

Summer 7-19-2018

## Internal Structures, External Mandates: How the Best Teachers Stay True to Their Vocation

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Kimberly Kent

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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Internal Structures, External Mandates:  
How the Best Teachers Stay True to Their Vocation

Kimberly Gayle Kent

Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor in Education in Professional Inquiry, Leadership and Transformation

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## Abstract

This study sought to explore whether or not master teachers who seem relatively unfazed by daily pressures and mandates may have some sort of internal structure to help them. In order to answer this question, relevant literature regarding self-concepts was examined. This literature included self-efficacy, self-determination theory, growth mindset, and grit. Synthesizing the literature, these theories had certain resounding commonalities among some or all of them. These commonalities include *perceived autonomy*, *perceived competence*, *relational importance*, and *hard work*. Using a heuristic, hermeneutic phenomenological framework, participants were interviewed, observed, and shared relevant documents. Specific codes were both prevalent and frequent among the participants. These included both a priori codes such as *growth mindset* and *perseverance* as well as emergent codes such as *pedagogical philosophy*, *noncompliance*, *relational importance*, *collaboration*, *flexibility*, and *compartmentalization*. The experience of the participants indicated that their pedagogical philosophy acts as an anchor in times of stress and as a foundation for professional growth. The idea that master teachers have a guiding pedagogy that is reflected in their lived experience, has not been studied. Such a thought is worthy of further research because what teachers think and believe about their teaching inevitably drives their practice and is an area we should consider.

*Keywords:* master teacher, unfazed, pedagogical philosophy, noncompliance

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my children and my parents. Jahleel and NayNay, your support and patience has made this possible. Thank you for putting up with my stress and pretending to listen as I worked. Mom and Dad, thank you for all of your help — emotional and financial. Mom, you don't have to refer to me as doctor. Dad, you'll probably want to.

## **Acknowledgements**

First, with the purest and deepest gratitude, I would like to acknowledge my dissertation committee, all of whom showed me compassion, respect, and caring while challenging me to read deeper, learn more, and write with greater clarity and understanding. Dr. Cathy Lambeth and Dr. Marty Bullis each helped me with specific questions and difficulties throughout the process, and my dissertation chair, Dr. Angela Owusu-Ansah, supported me continually. Thank you all.

Second, I would like to acknowledge the participants in this study, all of whom opened their hearts and minds so I could listen to their experiences. They were honest and articulate, and they relayed their experiences and spoke their truths in a way that made my job much easier. I hope that I did you justice.

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## **Preface: Coming to the Question**

Throughout my career as a classroom teacher, I have been interested in what makes students tick: what fascinates them, what choices they make, and how they see the world. When I began the doctoral process, I assumed that would be the focus of my dissertation. “Sure,” a friend told me. “Study what you already know.” When she said that, I began to feel like I was taking too easy a road. Still, I knew from both personal experience and research that students achieve more and are more engaged when they have autonomy over their learning along with guidance regarding improvement. Interestingly, although educators and educational researchers know this about students, teachers are not really treated the same way. Teachers are given mandate after mandate on what to do and how to do it. No wonder so many teachers burn out. On the other hand, some teachers do not seem as bothered as others. They may shrug their shoulders or roll their eyes, but they do not take the frustrations with as much severity, and it does not affect the joy of their job.

I wondered what was different about these teachers, whether they knew something that other teachers did not or if they ignored something that about which other teachers cared too much. Eventually I came to the question, “Are there certain internal structures common for master teachers who seem relatively unfazed?”

When I first wrote to principals in the district used for this study, one principal, who knows me and my work as a teacher, said, “You know, you’re kind of studying yourself.” I disagreed, “I kvetch too much to seem unfazed.” But he maintained his position, “Yes, but you always come around at the end and it doesn’t seem to bother you.” As I began the heuristic, hermeneutic process of exploring the experiences of my participants, I had to go through the same process for myself: self-interviews, self-questioning, defining and examining my responses to my

participants. I don't know if my principal acquaintance is right, that I too am one of the teachers I studied, but I know I feel an affinity with my participants and my answers to the interview questions fall in line with theirs.

As such, I want to be transparent about the type of teacher I am—not to bracket away my experiences as this is not a Husserlian phenomenology, but rather to allow the reader the clearest understanding of my perspective. Like my participants, I believe that pedagogical philosophy is very important, and I am a strong believer in differentiation. For years I was given all the TAG students, students for whom English is a foreign language, and special education students at my grade level. I joked that there would be only one or two children in my class without initials after their names, who were not labeled in some way. This was because parents and staff knew I would work to make sure each student got what they needed. Like my participants, I am non-compliant—probably no more so than they, although I tend to be more vocal about it. I believe in growth mindset and perseverance, and I would rather learn something new through a mistake than to be right. My biggest errors in teaching have been when I thought I knew something better than I actually did, so I have learned to tread lightly around my own arrogance. This has come in handy throughout the dissertation process, during which time I have doubled checked my participants' intent whenever I was unsure or when I worried that I was placing my perspective over theirs.

As a teacher I believe in humor and caring; to my own chagrin, I'm a little competitive about assessment scores; and I refuse to let a student get through a year with me without finding something that intrigues them enough to study it on their own. I do better with students who advocate for themselves, even at my expense, than with students who sit quietly and try not to be noticed. I get frustrated when new mandates misalign work that has been done without giving us

teachers time to realign our efforts. And what causes me to soar as a teacher is when I help a student decide that school is a space that belongs to them, that they are entitled to the very best education we can provide.

This process has been about self-exploration as well as exploration of a phenomenon. And while that is not the focus, I felt it should be acknowledged as a relevant side-effect of this research. While I do not know for sure if it will help me to become a better teacher, I feel certain in saying it has helped me to become a more self-reflective teacher.



## Chapter 1: Introduction

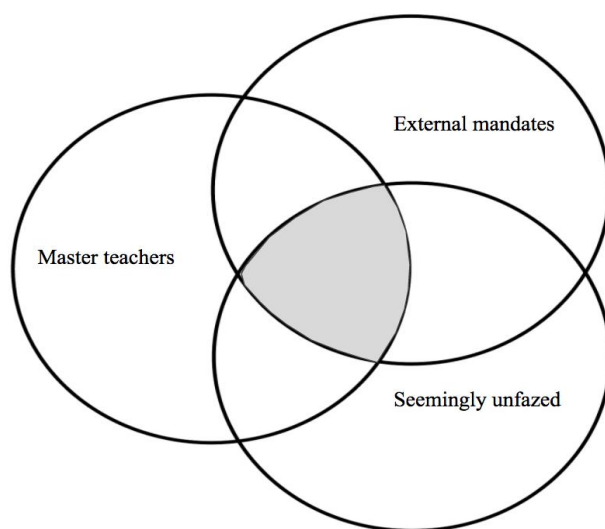
There is no doubt that teaching in the United States can be a frustrating profession. A multitude of increasing challenges including mandates such as No Child Left Behind, unpaid extra work, taxing student families, and perceived lack of respect all affect the way teachers view themselves and their place in the profession (Santoro, 2011). Teachers handle these incongruities in a number of ways. Some become frustrated with the discrepancy and teach in a way they know is less effective. Others resign themselves to acquiescing to the mandates and pressures in a way that does not necessarily benefit the students. A large number of teachers leave the profession entirely (Institute of Education Sciences, 2015; Metlife, 2012).

Some teachers, however, even after years in the profession, are able to come to work exuding more positivity than might be warranted under such challenging conditions. These teachers do not *burn out*, even after years in the profession; they put forth their best effort and do so in an affirming way. They thrive in suboptimal conditions in a manner that seemingly negates the weight of the external pressures and mandates. Yet no one knows exactly what qualities these teachers have, how they perceive themselves and their environment, if they can reflect on some element in themselves that is different than teachers who burn out. As of right now, these teachers' experiences are unknown. Because, while there has been an abundance of research about what creates teacher burnout, there has been scant evidence regarding teachers who seem relatively unaffected. In addition, the extant research tends to look at quantitative investigations—what percentages of those teachers have degrees from prestigious universities or majors of teachers who do not burn out (Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2014). Little research exists examining how those teachers perceive themselves.

This dissertation focuses on the lived experience of master teachers who seem unfazed by the discrepancy between the frustrations of their work environment and their best practices. By investigating the experiences of master teachers who have been identified as unfazed by their principals, the aim of this study is to explore commonalities and themes that might occur, to consider underlying reasons that these teachers, who already have years of experience and are recognized as proficient in their pedagogy by their administrators, may also appear untroubled by frustrations. At the same time, however, the researcher understands that how these teachers appear and what they are actually experiencing and feeling may not be the same thing.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Master teachers, educators with years of experience and well-honed pedagogical and relational skill, are a small subset of the teaching population (Feistritzer, 2011). Master teachers who accept the multitude of external mandates (orders from the district, state, or federal level regarding how and what to teach) are a smaller subset (Costigan, 2008). Even fewer are the master teachers who accept external mandates while seeming unfazed about these extra stressors (Center on Educational Policy, 2016). These teachers are the linchpin of this research.



*Figure 1.* Venn diagram denoting the focal point of the research.

According to the literature, certain constructs may be of specific importance in this regard. These center around the teacher's *theory of self*—how one sees oneself and one's place in the world. These theories include a strong sense of autonomy (a perception of freedom from external control), deep-seated feelings of self-efficacy (the ability to have a chosen effect on one's self and environment), self-determination (the intrinsic motivation to accomplish tasks), a growth mindset (the willingness to fail in order to learn from mistakes and ultimately do better), and a passion to persevere in the face of obstacles (grit).

One internal trait researchers have studied is teachers' self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to succeed at a specific task. Albert Bandura's work is considered pre-eminent in this regard. Bandura (as well as his collaborators and co-researchers) has found that teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy have greater measures of numerous positive objective outcomes such as better planning and organization, openness to new ideas, and persistence and resilience (Bandura, 1993, 1994; Holzberger, Philipp, & Kunter, 2013; Protheroe, 2008).

Self-determination theory (SDT) is the work of two seminal researchers: Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, both of the University of Rochester. SDT indicates that, if the quantity of motivation is the same, the type of motivation affects outcome, with intrinsic motivation creating a greater response than extrinsic motivation. In addition, intrinsic motivation is inherently intertwined with autonomy as one can only be intrinsically motivated if one has a choice. Deci and Ryan's work has been incorporated with studies regarding teacher motivation, finding results such as greater efficacy for teachers with an intrinsic motivation toward the act of teaching itself (as opposed to other tasks associated with educational professionals). In other words, teachers who would rather teach than perform other complementary tasks associated with the profession (such as classroom management, student evaluation, and administrative tasks) tend to have

higher outcomes for their students as well as greater teacher satisfaction (Fermat, Senécal, Guay, Marsh, & Dowson, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Self-Determination Theory, 2017).

One more contemporary theory that has grown out of Bandura's and Deci's studies is Carol Dweck's (2006) concept of *growth mindset*. Growth mindset is the internalized belief that hard work improves outcomes more than natural talent, and that perseverance in the face of adversity is a critical determining factor regarding success. Growth mindset also correlates to other positive factors such as workplace goal orientation, acceptance of remediation, and interpersonal interactions. These factors are the result of people having the willingness to recognize the importance of one's failure and the analysis of that failure as a stepping stone toward success (Dweck, 2006; Keating & Heslin, 2015).

Angela Lee Duckworth's (2016) ideas around *grit*, grew from Dweck's work. Duckworth defines grit as the integration of passion—an intense enthusiasm for a subject—with growth mindset. Researchers proposing grit as an integral construct recognize that over time people improve exponentially in subjects where they utilize both passion and hard work. Grit, however, is different from growth mindset in that the focus of grit is the need to persevere after success, looking for new and greater challenges. Duckworth and other researchers who have studied grit concentrate on continual improvement as well as hard work (Duckworth, 2013, 2016).

To study the lived experience of these teachers as well as their internal structures, I employed a phenomenological approach. Multiple interviews, as well as observation, and the examination of documents were the data collection methods employed. I found these participants based on chain-referral sampling from elementary school administrators. A phenomenological framework was appropriate for this study for two important reasons. First, as teachers' perspectives about their internal motivation were lacking in the literature, this gave a chance for their

voices to be heard. Second, because these teachers are motivated to *teach* but not necessarily to *reflect*, without a phenomenological framework, the essence of their motivation might not have been captured. As van Manen (1997) said, “Lived experiences gather hermeneutic significance as we (reflectively) gather them by giving memory to them” (“The Nature of the Lived Experience,” para. 12). Without the phenomenological framework, that memory might have been forgotten and its significance lost.

### **Problem**

The problem is as follows: there are only a small minority of teachers who are master teachers, following external mandates, and seemingly unfazed by the challenges of both (Mayo Clinic, 2016; Metlife, 2012). Because of this, a large-scale quantitative study would be challenging as it would be difficult to discern teachers who are dissatisfied from teachers who are satisfied without thorough evaluation. In addition, even in studying teachers who are satisfied with their positions, there has been little to no differentiation between their external and internal motivations. This study adds essential information to the understanding of what internal structures these teachers possess (if any) and examines and explores the essence of teachers who are internally motivated in order to discover what (if any) themes and commonalities emerge.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experience of teachers who have been identified as master teachers, who recognize the challenges and frustrations of external mandates, but seem relatively unfazed by these difficulties. I hoped to discover similar internal constructs that the participants possess in order to develop an understanding of underlying themes or similarities between the participants.

### **Research Question**

The research question that was explored was: what is the lived experience of these teachers and what specific qualities do these teachers have? Subquestions that help support the main research question are: How do these teachers perceive themselves and their environment that may be different than other teachers? How do they present themselves that may be different than other teachers? Are there themes and commonalities among master teachers who present themselves as feeling little frustration or discrepancy between external mandates and their best practices?

### **Significance of the Study**

This research is significant to numerous educational stakeholders. Teachers, especially, may be interested to reflect on their own internal structures, as well as those of other educators. The very act of analyzing what brings us joy as teachers and how one holds onto that feeling in trying times, could help us to further our professional self-improvement. Principals and hiring directors may be interested in the themes that emerge from self-motivated teachers as that may give them a better understanding of teachers who thrive regardless of daily pressures and stressors. While this research is not generalizable, it gives a glimpse of who these teachers are and how they maintain their enthusiasm and drive regardless of certain environmental factors.

### **Definitions of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, specific key terms must be understood. Further discussion of the terms are listed in the literature review.

**Best practices.** Studied and proven activities, approaches, and strategies that maximize student learning (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2012).

**External mandates.** Orders or commissions from outside the classroom. These include

assessments, required trainings, curriculum, and meetings from the school, district, state, and federal levels (New York State Department of Education, 2009).

**Hermeneutics.** Within a phenomenological framework, hermeneutics indicates an interpretation of the studied phenomenon whereby the researcher explicitly recognizes and defines the environmental context as it weaves within the research (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1997).

**Heuristic inquiry.** A phenomenological approach whereby the researcher discovers as she investigates and allows the lived experience to evolve throughout the research (Douglass and Moustakas, 1985).

**Master teacher.** An experienced teacher who meets student needs and challenges with an explicit understanding of where the students need to be and how to get each individual student there. Master teachers do this while utilizing best practices, fostering mutual respect and caring (Eaude, 2014; Finnell, 2009; Hamachek, 1999; Sternberg & Horvath, 1995).

**Phenomenology.** A qualitative research methodology that focuses on the participants' unique experiences (van Manen, 1997).

**Unfazed.** Teachers who seem unfazed by the external mandates do not manifest behaviors of people upset or those overwhelmed by stressors (Mayo Clinic, 2016), such as feeling pain, overeating, or negativity. While the term unfazed literally means undaunted, in this research, it is used to indicate teachers who seem less bothered by external mandates than their colleagues.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This study, like all research, is confined by certain limitations and delimitations. Limitations include the inability of this study to be generalized due to the inherent nature of the phenomenological process, time constraints, and the limited grade levels of the participant teachers.

In addition, bias on my part has been examined as a possible limitation of the study. Because of this, the researcher utilized scrutinization methods such as member checking and an auditable decision trail.

Delimitations include that the participants are all from the same school district, have at least five years of experience, are all elementary teachers, and all have at least five years experience. I chose these delimitations so that more subtle nuance could be analyzed in the participants' experiences.

## **Summary**

In summary, this dissertation focuses on the experience of a small subset of teachers—those who, in spite of external mandates and frustrations, continue to work enthusiastically using best practices. The research focuses on their theory of self: how they view themselves and their experiences in education, specifically regarding their perceived autonomy, self-competence, hard work, and relational importance. This study does so using a phenomenological framework, focusing on an exploration of the participants' experiences within the context of their daily work lives.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The purpose of a literature review is to create “the foundation for any research project” (Boote & Beile, 2005, p. 4). In doing so, a thorough literature review must provide the framework and context for the research being studied, investigate and describe relevant similar studies, and finally synthesize those findings to create a schema for the reader that is unique to the research at hand. In doing so, this particular literature review is divided into three main parts. The first centers on definitions and contextualization of the subject: master teachers who seem relatively unfazed by external mandates and pressures. The second is a direct reading of four leading theories of self-concept that may help explain the phenomenon being studied. These theories are self-efficacy, self-determination theory, growth mindset, and grit. The third is a synthesis of common traits in the four examined theories that may further the understanding of the phenomenon of unfazed master teachers. These traits are perceived autonomy, perceived competence, relational importance, and hard work.

The boundaries of this literature review are based on an inherent contradiction within the review’s purpose and the methodology of the design. The research was a heuristic inquiry which, according to Moustakas (1990) is the “process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis” (p. 9). Therefore, this literature review is a reasoned inference of what would be important in the research, created before the research began. Because of that, I used my own experience as a teacher as well as vicarious experiences in collegial relationships with other teachers to determine what theories should be studied to explore the phenomenon of unfazed master teachers. Only through the research process itself did the nature of the experience reveal itself.

## Definitions and Contextualization

In order to understand the phenomenon that is being researched, certain terms need to be defined so that reader and researcher have a common perception. Creswell (2014) wrote about the importance of term definitions to create a common language, specify connotations, and to create precision. Along those lines, I am explicitly defining three terms that will need to be understood in the context of this research: master teacher and unfazed.

**External mandates.** While the American public education system is a matter of state and local responsibility, since the ending of World War II, there has been an increased federal presence. This apexed in the 21st century with No Child Left Behind—an 1,100 page act that mandated standards, assessments, and accountability for schools, students, and teachers (New York State Education Department, 2009). Since that time, No Child Left Behind has morphed into the Every Student Succeeds Act which, among other provisions, mandated “challenging academic content” and proficiency standards for English language learners (National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d., p. 2). These conditions reflect a growing emphasis on quantifiable education programs that close the achievement gap between students. Besides the direct repercussions of such federal mandates, there have also been numerous “side effects” including a narrowing of the curriculum (focused teaching only on those subjects that are assessed) (Cawelti, 2006); a focus on specific reading programs over others; comparisons in state, national, and international programs (New York State Education Department, 2009, p. 82); and a decline in public attitudes toward school (Azzam, Perkins-Gough, & Thiers, 2006).

**Master teacher.** The publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 jump started a litany of repercussions in public education that continues to affect teachers today (Graham, 2013). One such

repercussion was the analysis of effective teaching practices and teachers themselves, thus creating the genesis of the present day concept of “master teacher.” Master teachers can be defined by three things: what they do, how they do it, and what they know about themselves (Hamachek, 1999). According to Sternberg and Horvath (1995), an expert (or master) teacher possesses specific characteristics that include pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical-content knowledge (specifically, how to “explicate” information) (p. 11). In addition, a master teacher possesses practical explicit and tacit information about how to be most effective within her environmental context and does so with greater efficiency and less effort than a novice (p. 15). Implied in that definition is the fact that master teachers inherently must have experience in their field. In other words, it is impossible for a novice teacher to also be a master teacher as she has not had the background to create mastery.

More contemporary authors have widened Sternberg and Horvath’s (1995) definition, and now include other aspects in defining a master teacher, such as the use of specific strategies such as presenting key ideas in a multitude of ways and careful but flexible planning (Finnell, 2009), as well as traits like greater sensitivity to context and environment (Eaude, 2014). Finally, a master teacher must have a sense of self:

In all of this, perhaps, there is an implicit bottom line that might be stated in the

following way: The kind of teacher one is depends on the kind of person one is.

This may seem apparent on the surface, but sometimes in our quest for better teaching methods, more efficient instructional strategies, specifically defined behavioral objectives, and more effective methods of inquiry, we lose sight of the fact that the success of those “better” things depends very much on the emotional

makeup and psychological underpinnings of the teacher who uses them.

(Hamachek, p. 209)

In other words, one's self-concept helps define what strategies work best and what pedagogical-content knowledge will be most successful for each individual teacher. A well-defined self-concept also allows a teacher to recognize problematic areas of practice and improve them.

