or evaluation.

I maintained a reflexive journal to capture notes on process, participant behavior or interpretation of questions, or other matters arising during interviews that might have affected data collection or analysis. The journal was a way to record positionality, and the unexamined assumptions I may have brought to bear on the meaning-making process (Krauss, 2005). Maintaining the journal rendered me more aware of the ongoing need for neutrality during interviews, coding, and analysis. This transparency elucidated the research process more completely, exposing bias or patterns of faulty interpretation that might have occurred during the interview or coding process.
Limitations of the Research

There are several limitations to this study, each of which should be considered in the interpretation of results and in consideration of follow-up studies. First, the teachers in this sample were nominated according to criteria that I devised for thriving. Over the course of this study, I have encountered research-tested measurement tools to gauge thriving, however, I did not have those tools when I solicited nominations. Also, only 10 of the 24 educators in my doctoral cohort submitted nominations. It is possible that other nominated teachers would have responded differently to my questions about their adjustments to challenges and changes since 2002.

The teachers in this sample live and work in two states in the Northeast where teacher salaries are well above the national average. No teacher complained about feeling underpaid. Had this study been conducted in a geographic area with lower average pay, teachers may have felt their job demands were not balanced by a commensurate salary. Of these ten teachers, seven work in districts with low percentages of students receiving free- and reduced-lunch. Two of the teachers work in communities that are among the wealthiest in the region. Teachers expressed that their students generally came from families where educational achievement was valued. Whereas all teachers indicated that more ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity was manifest in their schools over the past decade, only three indicated that many of their students came from non-English speaking households. Eight of the teachers in this study said community support of their public schools was robust, as seen in the passage of recent budgets. This sample of teachers is not nationally representative of the demographic and economic realities schools and districts face nationwide.
The sample included seven women and three men. It included five elementary school teachers, and only one middle school teacher. There were three special education teachers as well, and two high school English teachers. There were no music, language, physical or technical education teachers in the sample.

Another limitation in the research is that the interview questions did not target signature strengths directly. I learned about Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) work while conducting the review of literature after data collection was complete. Therefore, I extrapolated teachers’ expressions of signature strengths from the data. This means other strengths could be equally or more prominent. This would make a fruitful follow-up study to understand if there are certain signature strengths teachers tend to have as they begin their careers, whether those change at all over time, or if certain strengths are clustered in teachers who choose a certain content area or level of instruction.

Manual coding and grounded theory made it difficult to track the frequency of some codes because codes were often fluid. The in vivo codes were sometimes synonymous with each other. In an effort to hew as closely as possible to the raw data, I kept as many expressions in participants own words. This means that some of the categories could arguably be collapsed even further. It is my hope that, rather than being a redundancy, inclusion of similar themes and subthemes in the data analysis will help the reader understand how the themes complement each other and convey a more holistic understanding of thriving teachers’ perspectives.

Finally, I collected data over a 10-month period, with 27 of the interviews conducted over five months. The length of time between beginning and ending data collection may have led to a fuller interaction with the data, as I had to review the recorded interviews, transcripts, and coding processes to fill gaps in memory. Ultimately this iterative process led to a very thorough
interaction with the data, but it was not as efficient as it might have been with a more streamlined process. It is important to note that the data were collected prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Obviously, the pandemic redefined what teachers and the wider public think of as challenge and change. It would be of especial interest to see which of the findings from this study would emerge again in the context of distance, hybrid, and other forms of learning occasioned by this national health crisis.

**Conclusion**

This study was born of my desire to understand how veteran teachers who continue to love their jobs and bring deep value to their students and colleagues manage to avoid the pitfalls of professional malaise when faced with so much challenge and change. Much of the study confirms what researchers already know about job fit, that a balance between job resources and job demands is important. This study ties in research into positive psychology, including thriving and signature strengths.

This study shows that thriving teachers believe the job is the right fit for their disposition, attributes, and skills. These thriving teachers are consistently motivated to improve their skills in terms of pedagogy, content knowledge, and meaningful interaction with students and colleagues. They also report loving what they do, especially working with students. Teachers in this sample say the work brings them joy and satisfies their inner need for growth, variety, and challenge.

The results here point to the possibility of extending not only professional longevity for teachers, but also positive growth and subjective well-being at work. Whereas I specifically avoided any language or metrics around teacher “effectiveness” in characterizing thriving, future research could investigate the extent to which thriving teachers have a positive effect on the academic, social-emotional, or civic learning of their students. Particularly as schools embark on
a year of extended hybrid and distance learning, it is more important than ever to foster and maintain job fit for as many educators as possible.
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Appendix A: Permission to Use Peterson’s Character Strengths Matrix
Wendy Youngblood <wayoungblood@gmail.com>  
Mon, Oct 12, 2:58 PM (13 days ago)  
to seligman  

Dear Dr. Seligman,

I am hoping to secure permission to include Dr. Peterson's "unfinished masterpiece" in my dissertation, entitled "Veteran Teachers WI Thrive Amid the Challenge and Change of the Modern Educational System: Understanding Their Journey."

