

OPTIMAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE BUILDING OF A CONCEPTUAL
FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTICE: THREE CASE STUDIES OF VETERAN
TEACHERS

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I dedicate this dissertation to the loving memory of my father, Walter Danilchick, and my sister, Sharon Gifford. Dad, you worked tirelessly and sacrificed much so that I could have opportunities for a better life. Sharon (my wife's sister), you had your promising life cut short due to COVID-19. You believed in me, and you continue to inspire me with your example and love. I miss you dearly.

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ABSTRACT

OPTIMAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE BUILDING OF A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTICE: CASE STUDIES OF VETERAN TEACHERS

Andrew Danilchick

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Professional learning and growth for teachers is essential for effective teaching and the learning of students. Teachers receive formalized professional learning at the beginning of their careers through structures such as teacher education and induction programs. Beyond the novice years, professional growth opportunities for teachers vary and can be lacking in stimulation and value towards impacting practice. Given the negative impact of neoliberal forces and the current state of K-12 education in this post-pandemic era with teachers, students, and systems struggling, professional learning and support for teachers is especially vital. Teachers leaving and retiring are increasing, and the new teacher pool is extremely shallow. Understanding the support and growth opportunities that teachers need can help mitigate this crisis. While pre-service and novice teachers are extensively researched, much less is known about the experience of veteran teachers.

This qualitative case study examines the careers of three veteran teachers, their professional experiences and how they have developed their conceptual frameworks for practice. This dissertation sheds light on what happens when teachers have been intentional about managing their own growth and learning with the assistance of mentors and a network of support despite many challenges and difficulties to overcome.

Informed by case study and narrative research methodologies, this study examines how the three veteran teachers are shaped by the supports and challenges they experience. Their stories and the case study research provide insight on ways that teachers can optimally develop.

The first major finding of this study highlights the importance of mentorship throughout the teachers' careers, including having mentors as novices, finding "unofficial" mentors through the years, and benefitting from being a mentor to colleagues. The second main finding of this study shows the how collaborative networks of support are protective factors that foster teacher development. All three teachers intentionally sought out and even created spaces where they can learn with others. The third main finding looks at how reflective practices enhances the learning and development of the three teachers, nourishing both on individual and group levels, offering a range of benefits and positive outcomes. Implications of these findings are explored for how K-12 and higher education systems can more optimally support teacher growth across their careers and how conditions can be created to encourage teachers to be more agentic and intentional in leading their professional learning journeys. Future directions for research on teacher conceptual frameworks for practice building and optimal development are imagined.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Teaching involves a search for meaning in the world. Teaching is a life project, a calling, a vocation that is an organizing center of all other activities. Teaching is past and future as well as present, it is background as well as foreground, it is depth as well as surface. Teaching is pain and humor, joy and anger, dreariness and epiphany. Teaching is world building, it is architecture and design, it is purpose and moral enterprise. Teaching is a way of being in the world that breaks through the boundaries of the traditional job and in the process redefines all life and teaching itself.

--William Ayers (1989)

Nancy Fichtman Dana and Diane Yendol-Hoppey (2009) begin their often-cited book on reflective classroom research with this quote from Bill Ayers to illustrate “the enormous complexities, paradoxes, and tensions that exist in the simple act of teaching” (p.1). Those who teach can understand the continual complexities and dilemmas that are ever-present, embracing the difficulty and challenge of setting the conditions for the optimal learning of children. The journey towards expertise in teaching is long, non-linear, and as Ayers states, “a life project.” Given the complexities of teaching and learning, how do teachers navigate their own learning and development? Are there certain practices that support the optimal development of teachers? How can colleagues, K-12 school systems, communities, and graduate schools of education support such growth? What are the obstacles to professional growth?

Statement of the Problem

Challenges to Teacher Practice and Development

Many prevailing forces and conditions, however, run counter to the message of teaching as complex and transformative. Current neoliberal hegemonies, with a parochial focus on standardized testing, scripted curriculum, and accountability have de-professionalized teaching

(Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Ball, 2016; Ross, 2020). Spooner and McNinch (2018), critiquing “managerialism” in higher education, argue that we live in neoliberal age where we are “increasingly governed by and through numbers, incentives, de-incentives and competitive benchmarking” (p.xxiv). Neoliberalism is the most recent evolutionary form of capitalism (Ross, 2020) and its key principle is that competition is the defining characteristic of human relations (Monbiot, 2016). Hursh (2016) operationalizes a neoliberal concept of new public management which “shifts the focus from inputs and processes, including funding and standards, to output and performance, to be achieved efficiently through standardized exams and other quantifiable measures” (p.4).

Hursh further details the consequences of neoliberalism in public education by arguing that high stakes testing encouraged narrowing of the curriculum with a deemphasis on non-tested content: “Education is reduced to what is known, eliminating what is unknown but crucial to explore” (p.5-6). As a result, subjects like social studies, science, art, physical education, and dance are reduced in time or eliminated outright. With de-professionalization, standardization, and the narrowing of the curriculum, neoliberalism in education strives, through its policies, programs, and practices, to shift values away from complexity, human connection and relationship building, and critical, creative thinking towards productivity, human capital, efficiency, rigor, and performance. Indeed, neoliberalism’s reach has even extended to the youngest learners as seen in Bradbury’s (2019) article, “Making Little Neo-Liberals.” She describes, “the ‘schoolification’ and concomitant datafication of the early years, where mathematics and literacy have increased prominence in a system which values what is measured, operate at times in tension with a wider model of what constitutes a ‘good learner’” (p. 317). For

the youngest learners, free play, choice, and social learning are replaced with replications of the learning environments of older students with constant external measurements.

Hursh's (2016) critique of neoliberalism, by outlining its reductionist goals, also shows what can be lost in terms of creativity and possibility. This has implications for the role of the teacher. Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe how "these changes de-emphasized the strength of local contexts, local knowledge, and the roles of teachers as decision makers and change agents" (p. 6). Indeed, during the past few decades, teachers have been largely absent from national discussions of educational change and reform, and decision-making regarding teachers occurs outside of the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2006; Zhang, Bowers et al., 2020). As a result, teachers become less centralized agents of their teaching and curriculum and less in control of their own professional growth and learning.

Furthermore, many teacher education programs, subject to neoliberal influences, mass produce teachers without a focus on critical thinking, reflection, or the complexity of teaching (Bartolome, 2004; Paine 2019). Paine (2019) argues that "the discourse of teacher education has shifted and contributed to a narrowed imagination of what matters in teaching and teacher preparation" (p. 685). Even in programs that are committed to reflection and critical inquiry, the conservative (this term is not meant politically) nature of the school as workplace often tends to work against preservice teachers adopting the program stance. While schools can work against novice teachers' short pre-service experience with inquiry, reflection, or action research, the pressure from current neo-liberal trends is unrelenting. Bartolome (2004) further describes the consequences of teachers uncritically accepting the status quo as normal. "It also leads educators down an assimilationist path to learning and teaching, rather than a culturally responsive, integrative, and transformative one, and perpetuates deficit-based views of low-SES, non-White,

and linguistic-minority students” (p.100). This critique raises questions as to how teacher education can more powerfully shape the critical awareness and political and ideological clarity of pre-service teachers towards agency and away from assimilation. Zeichner (2018) describes the current moment as the “struggle for the soul of teacher education.” Paine (2019) argues that instead of being marginalized by external agents, the voices of teacher educators should be central voices in the dialogue of teacher education practices, programs, and reform.

Once novice teachers enter schools, they often experience “woefully inadequate” professional development that is “done” to them in a top-down manner with content usually consisting of national and state mandates on standards and testing (Borko, 2004; Zeggelaar, 2018). Also, schools are typically not structured for reflection, collaboration, authentic and responsive professional development, and action research (Ross, 2020). Berliner (1988, 2004) claims that most teachers move from novice to advanced beginner, to competence and rarely go beyond. Few teachers move into proficient and even fewer move into what he describes as “expert”. As teachers exit the novice teacher stage and achieve competence, they can often remain at competence and stop their professional growth (Berliner, 2004). All these forces create a serious problem; for the most part, teachers are not developing optimally.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, existing problems of teacher de-professionalization, burnout, demoralization, and retention intensified. A study of elementary teacher well-being and support measures amid COVID (Chan et al., 2021) showed most participants felt emotionally exhausted and experienced high levels of stress. Indeed, the intensified stress and responsibilities of teachers (Allen et al., 2020) have contributed to many negative outcomes such as decreased well-being, reduced professional functioning (Bottani et al., 2019), and increased teacher attrition rates (Allen et al., 2020). Without improved working conditions that include greater

support for teachers, the impact of COVID and the new landscape of K-12 is likely to substantially increase teacher attrition rates (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021).

Stress, anxiety, burnout, and depression for teachers are acute problems in K-12 education (Agyapong et al., 2022). Teachers were 40% more likely to report anxiety symptoms than healthcare workers, 20% more likely than office workers and 30% more likely than workers in other occupations (Kush et al., 2022). Burnout and other negative outcomes can follow high levels of stress and anxiety. Various measures depict the problem of teacher burnout. Almost half of K-12 teachers feel burned out at work “very often” (Marken & Agrawal, 2022). 67% of educators considered burnout to be a “very serious” issue in 2022 (Jotkoff, 2022). Teachers in K-12 grades are the most burnt-out profession in the U.S. with the burnout rate of K-12 teachers being 14% higher than in other industries (Marken & Agrawal, 2022).

These factors are influencing teacher retention and teachers leaving the profession. 44% of public schools posted teaching vacancies in early 2022 with over half of open positions due to resignations (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are more than 500,000 fewer educators in the American public school systems post-pandemic (Jotkoff, 2022). 55% of teachers reported plans to leave the education field sooner than planned (Jotkoff, 2022). These teacher issues are impacting students. Madigan & Kim (2021), in their review of 14 studies involving 5,311 teachers and 50,616 of their students, found that teacher burnout is associated with worse academic achievement and lower quality student motivation. Indeed, the current landscape of education for teachers seem bleak with many in survival mode, struggling to remain in the profession.

Story of the Question

I have been thinking about optimal development for a long time. As a K-12 student, I had a deep curiosity to learn and a strong drive to achieve. I read voraciously and always wanted to do well in school. I also dedicated myself to being a better athlete and musician. It wasn't enough for me to "do OK" with something. I had to do my best and strive to be the best. I enjoyed getting better at things.

I took that work ethic and drive to succeed to college. As a first-generation college student and second-generation immigrant, I struggled to adjust academically, but benefitted from many supportive mentors. During the summer after my 1st year, I taught 8th grade English in a summer program at my former high school. I had no training or support, but somehow it worked out and I was hooked on teaching. I was on a mission to be the best teacher I could be and couldn't wait to get my own classroom after graduation. I took as many education classes as I could. I found a teacher at West Philadelphia High School who let me teach his students whenever I could escape campus. I got certified as a social studies teacher and student taught in a middle school classroom.

Two mentors encouraged me to get grant funding for a violence prevention curriculum that I designed in my *Introduction to Education* class. This led to my starting and running *Education Through Sports: A Violence Prevention* program in Jersey City where I grew up. Over 3 summers, the program served over 300 students and had over 25 staff with a sizable budget and much in-kind support from local partners. As a novice teacher, I focused on self-improvement and my students' optimal development. With the violence prevention program, I expanded my optimal development lens to the community and systems level.

I loved being an English and social studies teacher for 15 years. My passion for teaching and connecting with students, coupled with my intuition and emotional intelligence, helped me have some level of initial success and compensate for my less-developed teaching skills. I sought out other teachers to observe or talk to. I felt support from my Rockefeller Brothers Fund Fellowship peers and mentors. I engaged in many reflective practices. Leading professional developments in areas such as conflict resolution and team building, enhanced my skills and professional identity.

My development as a teacher had its peaks and valleys and I feel like I learned the most from the failures and challenges. When I reached year nine or ten, I began to feel more like a beginning expert, that I could, in a coherent and steady way, fully implement what I could imagine and know and respond to where all my students were as learners. I hadn't investigated optimal development yet, but, looking back, my goal as a teacher was to set conditions for the optimal development of all my students. I taught less at students and shifted to facilitating learning practices and experiences. Students got to pursue their interests, make choices, and collaborated to support their own learning. I didn't yet know about flow theory, but looking back, I think I was trying to support individual and shared flow states for my students and myself.

As part of professional development requirements for veteran teachers, I decided to study a few core practices: literacy circles, circle discussion, reader's workshop, and writing workshop. I video recorded several classes and had other educators lead focus groups. I wrote a conceptual framework (not knowing the term yet, I used influences) describing how Paulo Freire, John Dewey, Jerome Bruner, and Lev Vygotsky shaped my practice. I was doing practitioner inquiry or action research without terms or training for it. My central question was, "how are students experiencing each structure and how can it be improved?" This practitioner research or inquiry,

undertaken in a very messy way, energized my teaching and helped me “level-up” my practices. I became even more intentional and reflective.

I left teaching in 2008. In 2011, I took Sharon Ravnich’s *Qualitative Modes of Inquiry* class. I learned terms like action research and practitioner research and reexamined my own previous experiences with action research and reflective practices. After learning about how scholars often wrote a conceptual framework for research to contextualize their study, I coined the phrase “conceptual framework for practice”. My hope is that by intentionally building and describing their conceptual frameworks for practice, teachers could optimize their professional growth and be more intentional in their future practice and learning. I applied conceptual frameworks for practice to my work supervising student teachers and teaching graduate students who were novice teachers.

Sharon’s class inspired me to start Action Research Group (ARG) with a group of graduate students from my *Adolescent Development* class. We met monthly over dinner at Penn GSE and supported each other in action research projects. I originally called the group Teacher Research Group but changed it to ARG as counselors and school leaders joined. During our MERPS (mentally, emotionally, relationally, physically, and spiritually) check-ins or discussions about our practice, ARG became a third space (Gutierrez, 2008) where a positive energy or flow generated in a setting that was not official work or graduate school. Despite their busy lives, people chose to come and decide what they wanted to work on. ARG was also a home space (Fine & Torre, 2021). where educators found a warm, trusting community where knowledge hierarchies were dismantled and educators at all levels could claim action research scholar as both identity and practice. I started and continued ARG to support educators in their optimal development journeys in a way that they weren’t getting from either their work environment or

graduate school. My experiences with ARG reinforced the importance of collaborative reflective practice.

In 2013, I experienced an optimal development crisis in Janine Remillard's *Doctoral Foundations of Teaching and Learning* class. During one session, I made a comment along the lines that education's central aim should be the optimal development of students. Janine asked me to explain what I meant by optimal development. I opened my mouth to confidently explain and then I froze. I couldn't operationalize it or even give an example. My inability to respond shocked me. How could I believe in something and invest so much of my professional work into a concept that I can't explain? What was blocking me? What do I now?

My subsequent dialogue with Mike Nakkula during an independent study in 2016 helped me contextualize what happened during my optimal development crisis. Mike and I talked about many concepts such as flow, critical consciousness, self-determination theory, and his field of possibility development. With possibility development, one imagines how they want to grow or what they want to learn and then, they develop the skills and plans to reach their goals. This process places the agency and choice on the learner as they clarify their interests (Nakkula and Schneider-Munoz, 2017). Possibility development profoundly impacted my understanding of optimal development. Mike and I together operationalized optimal development as having common and personal elements. Getting enough sleep, eating healthy, stay hydrated, experiencing mental stimulation are things that everyone needs to develop well although how they get those things optimally varies due to many factors. The personal elements of optimal development are centered on personal interests and what individuals want to get better at.

When I froze in Janine's class, I think I was trying to provide a universal definition of optimal development for everyone that is standard. Since optimal development is idiosyncratic,

personal, and agentic, I had no place, and no capacity in that moment, to proclaim a definition of optimal development for the masses. With Mike, I was able to dig deeper into elements of optimal development and forge a new, more nuanced understanding of what it is and what it can be. We further discussed the relationship of optimal development to mental health and flow theory, positing that there can be valuable learning that occurs out of the flow zone. Growth and learning can emerge from struggle providing the high challenge level is embraced.

From our discussions, Mike and I designed and started The Project for Mental Health and Optimal Development, which represents our collective effort to optimize professional and personal growth. Our possibility mentoring program helps middle school students explore their interests, imagining possible career and life pathways, developing related skills, and taking action to research their goals. Our Consortium for Mental Health and Optimal Development supports school teams in improving mental health capacity within their organizations. Our Global Possibility Network (GPN) bolsters youth development projects across the world. This current work, in addition, to my life journey as an educator have throughline inquiries centered around fostering optimal development and strengthening conceptual frameworks for practice which have led to the research questions of this dissertation study.

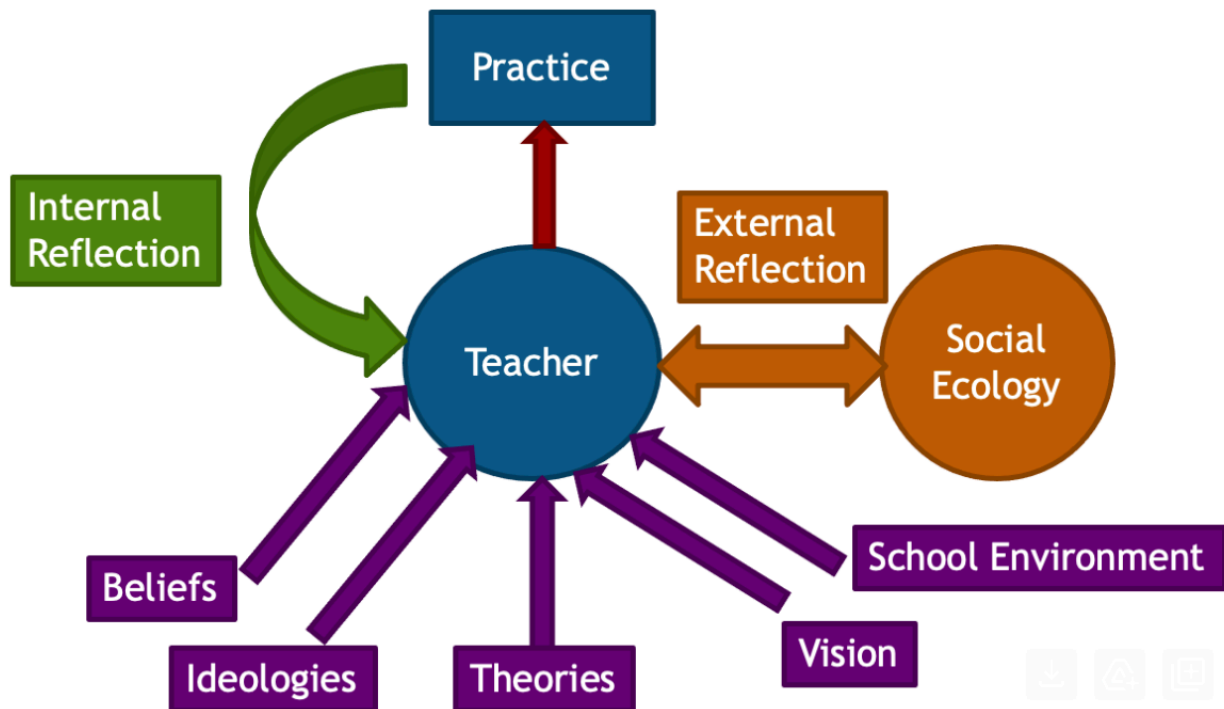
Research Questions and Organization of the Dissertation

Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) describe how reflective teachers are “involved in the development of conceptual frameworks that draw on their emic understandings of the practice of teaching and emanate from practitioners' constructions of their diverse experiences in classrooms.” The research questions for this study emerge from my lifelong interest and commitment to optimal development. The research questions for this study also focus on this construction of what I call an educator’s conceptual framework for practice, which includes

elements such as values/beliefs, ideology, key experiences, theories and theorists, vision, and more (see figure below). I want to understand how teachers grow throughout their career, what shaped them into veteran practitioners, and how they continue to develop as experts.

Figure 1.1

Elements of a Conceptual Framework for Practice



The central research questions of this study are:

- 1. How do teachers understand and develop their conceptual framework for practice and how is that process related to their professional growth?**
- 2. Also, in addition to the various factors that make up an educator's conceptual framework for practice, what aspects and supports have most encouraged their professional growth?**

The chapters of this study will explore these questions in depth and surface the data that emerged from this qualitative study. From interviews with three veteran teachers, case studies are

constructed to narrate the story of their professional growth and conceptual framework for practice building.

Chapter two provides a conceptual framework that grounds this study, focusing on the concept of a conceptual framework for practice and how flow theory and possibility development lens can inform it. The chapter will provide a literature review of the following: reflection and reflective practices, practitioner inquiry and action research, and teacher growth and development.

Chapter three outlines the methodology for this qualitative study explaining the case for a research design grounded and informed by the methodological frameworks of narrative research and case study research. The chapter also explains how research methods were utilized and the data analysis process for this study.

Chapter four presents the case study of Susan and discusses central themes in her development. Susan's case study depicts the importance of mentorship, shows her unapologetic and relentless commitment to curiosity, and highlights her dedication to serving her students and supporting her colleagues. After the case study is presented, three dominant themes are summarized and discussed: (1) impact of mentorship, (2) curiosity and drive to learn, and (3) collaboration/support with colleagues.

Chapter five presents the case study of Emma and discusses central themes in her development. Emma's case study shows the importance of mentorship and her commitment to developing the "literacies" of self, students, and colleagues, her commitment to curiosity, and her dedication to serving her students and supporting her colleagues. After the case study is presented, three dominant themes are summarized and discussed: (1) impact of mentorship, (2) curiosity and inquiry stance, and (3) focus on literacy and social emotional learning.

Chapter six presents the case study of Meg and discusses central themes in her development. Meg's case study depicts the importance of mentorship, how she found flow through a deeply internalized inquiry stance, and her efforts to emotionally regulate anxiety, stress, and trauma. Her dedication to her students and colleagues stands out. After the case study is presented, three dominant themes are summarized and discussed: (1) impact of mentorship, (2) inquiry stance, and (3) emotional regulation in coping with trauma, overcoming fear and anxiety.

Chapter seven is the conclusion and provides a further discussion of findings and implications for this study for research and practice. It will provide practitioners, policy makers, and researchers in education and beyond education a better understanding of professional growth and how teachers and other professionals can optimally develop. The chapter also examines the approaches, supports, structures, and systems that can foster optimal development. Future research possibilities are explored. The creation of The Optimal Development Project is imagined.

CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Framework for Practice

There are several bodies of literature that connect to conceptual frameworks for practice and understanding how teachers develop them. Sharon Ravitch and Matt Riggan's (2012) book depicts how conceptual frameworks guide research, especially qualitative research. Conceptual frameworks for research can be found accompanying many social sciences journal articles and studies. Ravitch and Riggan argue that sharing a conceptual framework for research further contextualizes a study and situates the agenda/bias of the author/researcher. Ravitch and Riggan (2012) define a conceptual framework as "an argument about why the research topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous." The concept of a conceptual framework *for practice* seems to be absent from social science literature. Other fields such as nursing, that have more extensive studies of expertise development, add value to understanding conceptual frameworks connected to professional growth.

At the heart of a conceptual framework for practice is the concept of optimal development. How teachers engage in the various aspects of their conceptual framework for practice shapes their development. While there seem to be general practices and areas to focus "optimal" growth often described as "best practices," it may not be appropriate to characterize optimal professional growth in any standard or universal way. Indeed, there are many different expressions of how optimal development is described in the literature.

How educators determine areas of interest or growth can shape what is considered optimal development. Examining literature in areas such as teacher choice, self-determination

theory, and agency in professional learning contributes to an expanded understanding of optimal development as a concept and practice.