**Unfazed.** This study hinges on the idea that these master teachers seem unfazed, but what that actually means is ambiguous and requires more metaphor than science. According to *Merriam-Webster Online*, “unfazed” means “not confused, worried, or shocked by something that has happened” (unfazed, n.d.). An educational administrator told me that he recognizes unfazed teachers because they make fewer complaints and there are fewer complaints about them (S. Thompson, personal communication, September 21, 2017). However, both of these definitions barely scratch the surface of the connotation and denotation of the word.

First, one must question the *Merriam-Webster* definition because to be “not confused, worried, or shocked by something that has happened” indicates that there may be a valid reason for such a response in the first place. Over the past few decades mounting research has demonstrated the eroding satisfaction and increasing stress of teachers. According to The Pennsylvania State University's issue brief *Teacher Stress and Health* (2016), there are four main sources for teacher stress. These are problems within the school organizational structure, increased job demands, lack of work resources that prevent a sense of autonomy, and low social-emotional competence (lack of mindfulness and self-aware emotional regulation).

Teacher frustration has also been studied extensively. In The Center on Education Policy's *Teacher View and Voices* (2016), 60% of teachers admit to lessening enthusiasm for teaching since they began their career, and *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* (2012) noted

a sharp decline in teacher job satisfaction since 2008. In one of their most striking findings, *The Metlife Survey* (2012) noted “Teacher job satisfaction has dropped 15 points in the past two years, the lowest level in more than two decades” (p. 13). Negative teacher response to stressful factors has been well documented. Three main effects to increased professional difficulties are teacher frustration (Hunt et al., 2009), leaving the profession entirely (Ingersoll, 2001), and less effective teaching (Costigan, 2005).

Teachers with the kind of stress and frustration described by these studies would be considered *fazed*—confused, worried, or shocked by what is happening. While this is a reasonable and common response to the problems endemic in teaching, *unfazed* teachers do not respond that way. Unfazed teachers respond to stress in a manner that could be considered unusual but helpful for their long term success in education and the continuation of their careers. Although there is little research about teachers in particular feeling unfazed, there is research about other stressful occupations and the jobholders who respond to those stresses in a less affected manner than is common. For example, Dohrenwend, Yager, Wall and Adams (2013) found that not all combat veterans developed posttraumatic stress disorder; certain factors were more protective and others were more harmful for veterans’ future mental and emotional health. Similarly, in a study of volunteer counselors, Bakker, van der Zee, Lewig, and Dollard (2006) found that certain factors were more protective and others more harmful in preventing burnout.

While there are some personality traits (Garcia, Kupczynski, & Holland, 2011) as well as certain teacher behaviors (Sternberg & Horvath, 1995) that lead to student success, and it would be logical to assume that teachers who feel success may be less fazed than their contemporaries without such success, there are no studies directly addressing the effect of these traits and behaviors on teachers’ feelings of stress, discomfort, and generally feeling *fazed*. For the purposes of

this research, the definition of *unfazed* centers around not appearing stressed, worried, or shocked even when those feelings or appearance of those feelings would be warranted by external circumstances.

## **Context**

In order to study master teachers who seem relatively unfazed, I have defined both master teacher and unfazed, however that is not enough to provide context for this phenomenon. Two specific contextual factors need to be considered. The first is that a teacher may present as unfazed to others while feeling differently. The second is that this research aims to explore internal structures of unfazed master teachers, and some teachers may have external factors that help them weather the frustrations of the profession. These two factors need to be taken into consideration before reviewing the literature in order to direct the focus of the review.

The fact is that a teacher can present as unfazed without actually feeling that way. To account for this possibility, I have used both self-definition as well as the definition of a manager, in this case, the participants' principals. According to Matt Zingoni (2015), using both self-rating as well as the rating of a coworker helps to offset problems with reliability and validity found when employees only rate themselves with no further verification. In addition, Fuller and Slotnick (1986) noted certain characteristics that principals tend to correlate with their best teachers. These include traits such as a "willingness to go the 'extra mile'" and "enjoys students" (p. 13). It is reasonable to assume that teachers who present with the characteristics Fuller and Slotnick (1986) describe would also present as unfazed. However, using Zingoni's (2015) framework, I have also asked the participants to self-rate whether or not they see themselves as unfazed.

The next context I needed to consider was whether or not these teachers have external or internal motivation (or both) for their success. Considering the taxing environment, the rationale

for even becoming a teacher could be in question; however, determining factors include intrinsic, extrinsic, and altruistic motivations (Claudia, 2015). In fact, teachers tend to choose the profession for more selfless and public spirited reasons than other professions (Darling-Hammond, 2003). The specific reasons that teachers stay build on these same principles. Some teachers are concerned with extrinsic factors such as job security, health benefits, and retirement benefits (*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*, 2012) even if their motivation for their profession is waning.

Teachers who remain in the profession for internal reasons may be motivated by any number of factors. Internal structures of motivation have been studied by numerous researchers throughout the last 50 years. Each theorist and practitioner has viewed these internal structures with a different lens. Overall, however, internal structures fall into three main paradigms: (a) need-motive-value, which operates with the supposition that people work toward somewhat universal objectives they wish to have satisfied; (b) cognitive-choice theory, which weighs the importance of objectives partially through a person's locus of control as well as through the lens of universal need; and, (c) self-regulation/metacognition theories in which objectives are part of a recurring cycle in which one has a great amount of conscious agency in determining the importance of objectives as well as whether or not they are accomplished (Kanfer, 1990). In each of these paradigms, the individual's self-concept as well as his behavior has a different significance. In need-motive-value, often the objectives are more universal in nature, such as payment for work that translates into the ability to provide for one's self. According to Kanfer (1990), "Need fulfillment theories attempt to answer broad questions such as the 'nature of human nature' and the intraindividual conditions under which different motives lose and gain salience with the individual" (p. 85). Cognitive-choice theories combine the universal and individual. "Effects on an

individual's choice on subsequent action depends on other factors such as situational constraints and ease of implementing the choice" (Kanfer, 1990, p. 113), an example of this would be one's choice of specific training for a specific job. Self-regulation/ metacognition approaches, "focus on the influence of self-processes in the context of learning and individual differences in behavior (Kanfer, 1990, p. 138); in other words, how one chooses to execute one's job.

While all of these paradigms have value in understanding the phenomenon that will be studied in this research, the focus will be on self-regulation/metacognition approaches as these allow the greatest differentiation between individuals' internal structures and motives. This interweaves with Hamachek's (1999) explanation of the importance of self-knowledge for master teachers: "their personal manner, individual style, or personality" (p. 217) as well as the effects of these on one's teaching and classroom. While Hamachek (1999) recognizes that a multitude of personality traits are possible in a master teacher, he also notes that certain ideas and self-concepts are more prevalent than others.

### **Theories of Self-Concept**

Self-concept has been defined as a way to frame experience and motivate action (Oyserman, 2001, p. 502). It is a cognitive structure (one imagines one's self) as well as a product of experiences, interactions, and socio-cultural phenomena (Oyserman, 2001). While there is debate as to whether self-concept is stable or mutable, permanent or situational; there is no doubt that self-concept defines and at least partially determines how we see the world and how we react to it.

For specific reasons, the following four theories may be particularly astute in understanding the phenomenology of master teachers who are undeterred by external mandates and stress-



ors. First, all four of these theories can be relevant to one's understanding of self in the workplace. Second, they all allow an ebb and flow of one's self-concept over time. Third, there is explicit integration of one's reaction to external frustrations as part of each model. And finally, these theories focus on how one's self-concept can help create attributes that foster success in challenging circumstances. In other words, there may be a virtuous cycle between people who have the characteristics defined in these self-concepts and people who continually develop and hone the skills necessary to excel according to these self-concepts. All four of these consolidate what Oyserman (2001) defines as necessary in self-concepts:

The self is seen as an active agent, seeking competence, resolution of life phase conflicts, and mastery in real world terms, yet it is also viewed as importantly molded...[w]hat the self-concept does is mutually constructed by developmental shifts in cognitive abilities and the requirements of particular life tasks embedded in particular times and spaces. (p. 501)

The theories being discussed are: self-efficacy, self-determination theory, Growth Mindset, and grit. These theories are philosophically adjacent to one another and each has built upon the other. Each theory represents a different lens on self-regulation/metacognitive approaches as a way to act as an internal structure and motivate action. While each theory has a slightly different focus on specific attributes such as perseverance, relational importance, perceived competence, and hard work, the theories are similar enough to be viewed as philosophically similar.

### **Self-efficacy.**

**Theory.** Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy began as a reaction to the behaviorism of B. F. Skinner—the theory that one's response to stimulus is solely based on external factors. In contrast, self-efficacy argues that human beings have the ability to create their own rewards or

punishments and that we do so implicitly with self-imposed performance standards. (Bandura & Perloff, 1967). In Bandura and Perloff's landmark study, children were given a task with the possibility of earning external reinforcement (tokens that could be exchanged for prizes). Half the group had an externally imposed level of accomplishment for earning the tokens, while half the group created individual self-monitored levels of accomplishment for earning the tokens. The results indicated that given the opportunity to choose an acceptable performance level, participants would hold themselves to high standards while foregoing easier incentives for the chance to self-regulate their expectations (Bandura & Perloff, 1967).

Thus began decades of research by Bandura and others regarding self-efficacy. As self-efficacy became a subject of greater study, the definition of the theory matured to "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (Bandura, 1994, p. 2). In other words, self-efficacy asserts that not all people will have the same response to the same stimulus. While there are a plethora of mitigating factors (including environmental, fortuitous, and cultural factors, (Bandura, 2001)), overall people who are allowed greater autonomy choose higher standards for themselves than people with externally imposed standards; this can lead to a virtuous cycle whereby people believe themselves to be more capable and therefore perform better.

Further studies indicated that self-efficacy holds strong sway in personal achievement. People who have a high sense of self-efficacy perceive difficult tasks as challenges while those with a weak sense perceive tasks as threats (Bandura, 1993). Those with a strong sense believe that they can affect their own success—both in understanding the task as well as accomplishing it. Those with a weak sense believe that success and failure are determined by unchanging aptitude. Finally, those with a weak sense of self-efficacy are more likely to feel stress and depressed

by these tasks than those with a strong sense, and are therefore more likely to quit that which they find difficult (Bandura, 1993). While this has significant consequences in all areas of life, many studies focused on its ramifications in the workplace and in education.

***Theory in education.*** Self-efficacy in children has been studied both as an aspect of developmental growth and in relation to formal education (Bandura, 1993). Developmentally, self-efficacy helps children to regulate functioning and emotional well-being (Bandura, Pastorelli, Barbaranelli, & Caprara, 1999). Educationally, it has significance as student self-efficacy has been shown to have a positive correlation with academic performance and persistence outcomes (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). Research regarding self-efficacy in educational settings with students has been studied in everything from completion of mathematical tasks (Bandura, 1993 quoting Collins, 1982) to fruit and vegetable consumption in fourth and fifth graders (Domel, Thompson, Leonard, & Baranowski, 1994). Student belief in their own self-efficacy has shown a correlation in their personal goals, peer interactions, educational interests, and even academic success (Bandura, 1994). Moreover, longitudinal studies demonstrate a correlation between student self-efficacy and graduation rates, which, in turn, “can affect the course of life paths through choice processes” (Caprara et al., 2008, p. 532). In other words, students with a low sense of self-efficacy feel they have both fewer academic choices and therefore fewer life choices than students with a greater sense of self-efficacy. Overall, student self-efficacy has been shown to be an effective measure of probable student success in many different areas.

***Theory and teachers.*** Self-efficacy has been studied both as a general workplace theory and specifically with teachers. In the workplace it has been shown to increase proactive behavior (Huang, 2017), correlate with conscientiousness (Burns & Christiansen, 2011), and link with

greater adaptability to changes in the workplace (such as use of new technology) (Cherian & Jacob, 2013). With teachers, self-efficacy has been studied as an area of interest, both as a reflection of a specific career and its impact on student learning.

The results indicate that teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy handle daily stressors better, have a stronger commitment to academic instruction, are more motivational, have better classroom management, and create more individualized learning environments for their students (Bandura, 1993, 1994; Holzberger, Philipp, & Kunter, 2013). It also suggests that teachers achieve this sense of self-efficacy in a complicated, integrated way that includes successful previous experiences, a supportive environment, and a virtuous cycle whereby the teacher and the students have a warm, accepting relationship (Ramey-Gassert, Shroyer, & Staver, 1996).

In essence, teachers with high self-efficacy have certain internal structures that may help them succeed without frustration. These include internalized high standards, autonomy, and a strong sense of relatedness.

### **Self-determination theory.**

**Theory.** Edward Deci and Richard Ryan developed Self-Determination Theory (SDT) beginning in the 1970's. This theory is a sophisticated explanation of how and why people have motivation. Their theory pivots on three specific human needs: autonomy, competence, and psychological relatedness (Self-Determination Theory, 2017). Autonomy is defined by the choice and willingness to spend time on an endeavor; competence is described as the experience of feeling effective; and relatedness is the sense of belonging and connectedness to other people (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). SDT theorists believe that autonomy and competence interact with one another, thereby increasing or lessening one's intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) as both pivot on one's "perceived locus of causality" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). In other words, one

needs autonomy to feel competent and one cannot feel autonomous without competency. Relatedness is the third part to SDT; this refers to “the need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73). It is important to note that Deci and Ryan do not believe autonomy and relatedness to be in opposition to one another. They use the term “autonomy” synonymously with the idea of self-agency not individualism and have shown a correlation between relatedness, autonomy, and well being (Deci and Ryan, 2001). One example they use to clarify the importance of relatedness and autonomy in relation to one another is that toddlers with a strong sense of both are more willing to explore because they feel the sense of self-agency to affect their own behavior as well as the feeling of belongingness and connectedness to feel safe while doing so.

Ryan and Deci have further created six mini-theories subsections of SDT that examine the intricacies of external and internal motivation as well as factors that affect them. Each of the authors’ mini-theories explores specific facets of motivation such as social constructs for motivation, the effect of psychological well-being on motivation, and other elaborations. In these mini-theories, Ryan and Deci recognize that while intrinsic motivation is more effective than extrinsic motivation, it is not always possible. They also note that a sense of well-being hinges on a complex equipoise of motivations and antecedents including competence, autonomy, and psychological relatedness, as well as having one’s basic needs met (Deci and Ryan, 2001, Self-Determination Theory, 2017).

***Theory in education.*** Deci and his colleagues studied Self-Determination Theory in schools beginning in the 1970s, with much of their work focusing on the effect of autonomy support and structure on students. Overall, their work indicated that students are more engaged when they feel their perspectives and interests are taken into account regarding learning activities and

that any external rewards are used as a way to increase the student's autonomy rather than as a method of control (Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981), such as praising a child's decision making process rather than rewarding a child for pro-social behavior. However, just as important as autonomy support is teacher structure, so that students know what is expected of them and can understand the path to achieve these expectations (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). Other researchers applied Deci's work to educational settings in such varied ways as online asynchronous discussions (Butz & Stupnisky, 2017) and girls' motivation and amotivation in physical education classes (Gibbons, Temple, & Humbert, 2011).

Overall, in a meta-analysis of intervention programs designed to support SDT and autonomy, Su and Reeve (2010) state that, "In educational settings, students who have their autonomy supported by teachers show educational and developmental benefits, including greater engagement, higher quality learning, a preference for optimal challenge, enhanced intrinsic motivation, enhanced well-being, and higher academic achievement" (p. 160).

***Theory and teachers.*** Self-determination was first explored regarding workplace motivation. In doing so, researchers defined different types of motivation as well as the internal and external regulations that furthered these. In general, it was reaffirmed that autonomy and work climate (including interpersonal relationships) strongly affect workplace motivation and output (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Other important findings regarding SDT and workplace motivation include the supposition that autonomous and controlled motivations may not be inherently conflicted with one another (Moran, Diefendorff, Kim, & Liu, 2012, p. 362), and that while intrinsic motivation affects the quality of work, extrinsic motivation affects the quantity of work (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Ford, 2014). While these findings were not specifically about teachers, studying

general SDT and workplace motivation theory is valid for this research as teaching as a form of employment.

Like Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, only after studying SDT and its effect on students did researchers turn to its effect on teachers specifically. In the past decade, a handful of studies have explored SDT and teachers. This research indicates that teachers with a feeling of greater autonomy combined with a virtuous cycle of student success and relatedness have a positive relation to "autonomy-supportive teaching, and personal accomplishment; and negatively related to emotional exhaustion" (Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, & Kaplan, 2007). Other research regarding teachers and SDT focused on the role that principals play in creating an autonomous-supportive environment so that teachers feel they have a role in their own self-determination (Pelletier, Seguin-Levesque, & Legault, 2002; Eyal & Roth, 2011).

Like self-efficacy, self-determination theory has focused on autonomy and competence. Both theories explore relatedness but with different perspectives. Self-determination theory, unlike self-efficacy, is more concerned with internalized motivation.

### **Growth mindset.**

**Theory.** Since the advent of Carol Dweck's *growth mindset*, her idea that *all* people can learn and improve in aspects of their lives has become a tenet in educational psychology.

*[G]rowth mindset* is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. Although people may differ in every which way - in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience. (Dweck, 2006, p. 7)

This is in contrast to what Dweck (2006) defines as a "Fixed Mindset," that our abilities and intelligences are innate and unchanging. Dweck goes on to say that people who believe in their

ability to grow through their own effort succeed at a greater rate than people who believe inherent talent (or lack thereof) defines success. Growth mindset differs from research about self-efficacy and self-determination theory in that it has been primarily used in the educational setting, so rather than adapting the theory to schools, students, and teachers; it is already meant for that audience.

In numerous studies and experiments, it has been proven time and again that people with a growth mindset work harder and more persistently to solve problems. These people are less likely to equate challenges with failure and they try to learn from their mistakes. As Dweck (2006) stated, “People in a growth mindset don’t just seek challenge, they thrive on it” (p. 21). People with a *fixed mindset*, on the other hand, look for their work to be flawless as proof of their ability and tend to stagnate at whatever point feels successful but unchallenging.

***Theory in education.*** In the decade since the publication of her book, Dweck’s ideas of growth and fixed mindsets have revolutionized educational psychology. Teachers, administrators, and other educational stakeholders have connected to growth mindset in such a way that it has become ubiquitous in the classroom. In a survey of 600 teachers, the Education Week Research Center (2016) found that 45% of respondents indicated that they were “very familiar” with the concepts of growth mindset and only 4% indicated that they were “not at all familiar” with the idea (p. 14). In the classroom, teachers use the ideas behind growth mindset in everything from posters exclaiming the benefits of making mistakes to read alouds about characters being challenged and overcoming obstacles.

In addition, there is recent research connecting teachers’ mindsets about students’ abilities to learn with the teachers’ appraisals of student achievement. In a meta-analysis, Zhang, Kuusisto, and Tirri (2017) synthesized and examined papers from 1998 to 2017 regarding growth



mindset. They chose four specific hallmarks to study: the delineation of the importance of mindset with direct causality in academic achievement, mindset as a mediator in helping teachers bridge student challenges with eventual success, mindset as an outcome (the greater one's success, the more one recognizes that it is due to effort not talent), and mindset without an evident role (in a small number of studies there is no apparent correlation between mindset and success) (Zhang, Kuusisto, & Tirri, 2017). Overall, there is a fair amount of evidence that growth mindset is an effective belief system for teachers to utilize regarding their interactions with students in order to increase student success.

***Theory and teachers.*** However, like the other theories, while growth mindset primarily has been used with students, its tenets have also been applied to teachers. There is, however, a dichotomy between the two primary uses of growth mindset and teachers: the first is how educational professionals can use growth mindset with their students. This includes subject matter such as the effect on student achievement when teachers have a primarily growth or fixed mindset about student ability (Rattan, Good, & Dweck, 2011). The second is how educators can use growth mindset to improve their pedagogy. While there is quite a bit of information about the former (a quick search on the internet finds numerous professional development classes to utilize and improve teachers' mindsets regarding guiding students toward a growth mindset model); in contrast, there is very little academic research regarding the latter. One of the only explicit studies about growth mindset as an indicator of improved pedagogy is a doctoral dissertation by Greg Gero (2013) that suggests a connection between growth mindset and teachers' professional learning (Gero, 2013, p. 133). In other words, teachers who have a growth mindset about their practice are more willing to engage in professional learning than teachers who have a fixed mindset.

Because of the general lack of research regarding teachers' mindsets, one possibility in studying growth mindset is to look at more general workplace research. In doing so, at least one meta-analysis notes the importance of growth mindset on workplace goal orientation, acceptance of remediation, and interpersonal interactions (Keating & Heslin, 2015). In their study, Keating and Heslin (2015) found a correlation between employees with a growth mindset and greater workplace engagement.