I came across the matrix while watching a video of your talk at the First Annual Christopher Peterson Memorial. I am hoping you are vested with the authority to grant this permission. I am also hoping this email lands in your inbox during an opportune moment--you are likely the busiest person to whom I've reached out for permission to reprint.

Thank you, and I must say, I have really enjoyed getting to know your work. I read Flourish at a really important time in my life--import to get the messages of book. So for that I also thank you!

Respectfully,

Wendy Youngblood  
Brookfield, CT

Seligman, Martin E P  
Mon, Oct 12, 3:15 PM (13 days ago)  
to me  

ok

Sent from my iPhone
Appendix B: Permission to Use Items from VIA Character Strengths Survey
Hi Wendy,

Thank you for your interest in VIA! We do not allow any of our surveys to be fully reproduced in any publication; however, we do allow researchers to publish 4-5 items measure to illustrate the types of questions asked in the survey. You are welcome to do so, selecting 4-5 items of your choosing, and can find the Signature Strengths attached.

Best,

Sara Rozner, M.A.
Research Applications Coordinator
VIA Institute on Character
Appendix C: Permission to Include the Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT)
Note: Items marked with * are reverse scored. (Su, Tay, & Diener, 2014)

Diener, Edward F  
Mon, Oct 12, 4:58 PM (13 days ago)  

Of course you can get use it, and tell your advisor you have my permission to do so!  
Ed Diener  

Sent from my iPhone  

On Oct 12, 2020, at 1:14 PM, Wendy Youngblood <wayoungblood@gmail.com> wrote:
Appendix D: IRB Permission to Begin Research
Re-appraisal, per enhanced privacy protections for participants, as stipulated by IRB
Appendix E: Email to Prospective Participants
My name is Wendy Youngblood, and I am in the same doctoral cohort as [redacted]. I'm also a high school social studies teacher in [redacted]. I'm doing research on experienced teachers (i.e., who've been in education since the adoption of NCLB) who continue to thrive at work. When I asked [redacted] for the name of a colleague who fit the criteria in which I’m interested, he mentioned you.

I wonder if you’d be interested in helping me with my research. It involves three sit-down interviews, conducted within a two week span of time. I’d be happy to come to you, to minimize any inconvenience on your part.

There is very little qualitative work done on this important topic, and I think hearing your story could get me closer to the big picture I’d like to share through my research.

Please let me know if you'd be interested. If so, I'll send you the official letter of consent that details a bit more about the project.

Thanks, and I look forward to hearing from you!

Wendy Youngblood
Appendix F: Letter of Consent
April 18, 2019

Dear [Name]:

You are invited to participate in a study examining the experience of veteran teachers who continue to operate at high levels of enjoyment, engagement, and holistic performance. This study seeks to understand how and why some experienced teachers thrive in their jobs despite the changes instituted in and around their work lives since the adoption of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and subsequent major federal and state policy initiatives. This study is being conducted by Wendy Youngblood, a teacher at [Shepaug Valley School], and a student in the Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership program at Western Connecticut State University (WCSU), under the supervision of Dr. Susan M. Baum, dissertation committee chair.

The following information is being provided for you to determine if you wish to participate in this study. You are free to decide not to participate in this research or to withdraw at any time.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to engage in a series of three interviews lasting about 90 minutes each, conducted by the researcher. They will be audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the collected information, and all interviews will be transcribed into a written record. You will have the opportunity to review your transcripts for clarity and accuracy. The audio transcripts will be destroyed once you are confident that the written transcript accurately reflects your comments during the interview. All transcripts will be kept locked in the researcher’s home office, and all pertinent research notes will be destroyed after three years. Pseudonyms for individuals and work environments will be used to protect the privacy of all participants.

There are several expected benefits from participating in this study. They are: 1) insight into the experiences of mature teachers who continue to enjoy their work despite the changes to and challenges in the profession; 2) a better understanding of the personal characteristics, mindset, and outlook of thriving experienced teachers, and 3) a better understanding of the environmental factors that support thriving for experienced teachers.

This research project has been reviewed and approved by the WCSU Institutional Review Board. If you have questions concerning your rights during the course of this study, please email the WCSU Assurances Administrator at irb@wcsu.edu and mention Protocol Number (1918-141). This study is valid until (1 year from approval date). If you have any questions about this study, please contact Wendy Youngblood, the student investigator, at [Wendy Youngblood] or via email at youngblood003@connect.wcsu.edu, or contact Dr. Susan Baum at baums@wcsu.edu. A signed copy of this consent form will be given to you for your records.