Furthermore, there are apparent dichotomies or tensions between expertise such as (1) automatic action without much conscious thought versus deliberate practice and reflection, (2) cognitive versus affective practices, and (3) situated skills and knowledge vs. transferable skills and knowledge. While there are possibilities for amalgamation of these conceptualizations of expertise, tensions between the concepts will likely remain.

Flow Theory and Possibility Development

People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy.

--Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990)

The field of positive psychology shifted emphasis to positive behavior and qualities that can enhance life satisfaction, joy, and optimal or peak experience (Swann, et al., 2012). The beginning of optimal human functioning goes back to Maslow's (1959) seminal work which introduced self-actualization as a peak encounter experience. Self-actualization is described as the contentment or positive feeling resulting from personal growth or achievement. Decades later Csikszentmihalyi (1989, 1990) developed flow theory where optimal experience is connected to states of optimal performance where the balance of skill and challenge supports deep engagement in a flow zone. When in the flow zone or flow state, one is in a condition of optimal sensation, one is completely absorbed in an activity where time feels suspended and full attention is placed on the task or experience. Flow theory came out of Csikszentmihalyi's study of creativity with artists (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976) when he noticed that when artists were very engaged in their work, they would relentlessly continue, ignoring basic needs for hunger

and sleep, and then would lose interest in their art once it was done. Csikszentmihalyi articulated flow theory as a phenomenon of being intrinsically ambitious and motivated to perform a particular task (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) focusing not on the outcome or an extrinsic reward, but on the process or activity. When someone is in a state of flow, they are operating at peak performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) studies of different professions, he found that feelings of flow or optimal experience have eight major components: A complicated activity that necessitates expertise, the integration of action and awareness, clearly defined goals and feedback, concentration on the task in hand, the paradox of control, the losing of self-consciousness, the changing of time, and the experience being intrinsically satisfying (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Flow states are more likely to occur when there is a difficulty-skill balance (Cho, 2018), where the individual feels a sense of control while also being challenged. Growth in skill occurs as individuals feel satisfaction from their achievements, being motivated for higher levels of skill and willing to confront higher degrees of difficulty.

At the turn of the century, flow theory became a central part of the emerging field of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Seligman (2013) in his book *Flourish*, adds a well-being component to optimal experience. Critiquing authentic happiness studies, Seligman centers well-being in positive psychology, describing the "gold standard" for measuring well-being as flourishing and central goal of positive psychology as increasing flourishing. Seligman places his well-being theory into a "PERMA" framework:

- **Positive Emotion:** happiness and life satisfaction are moved from outcomes or end goals to a continual process and factors of well-being.

- **Engagement:** Being in a state of “flow”, where time flies by as thoughts and feelings are often absent with one being fulfilling engaged and stimulated by an activity.
- **Relationships:** Being connected to others, sharing positive emotions such as joy, kindness, and pride, creating deep feelings of well-being
- **Meaning:** Feeling a sense of larger mission or purpose, serving others and being part of something bigger than ourselves.
- **Accomplishment:** Reaching goals such as money, fame, winning, or mastering skills.

These components of PERMA work together to increase flourishing or optimal human experience.

Possibility development provides a model for how teachers can be intentional in their approach to grow professionally. Possibility development, which does lack a strong empirical base because it is relatively new, is an emerging field of study which is mostly theoretical or utilized to describe practice or phenomena. Nakkula and Schneider-Munoz (2018) operationalize possibility development:

We define possibility development as the evolving sense of what is possible in one’s life and the degree to which those possibilities are actualized based on the integration of personal capacities and effort with the supports available from one’s family, community, and larger society (p.46-47).

Teachers can imagine possibility pathways for their own learning and the learning of their students. Reflective practices, action research, or intentional development of a conceptual framework for practice can act as the opportunity structure that supports growth. The work within the opportunity structure consists of taking an inquiry stance towards teaching and learning, generating questions for investigation, analyzing data, and sharing findings or “wonderings” with various stakeholders. As these skills are developed, deeper learning about practice occurs.

Nakkula and Toshielis, in their 2006 book, *Understanding Youth*, examine possibility development in the context of intervention with adolescents in counseling situations: “Possibility

development, like more traditional forms of intervention, blends imagination and skill.

Imagination may fuel the vehicle of creativity and learning, but skill building is required to move the vehicle in the intended direction” (p.64). This imagination enables some inquiries such as (1) what is possible for the learning of teachers and how can the intentional use of imagination support teacher growth, (2) based on possibility exploration and skill development, what interventions or changes can lead further teacher development, and (3) how can imagining possibilities through conceptual framework for practice development influence educational practice more broadly?

Nakkula and Schneider-Munoz (2018) suggest that “possibility development often emerges from contexts that simultaneously pose serious risks and great opportunities” (p.64). In their context, Nakkula and Schneider-Munoz describe how young people build strength and confidence for future challenges when they successfully navigate risks, but also exacerbate vulnerabilities when they are unsuccessful. For teachers who don’t create opportunities for their own growth, risks include remaining in Berliner’s (2004) competency stage. When teachers stagnate, possibilities for them to develop skills and imagine new places of learning for themselves and their students are lost. What are the “great opportunities” of possibility development? How does imagining these possibilities create a greater chance of them being realized? Further, what frameworks or mindsets are helpful in leveraging opportunities while minimizing risks?

Literature Review

Reflection & Reflective Practices

Reflection is a core part of teacher identity and practice. Having a deeper understanding of reflection can inform our collective knowledge of how teachers grow professionally. In a

central chapter of *The Handbook on Reflection and Reflective Inquiry*, Nona Lyons (2010)

organizes scholarship on reflection for three purposes:

- (1) to interrogate renewed contemporary efforts to include reflective inquiry as a critical element in the education of professionals,
- (2) to situate contemporary claims and criticisms of reflective inquiry within a historical and theoretical context, and
- (3) to examine the range of implications for contemporary professional education of incorporating reflective inquiry. (p. 3-4).

Lyons contextualizes the various forms and practices of reflection and coherent framework of reflection. The work of Dewey, Schon, and Freire, Lyons are major strands of a theoretical framework for reflection. John Dewey (1938), the father of inquiry in education, defines reflective thinking as a five-step process through which one can solve a problem or conflict:

Table 2.1

Dewey's Five-Step Inquiry Process

Step	Action
1	We identify a problem that is perplexing & 'felt'
2	We observe & refine the identified problem to create a fuller understanding
3	We develop a hypothesis or an understanding about the problem, its origins & possible solutions
4	We subject the hypothesis to scrutiny & reasoning
5	We test the hypothesis or understanding in practice

“To properly engage in inquiry,” Lyons writes, “one cultivates the attitudes of open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, responsibility, and directness” (p.13). For Dewey, teachers should essentially reflect, act, reflect on the action, and then take additional action, repeating the process. This

reflexive deliberation maps strongly onto many current models of practitioner inquiry and action research.

As the teacher research movement in North America was in its early stages, Donald Schon (1983) brought attention to reflection and inquiry as “thought-in-action”, a reflective practice during practice. Invoking Schon’s concept of the “reflective practitioner”, Lyons describes competent practitioners as exhibiting “a kind of knowing in practice.” Practitioners often reveal a capacity for reflection on their intuitive knowing in the midst of action that Schon believed made the knowing conscious and available for action (Lyons, 2010). Teachers’ capacity for intuition and “knowing in practice” helps not only in teaching students, but also in the kind of sense making that creates knowledge of and knowledge in practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Engaging novice teachers in action research may foster the development of teachers as reflective practitioner or integrating an inquiry stance into everyday practice.

Loughran (2010) describes the contributions of Dewey and Schon towards a deeper understanding of reflection and adds a collaborative element to inquiry in practitioner action research. Loughran holds that Dewey wrote of “problem” as a curiosity or something that requires attention or study. Essential to this process is the importance of noticing a problem and then creating opportunities for engagement and growth: “It is this aspect of reflection, which Schon (1983) described through the constructs of framing and reframing, that new insights into the nature of reflective practice emerge” (Loughran, p. 399-400). Loughran argues that the seeing of alternative perspectives is the driver of framing and reframing processes and that using these new lenses opens new possibilities for action and deeper insight.

In her *Handbook of Reflection and Reflective Inquiry*, Lyons (2010) further expands conceptualizations of reflection by referencing Paulo Freire who introduced a political lens to the

practice of reflection-in-action by advocating critical reflection as an interrogation of power structures and social situations. This critical reflection seeks to problematize systems, relationships, and processes. Freire holds that the cultivation of reflection as critical consciousness should lead to action that transforms or liberates (Lyons, p.16-17). Paulo Freire (2000) states, “It is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. They must act together upon their environment in order critically to reflect upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection” (p.34). Indeed, many teachers incorporate a commitment to transforming power relationships and structures through their work. Reflection in between practice (Dewey) and in practice (Schon) contributes to teacher growth and development. Critical reflection (Freire) also enables teacher growth and can act as a counter-narrative to the hegemony of neoliberalism. Reflection is deeply embedded into all forms of practitioner inquiry and action research, driving the capacity of reflection and action research to transform self, teaching practice, and system.

Practitioner Inquiry and Action Research

Often in contrast to their school or district’s approach to professional development (centralized and top-down), teachers have been engaged in self-directed learning, practitioner inquiry or action research, and collaborating with other educators in independent Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), action research groups, and edcamps (Carpenter et al., 2018). Teachers can experience such agentic and collaborative learning as stimulating, renewing, and transformational.

Practitioner inquiry or action research may have value as part of larger efforts to mitigate the harm of neoliberalism and challenging work conditions in education. Ross (2020), arguing that action research can transform neoliberalism, describes it as having the “potential to be a

powerful force for democracy in society and within the workplace” (p.19). Villancañas de Castro (2019), connecting Deweyan inquiry to action research, supports Ross’s argument by submitting that action research rejects positivist conceptions of knowledge and is a form of social inquiry that rejects the neoliberal managerialism. Practitioner inquiry or action research can also “dismantle knowledge hierarchies” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

The value of action research is relative to its agent, how that person can develop expertise through practice, and how that can be applied to the classroom. Sagor (2000) notes that “action research is always relevant to the participants...because the focus of each research project is determined by the researchers, who are also the primary consumers of the findings” (p.3). Teachers benefit by developing craft knowledge, becoming reflective practitioners, and gaining a sense of empowerment as they may benefit student learning and their schools (Dosemagen & Schwalbach, 2019). Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) describes some general benefits teachers have from studying their practice as they can be both “consumers of research” and “producers of knowledge.” They describe how “action research gives them tools to make sense of their practice and helps them think analytically about the problems they confront” (p.151). Through this sense-making process, action research acts as both scaffold and schema. As a scaffold, the action research process helps teachers better connect what they observe and experience to potential future action. Also, action research can help teachers create schemas through which they can organize their developing knowledge base of teaching knowledge, learning, and their students or their pedagogical content knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dosemagen & Schwalbach, 2019). Hine (2013) refers to this as a “pedagogical repertoire” which includes a deep knowledge of content to be taught as well as a deep understanding of students as learners.

The practice of inquiry also seems to energize teacher growth and development as seen in the blogs of teachers John Kreinbihl and Debi Hubell. Kreinbihl (2007) credits inquiry as a method for his growth because of the agency and empowerment that comes with being able to have control over his own “professional development”. He describes inquiry as a way for him to keep growing as a teacher: “Inquiry lets me choose my own growth and gives me tools to validate or jettison my ideas” (p. 1). Kreinbihl speaks to the transformative promise of agency in one’s own professional development. Hubell’s story further validates the power of developing an inquiry stance. She describes the meaningful discussions she has with colleagues about things in education they are passionate about: “Teacher inquiry is not something I do; it is more a part of the way I think. It has become the gratifying response to formalizing the questions that enter my mind as I teach” (Hubell, 2007).

As teachers gain experience, they can also develop expertise and knowledge. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999) refer to “knowledge-of-practice” and “knowledge-in-practice”, differentiating them from each other and privileging the value of knowledge-in-practice as generated exclusively by teachers in the classroom, not researchers from the academy. To locate theories and knowledge generation coming out of practice by practitioners themselves broadens where it is acceptable for epistemologies. Indeed, the local knowledge generated by classroom teachers can add something valuable to the wider knowledge base of teaching and leading, offering essential perspectives the university-led research could not uncover.

Dosemagen and Schwalbach (2019) describe the benefit that action provides towards the continuous improvement of teachers. “They develop the mindset of researcher, continually investigating problems, collecting data for analysis and finding solutions” (p.173). Integrating

action research into one's daily practice is a commitment to professional growth and development. Sagor (2000) supports this effect:

When each lesson is looked on as an empirical investigation into factors affecting teaching and learning and when reflection on the findings from each day's work informs the next day's instruction, teachers can't help but develop greater mastery of the art and science of teaching (p.7).

Lattimore (2012) specifically notes that engagement in action research impacts the professional orientation of practitioners, "providing the practitioner with the skills and dispositions to continually refine and improve practice" (p.2).

Experience and key events can also have a significant impact on teacher development, especially when engaging in meaning-making activities like inquiry, journaling, and action research. In his article on praxidents, A.J. Schiera (2014) raises the question: "How do we capitalize on the praxidents that so regularly surface in teachers' practice?" Schiera operationalizes praxidents as "accidental intersections between teacher values, actions, and reflections, and the academic discourses that happen to overlap with them." The notion of praxidents aptly frames the phenomena of teachers who unknowingly engage in practitioner research as they connect their practice to academic discourses (Danilchick & McManus, 2014). Praxidents can happen when teachers take the time to reflect on their practice and strive to go "deeper and further". Other inquiries emerge, such as how can a praxidents framework encourage K-12 teachers to search for serendipitous opportunities to make meaning of practice, and how can praxidents inform higher education researchers, enabling them to more successfully connect to and support the development of K-12 teachers as educators and emerging practitioner researchers (Danilchick & McManus, 2014). Indeed, learning from praxidents, whether intentional or not, affords teachers the opportunity to connect theory, beliefs, values, experiences,

and practice as they dynamically construct their professional identities, dispositions, and approach to practice.

This reflective work connects to the concept of a conceptual framework, most commonly used in academic settings to explain the theoretical framework and other researcher factors that shape the what, the how, and the why of a study or research project. Ravitch & Riggan (2012) argue that researchers should disclose their conceptual framework for research so that their work is contextualized and transparent. As researchers have their conceptual framework *for research*, teachers can have a conceptual framework *for their practice*, all the aspects that shape a teacher's identity, knowledge, and action. Examining the conceptual frameworks for practice of reflective, experienced teachers can provide insight on how expertise is developed and illuminate the forms of support and professional development that can optimize such growth.

There is a growing body of practitioner research conducted by experienced teachers themselves. In the past two decades, action research has continued to grow. In their preface to the *Palgrave International Handbook of Action Research*, Rowell et al. (2017) show the importance of action research by indicating that a search of the term on Google had 165,000,000 hits and the Academic Search Premier database had over 16,000 references to action research. New organizations and networks have been formed like Action Research Unit in South Africa, the Action Research Network of the Americas, and the Network for Educational Action Research in Ireland (Hendricks, 2019). Also, new journals of action research have been established, including the *Asian Education Action Research Journal*, the *Canadian Journal of Action Research*, *Action Research in Education*, *Action Research*, the *Journal of Teacher Action Research*, the *Journal of Educational Change*, and *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research* (Hendricks, 2019).

There are many places to find information about teachers engaged in action research, practitioner inquiry and reflective practices.

Teacher Growth and Development

Expertise theory and how teachers develop expertise can be an important field of literature to examine for this study. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines an expert as one who has acquired special skill in or knowledge of a particular subject through professional training and practical experience. What are the practices and thoughts of an expert teacher? As one becomes an expert, what changes with cognitive processing, professional knowledge, affect, and reflection? What do expert teachers leave behind or stop doing? What are the possibilities and implications of expert teaching for the education profession and educational reform?

Among the early cognitive studies of expertise, Brian and Harter's study of telegraph operators (Brian and Harter, 1899), studies on chess experts (Degroot, 1965; Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986), and Brenner's study of nurses (Benner, 2001) all present cognitive psychology representations of expertise. Different frameworks for conceptualizing expertise (1) expertise as intuition and tacit knowledge (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986), (2) expertise as conscious deliberation and organized knowledge base (Glasser and Chi, 1988), and (3) expertise as a continuous process (Bereiter and Sacramalia, 1993) are predominately cognitive and stress information processing and problem solving. The multiplicity of cognitive studies on expertise provides valuable insights into the minds and practices of experts, but this narrow cognitive focus obfuscates other complementary or distinct investigations that focus on non-cognitive elements.

Teacher identity development and teacher identity theory contribute to an understanding of teacher professional growth. The development of a teacher identity is an "ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of who one considers oneself to be and who one would like to

become” (Beijaard et al., 2004). How teacher identity intersects with experience and the development of a conceptual framework for practice is extremely relevant. One of the limitations of literature regarding teachers is the imbalance due to the overwhelming number of articles and studies on novice or preservice teachers (a convenient sample for teacher educators and academics at graduate schools of education). There are significantly fewer studies done with populations of experienced teachers.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Narrative inquirers study individual experience in the world, an experience that is storied, both in the living and telling that can be studied by listening, observing, living alongside another, writing and interpreting texts

--Jean Clandinin & Jerry Rosiek (2007)

Engaging with narrative or story is a powerful way to understand, communicate, learn, and grow. In this dissertation, the narrative research and analysis approach (Loseke, 2022; Josselson & Hammack, 2021) is content, method, and meaning making, enabling the lived experiences and stories of veteran teachers to elucidate their professional growth journeys with larger implications for how individuals, schools, and systems can support the optimal development of teachers and professionals across many fields.

In this methods section, many elements regarding methodology and methods are detailed including: context, positionality, and conceptual framework, participant selection, research methodology and design, and issues of validity.

Context, Positionality, and Conceptual Framework

The story of the question section provides the background that led to this current study. While I had been interested in optimal development throughout my life, my interest in conceptual frameworks for practice began in 2011 during a qualitative research class with Sharon Ravitch. After the class, I took an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) towards both concepts, identifying them as potentially central to my dissertation study and integrating them into my practice as a teacher educator and leadership consultant. I would engage in dialogue with student teachers, experienced teachers, principals, and superintendents about elements that have

influenced their professional growth and how that growth can continue optimally. My practice and my inquiry stance towards optimal development and conceptual framework building informed my framing of my dissertation as a close look at the professional growth journey of three veteran teachers. A more comprehensive study of how a large, diverse number of teachers build their conceptual frameworks for practice could be carried out after this dissertation study. One goal of the dissertation is to act as a first step to open future possibilities in practice and research.

In the spirit of transparency and to inform my choices for this study, it is important to share my positionality and conceptual framework for this work. Much of what has influenced me to engage in this work can be seen in the earlier “story of the question” section. Inquiry, reflection, collaboration, and action research are key elements of my own conceptual framework for practice. As I progressed through my 15-year career as a secondary English and social studies teacher, I strove to embody an inquiry stance, engage in reflective activities, and study my practice (even when I didn’t know the terms action research or practitioner inquiry). From approximately the 10th year of teaching until my 15th, I felt like I had developed into a beginning expert with a greater capacity to set the conditions for deep learning for my students and an even greater capacity to grow professionally. This change toward the end of my career piqued my curiosity in the building of expertise, optimal development, and teacher growth. Currently, as a teacher educator, leadership consultant, and Penn GSE’s Director of The Project for Mental Health and Optimal Development, supporting the development of educators is deeply embedded in my work. I am constantly interested in optimal development and the different forms it can take. I was also the founder and director of Action Research Group, an inquiry group of educators that, over 10 years, met regularly to support each other with practitioner research

projects. Finally, all these experiences and interests have led me toward a deep commitment to support educators in their work and help them galvanize their own and each other's growth. All these aspects of my conceptual framework and practice fund my interest to examine the affordances of understanding and supporting teachers as they develop their conceptual frameworks for practice.

Participant Selection

In his article of sampling in interview-based qualitative research, Robinson (2014) presents a four-point approach to sampling: (1) defining a *sample universe*, (2) deciding upon a *sample size*, (3) selecting a *sampling strategy*, and (4) *sample sourcing*. In defining my sample universe, I set inclusion criteria as being experienced teacher (over 10 years of teaching) and engaged participation or leadership in reflective practices such as action research, practitioner inquiry, roundtables, or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

In terms of sample size, I decided to apply a case study approach where I could focus on depth over breadth. This warranted a small sample size and I choose the number of participants to be three. As a sampling strategy, I chose convenience sampling and sought to include participants who were part of my professional network of teachers that I have interacted with over my nearly 30-year career in education. Two participants had been members of Action Research Group and have demonstrated a deep commitment to reflection and professional learning. Being connected to the participants would provide advantages in the interviews such as stronger rapport and some knowledge of participants' experiences and professional growth. I felt that the participants, as deeply reflective practitioners, would provide extremely relevant responses, stories, and insights that would enhance the study. "Particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to

questions and goals, and that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97)

I knew that the sample would not necessarily be diverse (all participants are White females which does reflect most teachers in education) or representative (only 3 participants). For sample sourcing, I engaged prospective participants in conversation about the dissertation study and asked if they would be interested in participating. Before interviews began, I reviewed an informed consent form with each participant. Table 1.1 presents the background of the participants.

Table 3.1

Background of Participants (Participants for this study are anonymous and given pseudonyms)

Participant Name	Background
Susan	Susan is a female Caucasian teacher with 11 years of experience (seven as an ESL/ELD teacher). She is in her fourth year as an English Language Development (ELD) specialist at a technical high school in a suburb of a large city in the northeast. She has been a lead teacher for three years, responsible for supporting new teachers through induction and coaching other teachers, offering needed support.
Emma	Emma is a female Caucasian teacher with 20 years of K-12 teaching experience (18 in public education and two years at a private school as an ESL/ELD teacher). She has taught in a range of settings: urban, suburban, parochial, and private. She left the classroom three years ago to start a K-12 tutoring company with a learning differences focus. Emma has a dual degree in elementary education and special education and is a reading specialist with a master's in reading, writing, and literacy.
Meg	Meg is a female Caucasian teacher with 28 years of experience as a teacher. She is currently a teacher of Teacher Academy students and an equity, inclusion, and belonging (EIB) director at a technical high school in a suburb of a large city in the northeast. Meg also is an adjunct literacy instructor (for the past nine years) and teacher educator at a local university.

Research Methodology & Design

In pursuit of a deep understanding of how experienced teachers develop their conceptual frameworks for practice, I use case study and narrative research methodologies.

Case Study Research

The case studies consist of a series of 3 interviews from 3 veteran teachers working in the greater Philadelphia area. This study doesn't seek to generalize any findings nationally (or even locally), but rather to provide an in-depth description of conceptual frameworks for practice, their development, and the complexity of how individual, contextual, and experience factors interact in the building of conceptual frameworks for practice. The findings will be connected to the 3 experienced teachers interviewed. The desire is not to provide generalizable answers, but rather to unearth descriptions and further questions about what influences the development of conceptual frameworks for practice.

There are many definitions of case study research. For this study, I use Yin's (2014) twofold definitions of case studies. The first part outlines the scope of a case study as an empirical inquiry that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case' in depth) and within its real-world context" (p.16). The second part of Yin's definition presents the features of a case study. Some of those features include a reliance on multiple sources of evidence with data converging in a triangulation fashion and the case study "benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis" (p.17). I apply a case study lens to a series of interviews with the 3 participants. Generally, each is a case study of conceptual framework for practice building and professional growth journeys. In composing each case study, I ask, "What is this a specific case of?" My answer to that question will be represented in the title of each case. Using a case study approach, provides an opportunity to balance emic and

etic representations of the teachers' experiences. The emic voices of the teachers are centered in the case study, and etic engagement occurs in the presentation, analysis, and discussion of findings.