Like self-efficacy and self-determination theory, growth mindset has focused on one's ability to affect change, specifically in the learning environment. Unlike the previous two theories, however, relatedness is not nearly as much in the forefront as other factors such as personal effort.

### **Grit.**

**Theory.** Angela Duckworth fully defined the idea of "Grit," in her book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (2016). In her famous TED Talk, Duckworth (2013) stated that her work on grit builds on Dweck's work on Growth Mindset, specifically both theories hinge on the idea that in order to be successful, one must believe failure is a mandatory but temporary condition that should be viewed as a teaching tool and an agent for change.

While grit may be seen as an offshoot of Growth Mindset, the two theories are also distinct. Dweck (2006) talks about Growth Mindset as a possible key to happiness (Dweck, 2006, p. 214), whereas Duckworth (2016) sees contentment (like failure) as a temporary condition. People with grit, she (2016) explains, never stop trying and enjoy the chase toward some semblance of perfection they know they will not accomplish. The only permanent condition in grit is that of striving.

For most, there was no realistic expectation of ever catching up to their ambitions. In their own eyes, they were never good enough. They were the opposite of complacent. And yet, in a very real sense, they were satisfied being unsatisfied. Each was chasing something of unparalleled interest and importance, and it was the chase—as much as the capture—that was gratifying. Even if some of the things they had to do were boring, or frustrating, or even painful, they wouldn't dream of giving up. Their passion was enduring. (p. 8)

Like Dweck's Growth Mindset, Duckworth's idea of grit has quickly become popular in modern culture. Her TED Talk has almost 12 million views, and the business world especially has connected with her research, with articles in publications like *Forbes* ("Five Characteristics of Grit: How Many Do You Have"), *Inc.* ("Why Grit Is the Real Key to Success in Business and in Life"), and *Fortune* ("This Four Letter Word is the Secret to Success"). While there is also burgeoning backlash to Duckworth's theory (Denby, 2016), the overall message, that if one is truly devoted to a subject (be it football, the oboe, or teaching), one strives to constantly improve, is generally accepted.

**Theory in education.** Because Duckworth's theory is so new, there is less research and fewer studies about its relevance in education. Grit has been preliminarily indicated as a factor in positive attendance, behavior, and test-score gain with eighth graders in Boston (West et al., 2016) as well as a factor in high school graduation rates with juniors in Chicago (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, & Duckworth, 2014). Like growth mindset, grit has been embraced by the public school community, fostering books, articles, seminars, and school events all focused on the importance of this trait (Dahl, 2016).

However, there are a number of important caveats in assigning causality between grit and student success in school. First, in order to measure grit, participants self-respond to a scale created by Duckworth and Patrick Quinn (2009). This, however, has created discrepancies from expected results, possibly due to reference bias and other challenges associated with self-reporting (Duckworth, 2016b). Second, while perseverance is a trait that generally aligns with public schools' missions; passion, especially student passion, is less of a focus. When schools use the concept of grit to further their own goals without student input, they are misusing the concept. As Duckworth herself said, "[H]ow many kids who are 16 years old are passionate about their standardized reading and math scores for school?" (Dahl, 2016, para. 8) Duckworth found that respondents' passion scores are lower than their perseverance scores, prompting her to theorize that we, as a society, may need more support on finding our passion rather than boosting our perseverance (Dahl, 2016). Finally, recent research by Datu, Valdez, and King (2015) used item response theory to separate out the importance of passion (defined as a consistency of interest) and perseverance in Duckworth's grit scale. I found that while perseverance had advantageous consequences for outcome, passion did not. So, there are still questions about the importance of passion in grit.

***Theory and teachers.*** There is less research regarding the importance of grit for teachers than there is about the importance of grit for students. Duckworth co-authored two studies about grit and novice teachers. In the first, researchers (Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009) studied self-reported personality factors for effectiveness, as measured by standardized test scores, with Teach for America participants. This study found that separated from other factors, grit and optimism have the strongest correlation between teacher effectiveness and personality traits. In the second study, Duckworth and her colleagues (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014) determined

grit scores based on a rubric they created which was applied to teachers' resumes. Grit scores were ascertained by participants' multiyear involvement in activities during college as well as their leadership roles in these activities. Once again, teachers with higher grit scores were found to be effective and less likely to resign their positions midyear. Nevertheless, one limitation to both studies is their specificity to novice teachers. As Duckworth, Quinn, and Seligman (2009) say in their paper: "The current findings might not generalize to veteran teachers. The literature on expertise suggests that once the challenges encountered in the first years of teaching are mastered, they are supplanted by qualitatively different ones" (p. 545). Nevertheless, grit may be a factor in master teachers persevering in the face of adversity.

In addition, if one removes the label of *grit* and researches the qualities associated with the term but without the label, there are studies of veteran teachers that support the possible effectiveness of grit. For example, in 2011, researchers Denise G. Meister and Patricia Ahrens studied four veteran secondary teachers and found that teachers who resist *plateauing*—finding themselves at a standstill in their career—are teachers who continue to have enthusiasm (what Duckworth terms *passion*) as well as resiliency (what Duckworth terms *perseverance*) in their careers. In other words, what is now labeled as grit might have existed under other labels in the past.

### **Synthesis of the Research Findings**

The four theories explored in the previous section have similarities that will guide and focus my interviews, observation and research. Specifically, as I look for commonalities and themes regarding master teachers who are unfazed by external stressors, I will pull from major commonalities found in self-efficacy, self-determination theory, growth mindset, and grit. This

section defines and considers those similarities. It is organized by the prevalence of the similarities, as can be shown by the following figure:

Self-efficacy	Self-Determination Theory	Growth Mindset	Grit
Perceived Autonomy			
Perceived competence			
Relational Importance			
		Hard work	

*Figure 2.* Commonalities in the studied theories of self-concept.

In other words, perceived autonomy is an important underlying foundational concept in all four theories. Bandura considers autonomy a necessary basis for one to have self-efficacy, Deci and Ryan consider autonomy to be one of the three pillars of SDT, and Dweck and Duckworth both discuss the importance of autonomy in choosing what one will work to improve. Perceived competence is important for all theories but grit, as Duckworth views perceived competence with a different lens and describes it as a possible negative trait if the person then stagnates in improvement (Duckworth, 2016). Both self-efficacy and SDT focus on the influence of one's perception of relational importance while growth mindset and grit focus solely on the individual and less on one's context with others. And finally, hard work is an essential explicit, central theme in growth mindset and grit, while it is more peripheral in self-efficacy and SDT.

**Perceived autonomy.** A factor in all four theories of self-concept is the importance of perceived autonomy, the belief that one has the ability to act as an independent agent in one's life and experiences. This is important in teaching as there is a correlation between perceived autonomy and job satisfaction (Renger, Renger, Miché, & Simon, 2017). Teachers may feel autonomy

in choice of curriculum, their interaction with students and families, and their interactions with supervisors (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). On the other hand, teachers may feel they lack autonomy regarding factors such as forced curriculum, district mandates, and imposed external assessments from the district or state (The Pennsylvania State University, 2017).

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014) explored the importance of perceived autonomy in the context of self-efficacy and self-determination theory for Norwegian teachers. They found a positive relationship between perceived autonomy and both teacher engagement as well as job satisfaction. While perceived autonomy was important for all teachers, regardless of their self-efficacy scores, those with high scores tended to see autonomy as a chance to experiment with teaching methods and change their practices to meet students' needs; in addition, teachers with high self-efficacy looked for greater student engagement and had higher expectations of attainment of educational goals. Teachers with low self-efficacy scores, on the other hand, used perceived autonomy to hide their teaching deficits (p. 76).

Other researchers have found similar results. Collie, Shapka, Perry, and Martin (2016) researched the importance of perceived autonomy for teachers and found a positive relationship between it and need satisfaction, well-being, and commitment:

For autonomy, perhaps this is because when teachers feel their behaviors at work are self-determined, this promotes a sense of ownership over the workload, enables teachers to utilize instructional practices or strategies that they deem suitable or necessary, and helps teachers to feel that they can respond to the regularly changing classroom- or school-level demands in a way that is based upon their own volition—all of which are important for teachers' work-related perceptions. (Collie, Shapka, Perry & Martin, 2016, p. 795)



Betsy Ng (2018) studied the intersectionality between intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and growth mindset and found that an autonomy-supported learning environment fosters intrinsic motivation, which in turn fosters resilience and perseverance—two cornerstones of growth mindset and grit. Duckworth also implies the importance of autonomy in her theory of grit as she describes the importance of practitioners choosing their passions. In other words, for one to develop the sort of interest that one must have to create a passion, one must first have the autonomy to make that decision.

For all these reasons, perceived autonomy is the most prevalent foundational theme in relation to the four self-concepts researched. It is a basis of teacher satisfaction in self-efficacy and SDT as well as a basis of intrinsic motivation in growth mindset and grit.

**Perceived competence.** Perceived competence in one's teaching is a broad framework that includes "[t]eachers' perceptions of their theoretical understanding, confidence in their role as a schoolteacher and mastery of the teaching task" (Hatlevik, 2017, p. 811). Perceived competence has been demonstrated to be a factor in student motivation, teacher professional identity, and professional commitment (Hatlevik, 2017). Teachers may feel differing competence levels based on factors such as their professional knowledge, pedagogical skills, and interpersonal abilities (Hatlevik, 2017).

Belief in one's competence is seen in self-efficacy, self-determination theory, and growth mindset. Interestingly, the opposite is explored in grit: the idea that good is never good enough. In relation to self-efficacy, Bandura (1981) describes competence as "a generative capability in which component skills must be selected and organized into integrated courses of action to manage changing task demands" (p. 587). In self-determination theory, Deci and Ryan (2014) define competence as "feeling effective and confident with respect to some behavior or goal" (p. 55).

Both theories explore the idea that one has the capacity to effect change based on one's belief in one's knowledge, skills, and abilities.

In growth mindset, on the other hand, Dweck also sees competence as the capacity to effect change, but the real significance is whether the person in question regards their competence in approach or avoidance techniques. Approach techniques include mastery and performance whereby the participant recognizes that she must work to achieve competence in each new skill or concept; she is not dismayed by failure, and instead strives for competence in greater and more sophisticated challenges. Avoidance techniques are those where the participant is afraid of losing competence so she finds a place of comfort and stays there (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2014).

In Duckworth's (2016) concept of grit, competence is even further removed. *Gritty* people expect to feel incompetent and insist on finding new goals whenever competency is achieved. She likens grit to the Japanese concept of *kaizen*, "*Kaizen* is Japanese for resisting the plateau of arrested development. Its literal translation is: 'continuous improvement' . . . After interviewing dozens and dozens of grit paragons, I can tell you that they all exude kaizen. There are no exceptions" (p. 118).

Perceived competence has been studied in teachers, most often related to career entry and experience. Beginning teachers have highs and lows of perceived competence, often starting with *practice shock*, the disequilibrium of realizing the difference between what one learns in teacher education programs and the reality of teaching in a classroom; followed by ebbs and flows throughout their first year; with a rebound at the end of the year (Mischo, 2015). In a longitudi-

nal study, Hatlevik (2017) found that teachers' perceived competence during their teacher education and in the beginning of their career has a correlation to their perceived competence later in their career.

Consequently, perceived competence is an important direct factor in self-efficacy, self-determination theory, and growth mindset as it is seen as a prerequisite for one to feel able to meet challenges and overcome them. In grit, however, while perceived competence is important, it is viewed as a "jumping off point" for further work and effort.

**Relational importance.** Both self-efficacy and self-determination theory stress relational importance. Bandura (1977) and his colleagues determined four modes of induction toward creating one's own self-efficacy, and of those four, three are relational: vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. While Bandura noted that the more straightforward method for a person to gain a sense of self-efficacy is through personal accomplishment, if that is not possible, social learning and relatedness also create similar effects. Self-determination theory proposes comparable ideas regarding the importance of relatedness. Ryan and Deci (2014), summarized this by saying:

SDT posits that relatedness is an evolved psychological need in its own right, which, although associated with adaptive advantages, takes on an intrinsic character in human nature. That is, people find relatedness to be inherently satisfying, independent of instrumental advantages. (p. 53)

This need for relatedness has been studied in teachers, as they connect both with students and colleagues. Numerous researchers have determined that teachers who have positive relationships with their students have a plethora of positive results including stronger student outcomes, greater teacher engagement, and less teacher burnout (Costigan, 2005; Johnson, 2012; Klassen,

Perry, & Frenzel, 2012). Indeed, the vast majority of teachers define their reason for entering the profession as a form of relatedness with students such as making a difference in their lives (McNeil, 2015).

While teacher relatedness with colleagues reflects a weaker correlation than teacher-student relatedness, it is still anecdotally important. Researchers have shown that positive relationships with colleagues create a successful social climate and can be key resources for support while negative relationships with colleagues create greater stress and discomfort (Aldrup, Klusmann, & Lüdtke, 2017).

In neither growth mindset nor grit does Dweck or Duckworth, respectively, place strong value on relational importance. Both of these theories are based on one's self-concept separate from one's environment and relationships. Because of that, neither author focuses on the effect of one's relationships.

Nevertheless, because relational importance is such a cornerstone of both self-efficacy and SDT, it is worth noting it as a commonality between those two theories. In addition, relational importance has been shown to be especially relevant in regards to teachers as teachers have a strong need for relatedness both for job success and job satisfaction.

**Hard work.** While it may seem incontrovertible to suggest that hard work could be a factor in master teachers' traits, Dweck's and Duckworth's ideas of hard work are in contrast to the established notion of innate talent. They both dispute the idea that talent is intrinsic and unchangeable, and much of their work is dedicated to both quantifiable and qualifiable examples of how effective hard work can be toward success.

In *Mindset: The New Psychology for Success*, Dweck (2008) points out that societally we tend to idolize those who succeed with little effort, but in her essay "Even Geniuses Work Hard,"

Dweck (2010) states “even geniuses have to work hard to develop their abilities and make their contributions” (p. 16-17). In addition, Dweck (2008) anecdotally lists numerous stories of people who are successful in their field in spite of inherent challenges. According to Dweck (2008) Muhammed Ali did not have the natural physique of a fighter, Michael Jordan was cut from his high school varsity basketball team, and Wilma Rudolph was a sickly child. Nevertheless, these athletes worked hard to overcome their natural adversity to have unnatural success.

Similarly, Duckworth (2016) echoes Dweck’s sentiment, “*Our potential is one thing. What we do with it is quite another*” (p. 14). Duckworth’s (2016) examples of hard work to accomplish one’s potential include students at the United States Military Academy, Seattle Seahawks football players, and Warren Buffet, the American billionaire. In each example, people with the perseverance to work hard have accomplished impressive feats. Both Dweck and Duckworth downplay the inherent characteristics of their success stories in order to highlight the importance of hard work.

In teaching, hard work is assumed, but phrases like “She’s a natural” that educators use to describe each other imply an unspoken belief in the power of innate talent. Thus, explicitly defining hard work as a characteristic is necessary. However, quantifying effort is challenging. In “Performance Standards and Employee Effort: Evidence from Teacher Absences,” Seth Gershenson (2016) linked teacher effort to absences, noting that teacher attendance correlates with both positive principal ratings and teachers’ value added scores (p. 616). On the other hand, other researchers have noted that it is the characteristics of the students themselves that affect teacher effort (Houts, Caspi, Pianta, Arseneault, & Moffitt, 2010). And still others link employment protection to teacher effort (Jacob, 2012). Overall, teacher hard work and effort is an important factor but one that may be hard to quantify.

Problematically, all of these measures are external. Determining internalized teacher effort is even more challenging and lends itself to metaphor more than measure. Speaking about the amount of work it takes to be an effective teacher, a former NASA rocket scientist who became a high school math teacher said, “Giving a presentation to NASA about how the thermal protection system of a spacecraft is connected to its primary structure is a cakewalk compared to getting 30 teenagers excited about logarithms” (Fuller, 2013, para. 9).

While hard work is explicitly described as important in growth mindset and grit, it is not an important factor in self-efficacy or SDT. In fact, self-efficacy postulates the importance of the virtuous cycle of success and effort (Lunenburg, 2011), noting that one is more likely to put forth effort if one feels successful (perceived competence over hard work). Because SDT is primarily concerned with motivation, hard work is seen as a consequence of motivation, not as a motivator in its own right.

## **Summary**

While teaching in an American public school can be frustrating for a variety of reasons and many teachers succumb to sundry pitfalls of this frustration, there can also be no doubt that a small subset of teachers seem less daunted by these frustrations. These teachers work to their potential almost regardless of the environment around them. The question my study will ask is: How do master teachers experience these phenomena—both of teaching and the frustrations—so they are able to do this?

In exploring the extant research, I have focused on four theories of self-concept that begin to answer the question. These theories are self-efficacy, self-determination theory, growth mindset, and grit. Self-efficacy is Albert Bandura’s theory that focuses on one’s own ability to

behave in a way that produces desired effects. Self-determination theory is a motivational concept penned by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan that pivots on the ideas of competence, autonomy, and psychological relatedness. Growth mindset is Carol Dweck's idea that all people can improve through hard work and strategies for improvement. Grit, the newest of the theories, is Angela Duckworth's belief that passion and perseverance equal success.

Because this subset of master teachers has never been studied in a phenomenological manner before, it is impossible to say which aspects, if any, of these theories blend together to form the phenomenon I have studied. However, there are recurring themes within the theories themselves which I anticipate. These themes are: perceived autonomy, perceived competence, relational importance, and hard work. While only perceived autonomy is consistent throughout all four theories, each theory incorporates aspects of at least two of the given themes. Perceived competence is found in self-efficacy, self-determination theory, and growth mindset. Relational importance is found in self-efficacy and self-determination theory. Hard work is a focus of growth mindset and grit.

These themes will help guide my research and interview questions. As I work with the participants of this research, I will focus on what internal structures help them. While there is quite a bit of research regarding teacher burnout, there is much less about veteran teachers who still enjoy teaching, who come in everyday and do their very best. To answer the questions about who these teachers are and how they experience their job and its context, an investigation exploring the phenomenon of master teachers who are seemingly unaffected by external mandates would yield socially significant findings.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction and Research Questions

This chapter details the research questions, purpose and design of the study as well as the population who were researched. I explain the analysis procedures, the rationale behind those procedures, and how I assure research credibility and dependability. Finally, I explain any ethical concerns inherent in the study. This study attempts to describe and understand the experience of teachers who possess specific internal structures that allow them to continue as *master teachers* despite external motivations and pressures, as well as how they perceive themselves and their environments and how they present themselves to others. *Master teachers* are defined as those teachers who advance learning for all students while fostering respectful and caring relationships. Such knowledge could benefit other teachers to increase their job effectiveness and satisfaction in the era of mandates. This study is significant because deconstructing and analyzing specific attributes that help teachers remain positive and effective could aid other teachers, as well as administrators and hiring directors in choosing and working with their staff.

The specific question guiding this research is: What internal structures help a teacher incorporate external mandates in his or her effective teaching with minimal personal and professional dissonance? Decades of work by seminal researchers Albert Bandura and Edward Deci and Richard Ryan suggest that internal motivation hinges on concepts such as self-efficacy and self-determination, respectively. These manifest themselves in ways presently described in the zeitgeist as growth mindset and grit, terms coined by researchers Carol Dweck and Angela Duckworth, respectively, and possibly includes self-protecting factors such as a dereliction of duties with specific external mandates not directly related to improved teaching. Therefore, my subquestions are as follows:



- What does it look like for these teachers to use best practices successfully? What does it look and sound like in their classroom?
- Could the teachers describe a time when they felt particularly successful using best practices?
- Why do these teachers think they have been described as unfazed?
- How do they react to new external mandates?
- How do they experience the discrepancy between best practices and external mandates?
- What frustrates them about teaching? What causes them to soar as a teacher?
- How do these teachers present to others in comparison to how they view themselves?

## **1. Purpose and Design of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore and examine the essence of the internal structures of teachers, who, despite external pressures in their profession, seamlessly and enthusiastically incorporate best practices into effective teaching with little or no display of dissonance. While quite a bit of research has been done regarding the negative outcomes of teachers who experience dissonance between external mandates and internal motivation (Costigan, 2008; Institute of Education Sciences, 2015; Metlife, 2012), little work has been done to study teachers who seem to have protective factors regarding these frustrations. Researchers do know, however, that these educators are in the minority of the teaching population. The Metlife Survey of the American Teacher (2012) reported a 15 point drop in job satisfaction since 2009 and a 12 point increase in teachers who are very or fairly likely to leave the profession. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2012) reported a decrease in all aspects of teacher autonomy over a 10-year period.