_________________________________________  ________________________
Print name  Date

_________________________________________
Signature
Appendix G: Interview One Questions
Interview 1 Questions:

1. Tell me about where you grew up.

2. Tell me about your family:
   a. Parents, siblings
   b. Activities that mattered to you

3. Tell me about your first impressions of school, early memories that shaped how you felt about it.

4. What were you like as a student? Do you think that influenced your approach to teaching later on?

5. When did you first think about becoming an educator? Describe that path please.

6. Describe your first teaching job.
   a. What, where, who, etc.
   b. Do you remember how much money you made that first year?

7. How did you feel about the first years?
   a. Curriculum
   b. Colleagues
   c. Environment
   d. Leadership
   e. Students

8. What were some meaningful lessons (for you) early on?

9. Did you feel supported (how)?

10. Were there was in which you did not feel supported?

11. Did you “fit” the school/job? How did you know?

12. Did the rest of your life fit the job? What was going on in the rest of your life during those early 5-10 years?

13. From whom have you learned something important about good teaching? What was that experience about?

14. When you look back on yourself and your practice early on, what do you think you were getting right?

15. What did you struggle with?

16. Did you think you would stay in teaching?
Appendix H: Interview Two Questions
Interview 2 Questions (with probes and follow-ups):

Theme: How participant experiences teaching now, perceptions of day-to-day work
RQs addressed: 1, 2, 3, 4

1. What is your teaching assignment this year? Have you always taught this subject/level?

2. Can you describe a typical day?

3. How much work do you take home?

4. Describe the work you do aside from direct instruction--what other roles do you have at your school?

5. What do you love about your work?
   a. Teaching
   b. People
      i. Socialize with people outside of work?
      ii. Friends at work?
   c. Personal factors
   d. Is this the sort of stuff your friends know about your work? How do you talk about your job?

6. What are new(er) sources of joy or satisfaction?

7. What do you not like about your work?
   a. Teaching
   b. People
   c. Personal factors

8. What feels hard? (only if not answered in #4)
   a. (What do you do when you feel stuck?)
   b. Have you ever wanted to quit? How do you handle a bad year?
   c. How do you handle an ineffective leader?

9. How is teaching different today than when you started?
   a. Is teaching [your level/subject] any different?
   b. Are professional demands different?
   c. Is building culture different?

10. Are there any examples that stand out?

11. What makes those important?

12. How did NCLB affect your teaching practice?
a. One of the tenets of NCLB was accountability. Do you all use that word in professional discussions? Does that idea/practice guide much of what happens in your school?
b. NCLB also called for highly qualified teachers. Is that part of your building’s culture or discussions? How do you know?

13. How does your school use CCSS?

14. In what ways have the CCSS affected your teaching practice?
   a. and your feelings about teaching?

15. How has your school’s evaluation system impacted your teaching? (and your feelings about teaching?)

16. As you look back on your teaching practice, what is a “best moment”?

17. What is a “worst moment”?

18. What does job satisfaction feel like to you?

19. Why do you stay in teaching?
Appendix I: Interview Three Questions
Interview 3 Questions (with probes and follow-ups)

Theme: How participant makes meaning from responses so far
RQs addressed: 1, 2, 3, 4

1. As you look back on your career, what have you learned about teaching, about good teaching?

2. What is the most important part of your job, for YOU?
   a. For kids
   b. For future

3. What qualities does a person have to have to do this job well?

4. What do you now understand about being a good colleague?
   a. What are things a good colleague does?
   b. What do they not do?

5. What have you learned about building leadership, i.e. being an effective leader?
   a. What are some adjectives you’d use to describe a good leader?
   b. Can you give an example of a time you felt supported?
   c. Can you give an example of a time you didn’t feel supported?

6. What do schools and teachers “owe” the community? (reword)
   a. What do grades communicate?
      i. To a child
      ii. To a parent
   b. Do you think parents understand what happens in your class?
   c. Do you think the community understands what happens in your class?
   d. Why do those things matter?

7. If you could make changes in your building, what would you suggest?

8. If you could make changes in public education, what would you suggest? Why?

9. What do you want to be doing in 10 years?

10. How does teaching fit in relation to other parts of your life?

11. Thinking about all you’ve shared so far, why do you stay in teaching?
Appendix J: Alignment Matrix Between Research Questions and Interviews 1, 2, & 3
Alignment Matrix: Research Question and Instrumentation