Narrative Research

The composition of the case studies presents as narrative or story, each describing the professional growth story of the teacher. To enhance this focus on story a narrative research lens is integrated into the case study approach. Loseke (2022) describes narrative as a “meaning-making communication form that can be used to make sense of self and the surrounding world” (p.6). In the interviews, each teacher tells stories and makes meaning of them. In composing and analyzing each case study, I am also engaging in meaning making. Loseke (2022) further describes narrative as being about power: “Power runs throughout the processes of authoring, telling, and evaluating stories” (p.11). It is my hope that in this study, power can be shared as the participants and I engage in collective meaning-making. These case studies can also have power to shape discourses and practices on teaching, teacher professional growth, and education more broadly.

Other Relevant Literature

I also approached this study with an emergent design lens (Cavallo, 2000). With an emergent design framework, researchers actively look for new data sources and perspectives that are grounded in the complex milieu of the research setting and their positionality. As salient stories and content emerged during interviews, I tried to adjust and take advantage of the serendipity to go to useful places that allowed for deeper sharing or understanding.

I also integrated the lens of critical realism for qualitative research as described in Joseph Maxwell's *A Realist Approach to Qualitative Research* (2012). Maxwell's critical realist

approach, combining both realist ontology with a constructivist epistemology, more fully equips researchers to critique existing methodological practices and imagine innovative ones. Simultaneously searching for what is real (ontology) and what is understood to be real (epistemology), encouraged more thoughtful exploration in the narrative accounts of participants. Connecting with an emergent design approach, Maxwell cautions about not only carefully planning a research design, but also being “attentive to what is actually happening in the research, and to adjust your actions to make the design more relevant and productive” (Maxwell, 2012). Viewing the research process as dynamic and iterative situated me as researcher to attend to emerging data sources that may have not previously been considered. In very early stages early stages of this study, I expected to individually and thoroughly explore each aspect of the teacher’s conceptual framework so I could build models of their conceptual frameworks. Piloting interviews with others and the initial interviews with participants changed this view. It seemed counterproductive to shoehorn participants to fit into a framework that I created for them. Rather, I decided to still ask about the various elements of a conceptual framework but mostly focus on the big picture of the participants professional growth journey, letting them determine and narrate about things they identified as most important.

Interviews & Focus Group

For the interviews, I was guided by the tables of Appendix A, Ten Interview Principles and Skills for Qualitative Interviewing (Patton, 2015) and Six Relationship-Focused, Interactive Interview Approaches (Patton, 2015). For example, listening and being present are essential skills that will be important in getting to areas of depth for the case studies. The table of relationship-focused approaches also provides guidance to be in the right mindset to adapt and construct as the interviews progress. I felt that interviews would more fruitful if I approach them

as partnerships to uncover narratives about conceptual frameworks for practice. Before each interview, I also reflected on answers to the questions in Appendix B, which I developed while in an advanced qualitative research class, which can be useful in preparing to conduct and learn from interviews.

Interviews of the three participants follows a multi-step, semi-structured protocol of three interviews. Appendix C details the interview process and lists the semi-structured topics and questions. Essentially, I engaged the participant in an interview about what has shaped them into the teacher they are. I was mindful of opportunities to help participants dig deeper into experiences or aspects of their practice or beliefs in the pursuit of rich, thick description and nuanced, personal storytelling. The topic areas in the protocol include experiences and key events, beliefs, theorists and theories, ideology, tensions and dilemmas, support networks, reflective practices, and vision.

The third interview included the “possibility” interview which was a final conversation during which we adopted a possibility development lens and look towards the participant’s future, imagining their future growth and development as an educator.

After the three individual interviews, I took time to transcribe and conduct preliminary analysis of each of the last interviews. From the summation of transcripts and analysis, I prepared prepare a semi-structured protocol for the focus group. The primary purpose of the focus group is to have participants share and reflect on their experiences, conceptual frameworks for practice, and artifacts, make connections to each other, and review preliminary findings. Participants were encouraged to respond to and question each other as they delve deeper into their professional identity and practice.

Data Analysis

I see the core work of analysis as a combination of annotating interviews, writing research memos, and conducting narrative research. After each interview, I will transcribe the recording and annotate along with text. These annotations will have a few functions among them processing the text, making connections to theories, concepts, and other excerpts of text, and identifying areas to return to and/or probe more deeply in subsequent interviews.

After each interview, I will write a research memo (Maxwell, 2013) that engages with the transcript or artifact as a further meaning making activity. The use of annotations and memos will be done within the lens of narrative research. According to Salkind (2010), “narrative research aims to explore and conceptualize human experience as it is represented in textual form.” Through in-depth exploration, narrative research strives to investigate the meanings people assign to their experiences. Usually this is done with a small sample in order to obtain rich and free-ranging discourse with the emphasis on storied experience. Salkind (2010) states that “generally, this takes the form of interviewing people around the topic of interest, but it might also involve the analysis of written documents.”

Since researchers use narrative analysis to understand how research participants construct story and narrative from their own personal experience, there is a dual layer of interpretation in narrative analysis. First, the research participants interpret their own lives through narrative. Then, the researcher interprets the construction of that narrative.

Using narrative analysis to make meaning of each text entails a 4-part process that is outlined in Josselson’s chapter on narrative research (2011):

- (1) We do an overall reading of the interviews to get a sense of how the narrative is structured and the general themes or theme. Then, we return to each specific part

to develop its meaning, and then consider the more global meanings in light of the deepened meanings of the parts.

- (2) We do multiple readings to identify different “voices” of the self and to create a view of how these selves are in dialogue with one another.
- (3) These iterative readings continue until we develop a “good Gestalt” that encompasses contradictions. The different themes make sensible patterns and enter into a coherent unity.
- (4) The work also enters into conversation with the larger theoretical literature so that the researcher can remain sensitive to nuances of meanings expressed and the different contexts into which the meanings may enter. (p. 228)

While engaging in this narrative analysis process, I strove to “be aware of our own presuppositions—how the interviewer and the interpreter are shaping the text as a co-constructed situation (p. 228)” The hope is that the interpretation “brings forth something new—something not apparent in the surface of the text.” (p.228)

Issues of Validity

The findings will be validated and verified through the following measures:

Triangulation (Ravitch & Carl, 2021)

I validated data from the study by triangulating methods through multiple interviews of the various participants and from the focus group interview which included all participants. Reviewing findings during the focus group interview which occurred after the individual interviews provided many data points that triangulated with data from the individual interviews.

Piloting Protocols and Dialogic Engagement

Striving to create and maintain a dissertation study that achieved its aims and commitments, I built in dialogic engagement throughout the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p.76). My primary dialogic engagement partners included my dissertation chair, members of my committee, and a group of critical thought partners comprised of doctoral candidates and

two faculty members in a university Research Apprenticeship Course (RAC). I also conducted pilot interviews with some of my student teachers that I supervised and members of Action Research Group. In these various groups, I worked through my interview protocols, methods, memos, and initial findings throughout the process. I worked to think more deeply about these protocols and initial findings. These various supports generated essential feedback before I began conducting interviews and carrying out the formal data analysis process.

Member Checks

I utilized various member checks in the study. I wanted transparency with my participants around the study and my findings, and I also wanted to be in dialogue around the data to continually build relational trust (Ravitch and Carl, 2021, p.197); I balanced this commitment with not wanting to put too much of a burden on very busy and, in many ways, overworked educators. Thus, I was strategic in limiting member checks to two core aspects of the study: (1) sharing the case studies, (2) conducting a focus group interview on the findings. After the case studies were drafted, I emailed all participants their case studies asking for feedback so they could make corrections or additions. The focus group interview focused on the findings provided a space for participants to further describe the findings with examples (which also provided triangulation) and allowed me to determine the relative strength of the findings so I could classify each finding as either a major or additional finding.

CHAPTER FOUR: SUSAN, A CASE STUDY OF MENTORSHIP AND UNAPOLOGETIC COMMITMENT TO CURIOSITY, STUDENTS, AND COLLEAGUES

Introduction

In this chapter, the case study of Susan is presented. The content reflects data from interviews and describes Susan's professional growth journey, highlighting the most salient experiences and important aspects of her conceptual framework for practice. Susan's case study depicts the importance of mentorship and shows both her unapologetic and relentless commitment to curiosity and her dedication to serving her students and supporting her colleagues. After the case study is presented, three dominant themes are summarized and discussed: (1) impact of mentorship, (2) curiosity and drive to learn, and (3) collaboration/support with colleagues.

Background

Susan is a female Caucasian teacher with 11 years of experience (seven as an ESL/ELD teacher). She is in her fourth year as an English Language Development (ELD) specialist at a technical high school in a suburb of a large city in the northeast. For three years, she has been a lead teacher, responsible for supporting new teachers through induction and coaching other teachers and offering needed support.

Childhood Inspiration from Mom

Susan is a multi-generational educator as her mother was a special education teacher who worked as a special ed case manager and a CT while Susan was growing up. When she was 12, she expressed, "I'm going to be a teacher when I grow up." After this declaration, Susan pursued a teaching career. She describes herself as a very verbal, often bossy kid who was extremely comfortable in front of a group.

She felt that teaching was innately within her as Susan enjoyed “being in charge of things,” organizing, and giving instructions to others. In her mother’s classroom, she saw how much joy being a classroom teacher brought her, and thought, “Well, this looks super fun and great!” Susan also saw the strong relationships and connections that her mother had built with her students over her 20 years of teaching which included continuing visits with them and their families. As a high school senior, Susan participated in a field experience in an ELD (called ESL as the time) elementary classroom. After her 30 hours of service, she felt “this has to be the most fun job of all the jobs.” This led to an exclamation in her yearbook listing her future occupation as an “ESL teacher!”

Entering the Field, Finding the “Pinnacle” of a Supportive Person

Susan graduated college in 2013, which she felt was a particularly challenging time to enter teaching, given the difficulty of finding a job in the wake of the financial collapse of 2008. She worked as a bilingual teaching assistant at a cyber charter school immediately after graduation and was promoted to a ninth-grade English composition teacher position in the fall. The situation wasn’t ideal for Susan, as she wanted to be physically with her students.

She did find that her “fabulous” principal, Kylene was the “pinnacle of a person” for support and mentorship. Admiring Kylene’s talent to cultivate leadership, Susan remembers Kylene’s words to her: "You're so good at this. I want to put you in a position to do this because I see that you're capable of doing this." As a brand-new teacher, Susan was a bit in disbelief when her principal told her, "Listen, I see a lot of leadership potential in you. Would you be interested in running a Professional Learning Community (PLC) with our staff with this book?" Another mentor also encouraged her to lead the PLC. Energized and supported, Susan proceeded to run her first PLC at the age of 22, embracing the unexpected leadership opportunity at the time:

"And I had my mentor at the time who was also really fabulous, and he was like, 'Try it. You know what I mean? What's the worst that would happen?' So, I ran my first PLC with a group of the staff."

From Kyleene, Susan also learned about curriculum development, learning management systems, Blackboard, Moodle, and other technology skills that have "served me through the rest of my career." Reflecting on her principal, Susan views Kyleene as a model example of servant leadership, "in the trenches with us." Susan summed up her boss's message: "I see that you're struggling. How can I better support you?" The principal would both provide authentic and specific positive encouragement about actions and the development of skills and acknowledge when things weren't going well. Susan's boss would help with prioritizing and managing feelings of being overwhelmed.

An example of this support occurred during a mid-year evaluation meeting. Susan recalls Kyleene's words: "You're doing so well in these things. Your instructions are great. The kids really seemed to like you, but some of your learning coach responsibilities seemed to kind of be falling by the wayside." Susan describes how the principal created a safe space where Susan could share challenges and perceived failures and know that beyond empathy and emotional support, she also would receive suggestions and strategies such as direction to seek technical support from a teacher who is adept and efficient in managing learning or coaching responsibilities. Susan sees that move as building a support network among teachers, as the helping teacher receives a message of support from the principal. This also normalizes sharing with and supporting colleagues. Susan felt that the principal garnered deep respect because regardless of whether a teacher was successful or struggling, everyone was treated with dignity.

After two years at the cyber charter school, Susan left with appreciation for the support she received from leaders but also with an intense desire to get with kids in a physical classroom. The sedentary nature of sitting at a desk eight hours a day was taxing and sparked a desire to go back to a “classroom feel.”

Being a “Gray” Safety Model

Thinking about her current practices as a leader, Susan further reflects on her principal’s impact: “I didn't have the language or anything at the time to understand what she was doing. I just knew how it made me feel, or how it made me feel as a teacher. And so sometimes it's like, WWKD, what would Kylene do in this situation?” Channeling WWKD, Susan, as a current teacher leader, strives to meet people where they are, to fully see them, and give them tools to improve, problem solve, or network. WWKD also entails always approaching people with the respect, dignity, and professionalism that they deserve, regardless of one’s personal feelings about that person. Susan shares a current example of a colleague being “pissed off” that she was included in a conversation. That reaction did not surprise her, but Susan was still felt that she was helpful by providing a framework that she used with another department. She did this framework sharing indirectly, having someone else engage with the teacher who would receive the person more positively than Susan. Susan states, “It's like I still want that person to be successful, even if they're not super inclined to my...I don't know. People have called me aggressive.” She adds that she was once called a pitbull. Susan knows there is a gendered aspect to these labels and treatment. Susan knows she can be very assertive when she feels strongly about something, but she feels it's always coming from the “best place.” She is trying to stay true to her beliefs and focus on the success of students and the school.

Aware of Kyleene's influence and focused on being a servant leader, Susan is steadfast in the integrity of her work even if her actions may sometimes leave colleagues annoyed or "pissed off." Susan is driven to support staff because she feels that helping staff leads to students learning more and being happier. While it hurts Susan when people judge or name call, she tries not to take it personally.

Susan describes herself as an adult "safety model" like portrayed by the Bobby Brady character on the TV show *The Brady Bunch*. Susan explains that she is not ossified in right or wrong thinking because "there's so much gray. I see things very blurry a lot of the time, but my values and the things that drive the choices that I make about where I put my energy and my thoughts and my work into is very aligned to a very specific set of things." Susan feels that the consistency she has with this can come off as annoying to people sometimes.

In her second job at a physical charter school, Susan laments that she went from having "the best boss I've ever had in the world to one of the worst." She provides an example of negative experience during an evaluation. "I got dinged for not following the protocol of the school because I used to have a little shelf in the front that just had school supplies, like pencils, pens, paper, whatever." Susan let students take what they needed and do didn't things that other teachers did such as making a kid trade their shoe to have a pencil. She was focused on student engagement and dignity, but Susan remembered the principal saying, "Well, the policy of our school is to teach students responsibility and accountability, and you're encouraging this lack of accountability in your classroom."

This "pencil jar management evaluation ding" provoked a strong reaction and a rant. "It's a pencil! What I care about is that these kids are here and learning and participating, and if they need a pencil to be able to do that, I'm going to give them a freaking pencil and I'm not going to

take their shoe. I'm not going to humiliate a student. I'm not going to flag things. I'm not going to whatever. I'm paying for these pencils out of my own pocket anyways, so I don't know what your concern is here." Susan felt very aware of how her beliefs were very different from her principal's. This incident set the tone for multiple small clashes that Susan had with her principal. She realized that "we're not aligned, and this is not going to work for me."

The Three “Things”

Susan identifies three core beliefs or aspects that drive her. Susan shares that she deeply believes in and cares about education. She says she takes very seriously the work that anyone does when they decide that they want to work with students: “I've seen time and time and time again, the impact that a good school and a good teacher and a good counselor can have on the trajectory of somebody's life. It can move mountains, literally.” Second, Susan strives to operate under the belief that people want to do well and they're doing the best they can with what they have at a foundational level: “I think that that's allowed me to work with a lot of really hard kids and hard adults is that how I extend that empathy to them and see that maybe there's a disconnect there.” Susan notes that no kid wakes up in the morning with the intention to wreak havoc in the classroom today. Susan feels “very lucky to grow up in a home where my mom taught me things about my emotions and how to regulate myself.” She realizes that not everyone has that kind of support, especially children.

Susan's third driving aspect is that she is a voracious learner: “I love to learn things. I want to know stuff. I want to find things out. And I also appreciate just being in the process of learning and making mistakes and not understanding stuff and meeting new people and asking questions and reading books and putting things into practice and trying stuff out and taking risks and failing and trying again.” Susan finds the learning process fulfilling. She feels it provided

accountability for her to learn things she doesn't know and encourage her students or peers to also appreciate and love that process. Susan knows that learning can be messy and frustrating, but those aspects can be embraced. She feels learning as learning into failure and growth. These three "things" have contributed to the consistency with which Susan does her work and how she allocates her time and energy. She is clear that if something "doesn't align with those things, then I'm not interested in it."

Susan's commitment to learning can be seen in her being "in school forever." She first went back to school to get her ESL certification, then earned a master's degree in reading and literacy along with a reading specialist certification. She started a second master's degree in curriculum and instruction, felt bored, and dropped out of the program. Then, Susan earned a certificate in instructional design from Penn State University. Throughout, Susan wanted to learn things that were applicable to her job but that might also give her a different skill set or allow her to network with people that have different experiences. She shared with her husband, "I feel like revived in my learning journey. I'm so glad that I can be learning something that's interesting to me."

These learning experiences encouraged Susan to adopt different lenses and apply many things to her practice. Most recently, Susan received a letter of endorsement for instructional coaching which she will do next year in her building. Before beginning her new role, Susan wants to learn the various models of instructional coaching: "I want to understand the intricacies of it and the different modes of coaching. I want to look at the theories behind it. I want to have all that knowledge before I do it." Susan wants to do her work at a high level and not "halfway." Susan's voracious appetite for learning extends beyond education. She has a yoga teaching

certification and takes cooking classes online. “I just want to know stuff. I like to learn new things. I like to network with people. I'm just curious.”

Teacher Leadership and Managing the Plateau

Susan stresses that her learning paths are not typical or not what others expect. “People can't get over the fact that I left a master's program after 18 credits. I was bored.” Interest and curiosity drive Susan’s learning process and evaluation of her progress. Susan wants to be leader in education but not an administrator. She has no interest in overseeing a building or supervising others: “I want to be with kids because that's the work that keeps me motivated.” Having been teaching for 11 years, Susan does feel a bit plateaued professionally but sees director work as “a trash job with no fun.”

In the spirit of pursuing a new venture, she has started to put out applications to teach as an adjunct professor. However, as she lacks a doctoral degree or post-secondary teaching experience, her many applications were initially unsuccessful. Susan did get hired by a local community college to teach two reading courses to K-12 educators and hopes that will lead to other opportunities to teach adults. She describes this hope as an effort to spark curiosity and stave off boredom. Susan observes that there aren't advancement opportunities for teachers and that the main difference in terms of job between a 30-year and three-year teacher is salary. She conceptualizes her “plateau” relative to the intellectual piece of her job.

While looking forward to taking the instructional coaching position next year, she has hesitation: “If I take a step away from kids now, will I ever get back?” She shared an anecdote on how she often experiences joy in her job. “This morning, I was with four students, and we were learning about the flow of blood through the heart, and we had all these little cards out and we were talking together in English and Spanish and practicing all the translations. And I'm like, ‘I

can't believe I get paid to do this.'" Susan describes herself as very open to new experiences but isn't sure what the unintended consequences of new jobs or roles might be. She is very excited to teach community college reading classes to English learners.

The Complexity and Challenge of Teaching

Susan has deep respect for the complexity and challenges of being a teacher today. She describes one of the core challenges of teaching as having a whole class of students who may not have "skills to manage the things" and being responsible to get them "to do things that they don't want to do. It's no joke and super hard." Susan feels like she has developed a deep appreciation for and understanding of the practice of teaching. She feels that what is being asked of teachers today is not reasonable. Susan describes that even with proper procedures and classroom management, today's teachers are using "brooms in a sword fight." Susan elaborates that challenging and unexpected situations are going to happen repeatedly and the best a teacher can do is react. "If you want 10 to 1 classroom management, then you need to put teachers in a 10 to 1 ratio. But if they're not in a 10 to 1 ratio, then you're going to get 25 to 1 classroom management and it's going to be what it's going to be."

Susan feels that her colleagues can be amazing teachers, but they are too often burning out because too much is asked of them. Returning to her own experience, Susan reflects on when she taught an ELD English class, describing it as challenging but the best three years of her teaching career. "I loved those kids. They were hard kids. They were kids that most of them have been kicked out of their other schools. They were involved in a lot of things outside of school that we didn't talk about, but I loved to teach and I had a great relationship with those kids." Susan shared that her students cursed every day and that she had three desks flipped in one year. She didn't feel like she was a bad teacher when her kids were having a bad day. Susan met her

kids where they were adapting to the context of the day while helping them learn skills and become better able to regulate themselves. She states, “Nothing that you could read in a book will ever teach you what you need to know to understand and respect a classroom teacher's day to day.”

Managing Burnout

Aware of the demands of teaching and her capacity to do “more than a lot”, Susan utilizes self-monitoring, self-regulation, and commitment to her mission to manage stress and burnout. “When you are able to very accurately identify the things that keep you from feeling tired or keep you from feeling burnt out, or the things that keep you attached to the reason why you started doing this in the first place,” self-sabotage can be avoided. She wants to avoid putting herself into positions that lead to detachment and deflation and rather engage in activities that make her feel that she “could totally do this for the next 30 years.” This mindset and commitment justify Susan’s avoidance of a promotion into school administration. “I just don't think I care enough about being in charge or having that salary, or I don't think I care enough to martyr myself to do it.”

In an introductory video Susan created for an e-learning course she taught, she said, "Hi, my name's 'Susan', and these are my certifications. And I work at this school and I'm teaching two courses, and I have three kids." She received replies remarking at her busy life and asking if she slept. Susan laughs at these responses and the absurdity of her “getting involved in 75 different things all the time, supporting the staff, running Teacher Roundtable, doing the teacher induction, having mentor meetings, doing the inter-office leadership, running the attendance initiative, being part of the grading team and helping and supporting that, doing the LMS management, whatever.”

Susan also notes that she has improved at not saying yes to everything: “What I’ve gotten better at the longer I’ve been in education is when to say no, how to say no, and how to be discerning about what are the things that I’m putting my time and energy into.” When Susan says yes to things she cares about, she is careful to surround herself with others who also care about those things and can support her in doing the work.

Prioritizing family is another way Susan avoids burnout. On the days when she has custody of her daughter, Susan is not available for open houses, after school events, or after school translating. “Do not ask me to be here. I will not show up. I will be here for back-to-school night. I’ll be here for graduation. Anything else that’s on a Wednesday or Thursday, I’m not going to be here.” Susan will give a lot to her school, colleagues, and students, but some things she is “not willing to sacrifice.” Susan strives to stay balanced with her commitments to sleep, eating dinner with her family, intellectual pursuits, and students. She understands that sometimes those things are going to come into conflict. When this happens, Susan makes “unapologetic” choices: “This is what I’m committing to right now.”

Fostering Reflection: Networks of Support

Susan describes herself as an extrovert who gains energy through interacting with others. She describes herself as a person who doesn’t get “burned out” on people and doesn’t need “alone time.” This allows Susan to always be in “circles with people.” She feels like her “best work is done when I’m able to identify someone that knows something better than me and take time with that person to learn from them.” She elaborates that the people she gravitates towards are those that “are doing something better than me.” Susan identifies two members of her support network: Meg (she’s one of the other case study educators) who is an “amazing” professional mentor, and her co-lead teacher Steve, “the construction guy.” Susan feels that Steve is

sometimes better at talking to some of the professionals who are coming in from the field. She enjoys learning from him and watching how he manages those relationships. Susan describes Steve as an incredible curriculum person, and she is stimulated by “understanding how his brain is processing things.” Susan feels like her cup is filled in a way that she can do better work, knowing she has people like Meg and Steve in her corner.