Because of the anomalous nature of the population this study will cover, as well as the lack of further research into this anomaly, phenomenology is warranted. Phenomenology is an umbrella hybrid approach to the social sciences that incorporates quantitative and qualitative information within a philosophical framework. According to Creswell (2012), a predominant feature of phenomenology is:

A philosophical discussion about the basic ideas involved . . . .This turns on the lived experiences of individuals and how they have both subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences of something in common with other people. Thus, there is a refusal of the subjective-objective perspective, and, for these reasons, phenomenology lies somewhere on a continuum between qualitative and quantitative research. (Creswell, 2012, pp. 77–78)

The lived objective experience that these teachers have in common is that of working to their fullest professional potential while seeming unfazed to those around them. How they subjectively realize this experience is the focus of this research.

The heuristic approach, in which one discovers as one researches, is a key piece in phenomenological ontology. Utilizing a heuristic approach allowed me to be guided by the findings, truly following the path of the data as it emerged.

Another important piece is intersubjectivity, a focus on the relationship between people as we grapple with both our own and others' understandings of an experience. Because the belief of intersubjectivity changes the power dynamic from implicitly uneven (subject and object) to implicitly peer oriented, van Manen (1997) actually rejects the traditional phrasing of "researcher and subject," instead referring to both parties in phenomenological research as "partner." These

two bases of phenomenology—an embrace of the heuristic and an expectation of intersubjectivity—guided the ontology of my dissertation. Because of this, I refer to the teachers I am studying as “participants” as a lexicological reminder that they have coequal relation and status in the study as the researcher.

Because of these two factors, in addition to being the guiding philosophy of my dissertation, phenomenology has also been my methodology. While phenomenology has two main branches as a philosophy and a methodology, I focus on Heidegger’s hermeneutic branch in which the researcher must integrate her experiences into her work. Unlike Edmund Husserl’s concept of phenomenology in which the researcher attempts to bracket her experiences and create an approximation of objectivity, Heidegger described the importance of hermeneutics in his work *Ontology—the Hermeneutics of Facticity*, contending that “hermeneutics is now no longer interpretation itself, but a doctrine about the conditions, the objects, the means, and the communication and practical application of interpretation” (p.10). In other words, all interpretation is inherently woven with the researcher’s contextual environment, and to try to bracket that away is an unrealistic task. It is better to constantly analyze how one’s place in the world is affecting one’s interpretation rather than saying it does not.

According to Susann M. Laverly (2003), “Interpretation is seen as critical to this process of understanding. Claiming that to be human was to interpret, Heidegger (1927/1962) stressed that every encounter involves an interpretation influenced by an individual’s background or historicity” (p. 9). This is an appropriate philosophy and methodology for this study because, like the participants, I am a public school teacher living in the Pacific Northwest. In addition, because

I have taught for 17 years, it would be impossible for me to bracket out that amount of experience or the way it has affected my weltanschauung. For these reasons, this study used hermeneutic phenomenology as both my ontology and my methodology.

This integrates well with both heuristic approach, where the researcher discovers as she researches, and intersubjectivity, so the researcher accepts a more equitable relationship with the participants. Kleinig and Witt (2001) outline specifics that help center hermeneutics with a heuristic approach and a partnership with a study's participants. These include rules such as the researcher being "open to new concepts" (p. 9) and willingness to change the topic of research as one discovers while recognizing that "obviously we do not start with a *tabula rasa*, are never free of preconceptions and don't have to be" (p. 9). Both of these were paramount during the data collection phase of this research.

### **Research Population and Sampling Method**

In this study, I seek to bring depth to my research while recognizing that the teachers I studied do not represent the broader teaching community proportionally. This is typical with qualitative research in general and phenomenology in particular. While quantitative research looks for patterns and themes within representatively broad populations, qualitative research is more focused on depth and distinction. According to Max van Manen (1997):

Actions and interventions, like exercises, are seen as repeatable; while subjects and samples, like soldiers, are replaceable. In contrast, phenomenology is, in a broad sense, a philosophy or theory of the unique; it is interested in what is essentially not replaceable. (van Manen, 1997, p. 6)

In other words, the lived experience for which I searched, should be unusual and somewhat challenging to find.

Because of the difficulty in finding master teachers who are unfazed by external mandates, I used purposeful sampling techniques, specifically what Michael Quinn Patton (1990) termed *intensity sampling*. This is defined as “information rich” but not extraordinary. In contrast to *extreme case sampling*, *intensity sampling* is more common and less extraordinary. The examples Patton (1990) used were the difference between school dropouts (*extreme case sampling*) and students with poor grades (*intensity sampling*). Patton (1990) stated:

Intensity sampling involves the same logic as extreme case sampling but with less emphasis on the extremes. An intensity sample consists of information-rich cases that manifest the same phenomenon of interest intensely (but not extremely) . . . . Using the logic of intensity sampling, one seeks excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest, but not unusual cases. (p. 171)

Patton (1990) continues by saying that this type of sampling is most effective in heuristic inquiry, where the researcher discovers patterns and themes as she goes, while trying to avoid preconceived expectations.

In order to successfully find a critical number of teachers who meet the requirement of internal motivation, I asked for nominations from six elementary schools from a school district about twenty-five miles outside of Northwest American city. While the district includes the entirety of the town where it is located, it also includes some more rural areas. In addition, it serves the suburban area of a planned private community that surrounds a golf course (Simplified school map, n.d.). While geographically large, the student population is almost entirely white (86%) and Hispanic (13%). The school district includes five elementary schools that serve students from kindergarten through sixth grade, one school for students from kindergarten through eighth grade, one middle school (seventh and eighth grade only), and one high school.

The school district employs over 280 certified staff members, and they are more often Caucasian than their students, with over 95% of certified staff self-defining as White and less than 5% self-defining as Hispanic. They have, on average, over 14 years of experience and 47% of them have master's degrees (2010–2011 school district report card).

After receiving permission from the superintendent, I sent an email to administrative staff requesting their help in my study. This email requested names of teachers they felt were both master teachers and who seemed unfazed by external mandates.

After receiving the responses, I contacted teachers whose names were cited, purposely looking for a variety in schools and grade levels taught. From those teachers I found eight to interview and observe to look for themes and commonalities. This number allowed me to find a variety of experiences while still achieving the data saturation point necessary for a qualitative study (Sargeant, 2012). It also achieves the minimum sample size determined by phenomenological research experts such as Creswell and Morse (Mason, 2010). Finally, because of my expertise in the subject as well as the modest claims made in this study, it is reasonable to use a smaller sample size (Mason, 2010).

## **Procedure**

Three methods of data collection will be used in order to triangulate the information from the participants in this study: preliminary interview, observation, examination of artifacts, and a final interview, which also served as a member check.

**Preliminary interview.** The preliminary interview was my primary method of data collection as interviewing is traditionally the most important method of data collection in phenomenology because of its inherent intersubjectivity. Van Manen (1997) suggests the researcher carefully consider the research questions before the methodology. While he notes the importance of

open-ended questions, he also states that the interviewer must keep the central idea in mind so as not to needlessly explore tangents. In addition, he suggests that the researcher guide the participant toward more tangibility in her answers. These two outcomes can be strengthened by asking the participant to fully explore one specific instance of the phenomenon—its context, situation and people involved; rather than casually interpreting multiple instances. . Because of this, my interview questions included asking about specific incidents of times the teacher felt frustrated by their work as well as times they felt their work “soared.”

Other phenomenological researchers echo van Manen’s (1997) sentiments. Vandermause and Fleming (2011) discuss four different strategies for a hermeneutic interview but suggest beginning with an open ended question that focuses the participant on the area of research. Then continuing the interview with follow up questions such as incomplete sentences to guide the interviewee toward greater detail (such as, “That experience helped you . . .”). For these reasons, I used a heuristic style with interviewing, maintaining focus on my primary research but also creating an atmosphere with open-ended questions that are intended to encourage sophisticated, thoughtful responses. For example, one of my interview questions stated, “Because of this you feel . . . .” Doing so allowed the participants to finish the thought as they saw fit.

Because I am a colleague of this study’s participants, I had already built a level of trust as well as an understanding of professional terms and acronyms. Quinney, Dwyer, and Chapman (2016) note that peer interviews have the benefit of “insider” knowledge and connection. As long as the researcher attempts reflexivity (checking for self-biases, assumptions, and prejudices) and recognizes if the participant skims subjects because of an assumption of common knowledge, peer interviews have the ability to obtain “rich and thick data . . . more quickly when a common

and shared language releases the participant from the need to interpret or alter their speech patterns for the interviewer” (p. 8).

**Close observation.** Close observation is the act of observing while taking part in the act which one is observing. Van Manen (1997) suggests this type of observation to understand the participant’s experience and context:

Close observation involves an attitude of assuming a relation that is as close as possible while retaining a hermeneutic alertness to situations that allows us to constantly step back and reflect on the meaning of those situations. . . . The method of close observation requires that one be a participant and an observer at the same time, that one maintain a certain orientation of reflectivity while guarding against the more manipulative and artificial attitude that a reflective attitude tends to insert in a social situation and relation. (van Manen, 1997, p. 69)

Close observation was the most appropriate for me for a number of reasons. First, because I, like my participants, am a teacher, it feels more genuine that when I visit their classrooms, I help in any way I can. Second, by being involved in classroom activities, I helped create a more realistic and honest setting so that both the teacher and the students in the room will be at ease. Third, by taking part in activities I separated myself from observers who came to watch and evaluate such as administrators (who often observe to assess teacher performance) or school psychologists (who observe to determine specific student behavioral challenges). In other words, I integrated myself better in the classroom and should therefore have a more genuine experience. For me, activities involved in close observation included listening to kindergartners read and redirecting second graders during a math lesson.



In close observation the researcher is alert to that which may be important in the future. For example, do they have pre-bought posters on their walls or examples of student work? Are their desks organized or messy? Do they have students sitting in groups or individually? While I did not look for themes at this point, once again the intersubjectivity is paramount. Therefore the primary experiences I hoped to observe were how the students interact with one another, how the students interacted with the teacher, how the students interacted with resources (such as curriculum, technology, and books) and how the teacher interacted with resources.

**Examination of documents.** My next method of data collection is the examination of documents. These included items like posters in the teachers' classrooms, emails sent to me by the participants, and physical organization of cards with the salient themes presented to the participants during the member check interview. While these artifacts may not tell a story on their own, examining them brought greater depth and clarity to the understanding I garnered through interviews and observation. According to Gorichanaz and Latham (2016), in a phenomenological study, documents exist primarily as their interaction between creator and receiver—the intent and the understanding of any document is more important than the paper it is written on. Because of this, I discussed the value and understanding of the documents with the participants both as I examined them and afterwards, as was warranted.

**Member checking.** My final method of data collection was interview member check. This was done twice: once after the preliminary interview and observation occurred so the participants could help determine the accuracy of the researcher's data and once near the end of the project so the participants could reflect on the authenticity of what was conveyed. Creswell and Miller (2000) suggest member checking as a triangulation method because it helps establish the

validity of the research by using the participants' lens as a legitimate perspective instead of assuming the researcher's paradigm is paramount. One member check was done as an interview, the other was done through email correspondence.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The heuristic nature of this study indicated the need for emergent design in its data analysis. In other words, the final design of the study was not determined at the outset. I made revisions aiming for "the greatest potential for discovery" (Suter, 2012, p. 343) throughout the interviews and observations. Clark Moustakas (1990), the preeminent scholar of heuristic research, states that such research requires that the "self-question and the methodology flow out of inner awareness, meaning and inspiration" (p. 11). This constant reflection insists on emergent design because the process is the purpose while the goal is the byproduct. Therefore, first, I transcribed the interviews, made objective notes of what I saw and heard during my observations, and analyzed certain artifacts. Next, I begin the coding process using Saldaña's (2009) methods found in his seminal work *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. I created codes based on observable patterns, then looked for categorical themes linking those codes. Saldaña (2009) describes this as both inevitable and beneficial:

Coding is a heuristic (from the Greek, meaning "to discover")—an exploratory problem-solving technique without specific formulas to follow. Coding is only the initial step toward an even more rigorous and evocative analysis and interpretation for a report. Coding is not just labeling, it is *linking*. (p. 8)

To begin coding, the methodology I used was the elemental methods. These provide "basic, focused filters which help lay the foundation for subsequent coding cycles" (Heglund-de Witt,

2013, p. 10) and are appropriate for first cycle coding, which is done at the time of data collection or shortly after. This includes descriptive coding, where the researcher summarizes information in a word or short phrase. One of the benefits of descriptive coding is that it can be used across various data collection procedures such as interviews and observations so is, therefore, most pertinent for this study. Other types of elemental coding used included structural coding, where the researcher codes whole sections of information with a title, and initial coding, in which the researcher codes based on first impressions of the information.

After all data collection and a first cycle of analysis, I moved through a second cycle of coding. In this cycle, the researcher looks for codifying elements to transcend the original codes. I used focused coding, in which the researcher compares and transfers the original codes, looking for recurring and salient themes. During second cycle coding, the researcher may recognize overarching themes, synthesize codes that now seem synonymous, create code hierarchies, and remove outlying codes. All of this work moves the researcher to a more abstract way of thinking and begins to move the work from analysis to theory.

However, in order to do this, one must first re-code and re-categorize until concepts and constructs eventually transcend the words themselves. While this is part of the science of phenomenology, it is consistently described with an almost poetic affect by phenomenological researchers. Saldaña states that “In qualitative data analysis, some interpretive leeway is necessary—indeed creativity is essential to achieve new and hopefully striking perspectives about the data” (p. 150). Van Manen’s (1997) perspective aligns with that of Saldaña:

Making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure— grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of "seeing" meaning. (Kindle Locations 1659–1661)

Second cycle coding is a process allowing this new “seeing”, this creativity to occur; it is the crux of hermeneutic phenomenology and is the goal of my data analysis.

### **Delimitations/Limitations**

As in all research, this study is affected by certain delimitations and limitations that should be understood as the reader examines the results. The primary delimitations concern the teachers who are to be interviewed and observed. First, as is typical in a phenomenological study using purposeful sampling, these results cannot be generalized. Only six teachers were part of this study; that number alone indicates a narrow focus. In addition, the six teachers are all from the same school district, and I purposely avoided novice teachers (young teachers with five or fewer years of experience) because they cannot be defined as master teachers, and their lack of frustration may be due to their lack of experience (Ingersoll, 2001) therefore my sample included teachers who were in their thirties or older. Teachers are all from the elementary level, kindergarten through fifth grade, so my research is further narrowed by this.

As I began recruitment, certain limitations occurred. First, because I requested names from principals regarding teachers they feel are unfazed, the teachers they suggested may be ones that present themselves in a certain way to their administrators but do not actually feel that way. Another limitation was an unexpectedly limited pool in one school. This school had a large portion of their staff that was in the midst parental leave as well as having just gone through a larger than normal amount of staff resignation, so they had nearly 50% turnover of certified staff

for the 2017–2018 school year. Another unexpected limitation was that almost 50% of the teachers suggested by principals teach one of two grade levels (kindergarten and fifth grade) so there is not a large range of grade levels (my six participants include two kindergarten teachers, two fifth grade teachers, a second grade teacher, and a first grade teacher). The time of year that I began collecting data also created a limitation. One teacher who had wanted to participate was unable to do so due to the time of year I would be interviewing and observing (February and March). Two other teachers I asked did not want to participate. One did not give a reason, the other felt that she would not be a good representation this year due to professional challenges.

### **Validation**

Synthesizing the works of researchers Guba and Lincoln (1994), Michael Quinn Patton (1999) and various other researchers, I strove for three major elements of validation in my research. While these elements have been given different names by the original qualitative researchers, the concepts are similar. In addition, because my methodology was a hermeneutic phenomenology, it requires using an interpretive, constructivist approach which placed a particular lens of knowing on my efforts toward validation, as well as my interpretation of Guba and Lincoln's (1994) and Patton's (1999) ideas.

**Truth value.** Lincoln and Guba (1994) equate truth value with credibility and consider this the cornerstone of qualitative validity. Truth value is defined as the researcher's accurate representation of the participant's reality. This is especially important in hermeneutic phenomenology because the researcher recognizes that she begins the study with her own perspective and, instead of trying to bracket that perspective away, attempts to integrate it into the study. This means constant self-analysis to assure that the participant's perspective is being represented, not that of the researcher. Each question, each answer, every turn of phrase needs to be examined—

“Is this the way the participant sees it?” “Am I placing my understanding on top of hers?” “Am I creating an unwarranted lens that guides the reader’s understanding of this phenomenon?” Only with this persistent barrage of self-questioning can the ontology of interpretive research be assured and the inquiry paradigm be found credible.

Patton (1999) also talks about the importance of the researcher recognizing the effect her very existence may have on what she is researching. The participant’s awareness of the research may have positive or negative effects on that which is being studied. In addition, researchers have been known to overestimate the importance of observer effect. While all of this seems like a minefield to navigate, Patton (1999) sums it up thusly, “Qualitative researchers should strive neither to overestimate nor to underestimate their effects but to take seriously their responsibility to describe and study what those effects are” (p. 1203). Using van Manen’s (1997) “close observation” should also help alleviate observer effect as I hope to be seen more as a classroom participant rather than an outside observer.

**Rigorous techniques.** Patton (1999) focuses on using rigorous techniques to ensure credible results in qualitative research. This includes triangulation, which he defines as “combining different kinds of qualitative methods, mixing purposeful samples, and including multiple perspectives” (p. 1193). It also includes maintaining records of what Guba and Lincoln termed the “decision trail,” in which the researcher creates an auditable account of the decisions she has made so that a future researcher should be able to repeat the original study and achieve similar results. In this study, I triangulated my work using three different methods (interviews, observations, and examination of artifacts); I also created an explicit “decision trail,” journaling the decisions I make and why I made those choices as I researched. This dovetails with the self-analysis necessary to create truth value in an interpretive, hermeneutic phenomenological study.

In order to accomplish this, I created a reflective analysis notebook using Koch's (2006) six sections as a guide. My sections were access (how I was able to know the participant), setting (where the interview or observation took place), experiences (what sensical data I encountered), issues (how the experiences affected me, my thoughts and feelings), and participant as co-researcher (what new questions did my experience with the participant create for me?). This supported the final interview as a member check because I had extensive notes and reflections to guide my request for feedback.

**Applicability.** While qualitative research is far more difficult to transfer than quantitative, applicability is still a necessary consideration. Applicability can be defined as to "whether findings can be applied to other contexts, settings or groups" (Noble & Smith, 2015, p. 34). In other words, there is little point to research in a vacuum. Applicability allows other stakeholders to consider each factor in a study to determine its value. In this study, further applicability can be determined by other researchers if they choose to examine and change any factors found in the self-analysis and the decision trail.

Finally, using the framework of truth value, rigorous techniques, and applicability, qualitative researchers are able to build their credibility and dependability. It is understood that I am resolutely and continually looking for instances in which I need to analyze the frame of reference, my experiences, and my belief system in order to examine its effect on my understanding of the research. In addition, I maintain awareness of the effect of my observation on the participants. And lastly, I welcome other researchers to try and replicate my results or develop other results by changing elements of the decision trail. By doing all of these, I work to create neutrality and validity in my work.

## **Ethical Considerations**

While ethical considerations of participants should always be on the forefront of a researcher's concerns, this study has minimal issues. First, there are no physical and only negligible mental or emotional harm that participants can experience based on interviews, observations, and document examinations. In addition, precautions have been taken to hinder any of these problems. These precautions include confidentiality and consent. Participants, their schools, and their district have been given pseudonyms in order to prevent effects to their reputations. As well, because participants are adults, well-educated and knowledgeable about issues in education, they are particularly well situated to understand the possible challenges inherent in taking part in such a study. Finally, I plan to offer breaks in the interview process so that participants can process any strong emotions without feeling obligated to continue responding. In addition, an objective internal review board will also check for ethical considerations. Finally, even after granting their consent, participants will be made aware that they can end their involvement with this research study at any time.

## **Summary**

In order to understand the internal motivations of a particular subset of master teachers, this research study used a hermeneutic phenomenological ontology and methodology. Teachers were chosen through purposive sampling from staff of one school district in Oregon. These teachers were interviewed at least twice, certain artifacts examined, and the teachers were observed in order to achieve triangulation regarding an understanding of their lived experience as well as any underlying, unifying themes in their experiences. The results of this data collection were then analyzed using both first and second cycle coding methods. Through this coding and analysis of the research, the expectation was that themes would emerge regarding these teachers'



internal motivations. In order to assure neutrality in the research process and analysis, I continually and rigorously self-examined rationales behind my decisions. I reported all findings and created an auditable “decision trail” so that other researchers could replicate the process. Finally, the teachers who participate dare doing so with free will, informed consent, and could end their involvement at any time; because of this, risks have been minimized.

## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results**

In this study I examined the phenomenon of master teachers who seem relatively unfazed by external mandates and stressors. Previously there had been a void in the research as studies have focused on novice teacher competency progression (what makes one a master teacher) or veteran teacher burnout (what causes master teachers to become frustrated with the profession), as noted in Chapter 2: Literature Review. However, there has been little previous research examining the possibility of master teachers and their resiliency against the day-to-day onslaught of the challenges inherent in teaching, with a concentration on whether or not teachers with these descriptors have internal structures that help mitigate frustrations. In the research questions of this study, I primarily asked about these teachers' lived experiences and secondarily examined how these teachers perceive themselves and present themselves to the world. Finally, I looked for themes and commonalities among the participants, to help structure the experiences of the participants in an analytical manner.

The conceptual framework of this study identified the teachers as possessing three overlapping qualities (master teacher, attending to external mandates, and seemingly unfazed), and I studied four theories of self that might help explain the internal structures these teachers have to protect them against the onslaught of daily professional frustrations. These theories are self-efficacy, self-determination theory, growth mindset, and grit. Finally, common features among these theories include the importance of autonomy, competence, relational importance, and hard work. Using this knowledge, I formulated questions to guide the interviews. However, as a heuristic study, I also continuously self-examined whether the answers to the research questions could be better answered by moving off script, sometimes changing questions or asking more probing questions about a specific answer.

As a phenomenological study, this research is specific and individual to the participants who engaged in the work. The sampling method I used to choose participants was a type of purposeful sampling technique termed *intensity sampling* by Michael Quinn Patton (1990). Intensity sampling can be defined by unusual cases that have intense and profound (but not extreme) qualities for which a researcher is seeking. Because of that, this chapter begins with a description of each participant that was written with their input to impress upon the reader each one's unique experiences and perspectives in teaching. Next, this chapter continues with an explanation of the codes that emerged using Saldaña's (2009) first cycle descriptive coding, which summarizes a topic using a singular word or short phrase. That explanation includes both the reason for including these specific codes as well as representative context and quotations from the participants regarding those codes. The next section of this chapter moves the codes to categories, a process of refinement, in order to establish a synthesis of the information as well as a basis for the final thematic analysis presented in chapter five. Finally, in this chapter, I have described the observations of each participant in order to better demonstrate how these codes and categories demonstrate themselves in the participants' lived experiences.

### **Description of Sample**

The participants in this study are all elementary school teachers in the same school district in the Pacific Northwest. Six teachers participated in this research. Of the six, two are male and four are female; four are white while two are Hispanic. Each teacher has at least five years of teaching experience and were recognized by their principals as master teachers "whose good work and attitudes are relatively unaffected by external mandates and pressures" (K. Kent, personal communication, September 21, 2017). However, besides those similarities, the participants are quite varied in their teaching and life experiences.

The following narrative descriptions of the participants were written with their input. They agreed that what follows encapsulates their personal context as a teacher—what affects them the most both pedagogically and personally in their practice.

**Angel.** Angel is a Hispanic female originally from Mexico. She moved to the community where she teaches when she was eight years old. Angel has worked for the same school district since she was 19. She has worked as an instructional assistant, an interpreter, and a teacher. She has been part of the district's dual language immersion school since its first year and is considered a leader regarding dual language immersion pedagogy. Angel lives with her husband and parents in the community where she teaches. Angel described the process by which she became a teacher and her passion for teaching in very personal terms, recounting her childhood education experiences as the “sink-or-swim” model of immersion, whereby students are given little support as they are steeped in a new language and culture. Angel repeatedly described her hope and active work in improving the educational climate for students, especially migrant students, in her community today.

**Ari.** Ari is a Hispanic male originally from Mexico. He moved to this community in the Pacific Northwest four years ago as part of a teacher exchange program. Ari has taught in both Mexico and the United States. Here he is part of a Spanish-English dual language immersion program. Ari comes from a family of teachers including his grandfather, mother, aunts and uncles. Ari has his master's degree and is particularly focused on bridging the cultural gap between his Anglo and Hispanic students and families. Ari described teaching as a way he can use humor and creativity that he does not necessarily get to utilize in his daily life otherwise. As he stated, “I enjoy being a teacher, it gives me chances to be creative. Helps me to sometimes disconnect myself.”

**Arthur.** Arthur is a White male in his early 60s. He has been a teacher in the same school since his 40s when he became a teacher after a series of other jobs and careers. Arthur grew up in a farm community in the Midwest. Presently he teaches fifth grade, although he has also taught sixth grade. Arthur has been considered a leader in his district in his pedagogy with English Language Learners and pedagogically self-defines as a constructivist. Outside of work, Arthur trains horses and dogs. Arthur described himself as a teacher using comparative perspectives from his life outside of teaching—through previous jobs, through present hobbies, and through his age, as he is older than many of his colleagues. Arthur explained, “I started teaching in my 40’s. So this is my 18th year . . .because [of that] I really do think there’s a different perspective.”

**Lewis.** Lewis is a White female; she is presently a kindergarten teacher although she has also taught other elementary grades up to fifth grade. She has taught in California as well as the Pacific Northwest. She is considered a leader in language arts instruction and is particularly focused on the workshop model of language arts instruction. She has recently been on the district’s language arts curriculum committee as well as its language arts advisory committee. Lewis comes from a large family and grew up on a farm. Lewis most often described her teaching with regard to her purpose with students, colleagues, and families. As she stated, “I feel like my purpose is to work with students and teach them and this when I feel like I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

**Miguel.** Miguel is a White female. She is a veteran first grade teacher who has taught in the same school and same grade for over a decade. She is considered a leader in primary grade literacy and is in the process of training as a coach with a non-profit organization that partners with the district to improve mathematical understanding in students. Miguel is originally from

California and studied to be a speech-language pathologist before switching to teaching. Miguel is married and lives in the closest large city to the community where she teaches. Miguel believes in teaching with regards to the *whole child* and emphasized respect for students. As she stated, “Being a teacher, I think for me, is having compassion. These are the earmarked, overarching...having compassion, developing relationships with the students and adult in the building, and having an outlook of “Ok, the kids can do it.”

**Sebastian.** Sebastian is a White female in her 30’s. She has been a teacher in two school districts and multiple elementary schools. She is in her first year of teaching kindergarten but has taught first through fourth grade previously. Sebastian is a leader for the district in Daily 5 language arts framework, she is also on the school’s Sunshine Committee as well as other school-based committees and organizations. Sebastian’s mother was a well respected and loved teacher in the same school district, and Sebastian became a teacher directly out of college in the same school from which her mother retired. Sebastian has her master’s degree and is almost finished with her English as a Second Language certification. She is married and has two sons. Sebastian emphasized her belief in the importance of teaching and helping to improve students’ lives and outcomes. She began her first interview by saying:

I’m impacting 20–25 little human beings everyday in the future of their lives And like I literally am changing or directing them that could affect them forever. And I’m doing that through life skills through academics through every bit of them as human beings.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to eventually discover themes and commonalities consistent among distinct personal experiences. However, in order to achieve that level of

synthesis, one must first code and categorize the data collected. In doing so, I kept Saldaña's (2009) words in mind about the inherent challenges and contradictions of qualitative analysis:

We are told to capture the essence of our study's data, yet also told to render our accounts with thick description. We are advised to "reduce" our data to an elegant set of well-codified themes, yet also advised to write about the intricate complexity of what we observed in the field. . . . We are charged to contribute productively to the knowledge bases of our disciplines, yet also advised to leave our readers with more questions than answers. . . .

We don't need to reconcile these contradictions; we only need to acknowledge the multiplicity of them. (pp. 191–192)

To wit, while there are innumerable methods of examining codes, creating categories, and finally eliciting themes, in this study, I have begun that lengthy process by looking for prevalence and frequency of each code. Then I amalgamate the codes into relevant categories, and finally in Chapter 5, I analyze the themes that evolve.

**Summary of the codes.** To examine the codes I began by looking at prevalence and frequency. By prevalence, I examined how often the code occurred in the 12 interviews I had (two with each participant). Therefore prevalence could fall anywhere between zero to 12. By frequency I mean the percentage of that particular code in relation to all other codes in each participant's interviews. So, if a participant had 50 coded responses in one interview, and 10 of those responses were coded with the description of “flexibility,” then that particular participant would have a frequency of 20%. If the participant did not make a statement with that code, I did not count it against objective frequency. I then averaged the percentage of frequency across all participants who have that code.

I summarized the results this way for a number of reasons. First, prevalence allowed me to see the pervasiveness of each code. For example, out of twelve interviews, phrases that were coded as “opportunities” occurred eleven times. This indicates the importance of opportunities to the vast majority of the participants. Second, frequency allowed me to see the importance of the codes to specific participants. In this case, “pedagogical philosophy,” while mentioned in eight interviews, was coded for the relevant participants 26.5% of the time indicating its importance compared to other codes relative to that participant’s interview. Finally, examining prevalence and frequency allowed me discard certain codes that occurred for only one or two participants in conjunction with a low frequency. For example, two participants had statements that were coded as “importance of teaching,” however besides being a low prevalence (only two out of twelve), this code also had a lower frequency than other examined codes (11%). Because of its relatively low prevalence and frequency, I dropped that code from the examined summary of results. What follows are the codes with a prevalence above three along with a frequency of greater than 7%.



This minimum was chosen because it indicates both pervasiveness and importance regarding the concepts with the participants.

Data from the examination of documents and observation was also taken into consideration. However, both of these data collection methods supported the primary method of interviewing rather than add much new information. Regarding the examination of documents, one participant emailed a letter clarifying her statements in the first interview, and three participants showed me posters that had mottos they felt exemplified their teaching practices, which had been described in detail during the interviews. Examination of documents was most relevant in the second interview in which I gave the participants physical cards with the ten most prevalent and frequent codes and asked them to tell me which they felt were most and least applicable to them. Two participants moved the cards into meaningful shapes with hierarchies and connections that they explained to me. This is further examined later in this chapter.

The observations reiterated the participants' master teacher status as they used multiple strategies and differentiation with their students. In addition, the teachers' strong relationships with their students and colleagues were evident. In the final section of this chapter, I describe the observations so that the reader can see how the codes and categories that emerged are present in the lived experiences of the participants. The observations also allowed me to have a tangible discussion starting point with the participants for the second interview as the participant and I could talk about the lesson I observed or how the participant used certain strategies or worked with specific students.

Nevertheless, because the vast majority of the data came from the two interviews, that is the focus of the following summary of the codes. Figure 3 illustrates the prevalence and frequency of each of the codes, and after Figure 3 there is an explanation of each code as well as

contextual information and specific quotations that further exemplify and define the code for the reader.

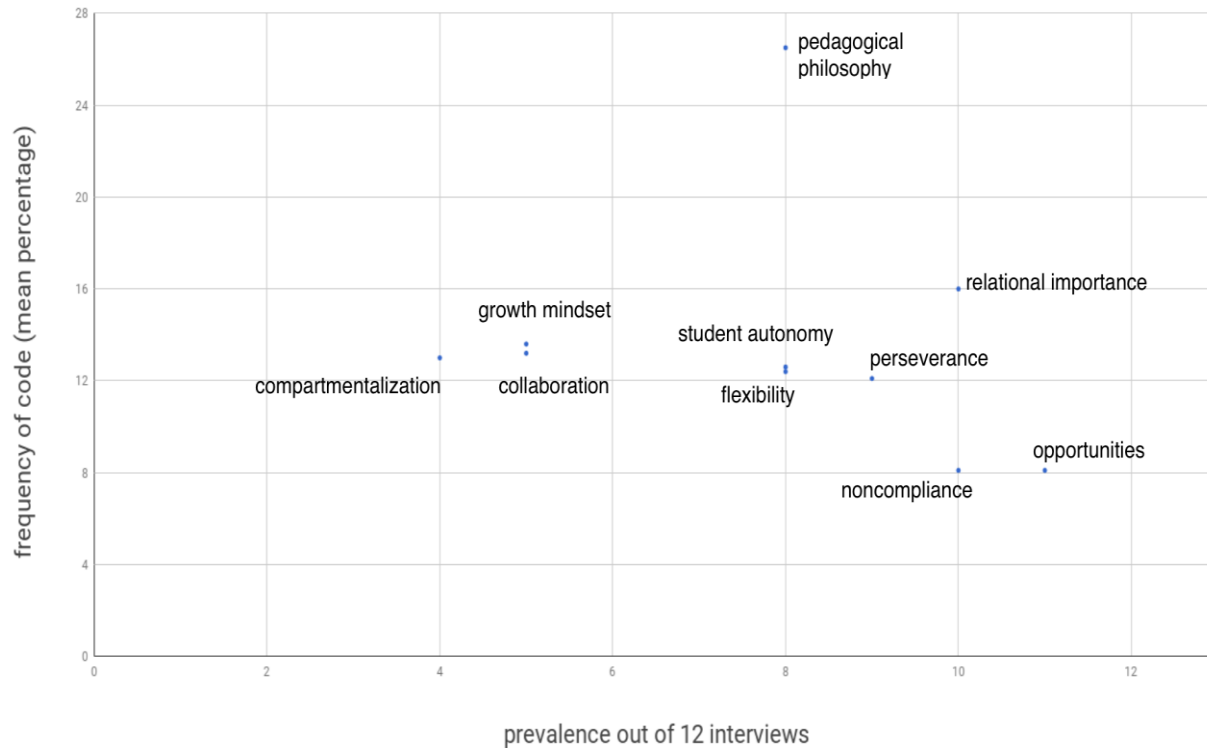


Figure 3. Dot-plot of the frequency and prevalence of the emergent codes

***Pedagogical philosophy.*** This code emerged with an extremely high frequency but an average prevalence. In other words, while not every participant discussed pedagogical philosophy in their interviews, those who did, talked about it quite a bit.

Participants who felt that pedagogical philosophy was important to them made statements similar to Arthur. During the second interview he said that pedagogical philosophy “covers a whole bunch of the others” regarding other themes I had noted from the participants in the first interview. “[T]hat takes care of perseverance and opportunities and flexibility and the importance of relationships and the growth mindset.”

Arthur, in fact, showed little interest in talking about anything else, waving away the cards with the other codes on them. When I pointed out other possibilities regarding themes, Arthur held fast. “I really think this pedagogical philosophy covers it all. Really.” He told me. Arthur also pointed me toward a poster in his room with a quotation from noted educator and philosopher Paulo Freire that said, “The future isn’t something hidden in the corner. The future is something we build in the present.” I realized that Arthur had brought up Freire in both the first and second interviews and asked if I could take a picture of the poster. Arthur agreed and stated, “Exactly. Because it’s the truth.”

“So your feeling is that pedagogical philosophy is the overarching umbrella?” I asked him.

“And it takes care of everything else. That’s what I actually believe,” Arthur responded.

Another way participants expressed the importance of pedagogical philosophy was in a manner similar to Angel who said that, “I have a really, some really deep values about education and why I do it, [it] helps me know and overcome the challenges.” While Angel expressed these thoughts explicitly in the second interview, she and I talked about this at length without defining it as pedagogical philosophy in the first interview. At that time, Angel expounded upon the personal importance she felt regarding a dual language immersion program, based on her background as a student in the sink-or-swim model of English language learning. Now she wanted to help provide a better pedagogy for students in a similar situation:

So what I do, I feel I try to teach the subject area in a way that is equitable and accessible for everybody, not just the kids that come in really strong but also those kids that have lots of gaps in their schooling or that have not had some experience with the subject area that we’re teaching. So I try to make it as much accessible as possible as I can

so they can reach their full potential. So when they come in, I take them from where they're at and I always think about "Where can these kids go?" And I try to do that for that kid.

For Angel, pedagogical philosophy was the reason why she became a teacher in the first place. In order to make sure that students like her were given a fair chance in the educational system, she had to help create a system based on equity and education, and she had to live it every day of her professional career.

While Angel's beliefs and actions may be intense regarding the belief in her pedagogical philosophy, they were not unusual among the participants. Most of them expressed a manner in which they felt it was important and necessary to help children learn, both for personal and philosophical reasons.

***Opportunities.*** This code emerged with high prevalence but low frequency. Participants noted the opportunities they have been provided by the school district and their administrators, but the conversation about opportunities did not create the length or depth of discussion that other codes afforded. Statements coded as opportunities included Sebastian telling me, regarding the school district, "my Master's they almost fully paid for. They paid for like, two thirds of it. And then I'm almost done with my ESOL endorsement and that hasn't cost me anything but books." While she and other participants were grateful for the opportunities the district provided such as free or low cost classes, they counterweighted those with further comments about what more could have been offered, "I do wish we had more time, and this is both school and district, where we can observe other teachers. We don't learn from anyone else... I'm taking classes, and I'm collaborating but if I don't know that I'm not doing something, I'll never know." In other words, while grateful for the official opportunities she has been able to access, Sebastian and

others wished there were other opportunities to teach and learn from colleagues. This measured response was typical of many of the participants: appreciation of what is there while wondering what else might be possible. In addition, Sebastian, like other participants, tended to discuss opportunities as a list: they paid for two thirds of her master's degree, paid for almost all of another endorsement, and she also mentioned that they provided a teacher on special assignment to help support the language arts pedagogy that Sebastian believes in. However, besides listing the opportunities available to her, Sebastian had little extra to add.

Angel discussed the importance of opportunities to her in a very different way. First, she described the program through which she became a teacher: the bilingual teachers pathway program at a local university. In this cohort, Angel's school district sponsored her membership and a specific administrator "really pushed me to take classes that I don't think I would have taken." Angel continued, "She was always kind of talking to me, like, 'This is what you've got to do, Angel, and I know it's going to be hard but you can take an extra class and you're going to be a teacher sooner.'" Angel's description of this connection to the administrator and systemic programs that helped her become a teacher emerged as she discussed the importance of opportunities in her route to becoming a master teacher.

Regarding the present, Angel also had more to say than Sebastian about the opportunities provided to her. She and I had to reschedule our first interview because she was at a conference in another state for which the school district had paid. Angel used the word "support" repeatedly discussing the opportunities provided to her. She talked about how the school district and the specific administrator supported her in the beginning of her career, and she talked about how she continues to feel support now. About the conference she recently attended, Angel said, "I'm fortunate enough so that people sort of support me to learn and grow and come back and bring back

to my kids.” One notable difference between the way that Angel discussed opportunities in contrast to Sebastian was that Angel described people as well as systems who provided her with opportunities while Sebastian only described systems.

On the other hand, Angel, like Sebastian, noted that more could be done. Angel got visibly unsettled when she talked about the superintendent’s presentation of state assessment data. “How can you talk and put all those scores up for all of our schools?” she asked, regarding a presentation the superintendent had done for each school comparing state test scores among the district’s elementary schools. “Put all of the scores for our schools . . . and not say anything about, ok these are your third grade scores and these kids, the test is done in English and these kids have been taught in Spanish from kindergarten.” So while Angel was explicit about the opportunities and support she has felt from the district since the beginning of her career, she also felt that more could be done, both on a systemic level and on a personal level from educational stakeholders with the power to provide better opportunities.

***Relational importance.*** Relational Importance demonstrated both high prevalence and high frequency. Participants discussed having genuine, respectful, and caring relationships with students, families, and coworkers.

For example, Lewis mentioned “I think student relationships are important. Getting to know the students, being happy to see them, knowing their pets’ names, their siblings’ names, those kinds of things. Just letting them know that I care about them.” Lewis repeatedly talked about her classroom like a family, “We talk a lot about that we’re a family and we help each other and I think that is so important in building a good classroom because if you don’t have that . . . it’s not as successful.” Lewis also contrasted her time at her present school, which has a stable, rural population which helps her to feel more successful in her work based relationships, as

opposed to her time at the beginning of her career in a more urban, unstable area where she was not as successful. About her school now, Lewis said, “I’ve been fortunate to have very kind families and supportive parents so it hasn’t been parents that make my life hard. So, I mean, sometimes because they’re too involved, but that’s not a terrible problem to have.” In addition, Lewis mentioned the similarities between the environment where she presently teaches compared to where and how she grew up. Being raised on a farm, she said, “I was kind of used to that country lifestyle.”

When she taught in a more urban area, both because of the students and because of her lack of expertise in teaching, Lewis felt, “I was just like, I didn’t have the skills, I would get the typical worst class of kids, and I just felt after like three years, I was so defeated.” Lewis described both the importance of relationships as well as the negative feelings associated when the relationships with students and families were not as strong as she would like. It was clear that Lewis felt these strong relationships are part of what keeps her feeling positively as a teacher.

Sebastian also provided a good example of relational importance as she talked about the significance of building relationships with whole families, “Building a relationship with families, especially once you start to get siblings too. If you can, from the get go, build that rapport, oh man, it makes your life so much easier.” Sebastian even noted that it was often the worst behaved kids with whom she had the best relationships.

My energy suckers, of course, always end up being my favorite kids because I get to know them the best. They’re the kids that I am with the most. But if I build that relationship, I have so much more pull when I’m doing something with them.