Questions from **Interview One in red; Interview Two in blue; Interview Three in pink**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Sample Questions from Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Since the adoption of NCLB, to what degree do thriving veteran teachers believe their profession has changed? | - Describe your first teaching job—what, where, who, etc.  
- What are new(er) sources of joy or satisfaction for you (connected to work)?  
- How is teaching today different than when you started?  
- Is teaching [your level/subject] different now?  
- Are professional demands different?  
- What do you think schools and teachers “owe” the community?  
- Do you think parents understand what happens in your class?  
- Do you think the community understands what happens in your class?  
- If you could make changes in public education, what would you suggest? |
| a. How do thriving veteran teachers perceive the changes in their professional culture in the past 18 years? | - How did you feel about those first years (e.g., in terms of curriculum, colleagues, environment, leadership, students)?  
- Describe the work you do aside from direct instruction—what other roles do you have at your school?  
- What do you not love about your work?  
- How is teaching today different than when you started?  
- Is building culture different now?  
- As you look back on your career, what have you learned about good teaching?  
- If you could make changes in public education, what would you suggest? Why? |
| b. How do thriving veteran teachers perceive changes in their personal practice in the past 18 years? | - When you look back on yourself and your personal practice early on, what do you think you were getting right?  
- What did you struggle with?  
- Describe the work you do aside from direct instruction—what other roles do you have at your school?  
- How is teaching today different than when you started?  
- Are there any examples (of change) that stand out? What makes those important?  
- How did NCLB affect your teaching practice?  
- In what ways has CCSS affected your teaching practice?  
- How has your school’s evaluation system impacted your teaching?  
- As you look back on your career, what have you learned about good teaching? |
2. What are the professional factors that support thriving for veteran educators?

- Do you think parents/community understand what happens in your classroom?
  Why do those things [outsiders understanding] matter?
- From whom have you learned something important about good teaching?
- How do you handle an ineffective leader?
- What do you understand now about being a good colleague?
- What have you learned about building leadership, i.e. being an effective leader?
- If you could make changes in your building, what would you suggest? Why?

3. What are the personal attributes that support thriving for veteran educators?

- Did you think you would stay in teaching?
- What do you love about your work?
- What do you do when you feel stuck?
- What qualities does a person have to have to do this job well?
- How does teaching fit in relation to other parts of your life?

4. How do thriving veteran teachers remain deeply engaged and sustain a positive mindset amid ongoing changes and challenges in their profession?

- When did you first think about becoming an educator? Describe that path please.
- What do you love about your work?
- What feels hard at/about work?
- What does job satisfaction feel like to you?
- What is the most important part of your job, for YOU?
- What would you like to be doing in 10 years?
- Thinking about what you’ve shared so far, why do you stay in teaching?
Appendix K: Reflexive Journal Excerpt
31 August 2019
Listened to Murph’s interview in the car en route to second interview. Really felt like a
collection--I was interested in what he had to say. That’s another thing about these folks,
they’re all personable. The first interviews are a bit stiff, understandably. I dive right in to
people’s lives. By the time the second interview happens, they’re interested and open. Murph
was deeply reflective. I noticed 3 or 4 times I gave him lots of wait time...probably 25-30
seconds as he thought about the questions and how to respond. It was a cool moment for me
as a researcher and as a person. Want to bring that practice more deliberately into teaching. I’m
such an “offerer” of choice to people--I have viewed that prompting as giving helpful context, but
maybe in fact it does the opposite--shuts down organic (authentic?) thought.

Took maybe 20 minutes to go through the first 2 questions--I was worried the interview would
last a really long time and he’d find it taxing. In the end though it was only 75 minutes. Maybe
80. And we’ll meet again next Saturday. I really enjoyed talking to him. His school and admin
sound amazing. It was the most powerful (broad, encompassing) and positive expression of
respect for admin I’ve yet heard.

26 August 2019
Saw Gloria today. I was right in my hunch: the 3rd interview only took us 55 minutes, even with
chatting in the beginning. And I found I was less surprised/struck by her answers...they were
ones she’d either expressed in previous interviews, or they reflected what others had said.
Starting to feel confident I’m getting to saturation.

Also, last night and this morning, I was reading Seligman’s *Flourishing*. I was subconsciously
mapping her answers onto his ideas of well-being theory. I think it’s a good fit.
She sounds like such a wonderful teacher and employee (she does so much for which she is
not compensated!!)
Appendix L: Date & Duration of Interviews with Transcription Method and Duration
## Interview Dates, Duration with Transcription Method and Duration

<table>
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<th>Interview length in minutes</th>
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<td>Elena</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6/29/19</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7/1/19</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7/3/19</td>
<td>58</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7/8/19</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7/11/19</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>2 addendum</td>
<td>7/11/19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7/30/19</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Rev.com</td>
<td>1.5 (paid for transcript)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7/12/19</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
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<td>7/26/19</td>
<td>90</td>
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<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8/24/19</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7/25/19</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7/29/19</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8/20/19</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murph</td>
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<td>8/25/19</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Murph</td>
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<td>8/31/19</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murph</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9/7/19</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7/30/19</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Rev.com</td>
<td>10.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8/13/19</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Rev.com</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8/25/19</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Rev.com</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1/10/20</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1/18/20</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1/25/20</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Otter.com</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix M: Sample of Transcript Showing Talk to Listening Ratio
Ruth  Interview 1, 4/18/19

You touched briefly on you as a student can you tell me what you remember about like your

processes, or like do you remember looking forward to school? not at all. I think it changed for

me. As I got older and had a little bit more control of my environment, I think it got better for me.