Susan also identifies the Penn Graduate School of Education’s Consortium for Mental Health and Optimal Development as valuable for support and learning. “I love our affinity groups and being able to talk to other teachers and hearing their stories.” She also enjoys learning from school administrators and appreciates having a space to share ideas, projects, and structures. Susan feels that the collaborative space is good for her but can be challenging for others. Susan values how she can learn from the different perspectives and experiences of others. She also values the sharing of tools like models or diagrams.

Susan thinks that her involvement in organizations like the Consortium supports her learning, professional identity development, reflection, and self-regulation. She says, “I’m constantly looking for information. I want feedback on what's working and what's not working because I am also wildly uninterested in continuing to do stuff that doesn't make sense or isn't beneficial to people, or even worse, is harmful.”

Susan also finds her herself learning from her “exceptional” mentee. She marvels how the mentee has “teaching in her bones” and how “the level at which she understands how to do a classroom is quite literally mind-blowing.” The mentee is extremely reflective in her practice constantly looking at what worked, what didn't work, and what could be done differently. The mentee writes in her journal weekly, reviewing her practice and imagining adjustments that she can make.

The approach of Susan's mentee often was critiqued by other veteran teachers. In a meeting, someone told Susan, "Well, you know how Constance. can be." Susan, relating to her experience as a young teacher, unapologetic and dedicated to kids, replied sarcastically, "'Well, unfortunately for Constance, she has me as a mentor.'" Afterwards, Susan provided additional encouragement to her mentee: "You so obviously care about the success of your students and the classroom. So when you're operating from that place where those are the things that are driving you to do the things that you do, you don't have to apologize to anybody for moving at the pace that you're moving at. Do the right stuff because it's the right thing to do and do it because it's your classroom and these are your kids, and you're allowed to be too much for somebody. Because look at how incredible your program is."

Susan is passionate about supporting young teachers the way she was mentored by her first principal. She also wants to help her mentee to manage many of the "slings and arrows" she received as a teacher. Susan wants to buttress how her mentee "deeply embedded this reflective practice into her every day." Susan notes that the best teachers she has worked with constantly reflect on what went well and what didn't. Susan explains that the teachers with the best technology, resources, or organization were not effective if they were not also reflective. Susan strives to constantly engage in inquiry about her own practice and interactions with others: "I look within the scope of my own stuff, checking in to see if I'm good. Can I take something else on, or should I just shut my mouth and let this be? Or do I have the skills to contribute to a solution to this problem, or do I have something to contribute to this conversation?"

Susan is also consistent in valuing solutions to problems over getting along with colleagues: "I have to choose between someone feeling a certain way or me creating a solution to the problem so that's not a problem anymore. I'll always choose the latter." Susan notes that

teachers who disagree with her or get annoyed by her often seek her out for support for things like doing goals or curriculum. Susan strives to not hold grudges and that her helping “the annoyed” benefits students and the school.

Out of Crisis Comes Teacher Roundtable

The 2021-2022 school year was very difficult for Susan. Feeling that everything was a “mess”, Susan seriously considered leaving teaching “I was like, teachers aren't okay. Kids aren't okay. Nothing is good. Everyone's a mess. This is awful.” Susan felt overwhelmed and almost paralyzed. She reached out to her colleague and mentor Meg to share that she was having a “complete education crisis” and told her, “I don't know if I want to be a teacher anymore.”

Meg and Susan talked and identified “this genuine disconnect between the staff members in the building, because we're very isolated. Everyone's in their programs. There's not a lot of traffic.” Meg, having a strong background in inquiry and action research groups suggested that they work together on setting up a Teacher Roundtable program that would give teachers a space to connect, share practices, solve problems, and support each other. Susan was surprised at how many people showed up for the first meeting of Teacher Roundtable and how people kept coming back.

For the two and a half years that Susan and Meg have led the program, they have had consistent attendance every week for something that is completely optional for teachers. She says, “I think it just speaks to me, when we're talking about burnout versus demoralization, you look at something like Teacher Roundtable and say, ‘If someone's really burnt out, why are they going to go do something extra? Why wouldn't they use that time for prep? Or why wouldn't they use that time to sit and eat lunch in silence? Or why wouldn't they use it?’” These inquiries lead Susan to a central question, “Why do people keep coming to this if people are identifying

burnout as the issue?” Examining this question led Susan to a realization that genuine disconnection, feeling a lack of support and a fractured sense of community may be more salient issues than burnout. Doing the work may not be as much a problem as not feeling supported in doing the work.

Susan sees Teacher Roundtable as a crucial model or program that provides those essential healing connections and a sense of belonging among teachers. Susan, noting a recent staff resiliency survey, identifies Teacher Roundtable as a “remedy to one of these resiliency factors. And this is something that's addressing that need for anyone that wants it.” Between 15 and 18 teachers regularly show up, which represents the bulk of the teaching staff. Susan states, “They're getting nurtured. If they're choosing to come, they're getting something out of it.” Susan feels that of all the large undertakings and projects, Teacher Roundtable has been the most valuable. Through her leadership and experience in Teacher Roundtable, Susan has not only resolved her “complete education crisis,” she has also positively transformed the culture of the staff, fostering community, reflection, problem solving, and connection.

Summary of Themes and Discussion

Table 4.1

Susan’s Three Themes with Examples

Themes	Examples
Impact of Mentorship	Susan’s first principal Kylene modeled resonant leadership, believing in her and cultivating Susan as a leader. Positive experience with her official mentor. Mentorship models shaped how Susan leads and supports colleagues. Early positive mentorship helped to mitigate later poor, negative mentorship.
Curiosity & Drive to Learn	Susan who is a voracious learner. She is curious to learn new things and skills and demonstrates a growth mindset, reframing failure as generative and leading to success. She has collected various degrees and certifications and is

	willing to stop programs or professional developments that are not stimulating.
Collaboration/Support with Colleagues	Susan is an extrovert who doesn't burn out on people. She is nourished by her participation in various networks or professional development programs. She feels a deep commitment to help others even if she has tension with them. Susan is especially dedicated to supporting novice teachers. Susan also leads Teacher Roundtable, engaging in collaborative problems of practice with colleagues.

Impact of Mentorship

Susan had dramatic positive mentorship experiences with her first principal Kylene who not only provided support and knowledge of the profession but also encouraged leadership and inspired her. Telling Susan that she is good at something and should lead a PLC as novice teacher sent Susan a message of competence and self-efficacy. Susan felt seen and understood by Kylene. Further, Kylene could see possibilities for Susan that she hadn't yet imagined. Kylene's mentorship embodied what Annie McKee and Richard Boyatzis refer to as resonant leadership (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Resonant leaders, like Kylene, move people powerfully, passionately, and purposefully using emotional intelligence competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship awareness.

Susan felt Kylene tune into or resonate with her thoughts and emotions, and, in the process, galvanize Susan towards higher levels of growth and leadership. Susan had other important positive experiences with mentors during her novice years, but none were so impactful as Kylene who persisted as a model of leadership for Susan.

Susan's experience with Kylene raises possibilities of reframing novice teacher mentorship and support. What would the novice years look like if new teachers were encouraged to be leaders and engage in leadership practices with colleagues that affirm the novice teacher as a competent professional with something to offer others? Feeling believed in and capable can

create positive energy that can help mitigate the struggle of being overwhelmed with the complexities of the profession in the early years. It may seem counterintuitive to help overwhelmed teachers by giving them more responsibilities, but this approach was highly effective for Susan who felt welcomed, affirmed, and challenged by Kylene. According to McKee, Boyatzis, and Johnston (2008), being a resonant leader isn't just about being positive or supportive. It can also entail sending a challenging, but also galvanizing message that may be difficult to hear but leads to positive results. An example of this is seen when Susan recalls Kylene's words: "You're doing so well in these things. Your instructions are great. The kids really seemed to like you, but some of your learning coach responsibilities seemed to kind of be falling by the wayside." Kylene would then offer specific suggestions on how the issue could be solved and provide a connection to other educators who are good models or could help in some way. From Kylene, Susan learned to internalize a resonant leader approach and to be there to support her colleagues even when they don't treat Susan as nicely or professionally as she would like. Invoking a "what would Kylene do (WWKD)" mantra, Susan strives to treat others with dignity and share responsibility for the development of everyone in the community of a school.

Curiosity and Drive to Learn

Susan, a voracious learner wants to know things and is unafraid to embrace challenges and failures especially if they can also be stimulating and help her develop her skills or learn new ones. She models a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and encourages her colleagues and students to also embrace the generative discomfort of failure. Embracing a growth mindset, Susan is constantly looking for stimulation and fighting "boredom." If something doesn't align with Susan's values and goals, she is not interested in it, as per the example of a certificate program that she left when she found it not helpful or stimulating. Part of her commitment to learning can

be seen in her being “in school forever,” collecting various degrees and certifications that gave her valuable knowledge and important skills. She enjoys learning new things and applies this mindset for learning across many domains in her professional and personal life.

For Susan, her curiosity, growth mindset, and hunger for stimulation act as an engine of professional growth and a hedge against the challenges or negative aspects of the teaching profession. What would it look like if teacher education programs, induction programs, and K-12 staff more deeply valued curiosity and a growth mindset? While teachers struggle to survive the novice years and the continual challenges the profession offers, teachers could simultaneously thrive, exulting in learning new things and basking in spectacular failures that stoke deep growth. While it may not be realistic to expect all teachers to share Susan’s intensity and curiosity of Susan, it’s likely that if curiosity, intensity, and growth mindset are modeled and encouraged a plethora of positive outcomes for teachers and their students will occur, including enabling teachers to stay and thrive in their professions.

Collaboration/Support with Colleagues

Susan is an extrovert who is nourished by being in “circles of people” and learning with others. She is constantly searching for colleagues who do things better than her. Partly inspired by her first principal’s encouragement to learn from others and galvanized by her strong curiosity and desire to learn and get better, Susan seeks out new mentors and opportunities to collaborate with others.

Susan is also nourished by her participations in professional networks and groups such as the Consortium for Mental Health and Optimal Development and her schools’ Teacher Roundtable which she started with her colleague Meg who is featured in the third case study. Susan’s experiences in these groups maps well onto the concept of communities of practice

(Lave & Wenger, 1991). In communities of practice, the focus is on being part of a learning organization, when members bring their learning or knowledge from other settings into the group with the purpose of improving the organization. In the Consortium, Susan works with colleagues on her team and across other school district teams to develop projects that improve the mental health capacity and outcomes of her school. In Teacher Roundtable, Susan and her colleagues identify problems of practice, adopt an inquiry stance to more deeply understand them, and generate possible solutions to be tried.

Susan feels that reflective practices are central to growing in collaborative relationships with colleagues, with key inquiries being “What worked well and what didn’t?” She sees this reflective approach as especially important in her support of novice teachers. In her relationships with colleagues, Susan values solving problems or creating solutions over getting along. Susan strives to not hold grudges and that her helping even “the annoyed” teachers benefits students and the school.

The teaching profession can be isolating with lots of barriers to collaboration and interaction with colleagues. Susan was very proactive in seeking out networks of support and opportunities to collaborate with other educators in and out of her school. Imagine the potential benefits of centering collaboration with colleagues as a top value within a school or system. Existing structures such as grade level or subject groups would be equipped with more time and resources. New structures such as roundtables or inquiry groups would be created. Faculty meetings would have less top-down sharing of information and more collaborative projects and working groups with sharing of practices and knowledge learned.

CHAPTER FIVE: EMMA, A CASE OF FOSTERING STUDENT AND SELF LITERACIES: ACADEMIC, EMOTIONAL, SOCIAL, AND TRANSFORMATIONAL

Introduction

In this chapter, the case study of Emma is presented. The content reflects data from interviews and describes Emma's professional growth journey, highlighting the most salient experiences and important aspects of her conceptual framework for practice. Emma's case study shows the importance of mentorship and her drive to developing the "literacies" of self, students, and colleagues, commitment to curiosity, and her dedication to serving her students and supporting her colleagues. After the case study is presented, three dominant themes are summarized and discussed: (1) impact of mentorship, (2) curiosity and inquiry stance, and (3) focus on literacy and social emotional learning.

Background

Emma is a female Caucasian teacher with 20 years of K-12 teaching experience (18 in public education and 2 years at a private school as an ESL/ELD teacher). She has taught in a range of settings: urban, suburban, parochial, and private. Emma has a dual degree in elementary education and special education and is a reading specialist with a master's in reading, writing, and literacy. She has led her own elementary classroom where she was responsible for all subject areas and supported special education students in mainstream classrooms. At her last school, Emma's caseload of special education students ranged from 22-40 students depending on the year. Additionally, she consistently supervises student teachers. Three years ago, Emma left public education because of frustration with her inability to move into a leadership role and the changing nature of being a special education teacher. She started her own tutoring company with a focus on learning differences and feels "joy" working with her own students.

Beginnings

Growing up, Emma felt fortunate that there were always books in her home. Her parents read to “us forever.” Emma would constantly talk to her sister about the different books they read even though they were five and a half years apart. “She would share with me the books that she really liked, and I remember getting older and wanting to read the books that she read like *Secret Garden*.” Emma struggled as a student and was diagnosed with dyscalculia when she was “pretty young.” In middle school, Emma was also diagnosed with a reading disability, but it “wasn't made specific to me.” Emma struggled badly with spelling but was a very functional reader with strong comprehension which was “what got me through.” Eventually, Emma was diagnosed with dyslexia.

Emma went to public elementary school, and then went to a private school as her mother and teachers felt it was better for her to be in smaller classes. Emma also felt that she needed the close relationships with faculty and with students at a private school. Emma felt that in public school many teachers seemed “bored”, but, in private school, most teacher “were passionate about what they were doing.” Effort was encouraged, and she resonated with the school’s mantra, “where there's a will, there's an A.”

Throughout her K-12 education, Emma knew she learned differently than others: “I had seen people I grew up with. It was so easy for them. They didn't have to study the way that I had to study. They didn't need that extra effort.” Emma needed more time and resources like tutoring and working one-on-one with teachers. At her private high school for students with learning differences, Emma saw “everything individualized” and this helped her as a future practitioner: “I really see my students as individuals and having ‘families’ both in school and at home.”

Entering the Profession

Emma had two student teaching placements, one suburban and one urban, which stretched out across the whole year. Her suburban placement was in the elementary school she attended. Emma found it inspiring to be in conversation with her former teachers about new curriculums and how they managed the work of the profession. She listened to their stories and advice and felt welcomed into the profession. The mentor teacher (also her teacher from childhood) underutilized technology and admitted her difficulties with it. Emma felt helpful both to the students and the teacher in modeling use of the laptop carts. During African American history month, Emma created a WebQuest for her students where they had to research various websites and answer basic questions. There were different challenges every day and a “huge” bulletin board showcased the work. Emma was proud of her impact on her African American students: “It was the first time they really ever did something that felt like they were learning about their past.” Emma’s teacher mentor appreciated it and asked her to teach her more about computers. Emma taught her about text to speech for those students who struggled with literacy.

Emma’s second placement was in an “under-resourced” urban public school. She describes her experience as “exceptional” with a teacher that made her classroom “magical.” The teacher used cardboard and wallpapered her room into different nooks and corners and reading areas. Lacking any technology from the school, Emma’s mentor teacher got 2 old typewriters for students: “She really created a world for these kids and that passion really spilled over. I was so honored to have been there with her.”

Emma saw her teacher adopt an inquiry stance and ask herself an ongoing question: “What do my students need to succeed?” Emma saw that many of the answers supported basic needs such as having bars of soap for students to wash up in the bathroom, toothbrushes, snacks

for students to take home, or putting them on lists for holiday food and presents. Emma learned the power of everyday practices and a focus on caring for the needs of her students. Moving forward, Emma always had basic items for her students in her many classrooms. Learning from her mentor teacher, Emma adopted being “creative and crafty” into her practice, always striving “to go the extra mile.” In addition to her mentor, Emma was grateful for her student teaching supervisor who was very “positive” and gave “really great feedback.”

After student teaching, Emma’s first job was with high school students providing full-time learning support. She experienced many challenges in her work and felt that leadership was absent, putting her in many “sink or swim moments.” The extent of support from her supervisor entailed being taken out for happy hour where they would only chat a little about work. That didn’t feel good to Emma as “happy hour wasn’t my scene.” Emma wanted more direct mentoring. “I needed somebody to really kind of talk to me about the culture of the school and teachers in general.” She felt isolated and unsupported. Emma also noted that the principal and other district leaders “never once came to visit.”

Embracing a Focus on Literacy

In the classroom, Emma felt that something was wrong with many of her students being illiterate, unable to fill out driver’s license information. The students had job coaching but their needs weren’t being met. While Emma blamed system issues such as disengaged leaders and staff and a “complete lack of books suited for their needs,” she was also intrigued by other factors that were blocking language acquisition. This inspired her to start a master’s program in reading, writing, and literacy. Emma wondered how the system failed her students and what she needed to learn to “teach her students better.”

As a full-time literacy graduate student, Emma felt very challenged but also appreciated the mentorship from professors and the information, skills, and research she learned. One professor, an expert in practitioner research modeled how to bring an inquiry stance to a classroom and how a teacher can share that with students. The graduate school was involved with a literacy network, which enabled Emma to put her new knowledge and skills to work with teachers and students. Emma observed the difference with teachers choosing professional development and deeply immersing themselves in the work and collaboration of those opportunities. This was a stark contrast to Emma's previous experience observing public school teachers disengaged from mandatory professional development "done to them." Working at the literacy center enabled Emma to see the "behind the scenes, the planning, doing, the research for different programs, current articles, and even planning the lunch events."

Emma valued the impact of adult literacy expert and activist Paulo Freire: "'Reading the word and the world' was one of the theories that really inspired me knowing that kids are sponges and that books are portals to learning about the world." Emma further added that, "Freire really spoke to the way that learning acquisition happens and that reading is a big part of it." Freire reframed literacy for Emma and he inspired her to integrate a critical lens to her practice and action research. For Emma, like with Freire, inquiry projects should be collaborative among teachers and students and lead to transformative change within individuals and groups and in the world.

Emma also took an African American psychology class that "still impacts me today, both personally raising a child of color and how I work with my students and talking about racial stress and what that looks like and feels like, and being really reflective of our own feelings, emotions, biases and what we bring to the table." The class also taught Emma about the power of

being uncomfortable and how to manage discomfort. The professor would say, “There's gonna be something that triggers you. There's gonna be something that hits you, and that's what we need to talk about.” This mindset and her experiences with the professor helped Emma support her future students to lean into tension and discomfort and manage their frustration, developing their awareness and skills.

Adopting an Inquiry Stance, Becoming an Action Researcher

Reflecting on applying these lessons to her teachers, Emma recounted a story about the Grand Canyon. None of the students had seen it, so Emma used Google Earth. The students' curiosity was piqued, and they asked many questions and engaged in exploring. This led to Emma and her students forming a lunch group to explore Google Earth. For Emma, fostering curiosity was foundational to having students adopt an inquiry lens to learning. With the Grand Canyon, “What does it look like? What does the terrain look like there or what animals live there?” Emma embraced an inquiry process where one question leads to others always probing deeper or in “serendipitous” directions. Emma reflected that her graduate school experiences with action research and practitioner inquiry became embedded in her practices and influenced how she approached teaching and student learning: “The idea of inquiry, making it magic is kind of how I've set it for students and really connect them to more.”

As a more veteran teacher, Emma joined Action Research Group (ARG) at Penn GSE which met monthly over dinner to support educators with action research projects. Emma enjoyed supporting many of the younger educators, especially the Teach for America students who had “not a lot of training, and it was kind of that sink or swim feeling for many of them.” She found value in ARG check-ins where “folks could get things off their chest and continue to do the challenging work.” Emma sought out these experiences as a younger teacher and wanted

to share her experiences and offer advice. Emma thought the novice educators listened to her because she was still “fresh and had passion.”

At Emma’s new public school, she had a “wonderful supervisor” and a group of “very inclusive colleagues.” She felt very invigorated to be in supportive professional communities both within and outside of her work setting. Emma noted how her knowledge increased from a close collaboration with the school psychology and a reading specialist. “We shared resources. I wanted to know more about my students’ testing. I really wanted to grow an understanding of what this report was that I was receiving and how to really address some of those critical issues.” Emma would talk with them about the work she was doing in her classroom and the reading specialist would observe her teaching and review curriculum together. Emma would then watch the reading specialist work with her small groups. Together, they shared an inquiry stance on understanding their practice and students’ learning.

Emma saw this collaboration as a continuation of her graduate schoolwork and an expression of her “relentless curiosity.” This work with the reading specialist increased her knowledge of student language development and the brain which led to improvements in meeting student speech and language needs. Emma described how her collaborations spread: “When I was in other people’s classrooms, they would see me working with small groups, the kids who were identified and were really struggling in their classroom.” Emma would get asked to do demo lessons or consult with teachers on specific students or curriculum practices. Emma used these sessions to help the teachers adopt an inquiry stance into their practices. “I started having them frame some questions about what they wanted to learn about.” Emma would share articles or provide them with a resource book that she found helpful.

Developing Expertise & Leadership

As she moved past her 10th year of teaching, Emma felt like she was becoming more of an “expert” teacher with a strong knowledge base and highly developed academic and social emotional skills. Emma also took on more leadership roles in her elementary school and collaborated closely with her principal. As Emma gained confidence, she started a principalship program and ultimately did not like it: “I got really bored fast, so I dropped out.” She did learn how to do budgeting and “how you deal with parents and discipline and curriculum and complaints, all those things.” Emma did complete a leadership program in her district which she described as “phenomenal.”

SEL Issues & Supporting Student with their Challenges

As a special education teacher Emma strived to develop her students executive functioning capacities as well as their ability to self-regulate and manage emotions. Emma appreciated how some teachers were also helpful to students in this regard but found that most weren't and escalated with students in ways that were unhelpful and often harmful to them: “Many teachers aren't helpful to students in this regard, others were very helpful. Sometimes I would be called down for a student when teachers were ‘done.’” Many of these “black and white thinking” teachers would work with Emma on developing plans to accommodate challenging students and others resisted collaborating. Emma shared that her kids would often shut down and refuse to do work in their other classrooms and then they would come “see me even though I wasn't a resource room.”

Emma felt that her classroom was a “beacon of hope where kids could come to take a break or get work done. They could ask questions, and I could make sure things could be adjusted to differentiate for their needs.” Emma explained that supporting students with

executive function was detail work: making sure they knew what the homework was, making sure they had systems for important things, and that they carried needed supplies with them.

Emma helped students develop emotional and social intelligence competencies: “Some kids didn’t have awareness of how they presented themselves to others or really misinterpreted what was coming at them.” Often kids would say things like “my teacher hates me.” Emma noticed a lot of shame that students connected to academic pieces with any task that was deemed as too difficult often leading to total shutdowns. Emma found success through talking to her students, even about their whole bodies. She would ask, “How are you feeling?” and the student might respond, “Well, my heart’s beating so fast or my cheeks are so pink.” Emma strived to give students time and space so they could unpack their emotions. She would avoid talking to students when they were angry or “in the middle of something,” instead waiting for the right mindset.

Emma often interceded with other teachers for students to have more time: “The gift of time was everything. It took the pressure off them.” Emma saw some teachers give instructions poorly. Then, a teacher might say that their students weren’t paying attention: “I would ask teachers to write it down and send it with the student with a copy for me.” Emma felt that knowing students and having them feel known was essential to the relationship building and problem solving: “I wanted to know who they were, what were their favorite discussion topics and colors. Emma also valued connecting with their parents, sharing with parents those positive moments and celebrating their students’ progress and “milestones.”