Both Lewis and Sebastian, as well as other teachers, discussed their relationships as teachers with primarily being with their students, secondarily with families, and tertiarily with

colleagues. Sebastian, for example, described two years that she *looped* (i.e., had the same students for two consecutive grade levels) as easier years, especially in terms of her relationships with the students and their families. “[T]hat way I got to hold onto those hard kids. And maybe having them for two years won’t get screwed up.” Sebastian contrasted this to the feeling of helplessness she has when she watches students do poorly in subsequent years when these students have new teachers after she extended substantial effort and has created a strong relationship.

While Lewis described the importance of easier, more familiar relationships for her and Sebastian described the importance of more challenging relationships, both teachers, as well as other participants, characterized relationships as one of the most important parts of being a teacher.

***Perseverance.*** Teachers discussed perseverance both for themselves and as a trait they would like to help instill in their students. Perseverance had relatively high frequency and prevalence which indicates that it is of moderate importance to the participants.

Miguel stated that she overcame the challenges of teaching when she was younger because “I wanted to take on more because I wanted to be sure I wanted to know everything and learn it all, you know? So I felt like I was always trying to catch up. You know, there’s always something more to learn.” In fact, Miguel discussed perseverance multiple times both as something she needed at the beginning of her career when she was just learning to be a teacher and facing those accompanying challenges, and now when she sometimes feels exhausted from having faced similar challenges for so many years. “Every now and again though,” she told me, “I have my down in the dumps. I say to my husband, ‘I don’t think I can do this for 15 more years.



I don't think I can do this!" While acknowledging bouts of frustration and upset in her professional life, Miguel continued by discussing the need for perseverance and focus she employs to be the best teacher for her students:

I try to come in every day: Ok, that's my job to be their advocate, I'm here to serve them, I'm here to create an environment that's going to make them feel comfortable, safe, happy to be here, excited to learn in whatever they're doing, and respected. And create that culture.

In the second interview, Miguel also talked about perseverance in a similar vein. "There's so many times I have to talk to myself. Self-talk. "You can do this, you can do this [Miguel]. Stick with it. Don't give up," she says to herself.

She also discussed perseverance as a trait she wants to help develop in her students. In discussing what her classroom would look like to an observer, Miguel noted a plethora of activities she provides for children that help students with perseverance:

Giving the kids ample opportunity to practice, practice, practice. Sharing, talking, communicating their ideas, communicating their thinking, communicating their strategies. Then being able to be creative and extrapolate. If this were to happen, what caused the effect? What are they experiencing in their lives? Bringing that about.

Therefore, for Miguel, perseverance is an act of interplay between herself and her students. She models it and expects to see it reflected in them. It is important to note that Miguel recognizes the difficulty of perseverance and honors the challenge of the struggle. While not always easy, and maybe not always possible, the ability to overcome hardship is a goal that she has for both herself and her students.

Similarly, Angel related that she makes sure her students know that persevering is an important part of their education. “I think I just model that you just work hard and you persevere and you’re going to have lots of falls,” she told me. Like her pedagogical philosophy, perseverance is very personal to Angel. She wants to make sure her students know that it is possible to persevere no matter what their background:

Because my mom did not go to high school. My dad did not finish his high school. But then he came here and he finished his GED and so I can say, I come from this background and it is possible.

Most importantly for Angel, “that’s what I think my job entails, is just not only teaching the subject areas but just providing a safe environment for my kids to be able to become whoever they want to become.” To Angel it seems obvious and inevitable that perseverance will need to be part of that recipe, and she sees it as her place to create a safe and supportive environment for her students to learn perseverance, just like she did as she was becoming a teacher, just like she wishes she had when she first moved to the United States.

***Noncompliance.*** This code emerged with high prevalence but low frequency. Teachers who discussed mandates with which they were non-compliant stated the specific issue and tended to quickly change the subject to a more positive way to handle the situation.

Ari discussed his dislike for the math curriculum he was supposed to teach this way, “I don’t like [name of math curriculum]. And I’m not using [name of math curriculum]...because for me, they don’t do what I want for my students. But instead of making a huge deal about it, I’m just not going to do it....so why should I be complaining all the time for something I already figured out how I’m going to do it?” His quick dismissal of the curriculum was telling: if there is something he is told to do but he does not accept *and* he can ignore it without repercussions, Ari

will ignore it without fanfare. Ari described going through different phases in his teaching in which he tried various strategies and decided whether or not they worked.

My mindset was something like, “Ok, they have to be free, they have to run and do whatever they have the need to do” but that eventually turned into my students being wild and not doing anything. So I was like, “Ok, I think this is not working.” So eventually I’ve been using this mindset of, because in the past I used to be those kind of person like “Ok, this traditional way is not, it doesn’t have nothing good to offer. I won’t do it.” . . . So now I feel like I try to use like “Ok, this works for me but this doesn’t work for me. I like what this has to offer me but I don’t like this thing is doing.”

Nowhere in Ari’s description of the evolution of his philosophy did he mention incorporating external mandates. While he admitted doing what is necessary regarding these mandates, for Ari it seems almost as an aside to his actual work of figuring the best way to teach students. When I specifically asked him about district and state assessments, he told me, “I mean I don’t agree for how they set up the explanations. It’s just like, why should I complain?” His point was that he would do what he felt was right when he could, grappling with the best way to teach his students with whatever necessary noncompliance that entails, but when there was no way around specific directives, it was better to just do them and then get back to the real work of teaching. If Ari feels the combination that a mandate does not help students *and* it can be ignored without negative outcomes for himself or his students, then (and only then) he will be noncompliant.

Similarly, Sebastian related that she does not follow her school’s mandated behavior management system, “I’m not a referral writer, I’m not a contact form writer, I don’t feel like they have a purpose. Except for a track record. If that’s the purpose, I’m going to write it and not

give it to the kid.” Because the school’s behavior management system is avoidable and does not agree with Sebastian’s beliefs as a teacher, she is able to be noncompliant about it.

On the other hand, like Ari, when there are unavoidable mandates, Sebastian too feels that it is best to do them quickly, without fuss, and then get back to the actual work of teaching. When I asked her about a specific online computer based assessment she was required to give to kindergartners three times a year, she told me, “I gotta do it. Right? Like, no matter how much I bitch about it, I can’t change it. It’s coming, right? It’s here. Get over it. How can I deal with it and move on?” She also mentioned, however, that she at least tried to read the reports to “help me know where my kids are at and how to better teach them.” Overall, participants who discussed noncompliance felt it was necessary but did not want to draw attention to their behavior, and they made sure I knew they complied when they felt it was required.

***Student autonomy.*** Student autonomy occurred with mid-level prevalence and frequency. When I brought it up, participants indicated their belief in its importance, however they did not necessarily mention it without prompting. Comments about student autonomy were similar to what Lewis expressed, “I think student autonomy is very important to me because I 100% believe in student choice and letting them take ownership and being able to make decisions about how they want to do something and all of that.” Nevertheless, she also described it as tiring:

And there are days when it feels like “Oh my gosh, I should just tell them what sentence to write, tell them what question to answer, they don’t get to have any choice.” Because there are some days where it just feels like this is chaos and it’s a mess and they’re not getting anything.

Lewis described the importance of student autonomy on the way it intersects with her pedagogical philosophy. She believes in the value of students having those choices and for these kindergartners to begin the work toward owning their learning, so she is willing trade her own exhaustion for their progress. “It’s very difficult in kindergarten because there are a lot of students who are not autonomous yet. And so it’s a challenge,” she told me.

I have had to pull back on some of them and some of them I’ve just had to say, “You don’t get to have choice.” And I have to tell them what to do and it bothers me because I want them to be able to make that choice.

However, student autonomy and student choice remain a bedrock in Lewis’ beliefs and behaviors as a teacher, and she mentioned the importance of both numerous times in her interviews.

Similarly, Arthur recounted how important student autonomy is to the systems he has created in his classroom. He described differentiating between students who need help and students who are simply seeking adult reinforcement. “We will help you,” he told me, “but you have to try” he said in contrast to students who ask for support immediately after a task has been assigned. “You haven’t tried,” Arthur explained he would say to these students. “You don’t even have your name on your paper. That’s not even a start.” After a while with these systems, Arthur explained, the students could work on “automatic pilot”—knowing what to do and how to do it. Arthur told me a story about how he had an observation by his principal and two other experts in elementary math instruction, but he had forgotten the guests were coming:

I had them rolling already, and they [the observers] walked in, and I went “Oh my G-d, they’re here today, I forgot.” But because my kids have this attitude, and I do things first like “3 before me.” Don’t ask me the first time you have a question, ask someone. Because that’s a line you will never get through when you have high needs kids. They’re

going to be the shy one at the back of this one and wanting to know their question. So “3 before me”—ask three people, discuss it. So they were on automatic pilot and everybody was working and doing their stuff and everybody had their public record. Because I have it right there, and they all have their versions of it. It was kind of fun because I thought, “Yeah, well, I do it.” They’re doing it. So that made me feel good. But it’s the “can do” attitude.

For the participants who described student autonomy as important to them, it was represented as initially exhausting but worthwhile—both for the students’ time in the class as well as the possible effect it would have on student maturity and responsibility throughout their lives.

***Flexibility.*** The participants discussed flexibility with almost exact same prevalence and frequency as student autonomy. This code, however, showed prevalence without prompting. Participants indicated that flexibility helped them handle challenging situations with students, external mandates, and coworkers.

Ari noted that without flexibility, he would not be able to teach due to the sheer number of students with differing personalities and needs: “I have to be flexible with them because they are more than twenty and then just me.” In addition, he stated that it is his responsibility to be flexible for his students in order to be a better teacher for them. “I’m the adult in the classroom so I think that I can be flexible, I think I can be, I can adjust for how they are.”

In a specific anecdote, Ari described the need for him to be flexible after the 2016 presidential election. In teaching at a dual language immersion school, Ari realized that he would have to walk a fine line in discussing how his Caucasian students and his Hispanic students, most of whom are Mexican descent, viewed the election—even at second grade. “There were two different kinds of conversations cause it’s not the same situation for my kids, for all my kids,” he

told me. Ari needed the flexibility to talk to one group of students more objectively about the election, while the other group of students needed more reassurance, “It’s a different conversation towards, ‘It’s ok, you’re going to be safe, things doesn’t work the way that people say so you need to be calm. Everything’s going to be fine.’” This sort of flexibility was in response to student needs, but many participants noted the importance of flexibility with all stakeholders in the education system.

Sebastian noted the importance of flexibility with colleagues, with yourself and with students, “[T]he willingness to just go with the flow, like whether that be from an administrator, whether that be with your colleagues, or whether that be in the moment when you’re doing a lesson. This is huge in all aspects, I think.” In discussing her effort regarding external mandates, Sebastian focused on both how it affected her students as well as how it affected her colleagues. She specifically considered the difficulties it presented for school’s technology specialist who was given the formidable task of administering the assessment to the whole school. “I don’t mind giving it to my kids. I can do it on my own. We can do it during Daily 5, whatever’s easiest,” she said, indicating her flexibility and empathy for the technology specialist’s plight. For all the participants who discussed flexibility, it was an important theme to help themselves and others face situations that would be more daunting and frustrating. Without purposeful and determined flexibility, participants felt there were many situations that would cause unnecessary and avoidable frustration.

***Growth mindset.*** In five out of 12 of the interviews, participants used the actual term *growth mindset* or vocabulary specific to the theory. Because this theory is so ubiquitous in educational circles, this is not surprising. Teachers who used the terminology did so with a fairly high frequency.

Comments that were coded as growth mindset included statements such as Ari discussing a math lesson, “We were teaching math but the content wasn’t the important thing. They trying, was what is important.” The math lesson that Ari taught was based on something he found on his own, in a video called *Teach Like a Pirate*, where an educator described the importance of engaging students through various methods. Emulating the educator in the video, Ari presented his students with a challenge that seemed intimidating, if not impossible to them.

I asked them, “Do you think that I can do it with just the string?” And they were like, “No, you cannot do it.” And then I did it. And they were amazed about what I was doing. After I did it, they were clapping. And after that, they were willing to try it. And I was like, “Ok, I think this is about good.”

Ari’s lesson, the students’ expectation of failure, and consequent illumination that success was possible with effort are all aspects of Dweck’s ideas of growth mindset. In the second interview, Ari said, “[T]his is what I want from my kids, from my students. I want them to have a growth mindset,” and using lessons like the one Ari gleamed from *Teach Like a Pirate*, he has been able to convey that to them.

Miguel also described the importance of growth mindset and specifically mentioned a conference she attended regarding its importance. She stated in conjunction to the conference, “our motto in our class is, ‘I can do anything if I try.’” She told me this while pointing to a poster on the wall with the motto. Throughout the first interview, Miguel discussed the importance of student growth, both academically and in their thoughts and attitudes. In describing the way she sets up a science lesson for her students, Miguel said that she provides them with opportunities to do the work independently so they can see themselves as more competent and eventually more confident.



Giving them opportunities where they feel they have control . . . . Or they feel like they feel like they can master. Or, you know, they love it when they hear, “Oh, I’m going to be a geologist.” It’s easy to convince 6 and 7 year olds they’re something important just by role playing or, you know, giving them ideas about what they can do.

By creating situations where the students are challenged but also have the ability and guidance to overcome the challenges, teachers like Ari and Miguel incorporate growth mindset into their pedagogy and practice.

***Collaboration.*** The code of “collaboration” occurred with almost the exact same frequency and prevalence as Growth Mindset. Participants felt that successful collaboration with other teachers helped them both professionally and emotionally. However, as noted previously, participants often implied that collaborative relationships were less important to them than relationships with students and their families. Also, many participants mentioned less favorable attempts at collaboration with colleagues they found challenging.

Regarding positive collaboration, Angel said, “as you meet other coworkers, other—especially now that we have a lot of new teachers right out of college, if you really learn from them, that [pedagogical philosophy] can change, right? Because my philosophy is from when I started teaching, just they have more of the most recent research and so that definitely changes based on my relationships with families, students, and other teachers.” Angel compared collaboration to opportunities and mentioned that “opportunities and collaboration would probably go hand in hand. Opportunities the district has offered the collaboration has helped me become the teacher that I am.”

Angel related a story illustrating her point in which she had a student-teacher the first year she moved from teaching first grade to fifth grade. It was a difficult year for Angel, as she

adjusted her expectations both academically (with students who were much more varied in their skills) and emotionally (as the students were less friendly and enthusiastic toward one another). Angel described how discouraged and unprepared she felt, but how helpful it was to collaborate with her student teacher:

Just watching her talk about the kids and taking her little notes for the day, and as she was getting ready to take over the class, she really pointed out some of the good things that were happening in the classroom that I couldn't see.

In other words, just having that collaboration with a colleague helped Angel to see her class in a different and more positive light than she was able to see on her own. Collaboration allowed Angel to move outside her own perspective and gain greater insight.

In discussing more challenging collaboration, Lewis talked about the difficulties of working with people with different ideas about education. She told me,

My team is . . . sort of friends and we're sort of colleagues that work together but we're on opposite ends probably of philosophies and styles so it's hard sometimes to find a middle ground to be able to work together on things because we just see things differently.

Nevertheless, Lewis repeatedly mentioned that when she could not find the sort of professional collaboration she wanted at her school, she was motivated enough to look for it online.

I also do a lot of online social media kind of stuff with reading and being in different groups of what people are doing. Like online Facebook groups about teaching math or about inquiry based learning because that's not necessarily something even my teammates are interested in.

Collaboration, therefore, could be found both in person with coworkers as well as in other forums with peers from other schools. However, participants repeatedly noted that good collaboration with colleagues was preferable. Lewis described the overall feeling of colleagues in her school as friendly, even if official collaboration was sometimes problematic:

Our school has such a nice community. I feel like it's just a really tight knit community.

And so that helped that people were friendly and excited. When there's a new teacher, even parents were reaching out and supportive and coming in to help. And so that helps.

Whether the participants found collaboration at their schools or through their own personal search, they agreed that it was better to have that sort of professional partnership to support ideas as well as bringing a fresh viewpoint to situations in their teaching.

***Compartmentalization.*** The last code that had some consensus of prevalence and frequency is compartmentalization. While it was the code with the lowest occurrence of prevalence, its frequency was in the middle range. Compartmentalization included statements where the participants separated frustrations they could change from frustrations they could not.

Arthur discussed balancing the feeling of wanting to affect change with the reality of constraints to his time, energy, and life outside of school:

I can't be on every committee to have my way about everything. And so maybe a committee makes a decision on an adoption that maybe isn't what I want. Or maybe theoretically I prefer that adoption but realistically that won't work . . . The decisions are made. I don't have all that control so I work with what I have.

Arthur credited his comfort with compartmentalization to growing up outside the mainstream. "I have always gone my own way, from a very early age," he told me. Arthur continued by describing his personal compartmentalization between his work and his social life.

Work is not where I get all my social contact. It's truly not. And I think that it's good to get along with everyone, I think it's part of our job, but I also think that just leads to a lot of group think, and sometimes you end up with people clashing, and I don't want to clash. I don't have time for the battles, I've got kids to teach, to stay focused on.

So for Arthur, part of compartmentalization was deciding where his energy could be best spent, while another part was preventing the sort of discord that sometimes happens when one area of life flows into another.

In another example of a participant discussing the importance of compartmentalization, Miguel stated:

I may not like what decision they've made, and it doesn't affect me positively so it can be frustrating, but what can I do? Every day I focus on, "Ok, I've got 20 kids, and what can I do to help them grow?"

Miguel then relayed a story exemplifying the difference between what should and should not be compartmentalized for her. She described her frustration with the public educational budgeting process.

It is very frustrating to see where money is allocated sometimes, and where it is not allocated sometimes. And also just it's frustrating to see how easy it is for folks who may or may not be qualified to be leaders. And it's troubling to me because those are the folks making big decisions that affect my daily [place].

While she can have no effect on the budget itself, when that budget helps to purchase new curriculum, then she can and has put forth effort. She talked about how she scrutinized the new math curriculum the district provided to find and list all the materials she would need to successfully teach it—materials that had not been originally included in the district purchase. "So I was just

like highlighting all the things that we need. I went straight to [principal], and I'm like, 'Here, this is what we need,'" she said. Miguel was able to get all the requested materials based on her organized and thoughtful list she provided the principal. "It was fantastic!" she told me. So while Miguel could not change the budget itself and had to compartmentalize that for her own well-being, she could and did affect its outcome for her students. This provided a sense of accomplishment and happiness that aided in counteracting the sense of helplessness she had from not being able to affect other external constraints, such as the budget.

**Summary of the categories.** In examining the codes in relation to the literature review, it became apparent that three categories unfolded. The first is *a priori* codes—those that exist from a direct reading of the extant literature discussed in Chapter 2, such as growth mindset. The second category is emergent codes that are not related to either the direct reading or the commonalities among them; for example, flexibility. The third is emergent codes that exist through inferred reading of commonalities among the theories of self-concept; these include codes such as relational importance. In this section, I will move from codes to categories which, as Saldaña (2009) discusses, helps one to research hierarchically in order to define that which falls within a category as well as explicit category delineations that assist in working across categories (p. 11).

A Priori Codes	Emergent Codes Not in the Reading	Emergent Codes Found in the Commonalities of Self-Concept Theories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Growth Mindset</li> <li>● Perseverance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Opportunities</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Compartmentalization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Flexibility</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Relational importance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Collaboration</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Perceived Autonomy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Noncompliance</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Figure 4. Categories and codes.

*A priori codes.* Three of the major codes I found could be categorized into a priori codes. These are Growth Mindset, perseverance, and opportunities. Because Growth Mindset is so ubiquitous in education, it is unsurprising that teachers use the same phraseology and explicit philosophy as described by Carol Dweck. The importance of mistakes is an especially noticeable facet of Growth Mindset that the participants found relevant. As Dweck (2008) says, people with Growth Mindset “look squarely at their own mistakes and deficiencies, and they ask frankly what skills they...will need in the future” (p. 110). Similarly, the participants felt that same straightforward recognition of their mistakes and inadequacies were important to them as teachers. Sebastian described how much she would like observations from her principal and colleagues that truly critiqued her craft as a teacher. “I wish we had more constructive feedback from our principal as well....Like not ‘you’re doing great,’ ‘this was great,’ ‘that was great.’ No, I’m not perfect. I need a couple of things to work on. What can I work on?” Angel reiterated the same idea in a similar manner, “I like people giving me feedback, even if it’s not good. Because that’s just what I think, that you learn from your mistakes and unless someone tells me, I’m actually bothered if they don’t tell me and I might be doing something wrong.” In these cases, the participants used wording common in Growth Mindset books, classes, videos, and journals. When asked, each of the teachers who used phrases coded as Growth Mindset acknowledged familiarity with the philosophy. Two teachers, Miguel and Ari, also directly commented that they want their students to have a Growth Mindset so they purposely model its tenets in their classrooms.