And again it so much really dependent on my relationship with the teachers, you know I look at

my kids now in my class and I teach 3rd grade. You know there are some kids in my class that

are happy no matter what. They're happy to be there. They love doing work, they love...and then

there are others where you really have to win them over, right? And I was definitely a

win-me-over kind of learner, you know like. I was a little awkward socially. Like just didn't really

feel comfortable in my skin, I don't think. I wasn't one of those confident kids in a classroom.

Not confident in school

what age were you thinking about?

I'm thinking elementary, and then it definitely got worse in middle school. Middle school is like

the armpit of childhood, I think in my opinion. I mean some people love it and I am so thankful

for teachers who really loved my middle school kids. But it was a miserable experience for me.

just did not like it at all. Again, balancing the social piece I think for myself with... and not

enjoying the academic piece, and some awkward weird things going on in the family. And again

there were certain people that were wonderful really that I really connected to, but

but so did you like gym class did you like art or music?
Appendix N: Reviewing Transcripts for Accuracy
you know, you share anecdotes, stuff with them, why we you know, so like, they hear the good, and they hear the bad. So they know the both and, you know, they, they get the, they get the gist of you know, you know, I had this kid today who’s said this thing was so amazing or did this thing and, and it was incredible. And I had this kid today that made me want to leave. And so, you know, they hear little anecdotal stories, and they they kind of get it, but nobody gets it like teachers. And I think one of the things that worries me right now is like, I have teachers that I started with at high school, and I don’t know, there’s something about your first job, your first school, we started with, you know, the first class and my teachers, then you went through, went through the best portfolio back in the day, and that was nightmarish, and fun. That it’s like, you know, they’re like, there, were buddies in the trenches, and they just stay stay no matter what different schools you go into. And there were about six of us who started then and two, who I thought would, you know, who were like, my hero, colleagues, like two of them had to one left for a few years, couldn’t anymore. It wasn’t like, just, you know, I want to take some time now with a family. She’s like that, it’s killing me, I had to leave. And another one switch careers. Totally. The one who left for a few years is now trying to come back and still having second thoughts. Like, I would love to have a point six or point five, that would be a dream for me, right? And

Purple text is my correction based on the audio recording of the interview. This technique was used for each interview that I did not transcribe by hand, ensuring accuracy in transcript data.
Appendix O: First-cycle coding
Maybe you can do it on talk-to-text (ha ha)
In the long run, I know it's something that will be good for parents and for me. For us to be on time crunch and constant communication with colleagues is a MUST. On the same page, but it's hard you know. It's hard to find the time, and I'd much rather go for a walk. You know planning for units, laying out the units, there's just not enough time to do that at school, you know, to figure out where you're going to go. So I do that a lot on Sunday afternoon, sometime Sunday mornings early, and just lay things out. So I spend probably 4 or 5 hours on a weekend you know, a few hours during the week, and during those times when I have to correct papers or a particular assignment, even more. That's what I love about summer is not doing all that take home work.

aren't there like in terms of personnel or interactions with admin is that, would you say, positive negative generally? Has there been any large-scale change over your career?

For me I've gotten along really well with all my administrators. We have had great administrators, I would say maybe with the exception of one or two, way early on. But the administrators that I have now are fantastic. I think their job is more overwhelming than I can even imagine, it's very difficult because they're attending PPT's, they're managing a school the size of ours, managing the personalities, managing simple things like substitutes, para substitutes and then behaviors. We've got a lot of behavior issues in our school. You'd think [this district] wouldn't have such extreme behaviors, but we do have some really pretty difficult kids and managing those kids and team meetings. I get along really well with my administrators. I will go to them only when I really feel like I need support. I'll always try to figure out the problems that come up myself or with my colleagues. But when I really need them and I voice my opinion or my help my need for help, they're right there and will brainstorm with me.

I think the teacher evaluation piece has put more pressure on them and it changed a little bit the relationship between a teacher and an evaluator.

what makes you think that?
Well, because they're constantly ranking us. When they're coming in with their iPad and, well I've not had one formal observation yet [this year]. I think my administrators are too busy and too overwhelmed at the moment, but we're supposed to be having three informal observations and they've got their iPad, and they're taking their notes and I just think... I used to get a lot more positive feedback with a quick walk-through from an administrator so, for example, when I first started, I would get little notes... [phone call interrupts... hear message from the next room]. It used to be so much more informal. My administrator would walk in you know mingle with kids, watch what I'm doing, not have to be data-cognizant you know like typing on the iPad, and then scoring and you know. But I used to get a note: "great lesson. Loved your idea for that. Did you share it with your colleagues?" or whatever, "I loved it." There seemed to be a lot more positive feedback, immediate feedback, one to one, eyeball-to-eyeball. Not formal, informal.
Appendix P: Research Question One, Themes and Subthemes Generated from

First- and Second-Cycle Coding
How have changes since the adoption of NCLB impacted teaching for thriving veteran teachers?