Values and Beliefs

Emma has centered her teaching around recognizing potential: “Every student that I work with has grown and learned and there's capability.” Emma feels that believing in the capacity of

students to change and grow positions her to see possibilities to support this responsively for each of her students. Another foundational value for Emma is that, with a growth mindset and support, adversity can foster development: “Learning to face challenges is something that not only have I done as a human and as a student, but what I really help guide students through those tough times and really celebrate them.” Emma notes that caring, connected support is essential in learning self-regulation and emotion management that is “the difference between growth and defeat, making sure that you have the support, and you give the support that's needed. That self-care piece is so important.”

Emma’s third central value is work ethic, or “putting in that extra effort.” She explains that the effort shouldn’t be about getting “credit” but rather “be because it's something that you're interested in or you have questions about.” Emma, having internalized an inquiry stance, always ask questions “about everything. Go back to the drawing board. And yeah, it's a lot of energy and effort, but it really makes the job fantastic.”

The Pandemic: Regression for Everyone

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on Emma: “I lost all autonomy. I had no support. What we were being asked to do as teachers was not okay.” Emma was able to teach online but she was also the only special education teacher at her elementary school with a caseload of 60 students that felt “undoable.” Emma no longer “felt confident about what I was being asked to do and performing in the way that I felt good about it.” This led Emma to the “hardest decision”, she left her position. “I loved my school, loved the teachers, loved the students, but there was pressure and there were things I had issues with.” Before leaving, Emma pursued a teacher-on-assignment leadership position but was told that there were not budget funds for that. Emma felt this as a rejection and a loss of a leadership opportunity. She thought,

"They're not hearing me. It's getting harder for me to do the things I know are right and I know that my students need."

Opening a Business: Continuing to Support Students

After leaving public education, Emma felt confident enough to open her own tutoring business which was “huge” for her. She hired summer teachers and her former student teacher and “still got to mentor her.” “We would meet before or after sessions to really make sure she was developing as a teacher.” Emma also became an adjunct professor at a local university where she was supporting student teachers and doing observations. Doing work independently and on her own terms sparked new passion and energy in Emma. She enjoyed this authority, expressed in simple ways like when she got to call her own snow day: “That was when I knew I was really in charge, kind of thing.”

Word spread quickly, and Emma became successful meeting a need for students, especially those with learning differences to get support they weren't getting in school. Emma's pitch to parents was "give me four sessions and you're going to start to feel better. My job is to help you feel better about what you're doing." She stressed to her students that “it's tough stuff” but that they would “work through it together.” Emma saw many parents who were frustrated with their kids who were seeing “god-awful” grades with criticism and pressure coming from parents and teachers. Emma also partnered with a private school who had students who had special needs or were identified with learning disabilities. Not only did she support their students, Emma also supported the school's staff, especially the reading specialist. The skills, knowledge, and expertise that Emma learned across her career helped her immensely in her tutoring business.

Developing self-regulation and relationship skills was central for Emma: “Looking at their social and emotional needs, both the parents and the students, was a huge part of my work.” Emma worked with students facing challenges like oppositional defiance disorder. She did unconventional things like reading a book to a child while hanging upside down on a chair with the student being underneath looking at her or accommodating to a child’s request to do Zoom sessions in the closet. Emma had a mindset that “by any means necessary, we were going to get through this together.” Emma was able to stay positive and dedicated to her students because of “the light bulb” moments where student “get it” or master a new skill, feeling a strong sense of pride and accomplishment: “When there is that click, there is nothing to me more joyous. I am 22 years in the profession, and I am still as passionate today as I was years ago.” Emma acknowledges she is less confused and needs less hand holding but is as “passionate about professional development as ever.” She still journals about her practice regularly: “I felt like there was so much inside of me that I really needed to get out to serve my students. It's always about those students and supporting myself to be able to do that.”

Concerns about the Current Landscape

Emma recently ran into some former teacher colleagues, and one said, "Oh my God, you look fabulous. Is that what happens when people leave this place?" Even though Emma felt this remark as a joke, she noticed that “they all looked really tired.” They told her, "It's worse. Way worse than when you were here." Emma was concerned as she had worked closely with these teachers who were very committed to their students and loved working with them. To see them struggling with burnout and wanting to leave the profession disturbed Emma. Afterwards, Emma felt that she had to have conversations about the current state of the profession with her

university students. Although it “was unfair to really warn them, they needed to see what was coming” so they could prepare for it.

Emma saw this less as a warning and more of an encouragement to stay true to oneself and one’s passions when teaching in environments that may not be conducive to growth and learning. In her former district “things have been so litigious, not just in special ed, but in regular ed.” Emma noted that there her district experienced double digit suicides and suicide attempts. She felt there was a critical need to address the social emotional needs of students. Invoking literacy expert Lucy Caulkins, Emma feels more needs to be done to make classrooms suitable environments for growth. Teachers and students need to feel that, “this is my place to really learn.” Emma understands the challenges in fighting the current feelings of disengagement, detachment, and even despair.

Looking Forward

Emma knows that schools have coaches but thinks they need more of them to support teachers professionally and personally, especially with special education. After 22 years, Emma still wonders “What do I want to be when I grow up?” She finds it difficult to imagine returning to public education as a teacher, especially to a traditional classroom or school. Even being a public school leader does not appeal to Emma considering how tired and devoid of passion many leaders seem to be. Emma is curious about other opportunities with curriculum or working with educational organizations like intermediate units. While Emma knows there is still a big need for special education tutors, she has closed her business for the moment: “It’s still my business and I can still do it in a different way.” Emma imagines her “doing a combination of maybe different things and feeling quite rewarded for that work.”

Summary of Themes and Discussion

Table 5.1

Emma's Three Themes with Examples

Themes	Examples
Impact of Mentorship	Emma had strong mentors for her two student teaching placements. She benefited from a reciprocal relationship with one mentor. Mentorship was absent in her early teaching jobs.
Curiosity & Inquiry Stance	Emma is curious and driven to learn as a student and a teacher. Her student teaching mentor modeled inquiry stance. Inquiry stance was central to Emma's practice. She fostered an inquiry stance and curiosity for students, encouraging student passion and agency with learning.
Focus on Literacy and Social Emotional Learning	Emma embraced many "literacies." She focused on developing traditional literacy knowledge and skills, developing a framework for literacy in graduate school. Also, Emma cultivated learning differences literacy for herself and her students. Further, she valued the fostering of social emotional learning literacy.

Impact of Mentorship

Emma had the opportunity to have two different mentors at her two student teaching placements. Each benefitted Emma in different ways. Her placement at her former elementary school left her inspired from the many conversations she had with her former teachers about the "behind the scenes" details of how they managed the practice of teaching. Her mentor and other teachers were generous and encouraging in sharing knowledge and skills. The impact of this positive welcome and support could be seen in how Emma felt empowered to be creative and take risks in the classroom. When her mentor admitted her deficiencies in using technology, Emma created an African American history WebQuest that was very impactful with her students, especially the African American students. Emma's reciprocal relationship with her mentor continued as Emma taught her mentor how to integrate technology into lessons and Emma's

mentor was open about her approach, techniques, successful lessons, and how she manages challenges. Emma and her mentor were in constant dialogue, debriefing lessons, imagining curriculum, and talking about individual students.

Emma's second placement was with a mentor in an "under-resourced" urban public school. Emma's mentor modeled a deep, caring and creative commitment to students. Emma was inspired by how passionate her mentor was and how she created "magical spaces" for learning. Emma observed the inquiry stance of her mentor whose practice was informed by a central question: "What do my students need to succeed?" Unlike her previous placement, Emma learned about the importance of meeting the basic needs of her students whether with food, bars of soap, toothbrushes, or connecting them to resources for the holidays.

From her suburban school mentor, Emma learned about the importance of collaborating with other teachers and helping each other grow in their practice. From her urban school mentor, Emma was inspired by the qualities and practices that her mentor modeled. Her experience supports the value of being exposed to multiple mentors, official or not, who can model a range of practices and approaches that can shape how a novice teacher like Emma creates her own approaches and framework. Strong mentoring can be a powerful buffer to manage the complexity and stresses of teaching in the early years. Receiving warm, supportive mentoring during the first entry into the profession as a pre-service teacher can be especially difference making.

After Emma's student teaching, she received minimal and very poor mentoring from her supervisors and colleagues. Her initial, positive experiences with mentors helped mitigate the shock of absentee mentorship that didn't extend beyond alcohol at happy hour. The isolation and lack of visits to her classroom left Emma feeling under-stimulated when she was hungry to learn

about the intricacies of teaching and learning. Indeed, mentors can cause harm when they are not directly being negative but simply absent when needed.

Curiosity & Inquiry Stance

As a child, Emma was a curious and voracious learner, discussing books with her sister. As a novice teacher, Emma was curious to learn as rapidly as possible about teaching and learning. She describes herself as a sponge who sought out conversations with colleagues, classroom visits, feedback, and opportunities to reflect. This drive to grow and an intentionality about how to pursue it persisted through Emma's career. One of her student teacher mentors adopted an inquiry stance around a central, ongoing question, "What do my students need to succeed?" Emma also internalized this question with a commitment to always reflect about it in her practice. In graduate school, various professors and mentors further supported Emma's learning about inquiry and how to integrate it into practitioner research and the classroom. Inquiry and action research are often strongly embedded in education graduate schools, especially in teacher education and literacy programs. Emma was fortunate to have a student teacher mentor to model inquiry stance during such a critical period for her. What would the impact be on the profession if K-12 schools more systematically supported the practice of inquiry stance, especially during the novice stage? What would it look like if curiosity was modeled and encouraged for teachers?

Emma integrated an inquiry-based approach with her students that was like Jerome Bruner's (1960) discovery learning theory, where teachers encourage student learning through guided inquiry and open-ended questions. This approach empowers learners to seek answers, make connections, and develop their cognitive abilities. The teacher's role in discovery learning or Bruner's inquiry approach is to facilitate learning through posing questions, helping students

learn how to generate their own inquiries. Emma demonstrated this approach when teaching her students about the Grand Canyon. Using Google Earth as a tool, Emma would pose questions like “What does it look like? What does the terrain look like there or what animals live there?” Emma describes an inquiry process where one question leads to others always probing deeper or in “serendipitous” directions. Throughout the curriculum process Emma is using inquiry to strengthen student interest, passion, and agency, encouraging her students to shape and own the learning process. Emma shows inquiry stance operating as a parallel process. On a teacher level, Emma adopts inquiry stance towards her practice, responding to what she learns in a John Dewey inquiry cycle approach that is self-correcting, and context bound (Johnston, 2012). On a student level, Emma is inculcating inquiry stance or discovery learning with her students, focused less on their own practice and more on their knowledge building, uncovering deeper, more nuanced levels of understanding through questioning and following their interests.

Focus on Literacy and Social Emotional Learning

Inspired by Freire’s notion of reading the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), Emma wants to enhance the agency of her students and their capacities to develop various “literacies.” Since childhood, Emma was passionate about literacy in its classic sense, devouring books and talking about them with her sister. As an English and Special Education teacher, Emma wanted her students to be highly literate, able to read various texts and make meaning from them. To better do this, Emma enrolled in a *Reading, Writing, and Literacy* graduate program, striving to learn more about the mechanics of reading, the psychology of supporting students with literacy development, and the sociology of literacy. She was driven to understand school and societal patterns that support or inhibit literacy. For Emma, literacy is a Freirean

political and social act, a pathway for students to develop a deeper understanding of themselves, each other, and the world, creating future pathways and opportunities.

Closely aligned to traditional literacy development, Emma is also dedicated to fostering literacy of learning differences for herself and her students. Having dyslexia and other learning differences attuned Emma to how learning differences can impact a learner physically, psychologically, and socially. It's personal for Emma and she wants her students to not struggle and suffer in school like she did. Cultivating learning difference literacy mitigates this problem. As Emma de-stigmatizes learning differences for her students, they can have the confidence and knowledge to better manage and self-regulate themselves as learners. Another parallel process is happening with Emma and her students with learning difference literacy as Emma manages her own learning differences while equipping students to do the same.

Further, Emma valued the fostering of social emotional learning literacy for herself and her students. As a special education teacher, Emma strived to develop her students executive functioning capacities as well as their ability to self-regulate and manage emotions. While Emma found that many colleagues were not knowledgeable or interested in social emotional learning, Emma knew she had to develop her own knowledge and skill with it. Emma positioned herself as a resource and advocate for students who would often get “in trouble” with other teachers, helping her colleagues understand the makeup of her students and the skill development they needed. Helping students develop greater awareness and capacity to regulate their emotions offered students relief as they were better able to manage themselves through challenges and be more cognitively capable with learning. Coupled with teaching students emotional and social skills, Emma also worked to develop their executive functioning capacity. Through strong

relationship building and providing students with more time and accommodations, her students could self-regulate across many domains.

What would it look like if teachers and schools were more deliberate in cultivating a wide range of essential literacies for their students? Emma identified literacies in language, learning differences, and social emotional learning. Additional literacies such as technology, social media, mindset (growth, inquiry stance), body knowledge (mindfulness) are important to deliberately foster. As schools set content and performance standards, they can also aim to develop various competencies across a range of literacies. An expansive literacies lens would encourage a more comprehensive view of what we want teachers and students to know and be able to do.

CHAPTER SIX: MEG, A CASE OF FINDING FLOW BY LEANING INTO FEAR THROUGH INQUIRY STANCE, SUPPORT, AND COMMITMENT TO SELF AND OTHERS

Introduction

In this chapter, the case study of Meg is presented. The content reflects data from interviews and describes Meg's professional growth journey, highlighting the most salient experiences and important aspects of her conceptual framework for practice. Meg's case study depicts the importance of mentorship, how she found "flow" through a deeply internalized inquiry stance, and her efforts to emotionally regulate anxiety, stress, and trauma. Her dedication to her students and colleagues stands out. After the case study is presented, three dominant themes are summarized and discussed: (1) impact of mentorship, (2) inquiry stance, and (3) emotional regulation, coping with trauma and overcoming fear and anxiety.

Background

Meg is a female Caucasian teacher with 28 years of experience as a teacher. She is currently a teacher of teacher academy students and an equity, inclusion, and belonging (EIB) director at a technical high school in a suburb of a large city in the northeast. Meg also is an adjunct literacy instructor (for the past 9 years) and teacher educator at a local university.

Balancing a Dual Role

Meg currently teaches Teacher Academy classes to high school students who are prospective teachers who also have field placements. She balances this commitment with being the technical school's equity director. Meg sees the two as connected as "I've been doing that kind of work within my program for a really long time." She feels like she has taken on a more formal leadership role in the technical school building, attending all leadership team meetings and planning with other school leaders. Meg appreciates and enjoys the opportunity but also

misses having more time directly with students. At present, Meg is running seven different EIB initiatives. She leads the EIB team and gets brought into discipline meetings where an “equity piece is involved such as a racial, LGBTQ, or belonging component.” In these situations, Meg will sometimes consult with staff or meet with students. Being an administrator, Meg isn’t always sure how her day will look “because you’re going to get called in to address things immediately.” Meg also started a chapter of Educators Rising, a national organization that aims to cultivate a new generation of diverse teachers: “Our chapter supports aspiring educators to become active voice of future education.”

Meg is experienced with her teaching academy work: “I have that down. I’ve developed my curriculum, my program, everything is there, but you’re trying to address the people in the room.” The EIB work is emergent and new and can sometimes pull Meg’s time away from her teaching academy work. Continually balancing the demands of the two roles is a struggle for Meg. Part of Megan’s effort to have more balance with students in her EIB work entails her always choosing to be on teams or in meetings that are student-facing so she can have more time with students: “Honestly, at the end of the day, that’s my goal, is to be with students or in support of students. But my favorite part of everything I do is always when I’m directly with students.”

At a graduate school of education, Meg is currently teaching a class called *Arts-Based Pedagogy Practices and Research*. Meg tries to connect her work with graduate schools to her Teaching Academy work at the technical high school. For example, Meg does the same visual teaching philosophy project with both her high school students and her university students. Both groups make art and reflect on field observations.

Feeling Flow as a Reluctant Administrator

Meg has difficulty embraced the label or role of administrator: “I think if I ever thought I wanted to be an administrator, I don't.” And yet Meg is one: “Administrators don't get to spend enough time with students. That's kind of part of how it just ends up and rolls out. And I think administrators that are more student-facing have to work really hard to do that. And that's not always possible.” Meg took the admin role because she could be of service to students and staff and make an important impact on a broader level. Meg feels like “flow” is often absent in administration, but potentially quotidian when teaching: “Opportunity is certainly there that you can be in some kind of flow space with your students. And I think mentally, it grounds you. It makes you present in the moment. And I think having that ability to connect and build relationships with students, that exists kind of in that space. I don't think it exists in the same kind of way outside of the classroom.”

Meg shared an example of “feeling flow” with her student who was teaching a middle school math lesson. In the role of observer, Meg is clear about her goal in the moment: “Help Jeremiah reflect and be prepared and build him up and make him feel good about what he's done and he was amazing!” Meg remarked on their powerful connection through a shared flow experience: “He's teaching about math translations and the kids were so engaged and they were asking me all kinds of questions about him.” Meg felt immersed in the experience as well and recognized that these “sacred” moments with students are worth protecting. Meg doesn't have the same feeling when doing administrative tasks.

Meg further explains the benefit of flow states that emerge out of reciprocal relationships with her students: “It's not completely altruistic. It allows me to be more grounded in the world and in the present moment. And it helps my mental state, especially when the world is really crazy, and all of the stuff happening in the world.” Having “productive, grounded” conversations

with students gives Meg hope. Meg finds this reciprocal transformation both valuable and validating.

The Struggle of the Early Years

When Meg started as a teacher, she felt very unsure. During student teaching, she did not have a “great mentor.” Meg was a little older than her pre-service peers in graduate school getting both an English master’s degree and a teaching certificate. She taught 9th and 11th grade English. “My mentor treated me like a high school student to the point where she made me call her ‘Mrs. So-and-so’.” Her mentor wouldn’t share resources like the teacher textbook or lesson plans, forcing Meg to look in her university’s library for old lesson plans. Meg described the extreme extent of her mentor’s deliberate lack of support when she forced Meg to do bathroom duty when her university supervisor wanted to debrief after a lesson. It was “crazy and a pretty rough experience! I had to develop everything myself and stumble through it all.”

When Meg started her first job, there were also no mentors for her. She remembers having “really bad” insomnia during that time because “I was having to do everything with no support at all.” Indeed, during her first three years, Meg wanted to quit: “I always felt like I didn’t fit in the school community. I was an outsider.” Meg’s outsider status connected her to her childhood when she lived in England for four years. When she was in England she was seen as “the American kid” and when she came back, she was the “British kid.”

Her yearning for receiving mentorship early in her career led Meg to highly value mentorship. She wonders if teachers today are leaving the profession more because they don’t want to put up with the hazing and negative treatment they get from mentors and colleagues. Meg did find an “unofficial mentor” in a math teacher who “would just help me and I would visit his class and watch him teach.” Meg also found support from the principal who “recognized my

assets” and encouraged her. But, for the most part, other teachers wouldn’t accept Meg and actively discouraged her creativity and initiative. “I still think it remains now, the idea that when you’re new and when you have ideas and you’re good, you better slow your roll because you’re making everybody else look bad.” For example, when Meg started a newspaper with her students, her colleagues were against her having students leave the classroom to work on stories.

Meg explains the “strange” feeling of confidence and self-efficacy possible despite colleagues sending a negative message to her about her abilities: “You can actually be confident and expert as a novice. And I think that because of the hierarchy of teaching, and the novice teacher in the building and being treated so poorly, that your assets are completely overlooked.” Meg felt like she came with ideas that weren’t acknowledged but rejected.

Finding Acceptance at an Alternative School

At a new, alternative, smaller school, Meg felt a greater sense of community and support to innovate: “I was just given full complete freedom to develop the English program.” She felt a sense of belonging in the alternative setting and stayed for seven years. Meg began developing “all the arts-based stuff” she carried through to her later work: “I started to really understand how to develop curriculum, write curriculum because I had to write it.” Meg noted that the culture of the school was more accepting as students could wear baseball hats or keep their hoodies up. The students “characterized themselves as misfits. And I also identified as a misfit teacher, kind of. And so I felt like there was a place for me.”

Managing Trauma, Learning Boundaries

Unfortunately, 12 “kids passed away” while Meg worked there and that traumatized Meg and others at the school. Meg also felt the job was “traumatizing because there was so much trauma that they brought to school every day.” Meg appreciated having such autonomy but felt

that more counselor support was needed for the mental health issues that students struggled with. Meg had many students who were constantly struggling or had been “in a placement like a drug and alcohol treatment center or mental health placement so we had kids who were actively addicts, and then we had kids who were trying to stay sober.” Other students struggled with eating disorders or suicidal ideation. Meg started a zine with students, *Concrete Voices*, and that became a “space for kids to make art and write poetry and do music.”

The level of trauma at the school was challenging for Meg to handle and ultimately led her to leave and get a doctorate as a “mental health sabbatical.” “In addition to having kids OD at school or commit suicide, we were dealing with all of that trauma. I think I couldn't stay in that space.” Meg describes working in an alternative school as “really emotionally taxing. You're the teacher, but you're also the counselor and the nurse and the--yeah. I just had to go to a lot of funerals. I had to speak at some of them.”

The emotional labor of trauma prompted Meg to reevaluate how she processed emotions in school, expressed herself in relationships and connected with students and colleagues. “I didn't get as close as I once did. But I think in a healthier way. I think that when you have that empathy, and in some cases, common experiences to your students, it gets a little tricky. And I think you just take it home too much.” By not taking things home as much, Meg found that it was better for her students because “it wasn't helpful for me to fall apart. It wasn't helpful to anyone; not my students, not myself, not my family. I guess, got to give myself a little grace. How can you not fall apart when you've lost that many kids?” Meg learned how to be caring, empathetic, and supportive in a way that wasn't “an overwhelming tax on my own mental health.”

Doctoral Work: Leveling up an Inquiry Stance

When Meg began a doctorate at an area university, she felt excited and supported by many mentors and peers. Her program “gave me the language for inquiry, of things I was already doing.” Meg felt less like an outsider and more accepted for her non-traditional approach to teaching. Communities like the National Writing Project and conferences like the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) welcomed and stimulated Meg. Her early graduate experiences “told me that I wanted more, that I was on the right track, and that I wanted to do more.” Meg “did the reading” and started to learn “the frameworks” which gave Meg the language to articulate an argument for her approach. Meg learned educational and sociological language. “There was epistemic privilege that I had, but I didn't know.”

Meg’s confidence as a teacher and graduate student significantly increased. Meg felt that having taught for more than 10 years before doctoral work gave her an advantage in building her “framework” for teaching and learning: “Now I can kind of analyze some of the stuff that I've been doing. Been teaching for so long, and some of the people I was in class with had never taught.” Meg also thought that her teaching experience also gave her an advantage with her graduate work: “I had lots of research sites and stuff, like getting a research question and doing it, collecting data and doing that, was never a problem for me.” Meg’s classmates struggled in part because they didn’t have the networks she had.

Facing Fear

Meg reflected how she has had a unique relationship with fear in her personal and professional life: “I always also felt like I had to do the things I feared the most. I was always kind of doing things out of a sense of, I can't not do this because I'm afraid.” When Meg began creating artwork with her Teacher Academy students, she was reluctant to take risks and physically make art: “I had huge fear. I was like, I'm just going to stay on my computer and do

graphic design.” Then, Meg made the connection to how her students let fear stop them from doing new or uncomfortable things. Leaning into the fear, Meg “let go” and tried new artforms. Meg reflected that she is now more open to experiences and doesn’t care if she fails: “I think that's a manifestation of getting older. It's liberating.”