Perseverance is one half of Duckworth’s (2016) formula for grit (the other being passion) and was an important code for many teachers. In a manner that is comparable to the ubiquitousness of Growth Mindset, perseverance is another keyword that is used often with both students

and teachers, making its prevalence as a code unsurprising. For example, Arthur told a moving story about a former student who persevered through a difficult home life and background to become a successful chef. Arthur's telling of the story reiterated how important perseverance is to him as a teacher as well as a trait that he wants to instill in his students. When discussing the intersection of the student's challenges with Arthur's own teaching, Arthur said, "So I think that in emphasizing the work, emphasizing the attitude, those are the things that I think are really important because that's, I believe, what will carry them more than whether they passed fifth grade math or language arts assessment." Arthur discussed perseverance in himself describing his own challenges using technology as an older teacher, "[I]t was just really, really hard because I believe in technology but I'm not naturally good at it. I learned to use a computer in my mid 40's. So that's quite a learning curve too." Nevertheless, Arthur noted his perseverance in technology in a similar manner to his description of his former student persevering in becoming a chef. In addition, both of these align with Duckworth's (2007) description of perseverance in grit: achieving a goal that takes years of work, conquering important challenges, self-defining as a hard worker and unbothered by setbacks.

Interestingly, the other half of Duckworth's definition of grit—passion—was less evident in the participants' interviews. Although two participants discussed their belief in the importance of teaching during the first interview (teaching as a passion), when asked about it in the member check, both participants downplayed that aspect of their first interview. For example, in Sebastian's first interview she stated that teaching "changes lives. I'm impacting 20–25 little human beings everyday in the future of their lives. And, like, I literally am changing or directing them that could affect them forever." However, when asked about the importance of teaching in the second interview, Sebastian stated that "I feel like no matter what job you do, I need to do

110%” implying that her perseverance is less about passion and more of a universal trait in her specific personality and temperament.

While I coded opportunities separate from perseverance, it was described by the participants as an aspect of that trait. Participants expressed a desire to continue to learn more about teaching, and multiple participants looked for opportunities to improve the facet of their teaching in which they felt least confident. Lewis described a class she is taking in this way, “Right now I’m doing one on engaging in math because math has always been my biggest challenge to teach. I don’t enjoy teaching it, I don’t enjoy math at all, so that’s been the thing that I focused on.” Participants consistently looked to persevere through various opportunities, therefore I have categorized it as a subset of perseverance.

***Emergent codes not in reading.*** Two emergent codes were not found in the reading at all, either directly or indirectly. These codes were compartmentalization and flexibility. Compartmentalization was the code used when the participants described the importance of boundaries for themselves and their emotional well-being. Participants explained that while teaching is an inherently altruistic profession, they also needed to separate what they can affect from what they cannot to maintain their own peace of mind. Participants described this as a way to make sure they use their energy in a productive manner rather than worrying about problems they cannot solve. Angel explained her use of compartmentalization in this way, “I think, there’s lots of things I want to change, but the only change I can make right now is with my 25 kiddos in here. Right? That’s the only change I can make. And if I don’t agree with some of the system that is in place, I can’t change this within my classroom.”



Flexibility was described by the participants as making changes in a positive manner when possible and can be viewed as the flip side of compartmentalization. While compartmentalization is about accepting what one cannot change, flexibility revolves around changing what one can. Participants described this as important with colleagues as well as other students, relating stories as varied as calmly accepting changes in the mobile computer lab schedule, district decisions regarding curriculum, and *on the fly* modifications and adjustments to lesson plans based on student feedback. Participants also described frustration with colleagues they view as inflexible with statements such as Arthur's, "I think that one of the things I have problems with with education is that everybody wants a program we can follow this little cookbook on day 3 . . . day 4, and day 5."

Neither compartmentalization nor flexibility were traits noted in the direct reading of self-efficacy, self-determination theory, growth mindset, nor grit. Nor were these traits noted in the synthesis of the reading. The implications of finding traits that had not been previously reviewed for this study will be discussed in the section on Recommendations for Further Research in Chapter Five.

***Emergent codes found in the commonalities in self-concepts.*** While the categories for some emergent codes were apparent from a direct reading of the works in the literature review and others were not mentioned at all, the majority of emergent codes could be discovered through inferred reading of commonalities among the theories of self-concept. These codes include relational importance, collaboration, student autonomy, pedagogical philosophy, noncompliance, and opportunities.

Relational importance and collaboration both revolve around what I termed relational importance in the literature review and is important in self-efficacy and self-determination theory.

In this, participants talked about the positive effect of creating authentic, genuine relationships with students, families and colleagues. Participants' language mirrored that of researchers such as Albert Bandura, Edward Deci, and Richard Ryan. For example, in his article about self-efficacy for the *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, Bandura (1994) stated that:

Social persuasion is a . . . way of strengthening people's beliefs that they have what it takes to succeed. People who are persuaded verbally that they possess the capabilities to master given activities are likely to mobilize greater effort and sustain it than if they harbor self-doubts and dwell on personal deficiencies when problems arise. (p. 3)

Similarly, Angel described how she motivates students verbally and how she creates a community of motivators in her classroom:

You just have to go, "We're going to do it! And I'm not sure how, but we're going to stay after, and we're going to do this and you're going to practice this." And you just start implementing the things that they need. And it takes extra time, but it's really worth it at the end to see he's doing great.

She continued by giving specific examples of students who worked hard and mastered work that was below grade level expectations but still represented a success for that student. Angel makes sure the student who has worked hard and found success knows that she, as the teacher, values the student's progress just as much as a student at a higher level. Both Bandura's and Angel's quotations speak to the importance of relationships and the ability to socially persuade others in a very comparable manner.

Collaboration, working well with colleagues, falls under the category of relational importance too, although it was coded with less prevalence and frequency than the relational im-

portance between student, family, and teacher. Sebastian described a good collaborator as someone “willing to come to the table and share ideas and listen to ideas and help me when I get stuck and be there if I need them or, you know, help me with resources.” All of these descriptors are similar to Deci and Ryan’s explanation of relatedness in self-determination theory. In their book *Self-Determination Theory*, Deci and Ryan (2017) state that relatedness, one of the basic psychological needs is, “feeling socially connected. People feel relatedness most typically when they feel cared for by others. Yet relatedness is also about belonging and feeling significant among others. Thus equally important to relatedness is experiencing oneself as giving or contributing to others” (p. 11). Sebastian’s description of the contrast between when she felt that relatedness with colleagues versus when she did not acts as further justification for its inclusion under relational importance. She told me that during a particularly bad year, it was important to have someone to listen to her, someone besides her husband or mother who understood what she was going through. And, during a year with strong collaboration, she felt both her practice as well as her overall enjoyment of the workplace improve. Consequently, I have categorized collaboration as a subset of relational importance.

Student autonomy, the idea that students should take control of their own learning, was a common code among the participants. This fit well with the commonality of perceived autonomy found in all four self-concepts. However, in the literature review I had focused on *teachers’* perceived autonomy. The participants focused on *student* perceived autonomy. Although the concept is the same, the focus was not what I had expected. For example, Lewis was frustrated about curriculum decisions the district had made, but at the same time expressed her empathy for the district’s decisions. In the end, she implied that as long as she was able to provide her students

with autonomy for themselves (as seen in “the workshop model” of literacy instruction), she could accept the district’s decisions:

I wish that we kind of had a little bit more leeway, I guess, to do what we felt like we wanted to do as professionals, and I understand the district’s hesitation with that because there are teachers who will work hard, and you know, want to figure that out and want to do that workshop model, and there are teachers who would rather have the curriculum to guide them. And so I understand the district not saying, “Oh, teach whatever you want” because it wouldn’t be consistent, equitable. But I do like having a little bit of leeway with the workshop model.

Because the participants found student autonomy to be such a paramount concept, it may fit better with pedagogical philosophy and noncompliance; both of which I categorize as perceived competence. However, because perceived autonomy was a separate categorization in my literature review synthesis, I have placed it separately.

Finally, perceived competence was the last commonality from the literature review that was found in the coding results. This revealed itself in two specific codes: pedagogical philosophy and noncompliance. Each of the participants discussed their pedagogical philosophy as a cornerstone of their teaching. For Arthur it was constructivism, and he talked at length about how this has been important for him in his teaching throughout his career, even when he had to disagree with parents, colleagues, and administrators about its tenets.

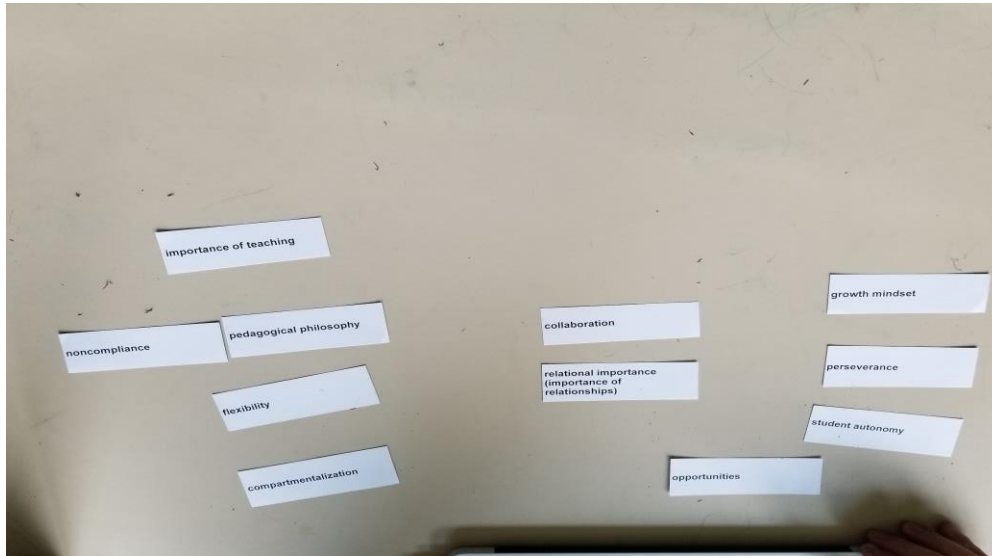
Letting kids talk and share—it’s all ok now. It’s a big change for me, I used to have to do it behind a closed door and keep it to myself. You know, I had parents saying, “You’re letting them all cheat, they’re copying!” It’s like, they only do that in the beginning. In the end, they really want to know how . . . I think the whole environment changed too. It

really did. Even the colleagues. Now I have colleagues who think that way. It's like, well this is weird. You know. I used to keep it to myself.

Ari and Angel talked about the importance of dual language immersion for both themselves and the students they teach. They delved into how important it is to create a sense of belonging for students who may not feel that in the larger community while at the same time, continuing to hold these students to the same high standards and expectations that exist for the majority culture. Lewis enthusiastically talked about the workshop model for both literacy and numeracy in kindergarten, explaining that it gives the students autonomy over their learning while also keeping the work fresh and interesting for her. Miguel advocated for Richard Allington's method of literacy instruction. She called the well-known scholar and educator "her coach." She continued by stating, "He is the guy that taught me everything, so I read everything about him and then taken these classes." Sebastian is a district leader in Daily 5, a literacy program. Sebastian described the importance of a work with an area expert in the program as one facet that made this year's professional development better than previous years. Each teacher had a foundation from which he or she was able to move forward. They feel competent in this pedagogy and that is what allows them to both move forward as educators and resist frustrations. This finding will be the focus of Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion.

In addition, however, noncompliance, which has its own code, is as much a part of perceived competence as pedagogical philosophy. Participants chose not to comply with mandates when it satisfied two separate conditions: 1) they felt they could get away with it, and 2) they felt it was not good for children. However, different participants chose not to comply with different mandates. The unifying factor was that each participant's noncompliance was centered around ideas that counter their pedagogical philosophy. In Ari's second interview he physically moved

cards with the words “pedagogical philosophy” and “noncompliance” together. When I asked why he said they are the same thing: “So it’s just like I don’t feel it’s right, then I won’t do it. It’s pointless, I won’t do it.”



*Figure 5. Ari’s model of relevant codes.*

Therefore, noncompliance is categorized as perceived competence because the participant teachers choose not to comply when they feel their pedagogy is of greater value than the mandate given (and they feel they can choose not to comply with little to no repercussions). This also will be analyzed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

### **Lived Experience**

While the specific codes and categories help to dissect how the participants perceive themselves and their actions as master teachers who seem relatively unfazed, teacher observations more appropriately exemplify the holistic lived experiences of these teachers so that one can better understand their essence and the day-to-day phenomenon of being a master teacher who is relatively unfazed. As van Manen (1997) stated, “At several points it is necessary to step back and look at the total, at the contextual givens and how each of the parts needs to contribute

toward the total” (pp. 33–34). In these chronicles of the observations, I attempt to demonstrate, in one snapshot example of the lived experiences of these teachers, how they exemplify the codes and categories discussed previously.

**Angel.** I was able to observe Angel teaching a math lesson to her fifth grade students. The lesson was an introduction to cubic volume in which students were expected to do a worksheet requiring them to find the volume of three dimensional rectangular prisms using various imperial and metric measurements. Although her goal was to incorporate the district provided curriculum, Angel felt that students were not ready to move to the abstract concepts the curriculum required. Instead, she created a lesson where students physically used centimeter graph paper, one inch graph paper, 12-inch rulers, yardsticks, and meter sticks to make tangible cubic volume.

After explaining the purpose of the activity to the students, Angel had the students work in partner groups or small groups to create the various cubes. For the graph paper, students cut out nets of the shapes and taped them together. For the rulers, students taped six of each type of ruler together to form a cube.

When all the examples of cubic units were created, Angel asked the students what sort of things would be appropriate to measure with each unit. For example, one might use cubic inches to measure the volume of a desk but cubic meters to measure the volume of the classroom. Part of the students’ discussion focused on weighing the pros and cons of similar units, such as cubic yards and cubic meters. The culminating activity was having the students explore how to use the cubic meter to estimate the volume of the classroom and efficient methods in its actual measurement.

In this observation Angel's pedagogical philosophy was apparent. While she stated that she planned on using the district math curriculum, she did not feel it provided enough introduction to her students, so she chose her own (noncompliance). In the work the students did, she allowed them to be independent and autonomous as they both put together the cubes and as they discussed various measurements. Angel's relationship with the students was obvious as she warmly spoke to individual students, sat next to them in student chairs, and worked alongside them. She continually asked them to further explain their thinking. Her pedagogical philosophy was also apparent as she purposely made space for quieter students to talk and be heard. As the lesson was in Spanish, Angel calmly corrected grammatical and vocabulary errors for both native Spanish speakers and native English speakers. Students accepted her corrections with ease and comfort, integrating each correction and continuing to speak, which further confirmed Angel's strong relationship with the students.

**Ari.** I observed Ari teaching a math lesson to his second graders. He began by having the students sit together on the carpet. He used a song with which the students were familiar to get their attention and had them sing with him. He then gave a verbal list of directions. While the focus of the day was adding numbers in the hundreds with regrouping, because the school is a dual-language immersion school, he also had to directly instruct how to say, read, and write the numbers in Spanish. Therefore he began the lesson with a quick review of various numbers. Having the students write the words and the expanded form (e.g., 153 would become un ciento cincuenta y tres and then  $100 + 50 + 3$ ).

Students then were given a word problem with the numbers missing to make sure they understood the vocabulary and meaning of the problem. As students talked in Spanish, each table group had an iPad where they timed how long they could speak in Spanish without transferring



even one word to English. This was done on the honor system and it was up to the table group to restart the timer if anyone accidentally switched to English. Students tried various numbers in the same word problem to get different answers. When students were unsure what to do, Ari gave them number lines or walked them to the public record on which they had recorded various strategies to use with addition.

Similar to the observation of Angel, Ari did not use the district math curriculum. Unlike Angel, Ari stated that he did not plan to use it at all as he felt it did not work with his pedagogy or his understanding of child development. This spoke to Ari's pedagogical philosophy and his noncompliance as a teacher. Perseverance was also noticeable in Ari's lesson as many children were challenged by the math Ari was asking them to do, yet he kept his expectations at the same level throughout the lesson. Instead of changing his expectations, Ari spent more or less time with particular groups as was necessary for them to show understanding of the work. However, flexibility was also apparent as there was a particular student who had been in the office crying when I entered the school (she did not want to eat the lunch provided in the cafeteria). This student returned to the classroom while I was observing and while Ari's high expectations for all students was obvious, he allowed this student the space she needed to get started with her work without feeling pressured.

**Arthur.** I observed Arthur teaching math to his fifth grade students, but unlike Angel or Ari, he was using the district curriculum. He assigned something called a "solve and share"—a challenging word problem with multiple steps and multiple strategies the students could use. This particular problem started with figuring out the perimeter of sod in a backyard and ended with figuring the total cost based on the cost of the sod per square foot.

When the students first looked at the problem, they did not do much, so Arthur asked them how they would get started. The students seemed unsure of themselves and no one answered so Arthur told them to “Talk as much as you can” in order to figure out a point of entry. He walked around and realized that students were figuring out the perimeter in two different ways ( $l + l + w + w$  and  $2l + 2w$ ). He had the students vote on which way they want to do the problem by walking to opposite sides of the room. Students could then choose the method with which they felt most comfortable.

As the students used one of those two strategies to figure out perimeter, Arthur scaffolded for them when they got stuck by showing part of the problem through the projector. When he did so, he told them imperatively, “Watch this, watch this now.” Near the end of the problem when the students seemed confused, he told them, “Let me give a big hint” as they figured out the final answer to the problem.

Arthur’s final answer seemed illogical and he realized it (from observing I knew that he has multiplied by the cost twice, so he accidentally got a price that was double what it should have been). Realizing that something seemed amiss and knowing that the students would be going to lunch soon, Arthur told the students he would check that answer. Arthur ended the lesson by telling the students that the work was really hard today, but he was proud of them for persevering through it.

Arthur’s lesson focused on growth mindset and perseverance, although that was not his intention when he suggested that particular time and day for me to observe. Arthur told me later that he misjudged the students’ abilities regarding the problem but that he decided it would be better for them to persist through the problem rather than give up. In doing so, Arthur had to be

flexible about his expectations in contrast to the reality of the classroom. Arthur had set up systems for student autonomy in his table groups that generally help them in these situations (heterogeneous grouping, roles for each person), but that day's lesson was past the ability of most of the students. However, in observing, it was apparent that the students took Arthur's expectations of perseverance to heart and that the systems he provided that support student autonomy helped to mitigate problems such as off task behavior that often happen when a lesson goes awry.

**Lewis.** I observed Lewis teaching literacy in her kindergarten classroom. She began by having the students choral read from a big book of *Five Little Monkeys*. When the students had the repetitive parts memorized, Lewis asked them to read with greater emotion. At the point in the repeated line, "Mama called the doctor and the doctor said, 'No more monkeys jumping on the bed!'" one student called out "Girls are called nurses when they're doctors!" Lewis took the teachable moment to correct the student and told him that both men and women can be doctors *and* nurses.

After reading the book, students practiced sight words, attempting to recognize them by first letter. Next Lewis told them that they could read independently while she worked with small groups. The first small group practiced specific letters. They had manipulatives (letter magnets) and placemats with the letters they were studying. Lewis later told me that this first group was behind where kindergartners would be expected to be in literacy at this time of year. Another small group was much further ahead, as exemplified by a student who asked why the word *books* is not spelled *boox*. Lewis answered all questions respectfully, and when she made small mistakes throughout the lesson such as not pointing to the wrong word on the sight word board, she narrated her own comfort and perseverance regarding the acceptability of mistakes.

After 10 minutes or so, Lewis had specific students come to the front of the group and tell the class interesting pictures or words they found in their free reading time. Students spoke clearly, and it was apparent that the class had practiced this before. Students also participated in a teacher led *brain break* where they stood up and pretended to put on seatbelts and touched their opposite knee (right hand to left knee, left hand to right knee).

Lewis exemplified the importance of flexibility and growth mindset. Numerous times during her lesson, students did things that were unexpected. Each time she used it as a teachable moment instead of ignoring the occurrence. Her humor and acceptance about the eccentricities of kindergartners (not understanding the difference between doctors and nurses, the unusual spelling of *books*) was apparent. It was obvious to me as an observer that she viewed mistakes as inevitable and worthwhile in the process of learning. Lewis also combined the district literacy curriculum with her own classroom library, using both to amalgamate her lesson into something that better matched her pedagogical philosophy.

**Miguel.** Unlike the other participants described so far, I observed Miguel in a meeting rather than when she was teaching. This meeting was a weekly grade level collaborative team whereby she and the other first grade teacher in her school planned for how to best teach their students. In this particular meeting, Miguel and her grade level partner discussed how to use the district math curriculum so that it would be more developmentally appropriate for first graders.