A. Changes in professional culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased emphasis on student safety</td>
<td>More safety measures</td>
<td>Physical safety</td>
<td>Locked door</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Psychological safety</td>
<td>Emotional safe space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustrations</td>
<td>Standards-based curriculum</td>
<td>Teachers responsible for student</td>
<td>Uniformity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>results (perception)</td>
<td>Leading to less onus on students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From adoption of NCLB</td>
<td>Not much change</td>
<td></td>
<td>Started teaching at same time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Huge change: Prescribed teaching,</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pressure to perform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>more pressure</td>
<td></td>
<td>Good guide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From adoption of CCSS</td>
<td>Use as framework (positive overall)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caused ripple effect (mixed feelings)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased demands on teachers and schools</td>
<td></td>
<td>Uniformity of expectations (not good for kids)</td>
<td>All kids to learn on same schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Content is even fuller</td>
<td>Can’t get to everything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with data</td>
<td>Widespread change</td>
<td></td>
<td>Massive change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using experience to apply the reform</td>
<td>Ambivalence</td>
<td></td>
<td>On the fence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>measures</td>
<td>Appreciating the benefits</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limiting the negative impacts on</td>
<td></td>
<td>Coherence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students</td>
<td></td>
<td>Poor rollout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Can limit creativity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B. Changes in personal practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developed systems to manage workload</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Proactive with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Paperwork</td>
<td>Make sense to you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time</td>
<td></td>
<td>Find work time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjust to work within new requirements</td>
<td>Reflecting on pedagogical practice</td>
<td>Vigilance needed to keep learning relevant, promote student engagement</td>
<td>Relevance to student’s lives is priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Safeguard student learning</td>
<td>Close the door when needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Learning in the classroom</td>
<td>No more take-home projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflecting on increased testing</td>
<td>Testing is not a problem</td>
<td>Data helps spot problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Testing is a problem (too much)</td>
<td>Time crunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased identification (ID) of students with special needs</td>
<td>Concerned about increase in ID</td>
<td>Pressure on kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>See more ID as progress</td>
<td>More diagnosed with anxiety, behavior issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Application of independent learning</td>
<td>In educational research</td>
<td>Students get services they need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In content area</td>
<td>Social benefits to typically developing children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Introspection and growth</td>
<td>Hattie Caulkins Marzano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Summer study in advanced math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exploring social justice through literature</td>
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Appendix Q: Research Question Two, Themes and Subthemes Generated from First- and Second-Cycle Coding
What are the professional factors that support thriving over time for veteran teachers?

<table>
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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feel supported by building</td>
<td>Professionally</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>They give me space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leadership</td>
<td>Personally</td>
<td>Trust &amp; respect</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel supported by colleagues</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td>Had my back when my kids were sick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborators</td>
<td>Showed me the ropes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Build units together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>We make each other laugh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix R: Research Question Three, Themes and Subthemes Generated from
First- and Second-Cycle Coding
**What are the personal attributes that support thriving over time for veteran teachers?**

<table>
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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy relating to people with purpose and understanding</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice self-care</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Listening, Patience</td>
<td>Listening, Patience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are intrinsically motivated</td>
<td>Enjoy variety</td>
<td>Physical, Spiritual, Apply knowledge of self for care</td>
<td>Exercise, Prayer, Bible, Time with loved ones, Hate boredom, Need to mix up routine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feel many internal needs are met</td>
<td>Desire to have clear purpose, Desire to be challenged</td>
<td>Know my why, Need a challenge, Want to be busy, Where does the time go?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are flexible</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Flexibility = essential</td>
<td>Have to be able to change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix S: Research Question Four, Themes and Subthemes Generated from First- and Second-Cycle Coding
What factors help thriving veteran teachers remain deeply engaged and sustain a positive mindset, amid the challenges and changes in education in the past 18 years?

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doing something of</td>
<td>Benefit to students</td>
<td>Helping students develop skills for life</td>
<td>Persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>value</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching students to solve problems</td>
<td>Problems as opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching students interpersonal skills</td>
<td>Working out conflicts together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benefits to society</td>
<td>Helping students function independently in</td>
<td>Lower tax burden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>society</td>
<td>Engaged citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benefits to self</td>
<td>Growth through learning</td>
<td>Aware of new ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intellectual growth through content taught</td>
<td>Better at math now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Making me a better teacher</td>
<td>Prioritize student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A good match</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Making me a better person</td>
<td>Helping others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pairs well with who I am</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Always known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Aligns with my lifestyle</td>
<td>Can be with family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Love the job, the kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Eager to see students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The job brings</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>Learn from mentors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>happiness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Time with students, summer school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Find the joy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Joy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix T: Analytic Memo Sample
Fluid nature of curric: p. 7
Super quote on it being a set of skills for real world
"It's kind of a false promise be... the curric is the world"

Relationships: cd name 60% of kids from S-Tg roster 2016 s g
"My strength in some ways is the relationship I have w/the kids"
Mayor Angala quote: how I make them feel (12)
Conflict w/ kids. Been in的情况: in class 2 years 14

Profile curve ball: moved from MS to HS (like a demotion)
Years 6-10... calve burned out but didn't (like DJ) like JT
A buffer against burnout
Dangers of elem. 12
"Major problem this year. fit
"...fitted."
"I found a niche there, and it's like the next tier."