Reflecting, Meg sees her fear as rooted in insecurity and not wanting anyone else to see it. Meg identifies public speaking as a particular area of fear and social anxiety. While Meg was fine talking in a classroom, she used to struggle speaking in front of the whole school or at an academic conference. Meg credits a counselor colleague for coaching her on how to manage her fears and be more effective and comfortable with public speaking. Meg also received valuable tips from a friend such as “eat a banana, a natural beta-blocker, 30 minutes before a presentation, because it will get rid of all the visible signs of nervousness. And the potassium will settle your blood pressure.”

Meg’s toughest experience came when she had a panic attack before getting on a plane to present at a “big conference” in England. Her family and colleagues helped Meg “pull herself together” and the presentation went well. The belief that others had in Meg gave her strength and helped her cope with the anxiety and fear. Afterwards, Meg saw a doctor and got beta-blockers that she could take before presentations and “it helped tremendously, tremendously changed everything.”

Looking back, Meg describes this as a “10-year process of figuring out my stage fright.” Meg’s experience with stage fright and anxiety with public speaking gave her empathy for her students. She noted that anxiety can diminish one’s ability to listen and process information. Meg strived “to provide all these alternate ways for those students to participate, so that they can participate in a low stakes way and do a rehearsal of sorts, and then allow them to participate in

the larger group as they feel comfortable.” Meg elaborated that her personal experiences impact how she tries to help and nurture her students. She values the mentoring and support she received with her anxiety and that moves her to “value mentoring even more.”

The Centrality of an Inquiry Stance

Meg places an inquiry stance at the center of her teaching and work with her students at Teacher Academy: “I think that's something that I try to impart through modeling, but also explicitly in my students, that, with an inquiry approach to teaching, that if you have that at your core, you won't be misguided into thinking that there's one right way to do something or there's one right way to have a relationship with a student.” Meg critiques the regressive messages that teachers can get about the practice: “It's a really narrow script of what you're supposed to be as a teacher.” However, Meg feels that paying attention to context and needs of her students, being flexible and adaptive to students is a better approach.

An inquiry stance and reflection enable such adjustments and a breaking free from many of the limiting, negative messages that teachers can get: “If you're constantly inquiring about what's working, what's not working, whose voices are heard, whose voices aren't heard, who's in the room, who's not in the room, and why, then you can act with empathy and care and intention about what you're choosing for your curriculum, how you're teaching it, what the students in the room need at that particular time.” Meg feels that it is important to “constantly challenge the status quo” and ask questions about “why things are being done. That comes directly from practitioner inquiry ethic.”

Meg again returns to her Teacher Academy student Jeremiah to provide an example of the power of inquiry. She explains how all of her students do inquiry work into their practice and setting and these efforts can get “personal to their own identity.” Jeremiah has inquiries: “Why

have I never had a Black teacher? Why have I never had a teacher who looks like me?" Meg explains that he's investigating the importance of representation to the point where this inquiry has led him down this path where he has discovered that "having a Black teacher, having a Black male teacher for a Black male student, is really, really important in the early years and in middle school."

Meg elaborates that Jeremiah's inquiries altered what level he thinks he wants to teach because he previously thought he wanted to be at a high school. Jeremiah currently has an internship at a middle school and Meg heard him say, "I think this is where I'm supposed to be." His inquiry questions "Why have I never had a Black teacher? Why does no one look like me?" led him into this "pretty profound identity, personal journey, for him." Jeremiah stated, "I'm going to be the Black math teacher in a middle school that I never had." Meg reflects on the utility of inquiry to raise more inquires and contribute to many kinds of development ranging from traditional teaching skills to identity development, and an ability to interrogate larger issues in society. For Meg and her students, she sees inquiry as "constantly making you question your approach or path."

Inquiry as Art

Meg reflects about how centering "art as inquiry" in her program helps her and her students cope with the complexity and uncertainty of teaching. She studied this in her doctoral work: "One of the things that I argue in my dissertation is that art is a vehicle in which to get comfortable with uncertainty, and that that's a really powerful tool to have for a teacher. Because there's so much uncertainty within teaching when you're in your classroom, it's very unpredictable. You're constantly being asked to solve problems that you didn't know were going to exist as problems that day. And you have to be really nimble and you have to be really

comfortable with flipping on a dime or changing your mind or changing the plan in the middle of a lesson.”

Meg knows that for many students, like it was with her, making art can be uncomfortable and engaging students to make visual representations of their experiences tests them to work in new ways. Meg feels this engagement teaches her students new ways “of figuring out problems. Having to process that information on this visual metaphorical level requires them to think visually or expansively.” Meg elaborates that there is no rubric or script for this and that that can make them “feel really, really uncomfortable.”

Again, Meg returns to Jeremiah as an example: “He wants to be a math teacher and he never kept a sketchbook and he is like, ‘I’m not an artist, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.’” Meg describes how he eventually started taking all of math notes in his sketchbook and even started using watercolor over them: “He would use the watercolor as a cognitive kind of thing where he would remember where he did that problem so that when he was taking it on the math in his exam, he would remember where it was in the sketchbook and he would remember what color he water colored over it. And he just created this learning strategy out of using a sketchbook.” Meg loves using the arts with her teaching as it “creates spaces where there's not one right answer. It requires invention.” Meg is trying to teach her students the kind of creativity and skillset they will need to be successful students.

Summary of Themes and Discussion

Table 6.1

Meg: Three Themes with Examples

Themes	Examples
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Impact of Mentorship	Her student teaching mentor had a harmful impact on Meg. Meg sought out an unofficial mentor in a math teacher who offered significant help. A principal in her second job recognized “her assets.” Meg acted as a supportive mentor to Jeremiah.
Inquiry Stance	Meg always demonstrated curiosity and a questioning approach to her practice. Doctoral studies elevated Meg’s understanding and practice of inquiry stance. Meg models inquiry stance for her students and colleagues. Meg also sees inquiry stance as a political act that interrogates classroom practice, schools, and educational systems.
Emotion Regulation: Coping with Trauma, Overcoming Fear & Anxiety	Meg experienced significant stress at the early stages of her career especially with student teaching and working at an alternative school. Meg also coped with anxiety over presenting at conferences, receiving support from peers. Further, Meg was challenged to manage traumas experienced from losing students and working in a setting with high levels of student trauma.

Impact of Mentorship

From Meg’s interviews, the impact of mentorship emerged as a strong theme. Meg’s student teacher had an extremely negative impact, eliciting strong negative feelings, significant stress, and even placing Meg at risk for leaving the profession. Lacking warmth, the mentor required Meg to address her as "Mrs. So-and-so" and deliberately withheld resources like textbooks and lesson plans. Meg felt that her mentor exercised “a deliberate lack of support.” Lacking helpful mentors during her first few years of teaching had a visceral, physical impact on Meg with increased anxiety, stress, and insomnia. She wanted to quit and this lack of support reinforced Meg’s feeling that she was misfit who didn’t fit in.

Faced with the often-overwhelming challenges of student teaching, novice teachers like Meg need warmth, support, encouragement, scaffolding, modeling, resources, generative conversations, and affirmation. Even with strong mentorships, new teachers will nevertheless struggle due to the complexity of teaching and the myriad of challenges faced without the skills

needed to manage them. The student-teacher mentor is uniquely positioned to welcome and equip new teachers in a way that helps set them up for a successful career. A student teacher mentor like Meg's harms their mentees and sends them a message that teaching is not for them. How many promising teachers have experiences like Meg and leave the profession? How many stay but are damaged, becoming cynical and spiteful from the harmful modeling they experienced?

Thankfully for Meg, she had the agency to seek out the support she wasn't getting. Finding an unofficial mentor in a math teacher colleague, Meg was able to get the support she desperately needed, watching how he taught lessons and interacted positively with students. From her conversations with him and encouragement from a principal who recognized Meg's assets, Meg drew strength to endure lack of mentor support and the challenges of the job. While negative mentorship can have a devastating impact on a new teacher, a positive experience can act as a lifeline, providing an emotional tether and needed knowledge and tools. While it may not be possible for all mentor experiences to be positive and effective, measures should be taken to oversee and support mentors in their practice, removing mentors from that role when they do harm. Furthermore, efforts should be undertaken to ensure that every new teacher has a least one positive, supportive mentor.

From her experiences with mentors, Meg highly values mentorship and strives to positively support her colleagues, especially those new to the profession. She is aware of the difference she can make and embraces that responsibility.

Inquiry Stance

Another dominant theme is Meg's deep internalization of an inquiry instance. While she possessed strong curiosity to learn and question aspects of her practice, Meg's full appreciation

and deepening of inquiry stance developed during her doctoral studies. Indeed, her doctoral program, “gave her the language for it,” for things she was already doing, the epistemic privilege (Campano, 2006) she had but was unaware of until her doctoral work. Meg describes her adopting of an inquiry stance as way to resist regressive or narrow approaches to teaching. The act of continual inquiry or being a reflective practitioner (Schoen, 1983) enables teachers like Meg to be dynamic and responsive to student needs and local contexts. The practice also enhances growth and knowledge of teaching and learning. Furthermore, Meg describes the constant reflection about what’s working and what voices are being heard as enhancing care, empathy, and intentionality. Given its potential to enhance student learning and growth, it’s unfortunate that inquiry stance is only strongly located in small pockets of higher education and is not centrally positioned in K-12 professional development.

For Meg, inquiry stance is more than a method that enables optimal teaching. It is also a political or critically conscious (Freire, 1970) practice that can “constantly challenge the status quo” and pose deeper questions to investigation how systems and structures may be harming students and educators. Meg deliberately modeling inquiry stance, her support of her student Jeremiah, and her leadership with Teacher Roundtable shows how she wants others to develop an inquiry stance. Meg taking on the role of diversity, inclusion, and belonging administrator demonstrates her commitment to raising awareness on issues of race and belonging and to increase the critical consciousness of others. Meg wants to work with staff to collectively build a safer, more generative learning environment for all.

What would education and schools look like if all educators adopted the “practitioner inquiry ethic” that is central to Meg’s identity and practice? What are the various ways that inquiry stance would impact the diverse group of educators throughout the world? What are the

beliefs, values, practices, and structures that support the generative development of inquiry stance? This “meta” act of taking an inquiry stance towards more deeply understanding inquiry stance enables the unlocking of knowing the possibilities of how it can be positively enacted in systems that create obstacles to block or mitigate its practice.

Emotion Regulation: Coping with Trauma, Overcoming Fear & Anxiety

Meg faced challenges with various traumas and a need to manage and overcome fear and anxiety. Her struggles and successes with emotion regulation show how human experiences intersect with teaching and what is possible when someone like Meg directly faces them, copes with them, and ultimately grows from them.

Whether it was feeling overwhelmed and stressed at the beginning of her career or uncomfortably integrating art into her practice, Meg had a drive to know and face her fears. Indeed, this inclination to lean into her fears, helped her “let go,” embrace failure, and feel a sense of liberation. One of Meg’s biggest challenges was with public speaking, especially at conference presentations during graduate school. Feeling insecurity and even panic attacks before presenting threatened to have a strong negative impact on Meg. Fortunately, she received and sought out support from her peers and medical professionals, mitigating social anxiety and ability to reduce the pain of presenting publicly.

Meg described how anxiety can diminish one’s ability to listen and process information. There may be many other areas where anxiety can negatively impact teacher functioning and capacity for growth, especially in the novice years where anxiety and stress can be very high. Learning from practice, adopting an inquiry stance, seeking out support, avoiding negative coping behaviors, being physically healthy can all be diminished under stress and anxiety. While successful mentoring and supportive peer environments can reduce stress and anxiety, school

systems, for the most part, do not directly or systematically address teacher stress and anxiety (schools also fall short on this with students). What would it look for teacher induction programs and ongoing professional development to center emotion regulation and the management of stress and anxiety? The teaching profession particularly lends itself to stress, but it is possible for highly stressed individuals to avoid burnout and thrive in their practice (Wiens, 2024). How can schools comprehensively foster a culture of self-regulation and emotion management?

Another area of emotional challenge for Meg is coping with the various traumas she experienced working with her students at an alternative school. For Meg, losing 12 students, young and full of potential, to things like substance abuse and suicide was very challenging. In addition, her students brought their ongoing traumas to school every day. For Meg, who was particularly empathetic and caring, student trauma was stressful and emotionally taxing. Meg addressed student trauma by creating a zine, *Concrete Voices*, that created a space for students to express themselves through poetry and music. Eventually Meg left the school setting for graduate school to get a “mental health sabbatical.”

From her experiences with trauma, Meg learned to set boundaries between school and home to help reduce the “emotionally taxing” experiences. She also reevaluated how she managed herself in school in terms of dealing with emotions, expressed herself in relationships, and connected with others. While still valuing empathy and caring, limiting closeness with others had a healthy benefit for Meg, and reduced her “falling apart” at school. Meg’s self-regulation around trauma raises larger issues of how schools and leaders can support teachers in being intentional about how they manage emotions around trauma and find ways to have balance and stronger mental health.

Schools across the country are improving their capacity for trauma-informed practices with students but are doing far less to be trauma-informed with teachers. What would it look like for school systems to have a trauma-informed approach to supporting teachers and staff? What additional resources would be needed? How could that be integrated into professional development and the intentionally building of culture? In places like alternative schools or working with student populations that have experienced significant trauma, more attention to support the trauma of teachers should be given.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see I have a chance to gain self-knowledge and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject. In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge.

--Parker J. Palmer (2017)

Introduction

This case study dissertation examines how three veteran teachers engaged in their professional growth journeys as they built knowledge of self and a conceptual framework for practice. Like Parker Palmer, Meg, Susan, and Emma consistently dove into that “mirror” with curiosity, caring, and drive to develop self-knowledge and skills for their practice. In looking across the case studies, three main findings emerged. Each of these key findings will be discussed. Three additional findings will also be shared. The findings will be connected to the main research question concerning conceptual frameworks for practice. In light of the findings, a recontextualization of neoliberalism will be explored. Implications for K-12 and higher education will be examined. Future directions for research will be presented in addition to imagining The Optimal Development Project.

Integration of the Focus Group into the Findings

The last interview of the study, a focus group interview, was conducted with Susan, Emma, and Meg. During our conversation, I shared the findings, encouraging the teachers to react, resonate, expand, and interrogate them. They talked about key experiences and individuals that encouraged or challenged their growth and impacted their retention in the professional.

We discussed the concept of flow and its relevance to professional growth and development, while they shared examples of being fully engaged and present in the “flow zone,” where they can balance their skills and abilities with the level of challenge they are facing. Meg,

Susan, and Emma also discussed the importance of creating flow spaces for students to enhance their learning experiences.

The participants also acknowledged that growth and learning can occur outside of the flow zone. They highlighted the value of facing challenges and struggles, even if the skill level is lower than needed to meet the challenge. They emphasized the importance of supporting teachers in navigating challenging situations and helping them develop resilience and a growth mindset.

The conversation also touched on the role of leadership in K-12 education and how it can support teachers throughout their careers. Susan, Meg, and Emma discussed the need for stronger collaboration and support networks in schools to foster a culture of growth and development. They also explored the potential for teacher education programs to have a more sustained partnership with schools to support teachers' professional growth throughout their careers.

The voices, stories, insights, and suggestions of Meg, Susan, and Emma are integrated into this findings section, helping to validate and contextualize the findings. Furthermore, their engagement in discussing findings enhances the ownership and strength of this section as a co-construction of Susan, Emma, Meg, and myself. The three major findings and three additional findings are summarized in table 7.1.

Table 7.1

Major and Additional Findings Across the Three Case Studies

Type of Finding	Finding
Major Finding #1	Mentors Make a Difference
Major Finding #2	Networks of Support Foster Teacher Development
Major Finding #3	Reflective Practices Enhance Learning and Development

Additional Finding #1	Growth Can Emerge from Struggle
Additional Finding #2	Intentionality Drives Growth
Additional Finding #3	The Brain Changes

Summary of Findings

Major Finding #1: *Mentors Make a Difference*

For Susan, Emma, and Meg, mentorship has made a major impact on their professional growth and personally affected them in a variety of ways. Being impacted by mentoring and mentoring others came up repeatedly across all three case studies. Mentoring experiences have a geometrical, complex nature with direct, subtle, and sometimes surprising interactions resulting in a range of positive and even harmful impacts. Sometimes the mentors were officially mentors as part of teacher induction. Meg, Susan, and Emma also found unofficial leaders, principals, counselors, and colleagues who provided mentoring and support. Supportive, caring mentors made a dramatic impact on all three. Even when mentors were not helpful or even harmful, learning and growth sometimes occurred, especially when Meg, Susan, and Emma intentionally sought out alternative support. They have experienced many positive benefits to being a mentor to others.

Finding Mentoring Spaces

Emma, whom I taught when she was in 11th grade and who co-taught my 8th grade class when she was in 12th grade, identified me as a mentor who “helped me figure out that this teaching thing is pretty cool.” Emma mentioned the value of mentors with “peeling back layers.” She described her experience in Action Research Group (ARG), a practitioner research group for educators that I ran at Penn GSE. Emma described MERPS (Mentally, Emotionally, Relationally,

Physically, and Spiritually) check-ins as particularly valuable. MERPS, done at the beginning of sessions, was where “we could just be human and get things off our chest. Then, we let it go and can dive deeper into the work.” Emma stressed the importance of having the space and the time to have these generative conversations. Her mentors and spaces like ARG helped Emma “walk away from days that sucked.” Emma valued others providing empathy by sharing that they have had days like that. Feeling empathy and connection with colleagues enabled the “deeper conversations” to start well, breeding hope and positivity to continue with mentors and collaborative groups like ARG.

Emma feels that it is important to seek out and find mentors. “With the mentoring, I’ve had good, bad and indifferent. I just have always been able to navigate that, find the ways around it. Know that there’s always somebody in your corner that you can talk to.” Emma shared that she usually thinks of mentors “in only positive terms because if they are having a negative effect on me, I’m not counting them as a mentor.” Emma considers that “challenging mentors aren’t necessarily negative mentors,” as they can help you go beyond what is possible. “They’re challenging you to go beyond what you thought was “possible for yourself or your students.”

Dealing with “Really Bad” Mentors

Meg reflected on her cooperating teacher from her time student teaching as a challenging, even horrible mentor. Meg “thrived despite her,” having to navigate the would-be mentors negative comments, territoriality, and undermining. Meg did have a student teacher supervisor who would “come visit me and he confirmed or validated my thoughts, my feelings.” The “really bad” mentoring did have Meg questioning if she should stay in the profession. This early, negative experience with a mentor has since galvanized Meg to seek supportive mentor teachers for her high school students in Teacher Academy.

Describing how both mentors and mentees can have mutually beneficial relationships, Meg often had mentor teachers share “how valuable the experience was.” Meg explained that sometimes “I’ll get a bad mentor and I’ll have to have a conversation with my student about, ‘What can you learn here anyway? What is there for you to learn about what maybe you don’t want to do as a teacher? And how can you critically look at practices that are happening in the classroom and understand different disciplinary models that fail students?’”

Meg stressed that if her students are properly supported and persevere, they can come away “understanding a lot from things that they don’t think are good practices.” Since the students of Teacher Academy come back to high school classes for the afternoon, “they’re critically looking at all of their teachers because now, they’re on both sides of the desk.”

The Humanity of Mentoring

Susan identifies humanity as central to mentoring. “Just being acutely attuned to the fact that the best thing I can do for my mentees is to show up for them with whatever the thing is that they’re bringing in that day.” Susan explains that adapting to mentor needs shapes interactions as some days there can be focus on instructional practices and other “hard days” need to be about providing emotional support and processing. Susan resonates with how her husband describes her many interactions with mentees and colleagues as “peopling.” Susan describes her “peopling” as difficult and intense, requiring constant attuning and self-regulation of emotions, thoughts, and interventions.

This mentoring work is important for all teachers: “I think especially for a new teacher, it’s so crucial. And I also think too, particularly with the way that teaching is right now and this huge turnover that we’re seeing in the first five years of teaching, I think if we can’t get new teachers with strong mentors from the jump, they will leave.” Susan described the teaching

profession as isolating, meaning that great care needs to be applied in selecting mentors.

Furthermore, mentors themselves need support: “Giving mentors some sort of model of what does this look like, and how to be responsive to those things is so important.”

Susan recalls her first principal Kyleene “who was a literal angel” and how she thinks about her “all the time.” Kyleene would communicate to Susan, “Hey, I think you're really good at this, would you want to try to da, da, da, da?” Susan felt both pushed and encouraged. Without her mentorship in the early years, Susan doesn't know where she would have ended up: “She was that impactful for me and really set the course. And I think if we can't provide new teachers particularly with that level of mentorship, they won't have enough skills to be confident enough in themselves as professionals, to be able to get to the point of growing.”

As an 11-year veteran, Susan now feels less vulnerable to “bad supervisors because I know who I am as a teacher.” For novice teachers in their first 5 years, “they don't even have a picture of themselves as a teacher to be able to combat it.” Susan then identifies Meg as “an amazing mentor to me professionally and growing some of that academic nerdy side of myself where I'm like, I really want to learn more. And you're like, try this or go here, but it's the newbies, that if they don't have a good mentor, they will leave.”

Informal Mentorship

Meg shared about her intentionally seeking out an “unofficial, math teacher mentor” because he was “a great teacher who would let me watch him.” Meg did this because she was “desperate and struggling” and “creating a classroom culture seemed so beyond my powers.” The math teacher's classroom seemed so different from hers. When Meg asked him how he did it, he replied, “It takes a while.” Meg “asked him a million questions, but there was nothing

formal about it.” Meg feels that without his support and the kindness of other educators, she would have quit teaching.

Susan, resonating with the comments Meg shared, said, “I just genuinely feel this in my heart. Unless there is someone available, whether it's formally or informally, that can serve as that person during those first few years, you either make it or you do not.” Susan feels that most teachers don’t seek out the support that Meg did, and they need to be encouraged to do it. Susan described the responsibility of leaders to identify and support positive and effective mentors: “If they don’t, I think it's so much fewer and far between of finding people that are going to actively seek that, they could be singly contributing to a high turnover rate of new teachers in their building.” Susan feels building strong programs is more essential than ever “because there's even less incentive now for people to stay than there was 15 years ago.”

Major Finding #2: *Networks of Support Foster Teacher Development.*

Reciprocal Transformation

Emma believes strongly in sharing what she learns with others especially “some newer blood.” She ran action research professional development for all incoming teachers: “These people were so motivated and a couple young teachers who they would come after school, after a long day and come and meet with me and offer to meet on weekends. And they were so committed to the practice.” The excitement was reciprocal, and Emma felt inspired by them to try and study new things in her own practice. Emma sees action research as a collaborative practice: “When you have somebody that's willing to help with collaboration and is really into that, it just becomes a seed that grows.” Connecting with colleagues and leading professional development invigorated Emma’s practice and understanding of teaching and learning.

For Meg, visiting other classrooms and interacting with other teachers is a key practice that expands her network of support and professional growth. When she started Teacher Academy, a core part of her work was going out and observing teachers: “That was never part of what I was able to do prior to that, and I can't tell you how much it exploded my growth, just being able to observe other teachers. I think that that isn't something that's part of professional growth as a standard practice, but it's huge.” Meg feels that seeing many “wonderful and amazing” teachers contributes to her continual growth. Being able to reflect on those observed practices with her students is “this missing piece that would be a wonderful addition to professional growth for all teachers.” Part of the benefit of the classroom visits was the reciprocal growth involved. Meg, her Teacher Academy students, and the teachers being visited exchanged ideas and support.