Current Tg > last 10 yrs: AMAZING
respected at work
doing st valuable w/kids
"This is where I feel like I was meant to be Tg"

Relevance:
1) Throughout my career, I've developed an allergy to
at. I can't stand behind the scenes. When A
to leave my room, how are they going to use it?
"I can't fake it"
2) "Rebel": prepare them for career readiness more
than college readiness (earlier) is: the coursework.
AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT is paramount.

"There's a thread here..."
1) Which is like, I need a
justification. The time is too precious: my time, my
college's time, my student's time, for us to be chasing
the wrong rat."

Almost 4: I do stems from "how can I get Tim
or Stacia, Sheila to be excited about the lifelong
learning process?"

Those situations that frustrate me in a nutshell:
When we don't have clarity on our why I how

THRIVING: 10 to use
To me is not "let's get
through this horrible system
& make the best we can."
I think that's getting through:
Thriving is alignment be-
tween what I believe is im-
portant & what I know is going to
value you and the process
pursue together.
"Test prep, reg. Texts:
35 hoops that can
impede/impair this
alignment.

St. of Value

Fit
Appendix U: First-Cycle Coding Boards
Appendix V: Second-Cycle Coding Boards (Axial Codes)
Appendix W: Post-Findings, Concept Mapping Process, Iteration One
Concept map generated based on themes extrapolated from data analysis. I deemed this iteration incomplete, because it lacked integration of the intrinsic motivation construct.
Appendix X: Post-Findings, Concept Mapping Process, Iteration Two
Concept pyramid showing elements of self-actualization and intrinsic motivation. Bottom row of pyramid (5 lighter blue triangles) are beliefs held by thriving teachers. They contribute to intrinsic motivation and are part of the impetus of self-actualization. The three darker triangles in the top tiers of the pyramid show the channels of self-actualization.
Appendix Y: Research Question One Findings by Theme and Subtheme

Connected to Seligman’s Signature Strengths (2011)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question One A</th>
<th>Themes &amp; subthemes</th>
<th>Virtue Clusters</th>
<th>Signature Strengths (within Virtue Clusters)</th>
<th>Data sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do thriving veteran teachers perceive the changes to their professional culture in the past 18 years?</td>
<td>Increased emphasis on student safety</td>
<td>Wisdom &amp; knowledge</td>
<td>Social intelligence/personal intelligence/emotional intelligence Perspective</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Valor &amp; bravery Integrity/genuineness/honesty</td>
<td>Ru, Ro, Mi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humanity &amp; love</td>
<td>Kindness &amp; generosity</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Citizenship/duty/teamwork/loyalty</td>
<td>Ba, Va, Ro, Ele, Ru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Self-control Humility &amp; modesty</td>
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<td>Appreciation of beauty &amp; excellence Hope/optimism/future-mindedness</td>
<td>Mu, Eli</td>
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Ad = Adam; Ba = Barbara; Ele = Elena; Eli = Elijah; Gl = Gloria; Mi = Michelle; Mu = Murph; Ro = Rosa; Ru = Ruth; Va = Val
### Research Question One B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes &amp; subthemes</th>
<th>Virtue Clusters</th>
<th>Signature Strengths (within Virtue Clusters)</th>
<th>Data sources</th>
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</table>
| How do experienced thriving teachers perceive the changes in their practice in the past 18 years? | Develop systems to manage the workload as the profession changes  
- Communication  
- Organization | Wisdom & knowledge | Judgment/critical thinking/open-mindedness  
Social intelligence/personal intelligence/emotional intelligence  
Perspective | All |
|  | Courage | Valor & bravery  
Perseverance/industry/diligence  
Integrity/genuineness/honesty | Ro, Mi, Ru, Ba, Gl |
|  | Justice | Citizenship/duty/teamwork/loyalty | Ba, Ru |
|  | Temperance | Prudence/discretion/caution  
Self-control | All |
|  | Adjusted to work within new requirements (NCLB, ESSA, IDEA, etc.)  
- Pedagogical practice  
- More use of data  
- Standardized curricular guidelines  
- Testing  
- Increased identification of students with special needs  
- Role of personal learning | Wisdom & knowledge | Curiosity/interest in the world  
Love of learning  
Judgment/critical thinking/open-mindedness  
Ingenuity/originality/practical intelligence/street smarts | All |
|  | Courage | Perseverance/industry/diligence  
Integrity/genuineness/honesty | Gl, Ru, Ba, Ad |
|  | Justice | Citizenship/duty/teamwork/loyalty  
Fairness & equity | All |
|  | Temperance | Self-control  
Humility & modesty | All |
|  | Transcendence | Appreciation of beauty & excellence | Eli, Ba, Ru, Ele, Va, Mu |
|  |  | Hope/optimism/future-mindedness | Ad, Mi |