A Protective Factor

Emma and Susan both lament how some teachers treat professional development and professional learning communities (PLCs) as “a kind of checkbox.” Susan feels that “if they took the opportunity to engage and really develop that connection and that system of support, I think it's one of the most powerful indicators of a teacher's success personally.” She describes how collaboration and networks of support helps her and others navigate the complexity of teaching and the daily, difficult challenges of the job: “I think it can feel very isolating unless there's this purposeful movement towards a network of support in a professional capacity. Susan provides an example of how with Meg and her technical high school, many teachers “come in experienced and older” from industry and trade jobs needing significant support.

Their involvement in Teacher Roundtable and other collaboration with colleagues and leaders acts as a protective factor contributing to high retention rates. Emma speculates that this

collaborative support is even more important in retaining new teachers. Veteran teachers provide a helpful, long-term perspective that teaching is “really hard, much learning is required, and we are here for you.” Emma stresses the importance of “developing networks of supports for teachers that are not only supportive but also productive. The power in that is significant.”

Teacher Round Table

Meg adds that Teacher Roundtable came from a need, referencing Bob Fecho’s (2019) work about “interventions or inquiry coming from a felt need or wobble moments.” She elaborates, “it has to be this authentic need that speaks to something that's happening in the building with teachers that they need and want this.” Meg values that Teacher Roundtable is a network of support that isn't tied to administration is free from administration influence. Meg appreciates how Teacher Roundtable “really embraces and internalizes this idea of how hard teaching [is] and [how] undervalued and deprofessionalized it becomes.” Given those negative forces against teaching, “it makes these networks of support and our grassroots efforts super, super important.”

Meg explains that the “felt need” was connection and support and there wasn’t previously a space for collaboration in the building for that. Meg shares that they started Teacher Roundtable “right when we were allowed to be back together after COVID. And I think that people just wanted to talk to each other.” Meg reflected how she was shunned and critiqued by her colleagues at the beginning of her career. “I would've loved to have had that support and the space to really think through difficult problems of practice.” She feels she would not “have floundered so much.”

Susan supports Meg’s insights on Teacher Roundtable and adds, “It has allowed people to be able to recognize their own professional capacity, I think especially for our population of

teachers because there is such a significant learning curve. Susan explains that regularly participating in Teacher Roundtable “makes them feel like they are better teachers. It actively engages them in the conversation in a way where they're not just novices...where you have something valuable to bring to the table here as a teacher.”

For Susan, teachers can realize that they have valuable knowledge and expertise and can solve problems: “I think it helps. When teachers are able to be in that space and be presented with a problem of practice and be able to really engage with other teachers around that problem of practice in a way that's meaningful and helpful and productive and things like that.” Susan feels that when teachers participate regularly in Teacher Roundtable, their dialogue roots them into the practice of being a teacher with valuable knowledge and expertise: “You're able to contribute to this conversation, you're able to work through problem solving.”

Teacher Roundtable helps the teachers “take that lens to their own classrooms” and sends a message that “reflective practice is okay.” Susan adds how the group supports an inquiry stance into their practice: “Here’s the problem, let's talk through it. What would this look like? What could this look like? Who has ideas? Let's talk about it. What are we capable of doing to make improvements?” Learning this inquiry stance helps teachers be “active problem solvers of their own things within the microcosm of their classroom.”

Major Finding #3: *Reflective Practices Enhance Learning and Development: The Power of Inquiry*

Reflective practices can be very nourishing both on individual and group levels, offering a range of benefits and positive outcomes. This finding connects to the previous finding and the discussion of collaborative inquiry and reflection in networks of support and spaces like Teacher Roundtable which is described by Meg “as built out of inquiry”. She explains that Teacher

Roundtable asks “an ethnographic question: what’s going on here?” Using reflective practices helps deeper understanding. Meg follows with probing questions: as we “unpack it, what are the roots of the things? And where is it coming from, and where's it coming from on an individual level and a systems level? And how are those two things intersecting in maybe problematic ways? And then what can we do about it? And so it's an iterative cycle.”

Meg engages in a parallel process in her classroom, “constantly engaging in inquiry around your own practice to see what's working and what's not working.” Meg stresses that the collaborative process of inquiry and reflection in Teacher Roundtable gets her “thinking about her own program and I talk about it with my students who are going to be teachers about how important that practice is.”

Meg feels that having an inquiry requires intentional and constant engagement. “Sometimes, if you're not looking at things with a lens like that, you will come up upon somebody who has just got a big stop sign in front of your face. And that always startles me.” Meg questions “why the stop sign? why? We're asking questions here. Questions is the way to go. Stop signs aren't the way to go.”

Collaborative Inquiry

Emma identifies one of her core questions of her practice connected to early intervention in K-2 classrooms: How can students with different learning needs be better identified and supported? This inquiry is personal for Emma as she reflects on her own childhood and the failure of her school to see and address her learning needs.

Like Teacher Roundtable, Emma describes a series of professional development she did with her colleagues with the central inquiry: what interventions could be done earlier on for

students? Teachers shared lessons in math, gym, reading, music, spelling, etc. Integrating the inquiry into curriculum led to teachers seeing K-2 students “potentially needing support later.”

Emma saw teachers finding more value in IEPs and providing accommodations unofficially even to students without IEPs. Emma and her colleagues paid closer attention to their students’ brains and “how they are able to access information and what they're able to show.” Emma felt that in some cases, kids were able to show amazing abilities that they previously had not demonstrated in a typical classroom. Emma noticed that teachers, outside of the professional development, began to have more conversations about their practice with her and each other.

Curiosity, Reframing Failure, and Making Adjustments

Susan also values reflective practices. “I think the power of reflective practices and just general, just having an inquiry, or even just a curious mindset to seeking to understand what's going on, why things are happening.” Susan identifies the most powerful benefit of reflective practices as being that it “frames failure as just learning in a very purposeful way.” She makes the connection that a commitment to reflective practices is also a commitment to getting “bad feedback or not the feedback or results you were wanting.”

Being proactive in reflecting is “all about wondering why and making adjustments.” For Susan, reflective practices can be intentional and learned, but they can also be innate. Susan thinks of a new “rockstar” teacher who does a lot of things that show “she just understands how to teach.” When Susan and the new teacher reflect about their practice, they both embrace an ethic of experimentation. “When I'm talking with her it's, ‘Well, I really want to try this thing.’ And I'm like, ‘That's great, let me help you design it, we'll run it, we'll see how it goes.’”

Failure or things not working are seen as a part of the process of teaching. Susan identifies this “inquiry/trying things/reflecting” process as especially valuable for new teachers: “As long as you're engaged in that reflective practice, then it wasn't for nothing. It wasn't a waste of time, it wasn't a flop, it wasn't a failure. It was just information that you can use in your reflective practice to make adjustments.” Susan tries to encourage all her mentees and new teachers to engage in reflective practices. She views qualities like grace, self-compassion, and forgiveness as vital to the growth of new teachers.

Barriers

Emma identified some barriers to reflection such as a fear of change, lack of time, and “that [it] is not expected that we are as reflective on our practice from the top down.” Emma wishes there was more time built into the school day for collaboration and reflection. She feels teachers should have scheduled time to see each other, review lessons, share challenges and solutions, and see how others do things differently. Regardless, Emma feels “really fortunate to work with groups of people who met me early, late, in between, upside down, whatever it took.”

Susan added personal qualities such as having a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2006) or not valuing students can be a barrier to reflection. “It’s definitely hard to encourage people.” She feels that while you can teach people many things, how to care isn’t one of them. Teachers that “don’t care” personally offend Susan because “I feel so strongly about this profession, and I think that schools are so important for kids.” She wishes those teachers would leave and feels that almost all those teachers are veterans as she finds mentees who, for the most, are open to growth and need support.

Susan gives an example of a new teacher who had been a contractor for his whole career. He expressed doubt about whether he can or even wants “to do this.” After observing him teach

Susan shared, "Look at the impact that you're making, these kids love you when they're learning so much from you." With positive feedback, additional support, hard work, engagement in Teacher Roundtable, and a positive mindset, he made it to the end of year and exclaimed, "Yeah, I really love to teach!" Success stories like this mitigate Susan's struggles with teachers who don't care. Susan feels strongly that if you love to teach and love to be with the kids, "the rest is teachable."

Additional Finding #1: *Growth can emerge from struggle*

Struggle/obstacles/challenges can be generative (while also potentially difficult and unpleasant). Protective factors such as mindset, networks of support, reflective practices, and attributions can help foster growth through hardship and experiences with toxic individuals and culture. How can struggle and challenge be generative? How can you grow and learn while you may at the same time be harmed by mentors or colleagues? What can "finding flow" look like across a teacher's career growth journey? This finding is threaded through our group's discussion of the other five.

The Magical Space of Working within Flow

Meg intentionally embraces flow. "Working within flow, not outside of the flow is probably the reason I teach, it's the best part of teaching and I've talked to my students about it." Meg describes that when everything is going very well, she feels present "in the moment" with time stopping and Meg having enhanced awareness of what's going on in the learning environment: "I'm able to remove myself from all the other things in the world, which can tend to be either within a school building or institution or even in the world. It allows me to feel like there's a beauty to it."

Meg describes it as “a magical kind of space” that can be created when in that flow. Meg feels energized with “all of her senses engaged.” Meg describes this as not just the peak of learning, but also the peak of teaching: “You could be having the worst day in the world, and you could go into your classroom, and if you're able to just be present and engaged in the teaching, that can happen. And it can completely alter your day for the better.” Meg notes that finding flow was extremely difficult early in her career, but as she gained more knowledge, skill, and wisdom in practice, it become easier.

Reframing Flow for the Novice Years

Susan supports the notion that finding flow is challenging in the novice years, but as an experienced teacher, she avoids areas of discomfort. “I feel like I have very specific things that I feel super confident about and feel very trained in and educated in and able to do.” If Susan feels as though she lacks skill, knowledge or talent, she will avoid the task or challenge. “If you ask me to make a logo or a poster or something, I will be like, you maybe should ask someone else?” Susan explains “that as a professional, I'm only attracted to or want to engage with struggles or obstacles or challenges that I also feel like I have the skillset to get into that flow space with to grow myself.” Susan identifies two challenges with skill development for novice teachers being “growing their skills” so they can engage with the challenges that come up, but also helping them “realize the skills they already have” so they can feel like they have something to offer and build confidence.

Emma, knowing the complexity and difficulty involved in teaching and learning, believes new teachers need to frame their novice years as full of struggle and challenge: “I think when working with new teachers, telling them they're going to be times where it is painstaking, and you are doing one little thing at a time and it's okay.” Knowing that struggle is part of teaching

can help manage the stress that new teachers have. Eventually, teachers can experience the “pretty phenomenal feeling of getting in your groove. And I think it looks and different throughout your life. For me, it's when I can adjust in the moment where I'm realizing this is tanking, this isn't going well at all.” And that's okay because we are going to readjust and do something different. Emma describes how flow can emerge from failure and struggle. “I feel the most in my flow, not because things didn't go well, because it's going to go better now that I just realized we need to stop and start over.”

Additional Finding #2: *Intentionality Drives Growth*

Intentionality applies to the deliberate cultivation of mindsets/beliefs that support growth (growth mindset, inquiry stance/curiosity, and deep commitment to students, colleagues, and education). This intentionality and the outcomes from it are associated with professional growth and skill development.

When discussing this finding, Susan shares that intentionality is a “really crucial part” of that statement. She explains different aspects of intentionality such as commitment to learning or growing as a professional or having a deep commitment to students or to education in general. Susan explains the importance of “having a clear picture of that and actively moving towards that thing because of whatever motivates you is, you don't just fall backwards into growth.”

Meg adds, “I think that because of what we believe, we continue to be intentional despite challenges that we might face. So sometimes those challenges or barriers hinder our growth, but the growth is still there because that's who we are.” Meg explains that being intentional over time enables an educator to be aware of when they are not doing that and then they can correct: “I feel like when I'm not doing the things that I believe, it's almost a choice at this point because I am committed to being intentional.” The intentional deep commitment to students is the most

important choice that Meg always strives to make. Emma intentionally chose to have student teachers to not only mentor and support novice teachers, but also for her to keep growing professionally.

To be an effective mentor for student teachers, Emma reflects, “it's important for me to know why I'm doing what I'm doing, and that I can enact my desire to help new teachers really come into their own and really help connect with the practice and get them started on the good foot.” Emma was also thoughtful of when it was or was not the right time to support someone else and sometimes choose not to take on a student teacher.

Susan, over her 11 years as a teacher, has worked in “a lot of different settings, had a lot of different jobs, worked with a lot of different student populations, did different professional developments, led different professional development.” She values the intentionality of choosing things that feel in alignment for her. Central to Susan’s choosing or intentionality are key questions that she asks herself: “why do I do what I do? Why am I committed to this profession?” Reflecting on these inquiries helps Susan be selective about her next steps or “if I'm feeling stuck or something's missing or feeling disengaged or whatever the situation is, it's, ‘how can I be selective about choosing things that feel like they speak to those core values?’” Susan clarifies that it’s not like she has a particular narrow goal as much as she is open to a lot of different professional opportunities and “wants to continue to pursue work that to me feels like why I wanted to be a teacher in the first place.”

Additional Finding #3: *The Brain Changes*

In addressing changes in her brain over her career, Meg described how her anxiety has impacted her brain and teaching: “I probably had a lot of anxiety and I think anxiety can mess with your brain, it can limit or fog your thinking.” She describes how being “confident in what

I'm doing" allows her to access other parts of her brain." Meg also notes that information can get processed faster when she avoids spending too much time "rethinking or thinking everything needs to be perfect." She feels that when she does this, her brain is more adaptable and that she can get to "flow" easier.

For Meg, her doctoral program was a place of brain development especially when engaging with new academic vocabulary and concepts: "I had to almost learn new language, it helped me to know that my brain could change and respond and that did have that neuroplasticity. I feel like there's a tremendous difference between how I process information when I first started out than how I process information now."

Susan feels that her experiences and processing of those experiences drive learning and brain change. She sees how things are interconnected but laments how things such as SEL, curriculum, discipline, technology, and school procedures can be talked about separately in their own silos. Susan now sees "that everything fits together and being able to draw those pathways faster and say, okay, so if we make this change here, it can actually impact something over here." In the beginning of her career, Susan was not seeing the whole system or the ecosystems of a school. She focused narrowly on her students, her classroom and the next lesson. "The more that I've learned, I tend to see things now more on the systems level."

Emma describes that her brain changed as she acquired more experience and expertise. "Originally it was more, 'I'm focusing on my student.' And then as my career built, I really started looking at curriculum as well. I started seeing pathways in education." Emma offers an example of how teaching multiplication was disjointed over the different grades in her elementary school. "I kept seeing these disconnects grade to grade and I had the pleasure of working with kindergarten through 5th grade." She asked, "what's being done? What could be

done over the summer? What can we offer students and parents to give them a heads-up about what's going to happen?"

Like Susan, Emma extolled the value of being able to see a “bigger picture and a systems perspective on why things are working, why they aren't working, what could be done within the realm of what's permissible in a public school setting.” Emma added that having dyslexia and training to be a reading specialist required her to “learn how to reshape my brain.” For Emma, the higher degree of challenge, “the more I dove into figuring it out so that I could help another kid.” Emma feels like she experienced the most growth when being a student and an educator at the same time.

A Return to Conceptual Frameworks for Practice

There are many ways that the case studies and experiences of Susan, Emma, and Meg inform the two central questions of this study:

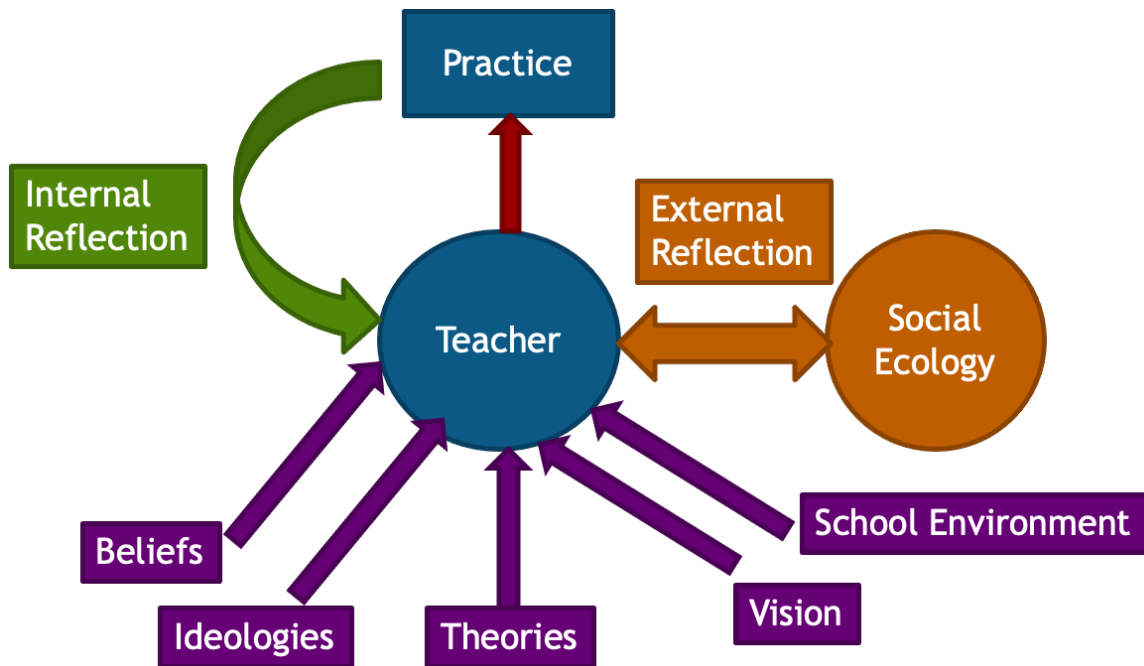
1. How do teachers understand and develop their conceptual framework for practice and how is that process related to their professional growth?

2. Also, in addition to the various factors that make up an educator’s conceptual framework for practice, what aspects and supports have most encouraged their professional growth?

Before I began the interviews, I developed a model for a conceptual framework for practice (see figure 1.1 from Chapter One).

Figure 1.1

Elements of a Conceptual Framework for Practice



The case studies map onto this model in many ways. Reflection, both internal and external, was central in the development and practice of Susan, Emma, and Meg. Susan framed her reflection around curiosity and learning new things. She also embraced an inquiry stance around how things were working or not working in the classroom. Continuing to reflect on this inquiry drives the adjustments Susan makes in her practice. For both Meg and Susan, external reflection occurred in spaces such as Teacher Roundtable and the Penn Consortium where they could learn with others and engage in problems of practice collaboratively. Emma and Meg both deeply integrate inquiry stance into their identities and practice and externally reflected with other educators in Action Research Group. Inquiry stance or practitioner inquiry occurs for Susan, Emma, and Meg as both internal and external reflection.

Beliefs and values serve many functions in conceptual framework building for the three teachers. For Susan, her belief in supporting rather than punishing students helped her navigate the “pencil jar incident” with her difficult principal. Her curiosity drive and intolerance of

boredom influenced her choices of professional development and pursuit of additional degrees and certifications. Emma learned that same dedication to supporting students with basic needs from her student teacher mentor. Meg was challenged to manage the traumas and stresses of working in an alternative school. She developed a belief in establishing healthy boundaries and a sense of balance that could keep her caring and effective while also mentally and physically healthy. Beliefs develop or sharpen throughout the teachers' careers based on their experiences and how they manage those experiences. Beliefs and values also prepare the teachers to weather adversity. All three had many moments where they considered leaving education. Many of their strong beliefs, such as dedication to their students, joy in teaching, willingness to face stress and fears, and drive to seek support from others, were all protective factors against leaving the profession.

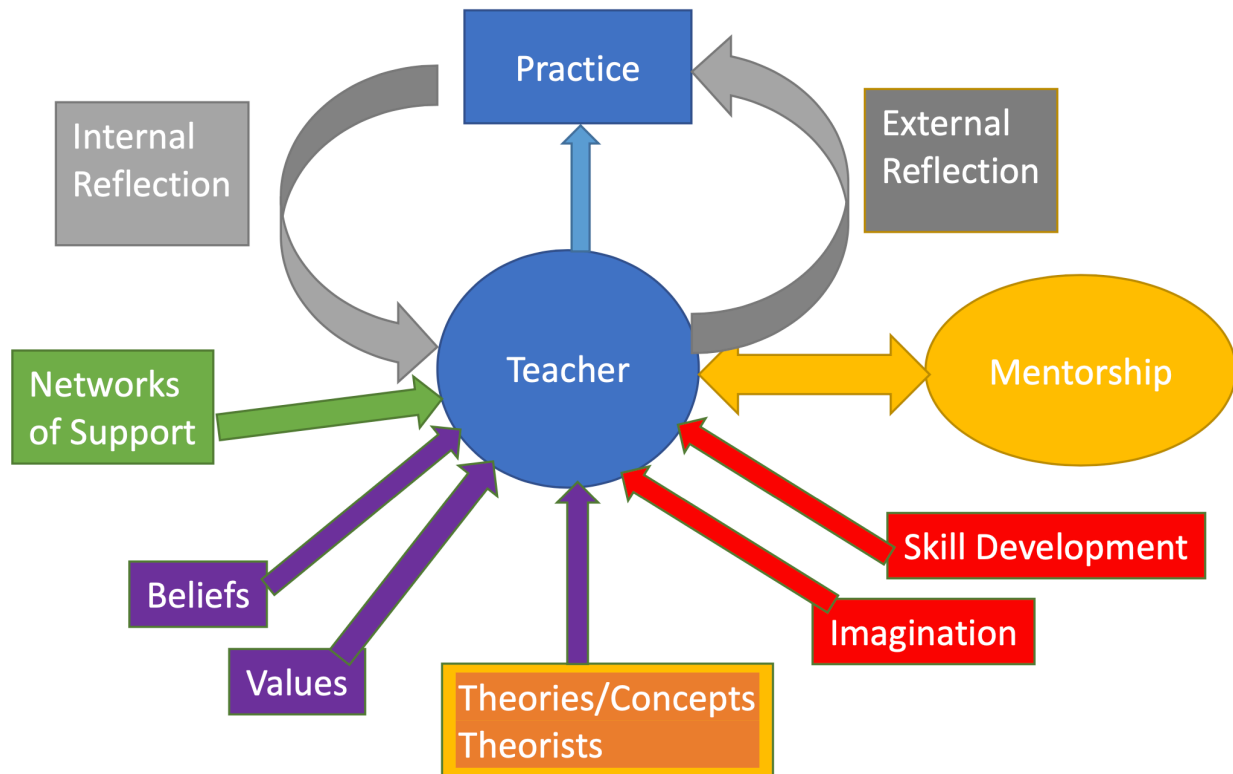
Mentorship and networks of support seem to be crucial to the professional growth and conceptual framework building of the teachers, and yet it is not directly part of the figure 1.1 model. School environment, social ecology, and external reflection are categories that connect to mentorship and networks of support. Perhaps, mentorship and networks of support warrant their own categories. The category of vision does not strongly show up in the interviews as much as does a related concept of imagination. Vision may suggest a static view of a future state that may not be resonant for Susan, Emma, and Meg. All three teachers were deeply engaged in their quotidian inquiry practices. With inquiry stance, they imagined possibilities and next places for growth for themselves and their students. Susan, Emma, and Meg also consistently identified skills they wanted to develop or knowledge they hoped to gain.

Constructing a New Model of Conceptual Frameworks for Practice

Data from the case studies supports developing a new model for conceptual frameworks for practice (see Figure 7.1 below).

Figure 7.1

Elements of a Conceptual Framework for Practice (Revised)



In this new model, somewhat broad terms like school environment and social ecology are removed and replaced with the more specific concepts of networks of support and mentorship. Both concepts showed up very strongly in the interviews and warrant a central position in this revised model. Terms like ideologies and vision, which were not strongly reflected in the interviews, were also removed. Beliefs and values seem to resonate in ways that ideologies do not. Vision is replaced with two aspects of possibility development: imagination and skill

development. Indeed, a possibility development lens or approach can be observed throughout the interviews whereas vision barely seems to register.

Figure 7.1 is a revision of the conceptual framework for practice model that connects more strongly to the case studies. With additional research, other concepts or categories may emerge as salient for this model. Competencies with emotional and intelligence could be included as well as trauma or mental and physical health. Considering all the factors that influence the development of a conceptual framework for practice, which ones are most important for a general model? Considering the idiosyncratic nature of optimal development, there may be value in constructing individualized models. These personalized models, constructed with the teachers themselves, might heighten their self-awareness, enhance their professional growth, and focus future development. Meg might center trauma experiences, managing anxiety, or integrating the arts in her personalized model, while Emma may construct her model based on the various “literacies” that are central to her growth and practice. Meg, Susan, and Emma might all include inquiry stance in their models. There are many possibilities in the further development of general and individualized models for conceptual frameworks for practice.

Optimal Development and Authentic Mentorship

The importance of mentoring and mentorship for development is clear in all three of the case studies. In examining the experiences of Meg, Susan, and Emma there are examples of optimal, generative mentoring relationships, like Susan’s Kylene and Emma’s urban student teacher mentor. Meg’s student teacher mentor relationship stands out as dissonant and harmful. Imagining what optimal mentoring can be, I suggest that K-12 schools and teacher education programs embrace authentic mentorship. Deborah Ann Bieler’s 2004 dissertation *"Inventing*

what we desire": Reconceptualizing 'mentoring' relationships with student-teachers as dialogic praxis makes a case for authentic mentorship in teacher education. Bieler studied her interactions with four student teachers through dialogic journals, challenging models of traditional teacher preparation programs that utilize Freire's (1970/2000) banking concept of education which separates the teacher, the one with the knowledge and expertise to "deposit" in the learner, and the learner who is ignorant and needs to absorb information from more knowledgeable others. In teacher preparation programs, this manifests as dichotomies between mentors and mentees and teachers and students. Student teachers engage in responding to generic prompts and are evaluated by a mentor. For Bieler, with her four English student teachers, to engage in dialogic journals rejects the banking concept to effect deeper learning for all: "The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [or herself] in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (Freire, 1970/2000). Bieler provides an extended Freire quote on imagining a dialogic, authentic mentoring practice:

The contradiction that the teacher must therefore deal with to be an authentic mentor is that he or she needs not to be mentor. *What I mean is that to be an authentic mentor, the teacher should not adopt the role of mentor* [italics added]. In other words, it is necessary that the teacher understands that the authentic practice of the mentor resides in the fact that the mentor refuses to take control of the life, dreams, and aspirations of the mentee. Because by not doing so we could very easily fall into a type of paternalistic mentorship. The fundamental task of the mentor is a liberatory task. It is not to encourage the mentor's goals and aspirations and dreams to be reproduced in the mentees, the students, but to give rise to the possibility that the students become the owners of their own history. This is how I understand the need that teachers have to transcend their merely instructive task and to assume the ethical posture of a mentor who truly believes in the total autonomy, freedom, and development of those he or she mentors.

As Freire encourages, Bieler rejects the role of mentor in the traditional positivistic or paternalistic sense. The authentic mentor supports agency growth and seeks to liberate.

Furthermore, authentic mentorship connects to reciprocal transformation (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1994) with the fundamental work of mentorship co-constructing optimal learning experiences for both mentee and mentor. This kind of authentic mentoring practice needs to be studied further. Slick (1998) has called specifically for research that addresses “the potential...for reciprocal learning-to-teach and sharing-of-professional-insights” between mentors and student-teachers and Stone (1987) has advocated that supervision extend beyond observing and talking to students and that it should involve theoretical work in pedagogy. “Instead of a system where supervision is something that is done to student teachers, I am advocating one in which students and supervisors jointly explore teaching analytically and experimentally.”

The work of Bieler (dialogic mentorship), Freire (authentic mentorship), and Nakkula & Ravitch (reciprocal transformation) influences the centering of mentoring and mentorship in conceptual framework for practice. Authentic mentorship can have value for all teachers and educators throughout their careers. A culture of authentic mentorship fosters optimal development with each educator having their own agency, professional interest and goals, and practices supported by a community of mentors.

Confronting Neoliberalism in Challenge Times for Teachers and Education

In the introduction, the harmful practices and impact of neoliberalism were described. Rooted in liberalism and capitalism, neoliberalism is often depicted as economic activities and solutions that can solve societal problems and serve the individual good. Hursh (2016) defines neoliberalism in public management as a shift in “focus from inputs and processes, including funding and standards, to outputs and performance, to be achieved efficiently through standardized exams and other quantifiable measures” (p.4). Neoliberalism is a capitalist ideology centered on free markets, increasing profit and creating new markets. Eschewing the welfare

state, freedom means the freedom of markets and the consumer choosing how to spend.

Neoliberalism is individualistic, with society made up of a collection of individuals pursuing their economic good.

In *Educating the “Right” Way*, Apple (2001), describes how neoliberalism joined in a strategic alliance with neoconservatives, authoritarian populists, and a rising managerial class. This alliance benefits as the state shifts its role in the field of education away civic-minded public schools towards the creation of education markets. Instead of an educational service, education becomes a business venture with a focused of return on investment. Like Frederick Taylor’s scientific efficiency approach, Teachers are workers who are controlled to produce desired outcomes. Students are trained to fit the needs of the economy.

Considering the case studies and the neoliberal forces present in Susan, Emma, and Meg’s professional journeys, it is useful to revisit and re-conceptualize neoliberalism in education. Many of the practices and impacts of neoliberalism in education can be understood as forces and actions that de-professionalize educators and strip them of power and agency, erase the complexities of teaching and learning, elevate high-stakes testing data to the exclusion of broader data available, and eliminate key stakeholders such as school leaders, teachers, students, and parents from decision making and reform efforts. An example can be seen in Susan’s “pencil jar incident” with her principal, who in a very neoliberal way, demanded that Susan hold students accountable for being prepared by while withholding the provision of school supplies. This example is in stark contrast to Emma’s urban school student teacher mentor who embraced a “what do students need?” approach and provided a wide range of basic items such as snacks, soap, and toothbrushes. Emma’s mentor humanized her students and met basic needs which set conditions for them to learn, while Susan’s principal dehumanized students, controlling and

shaming them in a way that was likely to result in stress and disengagement. For the most part, Emma, Susan, and Meg did not receive sufficient professional development, support, and stimulation from the educational systems they worked in. As such, they were intentional in seeking out additional educational opportunities. They created or joined third space activities like leading colleagues in professional development and participating in inquiry groups, Teacher Roundtable, or Action Research Group. Meg, Susan, and Emma demonstrated the power of what can happen when growth and possibility mindset-oriented educators are the central agents of their professional growth. They all actively and intentionally constructed their conceptual frameworks for practice with an optimal development lens.

Possibility development, flow theory, and optimal development are counter-narratives to neoliberalism that can help to dismantle its hegemony in education. In the service of optimal development and as a counter to neoliberal forces in education, I suggest that we establish a critical, collaborative possibility framework for teaching, learning, and building and managing school systems. This would establish a recommitment to the egalitarian ideals of public education that aim at empowering citizens to develop their judgment and skills as they engage in building a better civic society. A possibility development framework encourages teachers and students to imagine how they want to grow and what pathways and skill development will help them reach goals they set. A critical possibility framework utilizes inquiry stance for critically examining factors on many levels, individual, collective, and societal. The collaborative aspect of possibility framework recognizes, as Dewey (1916) argues, that we are social learners and that we grow best from and with each other. Individuals are connected in a network and support each other in the process of growing. Some neoliberal practices may have a place in a critical, collaborative possibility framework. Outputs and measurements can still have value if they serve

the optimal development of teachers and students. Standards can also be useful provided they are co-constructed at all levels from stakeholders such as teachers, students, and school leaders.

Implications

To consider implications for educational practices, systems, and other aspects for supporting the professional growth of teachers, I have posed five core inquiries. Each of the inquiries and implications connect and overlap with the others.

- How can teachers be better supported throughout their careers?
- How can leadership in K-12 foster teacher professional growth?
- How can teacher education effectively support teachers throughout their careers?
- How can teacher agency be increased empowering them to be the central agents of their own professional growth?
- How can we foster strong networks and cultures of support and collaboration in K-12?

How can teachers be better supported throughout their careers?

Overall, greater professionalization of teaching as a career and a practice needs to be established and universally valued. The complexity of teaching and learning needs to be embraced and norms, standards, and investment into professional development and lifelong career learning need to be increased. The support that teachers receive should be contextualized based on career stage, individualized based on interests and self-determined needs, and collaboratively enacted as a shared experience with mentors and colleagues. Instead of adopting the classical top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to professional development, a reframed approach focused on agency and optimal development can be utilized. How can schools and systems set conditions for the optimal development of teachers as they become central agents of their own and each other's growth? Considering this question, opens possibilities for redesigning systems and practices, and incorporating more time for teachers to reflect, plan, and collaborate.

Attention should be placed on enhancing school and staff culture. Eliminating the hazing and harshness that new teachers often feel from mentors and veterans can reduce the harm that is often done to novice teachers. Cultivating authentic mentorship and building strong mentor programs that mentor, support, and assess the mentors themselves can promote mentors acting in warm, supportive, and helpful ways. Accountability and professional development for mentors can reduce toxic mentorship. Additionally, a funds of knowledge approach (Moll et al., 2005) where all teachers at all levels have knowledge of practices and skills to share with each other can reframe mentoring as a responsibility for everyone, creating a culture of collaboration, support, and discourse about teaching and learning.

How can leadership in K-12 foster teacher professional growth?

Leaders at the building level and in central offices are uniquely positioned to support teacher growth. Central office leaders such as superintendents, curriculum directors, and supervisors can prioritize teacher growth as a district goal. They can also provide more administrative support to building leaders, reducing their stress and managerial responsibilities so they can devote more time to instructional leadership and teacher support. District leadership can also evaluate how the structuring of their system supports or inhibits teacher professional growth. They can make needed changes such as making a different schedule, increasing professional development time, or providing more choice in professional growth opportunities. Building leaders can block off more time in their schedules to be a presence in hallways and classrooms, taking opportunities to dialogue with teachers about their practice and connect with them professionally and personally. Formal evaluation processes should be reframed as opportunities for teachers to be the lead agent of their growth with the building leader talking

less and listening more, providing space for the teacher to imagine new, future pathways for their growth.

How can higher education be helpful in supporting teachers throughout their careers?

Teacher education programs provide value to pre-service teachers, introducing them to the profession and providing a range of mentors and supports to prepare teachers for their first jobs. Teacher education can be absent for their students once they complete the program and often does not support local teachers who did not go through their programs. What if teacher education was reframed as a partnership between higher education and K-12 to provide career long support to all educators? School districts, the state, and universities would need to offer more funding to support this. Establishing this effort as a research-practice partnership, long-term mutual beneficial collaborations that promote the production and use of research, could provide better support from the academy.

How can teacher agency be increased empowering them to be the central agents of their own professional growth?

Central to the findings of this study is the power of teachers as central agents of their own growth. School districts and leaders should recognize this power and design their systems, policies, and practices to foster professional growth agency. Districts could ideally: provide teachers with choices in school-based professional development; pay for teachers to attend and present at conferences; significantly subsidize teachers that seeks additional degrees and certifications; engage in dialogue with teachers about how they have professionally growth and how they imagine future professional growth and make optimal development and possibility development core values and practices.

How can we foster strong networks and cultures of support and collaboration in K-12?

First, we must recognize the value that networks of support have in the professional growth of teachers. There are many such networks that exist or structures such as Teacher Roundtable, lesson study groups, and inquiry or action research groups that can be used to create new groups. School organizations should provide more funding to networks of support within and outside of schools. For example, a principal can provide space and food for a group like Teacher Roundtable. Schools and school leaders can take a supportive and listening approach, learning how these networks can integrate practices that support professional growth and optimal development.

Future Directions for Research

There are many future directions for research on conceptual frameworks for practice and optimal development. Additional case studies could be done across more diverse populations of teachers and other educators such as counselors, principals, and superintendents. Creating a knowledge base of robust, descriptive case studies that detail the professional journeys of educators would yield insights about how professionals grow, what challenges they face, and how they could be better supported. As core elements of a conceptual framework for practice are more established, a series of batteries can be developed that can describe the experience and relative importance of each element. Possible elements included are values and beliefs, networks of support, mentorship, reflection, imagination, skill development, etc. Results from the batteries could be used to construct conceptual framework for practice profiles. The profiles could have both empirical and professional development value.

The Optimal Development Project: Supporting Lifelong Professional Growth

Inspired by this dissertation study, I intend to start the Optimal Development Project (ODP) to develop interventions and study optimal development and conceptual frameworks for

practice. The ODP will do work with all educators and perhaps professionals in other fields. A description of the mission of the ODP is below:

Recognizing that professional growth is personal, dynamic, and essential, the Optimal Development Project (ODP) offers structures, assessments, programs, and networks to support the continued development of educators throughout their careers. Through reflective practices and engagement with others, the ODP strives to unlock the agency of educators, helping them to adopt both a “possibility development mindset” and a “mindset of intentionality” as they make choices to support their optimal development.

As a shared in the beginning of this study, optimal development has been a lifelong project for me. This dissertation study has moved this project forward in many compelling and serendipitous ways. I am excited about the future possibilities.

Appendix A

Qualitative Interviewing

Ten Interview Principles and Skills for Qualitative Interviewing (Patton, p. 428)

1. Ask open-ended questions. Ask relevant and meaningful open-ended questions that invite thoughtful, in-depth responses that elicit whatever is salient to the interviewee.	6. Be both empathic and neutral. Show interest and offer encouragement nonjudgmentally: empathic neutrality.
2. Be clear. Ask questions that are clear, focused, understandable and answerable.	7. Make transitions. Help and guide the interviewee through the interview process.
3. Listen. Attend carefully to responses. Let the interviewee know that they've been heard. Respond appropriately to what you hear.	8. Distinguish types of questions. Separate purely descriptive questions from questions about interpretations and judgments. Distinguish behavior, attitude, knowledge, and feeling questions.
4. Probe as appropriate. Follow up in complete responses with clarifying probes. Interviewees will only then learn what degree of depth and detail you seek through probes.	9. Be prepared for the unexpected. The world can intrude during an interview. Be flexible and responsive.
5. Observe. Watch the interviewee to guide the interactive process. Acknowledge what is going on. Adapt the interview as appropriate to fit the reactions of the person interviewed. Every interview is also an observation.	10. Be present throughout. Interviewees can tell when the interviewer is distracted, inattentive, or uninterested.

Six Relationship-Focused, Interactive Interview Approaches (Patton, p.462)

The Interview Conversation	“An interview is literally an <i>inter view</i> , an inter change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (Kvale, 1996, p. 2)
Responsive Interviewing	“Empathizes flexibility of design and expect the interviewer to change questions in response to what he or she is learning” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p.7)
The Active Interview	An interview is a social interaction with the interviewer and interviewee sharing in constructing a story and its meanings; both are participants in the meaning-making process. The interviewer facilitates the interviewees in “subjectively creating their story” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 8)

Creative Interviewing	Situationally adaptive interviewing that varies interview questions and interview processes to fit the particular situation and context in which the interview interaction occurs.
Reflective Interviewing	Integrates the theoretical conception of the interview, the researcher's relationship to the inquiry and participants, and the methodological review of the interview interaction to inform design (Roulston, 2010, p.1)
Portraiture Interviewing	Portraiture is a negotiated co-creation between the social scientist and the person being depicted

Appendix B

Andy's List of Questions for Transformational and Growth Oriented Interviewing

Pre-interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What preparation, actions, and reflection are needed for a successful interview? ● What type or combination of types of qualitative interviewing approaches map onto the methodology and context for the interview?
Principle and Skill Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What principles and skills will be most important during this interview? ● What principles or skills do I want to focus on improving during and after the interview?
Positionality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is my position in this interview? ● What is the position of the interviewee? ● How does positionality influence the affordances and challenges of the interview?
Rapport & Relationship Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How can relationship building occur before, during, and after the interview? ● How can I listen to, encourage, and affirm the interviewee?
Serendipity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do I imagine will occur during the interview? ● What are some unexpected directions the interview may go? ● What mindset and skills will enable me to take advantage of the serendipitous possibilities that may emerge during the interview?
Dialogic & Reciprocal Transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What “funds of knowledge”, insights, and perspectives does the interviewee have? ● What is needed so that I can be open to change and grow during and after the interview?
Mindfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How can I practice mindfulness while interviewing? ● In what ways can I trust my intuition? ● In what ways do I need to be wary of my feelings, thoughts, and potential inaccurate assessment of my interviewing skills?
Culture & Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What culture, class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc. elements inform the context of the interview?
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Criticality? Temporality? Other conceptual framework parts?

Appendix C

Conceptual Framework for Practice Semi-Structured Interview
Introduction
<p>Show Conceptual Framework for Practice Graphic Handout (Attached)</p> <p>Things to Point Out:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Describe the various elements and how they can influence professional growth.● These elements are fundamental to a conceptual framework for practice, but not comprehensive. As we talk, maybe we can uncover other important aspects in general or even specific to you.● Essentially, I am interested in understanding what you think about all the things that have shaped your growth as an educator; Step 1 (<i>Conceptual Framework for Practice Interview</i>) in our process is a discussion of elements of your conceptual framework for practice.● Step 2 in our process (<i>Create My Own Conceptual Framework for Practice</i>), will be you creating a representation of your conceptual framework for practice. After you create it, we'll have a second conversation during which we will discuss the artifact and further deepen our discussion of your conceptual framework for practice.● Step 3 in our process (<i>The Possibility Interview</i>) will be a final conversation during which we adopt a possibility development lens and look towards your future, imagining your future growth and development as an educator.
Experiences & Key Events
<p>Let's talk about key experiences and events that have shaped your conceptual framework for practices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● What were the key experiences and events that shaped your development as a teacher?<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Before you became a teacher?○ During student teaching and novice years?○ After the novice years?○ Recently?○ Outside of the classroom, but still in education?○ Outside of education?○ Times of struggle?● How did these experiences/events influence your thinking about teaching, learning, and students?● How did these experiences influence your practice?

- Are there experiences that took place over a long period of time, such as a relationship with a mentor or colleague, or a particular year of teaching that were significant? Describe.

Beliefs

Let's back up a bit and talk about your beliefs.

- What do you now believe about students, child and adolescent development, teaching, and learning?
 - What are your top three beliefs?
 - What do you **not** believe?
- How did your beliefs change over time?
- How do your beliefs shape your practice?
- How does your practice shape your beliefs?
- Can you give an example of how your beliefs show up in your teaching?
- How have your colleagues influenced your beliefs?
- When have your beliefs been challenged? Where have you struggled the most with these beliefs? How did you deal with the challenge?

Theory & Theorists

Let's dig into the theories and theorists that are most important to your conceptual framework for practice.

- What theories and concepts lie at the core of your identity and practice?
 - From undergrad & grad school
 - From professional developments
 - From independent reading
- What theorists, writers, and educators most influence your work as a teacher?
- How have these theories/theorists influenced your practice? Examples?
- What theories/theorists are you most interested in further investigating?

Ideology

Think of ideology as a bit more than beliefs and theories (maybe it's the conflating of your many beliefs and theories into a worldview) and also connected to your goals, expectations, and actions.

- What is your ideology and worldview as an educator?
- What are your goals both in and out of the classroom (for yourself, your students, and others)?
- What actions or social justice actions do you engage in?

Tensions/Dilemmas

Let's talk about the tensions and dilemmas that you experience. Often, these tensions and dilemmas are things to manage, but don't get fully resolved. How we "work"

these tensions and dilemmas can illuminate much about how we approach teaching and learning.

- What dilemmas and tensions did you engage with as a teacher?
- How did you navigate and manage them?
- Are there key people who help you work things out?
- How do you conceptualize the role of dilemmas and tensions in your development as an educator?
- What dilemmas and tensions are you currently engaged with?

Support Networks

Let's discuss your networks of support. You may be in multiple networks inside and outside of school, or within or out of education. Friends and family can be part of your support networks.

- Tell me about where you feel support as an educator:
 - In your site of practice?
 - From former colleagues?
 - From mentors, past and present?
 - From family and friends?
- Are there educator groups/organizations that you belong to that provide support? Describe your involvement and how you benefit from them?
- Are there non-educational groups/organizations that you belong to that provide support? Describe your involvement and how you benefit from them?

Reflective Practices

Let's talk about the reflective practices that you have engaged in.

- List and describe some of the reflective practices you have engaged in
 - Internally: By yourself (i.e. journaling, blogging, meditation/mindfulness, etc.)
 - Externally: With others (i.e. planning partners, groups/organizations, conferences, writing groups)
- Describe how you have engaged in action research throughout your career.
 - At the beginning of you career?
 - Through different stages?
 - Currently?
- What action research/reflective practice themes or “throughlines” can you identify over your career?
- What benefits have you derived from reflective practices?

Vision & Possibility

Let's talk vision and how, looking towards the future, you see yourself, your practice, the profession, and the state of education.

- What are your hopes and dreams as an educator?
 - At the beginning of you career?

- Throughout different stages of your career?
- Currently?
- How do you imagine and envision your ideal self as teacher?
- What would the ideal classroom, school, or larger educational system look like?
- What skills do you want to further develop?
- How do you imagine yourself changing over your future career?

Post-Interview

--Thank teacher for their participation

--Remind them of next steps and inform them they will soon get a transcript of the interview to help them with their *Construct Their Conceptual Framework for Practice* task

--Ask if the teacher has any questions or needs

Appendix D

Initial Finding Shared and Discussed during Focus Group Interview

Working Title: Optimal Development and the Building of a Conceptual Framework for Practice

Description: The central research questions of this study are: How do teachers understand and develop their conceptual framework for practice and how is that process related to their professional growth? These central research questions are explored through case studies of experienced teachers. Themes are identified and implications for supporting teacher professional growth and optimal development are explored.

Professional Growth & Building a Conceptual Framework for Practice – Preliminary Findings

- (1) *We become who we are and aspire to be:* Mindsets/beliefs support growth (Growth mindset, inquiry stance/curiosity, deep commitment to students, colleagues, and education, etc.) being intentional about growing and developing skills enhances learning
- (2) *The brain changes:* Expertise develops in cognitive functioning, capacity to manage and respond to information in the field, various skills and ability to implement/set conditions for learning of self and students
- (3) *It takes a village (or teamwork makes the dream work):* Importance of collaboration and networks of support (Teacher Roundtable, Action Research Group)
- (4) *Reflective practices are a superfood:* Reflective practices can be very nourishing both on individual and group levels, offering a range of benefits and positive outcomes.
- (5) *Mentorship is geometrical:* Mentoring experiences are complex and potentially helpful across many forms. (Having supportive mentors, challenging mentors, being a mentor to others, etc.)
- (6) *Growth can emerge from struggle:* Struggle/obstacles/challenges can be generative (while also awful). Protective factors such as mindset, networks of support, reflective practices, attributions can help foster growth through hardship and experiences with toxic individuals and culture.

What's Missing?

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