Ad = Adam; Ba = Barbara; Ele = Elena; Eli = Elijah; Gl = Gloria; Mi = Michelle; Mu = Murph; Ro = Rosa; Ru = Ruth; Va = Val
Appendix Z: Findings for Research Question Two by Theme and Subtheme

Connected to Seligman’s Signature Strengths (2011)
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<thead>
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<th>Research Question Two</th>
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<td>Believe good leaders support them</td>
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<td>Curiosity/interest in the world</td>
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Appendix AA: Findings for Research Question Three by Theme and Subtheme

Connected to Seligman’s Signature Strengths (2011)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question Three</th>
<th>Themes &amp; subthemes</th>
<th>Virtue Clusters</th>
<th>Signature Strengths (within Virtue Clusters)</th>
<th>Data sources</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| What are the personal attributes that support thriving for veteran teachers? | Enjoy relating to people with purpose and understanding  
  - Empathy  
  - Listening  
  - Patience | Wisdom & knowledge | Social intelligence/personal intelligence/emotional intelligence Perspective | All  
  Ba, Eli, Ad, Ru |
|  | | Courage | Integrity/genuineness/honesty | All |
|  | | Humanity & love | Loving and allowing oneself to be loved  
  Kindness & generosity | Ba, Ele, Mi, Va, Ro  
  All |
|  | | Justice | Citizenship/duty/teamwork/loyalty  
  Fairness & equity | All  
  All |
|  | | Temperance | Self-control  
  Humility & modesty | All  
  All |
|  | | Transcendence | Hope/optimism/future-mindedness  
  Sense of purpose/faith  
  Playfulness & humor  
  Zest/passion/enthusiasm  
  Appreciation of beauty & excellence  
  Gratitude  
  Hope/optimism/future-mindedness  
  Sense of purpose/faith | All  
  All  
  All  
  Ru, Gl  
  Ad, Eli, Mi  
  Ru, Ad, Ele, Ba, Gl, Va  
  All  
  Ru, Ro, Va |
| Maintain habits of self-care  
  - Physical  
  - Spiritual  
  - Other personal needs | Wisdom & knowledge | Social intelligence/personal intelligence/emotional intelligence | All |
|  | Humanity & love | Loving and allowing oneself to be loved | Ru, Gl |
|  | Temperance | Self-control  
  Prudence/discretion/caution | Ru, Ro  
  Ele |
|  | Transcendence | Appreciation of beauty & excellence | Ad, Eli, Mi |
|  | | Gratitude | Ru, Ad, Ele, Ba, Gl, Va |
|  | | Hope/optimism/future-mindedness  
  Sense of purpose/faith | Ru, Ro, Va |
|  | Are intrinsically motivated | Wisdom & knowledge | Playfulness & humor  
  Curiosity/interest in the world  
  Love of learning | All  
  All  
  All |
<p>|  | | Courage | Perseverance/industry/diligence | All |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Believe the job satisfies internal needs</strong></th>
<th><strong>Wisdom &amp; knowledge</strong></th>
<th><strong>Courage</strong></th>
<th><strong>Temperance</strong></th>
<th><strong>Transcendence</strong></th>
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<td>• Attracted to the variety in their work</td>
<td>Integrity/genuineness/honesty</td>
<td>Valor &amp; bravery</td>
<td>Self-control</td>
<td>Appreciation of beauty &amp; excellence</td>
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<td>• Dislike being bored</td>
<td>Kindness &amp; generosity</td>
<td>Perseverance/industry/diligence</td>
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311
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Ad = Adam; Ba = Barbara; Ele = Elena; Eli = Elijah; Gl = Gloria; Mi = Michelle; Mu = Murph; Ro = Rosa; Ru = Ruth; Va = Val
Appendix BB: Findings for Research Question Four by Theme and Subtheme

Connected to Seligman’s Signature Strengths (2011)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Themes &amp; subthemes</th>
<th>Virtue Clusters</th>
<th>Signature Strengths (within Virtue Clusters)</th>
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<td>See deep value in work</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- For students, society, and self</td>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Perseverance/industry/diligence, Integrity/genuineness/honesty, Loving and allowing oneself to be loved</td>
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<td>Humanity &amp; love</td>
<td>Citizenship/duty/teamwork/loyalty, Leadership</td>
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<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>Appreciation of beauty &amp; excellence, Gratitude, Hope/optimism/future-mindedness, Sense of purpose/faith</td>
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<td>Believe the job is the “right fit”</td>
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<td>Love what they do; Job brings happiness</td>
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Department of Education and Educational Psychology
Dissertation Registration Form

Student: Wendy A. Youngblood           Date: 12/1/20

Dissertation Title: Veteran Teachers Who Thrive Amid the Challenge and Change of the Modern Education System: Understanding Their Journey

Dissertation Committee Members: See attached Dissertation Approval Page

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