Miguel had marked the next two sections of the curriculum they were supposed to teach. She mentioned that it felt like the two sections would be better taught in the opposite order (section eight before section seven). She also noted that there did not seem to be enough depth or practice for students to truly master the material. Miguel's teaching partner agreed. They both

decided to look in the Common Core State Standards for the expectations of the material for first graders.

Miguel and her teaching partner compared the efficacy of the different strategies they had used and decide to modify the curriculum. The curriculum grouped the work by addition of larger and larger place value (moving from adding one digit numbers to two digit numbers to two digit numbers with regrouping), but Miguel and her teaching partner decided to group strategy lessons (for example, teaching addition with 10's and 1's manipulatives for one lesson, then teaching addition with number line in another), instead of by the value of the numbers.

Miguel and her teaching partner then went through the curriculum's assessments to see what they wanted to use and what they did not want to use. The teaching partner suggested marking the questions they wanted to use with stars and Miguel readily agreed. Miguel suggested taking notes regarding what they decided and the teaching partner agreed. At the end of the meeting, Miguel checked that the teaching partner had done her part for their grade level responsibility for classified appreciation week (brought the requisite food for a potluck), and they finished the meeting.

This meeting demonstrated strong collaboration between Miguel and her partner. While they may or may not have differing pedagogical philosophies, they worked together to modify the district's curriculum to better meet both their expectations. Miguel spoke about the importance of developmental appropriateness numerous times in the meeting and used it for her rationale for changing aspects of the district curriculum (noncompliance). After the pedagogical collaboration, Miguel also checked for social collaboration regarding the expectations for the potluck luncheon.

**Sebastian.** I had the opportunity to observe Sebastian both in a grade level meeting and teaching literacy to her kindergarten class. During the grade level meeting she and the other two kindergarten teachers agreed upon plans for the upcoming week, and during literacy Sebastian taught a lesson on the Dr. Seuss book *Green Eggs and Ham*.

In the meeting Sebastian told the other two teachers about the upcoming leprechaun trap project she was having the students do in relation to Saint Patrick's Day. Another teacher suggested finding art and science activities to go along with the leprechaun trap. Next, the teachers agreed on which sight words to teach next week. When they discussed where they might get lessons and activities for their sight words, Sebastian scoffed and sarcastically asked, "Like from the curriculum?" Another kindergarten teacher complained about headphones breaking, and Sebastian told her where to send them for free repairs.

In the lesson I observed, Sebastian began by reading *Green Eggs and Ham* to the students. The students then brainstormed other food they may not eat if it were green and Sebastian wrote the brainstormed words on the whiteboard. Examples included pizza, cereal, and other foods with which the students were familiar. Although Sebastian began the lesson with a whole group activity, she met numerous times with particular students one-on-one. For example, she took one child aside who was having behavior problems and talked to him about how to curb his negative interactions with other students. Sebastian talked to another child who seemed anxious about the schedule for the rest of the day. After brainstorming foods besides green eggs that the students would not eat, Sebastian had them copy the words from the whiteboard onto a photocopied paper and draw a picture to go with it. Sebastian quickly checked each paper as the students finished it and they went to play with phonics based manipulatives.

Sebastian collaborated with other teachers, but she also collaborated with students, demonstrating relational importance. At one point, a female student suggested a food that was already written on the whiteboard. Sebastian replied, “We already have pizza, sister” using a familial term to encourage a closer relationship with the student. Sebastian also scoffed at the idea of using the literacy curriculum in the meeting, and when I observed her, she was teaching literacy with her own book and lesson, rather than using the district curriculum (noncompliance).

**Summary of the observations.** In observing the participants, certain aspects of their lived experiences became clear. First, they all had pedagogies and areas of expertise in which they felt most successful. This was clear in both their suggestions of when I observed them as well as the ease with which they taught. Part of that ease demonstrated itself in their flexibility with unexpected occurrences, their relationships with their students and colleagues, and their use of materials (whether it be their own materials or what the district provided). Second, the participants also had philosophies that were observable. These included beliefs like the importance of perseverance and the need for developmentally appropriate instruction. Finally, the combination of the participants feeling competency regarding their pedagogy with their intrinsic understanding of their own philosophies helped the participants to seem unfazed. Because they felt comfortable about what they were teaching and why they were teaching it, the participants moved with relative comfort and take in stride situations that might create greater stress and discomfort to other teachers.

## **Summary**

This chapter has provided a description of the participants and a presentation of the data and results. Most importantly, there is an explanation of the major codes that were discovered as

well as the categories in which these codes appertain. In this chapter I explored the lived experience and the essence of the participants as it relates to them being master teachers who seem relatively unfazed by external mandates. I did so by relating their stories and experiences. As such, there are individual narratives describing observations of each participant to better exemplify how these traits appear in the natural world. Using a phenomenological framework—through interviews, observations, and document examinations—codes and categories of participants’ experience as unfazed master teachers revealed themselves.

These codes and categories created a framework of results that provide the basis for analysis in Chapter 5. Some codes were expected from direct readings described in the literature review, others were not present in readings described in the literature review at all, and some were only present as a synthesis of inferred understanding regarding the commonalities of the theories of self-concept as found in the literature review. This last category will be the focus of Chapter 5.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

The goal of this study was to explore the lived experience of master teachers who seem relatively unfazed by the external mandates and stressors present in education. Specifically, I wanted to know if there are internal structures common among participants, how they perceive themselves and their environment, and how they present themselves to others. I began by exploring the literature, specifically literature related to self-concepts. I did this in order to provide context and background information for the phenomenon. I continued by collecting data and presenting the results of that data. Most importantly, the lived experiences of the participants allowed certain codes and categories to emerge with both prevalence and frequency.

In this chapter, I will both discuss and analyze those results, to explore the results themselves in conjunction with specific literature, then reframe them in relation to educational stakeholders such as other teachers and administrators, and to connect the results to the community of educational scholarship. In doing so, I will also examine the implications of this study and how it relates to those communities. Finally, I will reiterate the limitations of the study but also suggest recommendations for further research that may address those limitations.

### **Summary of the Results**

In interviewing and observing the participants as well as analyzing documents they shared, certain codes and categories revealed themselves. The most prevalent and frequent codes were: pedagogical philosophy, relational importance, opportunities, perseverance, noncompliance, student autonomy, flexibility, growth mindset, collaboration, and compartmentalization. These codes were then assigned categories based on existing literature regarding self-concepts. These categories are a priori codes (codes that are based on a direct reading from the literature)

and include growth mindset, perseverance, and opportunities; emergent codes not found in the literature studied, which include flexibility and compartmentalization; and emergent codes that can be found only in a synthesis of the literature on self-concept. This is the largest category and includes relational importance, collaboration, pedagogical philosophy, and noncompliance.

A Priori Codes	Emergent Codes Not in the Reading	Emergent Codes Found in the Commonalities of Self-Concept Theories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Growth Mindset</li> <li>● Perseverance</li> <li>○ Opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Compartmentalization</li> <li>● Flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Relational importance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Collaboration</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Perceived Autonomy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Noncompliance</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Figure 4. Categories and codes.

## Discussion of Results

In this chapter, I will focus only on the emergent codes that are present. The a priori codes reiterated known scholarship. While this is important as a reinforcement of the ideas in growth mindset and grit (especially perseverance) for both teachers and in the classroom environment in general, it does not necessitate much further discussion. As Carla Willig (2013) wrote in the chapter “Interpretation and Analysis” in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, qualitative data interpretation should be focused on a better understanding of an author’s meaning or of the context in which the data occurred. This would not be the case with further analysis of a priori codes in this study as they were not a significant or original finding of this research.

Instead, I will focus on the emergent codes, both those that were not found in the literature on self-concept and those that were found as a synthesis of the different theories. The major

codes include flexibility, compartmentalization, relational importance, and pedagogical philosophy. Two other codes are also included, collaboration and noncompliance, but these codes are nested under relational importance and pedagogical philosophy respectively, as analysis clarified that collaboration and noncompliance were subsets of the more major and encompassing codes. The rationale behind this will be further discussed in this chapter.

**Flexibility.** Flexibility has been a well established trait necessary for successful teachers. Regarding its importance, over 50 years ago Charles Bidwell wrote in 1965:

The problem of dealing with variability in student abilities and accomplishments, during a school year, thus is vested in the classroom teacher, and one important component of his professional skill is ability to handle day-to-day fluctuations in the response to instruction by individual students and collectively by the classroom group. (p. 975)

Bidwell goes on to say that an important factor in the success of a classroom and school is the discretion with which teachers make decisions. In other words, flexibility is an important facet in the success of the teacher professionally, the classroom academically, and the entire school bureaucratically. While Bidwell (1965) wrote those words long ago, the same tenet holds true today. In April, 2018, Parsons, et al., published a research synthesis regarding instructional flexibility:

Classrooms are messy, unpredictable contexts. Daily, educators teach students who come from different backgrounds, cultures, and life experiences; who have diverse interests and motivations; and who have varying levels of language proficiency, skills, and abilities . . . .To effectively navigate these contexts and provide all students with a quality education, teachers must be flexible and creative in their approach as they adapt their instruction to support the various learners under their care. (p. 206)

However, as well regarded as flexibility is within the world of education, it simply is not a tenet associated with any of the four theories of self-concept I studied. In fact, Bandura and Wood (1989) researched the effect of one's perception regarding a lack of organizational controllability (the necessity that one be flexible because of one's lack of agency over one's work environment), and found a direct correlation between perceived controllability and self-efficacy. "Viewing an organization as controllable increases perceived self-efficacy to manage it, whereas regarding it as relatively uninfluenceable undermines self-beliefs of managerial efficacy" (p. 811). Because of this, Bandura's description of the human need for self-efficacy and the teaching need of flexibility are somewhat paradoxical.

Nevertheless, the participants of this study expressed that flexibility was important because of the inherent lack of controllability within the teaching profession. Flexibility provides the ability to bend instead of break when external circumstances are frustrating or chaotic. For example, Ari related a story about his experience moving to the United States. He was part of a teacher exchange program from Mexico in which he flew into the United States on a Sunday evening and was expected at work with students by Tuesday. He had little time to adjust to a new country, climate, or professional position. Ari chuckled when he told me:

I remember, we had a conversation with the organization who sponsored our visas, that they were explaining to us about the cultural shock experience. They were telling us that you go through this honeymoon phase. And I'm like, "I think I did not have that."

Ari felt that he did not have time for a honeymoon phase and instead had to be flexible in *everything*. Ari described it as such, "I had no choice but go with the flow, keep moving." Now, years later, Ari uses that same flexibility in his classroom on a continual basis:

Like, who am I with my students—it changes. It depends on them and it depends on me.

Like, how we connect, or the way that we connect, it's different with each class. . . .So,

who am I? It depends, it's just . . . if I see myself as someone static, that doesn't work for

me. Just, I have to be flexible with them.

Flexibility may be the opposite of concepts such as self-efficacy and perceived autonomy, but there can be little doubt that it is a necessary trait for master teachers who want to remain unfazed as the very fact of seeming and being unbothered by that which is inherently troublesome is the cornerstone of being unfazed.

**Compartmentalization.** Compartmentalization, the act of pigeonholing parts of a whole instead of allowing them to integrate, is another trait with a long history in stressful jobs. As far back as 1984, researchers Robert A. Clarke and Denise M. Rousseau hypothesized about the importance of compartmentalization as a way that teachers may mitigate the stressful aspects of their work and family lives. Doing so, they state, might allow teachers to separate “stressful events and conditions associated with any particular role” (p. 258). They also note a correlation between teachers who marry and have children, therefore having more responsibility and a greater need to compartmentalize, with specific effects of stress. One correlation is that these teachers with a greater need to compartmentalize seem to be in better health than those who do not. Clark and Rousseau (1984) state that “busier people tend to be happier and less prone to spend time in anxious or depressed states” (p. 258). This particular possibility was not directly researched in my study; however, each of the participants did express their busyness—whether it be in conjunction to their home lives, school responsibilities, or further professional development they chose to undertake. So it is possible that the participants studied in my research have a

greater need to compartmentalize as a side effect of the importance they place on opportunities and perseverance than other teachers, but this was not studied directly.

Interestingly, two participants indicated their difficulty they presently feel in compartmentalizing and noted direct effects from this. Miguel talked about physical pain she experienced in her shoulder that she felt was connected to work.

[T]his past year I all of the sudden got this terrible pain in my right shoulder, and it was triggered by what was going on in my classroom. And it wouldn't go away. It was horrible. I tried deep breathing just to calm my body. It still wouldn't go away, even at night. While Miguel did not directly tell me that her pain was due to challenges with a specific student, she did relay a detailed story before telling me about the pain. This anecdote regarded a boy who was extremely needy and had severe behavior problems. Miguel and I discussed how the child worked with other staff members, how he behaved when observed by experts, and the extraordinary efforts Miguel exerted to improve this child's behavior. Nevertheless, it seemed that the most frustrating part was dealing with other students' parents about this boy.

Learning what to say to them and what not to say, learning to just hear what their frustrations are. Or let them know that they're heard. I don't know, not telling them the parameters of my limitations but at least letting them know I'm doing the best I can, and what have I done.

Miguel continued by saying, "Trying to compartmentalize my life is really hard for me." Finally, regarding the pain, when Miguel had a specific parent-teacher conference she been dreading, the pain subsided. She said, "It was incredible. I've never experienced that before. And perhaps it's just because I'm getting older, and so I'm affected a little more physically than I was a little bit more resilient when I was younger."

The other example describing the importance of compartmentalization was Angel's response when I asked if she sees herself as a classroom teacher in five years. Angel hesitated, then described her frustration with seeing her students not succeed to the extent she believes they should after they leave her classroom. First she mentioned the possibility of moving to a middle school or high school position to help former students, then she talked about moving to an administrative job, particularly one that might help migrant families. Overall, she described the limitations of teaching when as she said, "Sometimes these rules or whatever, don't allow me to make any further changes so then I have to think about what else do I need to do in order to make that change systematically." In other words, when she could no longer compartmentalize, she had to look at what else she could do.

According to Cordes and Dougherty (1993), this lack of compartmentalization can lead to burnout. In their article "A Review and an Integration of Research on Job Burnout" they note that "compassion fatigue" (p. 623) is common among workers in the "helping professions" (p. 621) who "realize they cannot continue to give of themselves or be as responsible for clients as they have been in the past" (p. 623). While burnout and being unfazed are not directly synonymous, for the purpose of this study, what is important to note is that there seems to be a correlation between teachers who are unfazed and those who can compartmentalize. On the other hand, the ability to compartmentalize does not seem static, and a teacher who can do so at one point in her career may not be able to do so at another point. Therefore while a teacher may seem unfazed in one year, the true may not be the same at another time.

Like flexibility, although compartmentalization was an important theme for the participants, it was not mentioned in the literature studied for this research. Like flexibility, compartmentalization is about one's response to what one cannot change which is why it would not be regarded in any of these theories of self-concept, all of which center around one's own agency.

**Relational importance (and collaboration).** There is strong support in literature about the significance of relational importance—both in the four theories I studied as well as more general research regarding successful traits of master teachers. Relational importance, in fact, may be one of the most documented traits to show a correlation between good teaching, teacher attitude, and student success. In their article “Teacher Wellbeing: The Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships,” Jantine L. Spilt, Helma M. Y. Koomen, and Jochem T. Thijs (2011) reviewed previous literature about relational importance and noted that “both in-depth interviews with teachers and correlational research indicate that teachers get intrinsic rewards from close relationships with students” (p. 461). Their own work “sought to understand why teacher-student relationships are important to teachers” (p. 470) and found that basic teacher well-being seems affected by positive and negative relatedness with students. In another study, Sara Rimm-Kaufman and Lia Sandalos (2018) found that good student-teacher relationships “support students’ adjustment to school, contribute to their social skills, promote academic performance, and foster students’ resiliency in academic performance” (para. 8). In other words, relational importance helps both teachers and students, creating a virtuous cycle that helps prevent teacher burnout and supports teachers remaining unfazed by external stressors.

Relational importance is a factor in both self-efficacy and self-determination theory. Self-efficacy is created through numerous ways including modeling influences and social persuasion, both of which are more effective with good relationships. These are critical for students during



their school years as teachers have the ability to affect students' "aspirations, their level of interest in academic activities, and their academic accomplishments" (Bandura, 1994, p. 11). In addition, the benefits of strong self-efficacy can create a virtuous cycle in which the student succeeds, so the teacher feels better about her practice which, in turn, allows the student greater success. All of this is built upon the foundation of a strong teacher-student relationship as each helps encourage the other's self-efficacy.

In self-determination theory, Klassen, Perry, and Frenzel (2012), noted that good relationships with students showed a strong bivariate with work engagement and teaching enjoyment. This leads to greater "vigor, dedication, and absorption in the workplace" (p. 161) along with "higher levels of occupational commitment and lower levels of burnout and ill health" (p. 161). This relates to the belief in SDT that relatedness is one of the three basic psychological needs.

This virtuous cycle was reflected in the experiences of participants in this study repeatedly, but most notably by one particular anecdote. Angel told me about a student in her class when she was first teaching in the district's Spanish-English dual immersion program. The student was supposedly a native Spanish speaker but his language skills were extremely low. Angel was considering referring him for special education services because, as a beginning teacher, that was one of the only strategies she knew to help this student. However, before referring him, Angel decided to visit the student's home and talk to the parents. In doing so, she realized that both parents spoke Spanish as their second language, their first being two different indigenous Mexican languages. Spanish was the only common language between them, but neither spoke it with true fluency. In turn, their son had grown up speaking Spanish with limited vocabulary, sentence structure, and grammar. By the time he got to kindergarten, his language was so behind his peers

that he sounded like a student who could be referred for special education services. However, because of Angel's positive relationship with the student and his parents, which included visits to their home and multiple conferences, she realized the cause of his language difficulties and worked to help him in a more positive and effective manner than she would have without the strong relational importance. This not only helped the student but helped Angel herself. She finished the story by telling me:

I really think that encountering that in my early years in teaching made me realize you cannot assume until you know the whole picture. And I've done home visits, I've done after school meetings, I've done before school meetings, just to be able to connect.

As reflected in the literature, Angel's relationship with the student helped not only the student but also improved her craft as a teacher. In addition, going through that experience expanded Angel's strategies as a teacher which, in turn, may help her to feel less fazed the next time she encounters a difficult situation. In this case, Angel became more unfazed because of the relational learning she acquired through a student and his family.

As a subset of relational importance, there is also quite a bit of literature about the positive effects of collaboration. It has been shown to provide opportunities for peer learning and advance student learning, and increase teacher retention (Barry, Daughtrey, & Wieder, 2009). Similarly, collaboration is important from the perspective of relational importance as it helps teachers to feel less isolated while they are in their classrooms handling various challenges.

Sebastian talked about how much better teaching felt in the years when her grade level partners were strong collaborators. This is in contrast to how alone she felt in years when she had teaching partners who were unwilling to collaborate. "I think I've learned the power of collabo-

ration. How much stronger that makes me as a teacher,” she said. In discussing a year with particularly challenging students, she said, “probably would have died without” her teaching partner. In contrast, in discussing a year when she did not have strong collaborators, Sebastian described it this way, “There are some years that I’ve been on my own. It’s not fun. It’s just not as enjoyable. Especially on the bad years.”

While collaboration is undoubtedly important, the literature reflects similar results to my study in that it is less important than teacher-student relationships. In Klassen, Perry, and Frenzel’s (2012) work they found that “[m]ost teachers rated the importance of connecting with students higher than the importance of connecting with colleagues” (p. 160). For those reasons, although I originally coded it separately from relational importance, I eventually integrated it as part of the same theme. Once again, however, relational importance helps teachers to feel more unfazed. In this case because they have a person or persons with whom they can relieve the pressure of teaching.

**Pedagogical philosophy (and noncompliance).** Pedagogical philosophy was an unexpected emergent code in my research and one that only became noticeable due to the heuristic nature of my methodology. In my first interviews, the participants all discussed their beliefs and actions as teachers, but I did not originally code this as pedagogical philosophy. After the first interviews, when I was preparing to observe participants, they were fairly outspoken about what they wanted me to see them teach. Lewis, who expressed her conviction in the workshop method of literacy instruction and her discomfort with teaching math, wanted me to see her teaching literacy. Arthur, who is very comfortable with how he has integrated his constructivist perspective with a challenging math curriculum, wanted me to see him teach math. Each participant, while

open and welcoming to being observed for whatever I wanted to see, had a specific idea of what I should see.

In our second interviews, I asked the participants to look through the most prominent codes of the first interviews. Immediately in her second interview Sebastian expressed her disdain for the phrase “pedagogical philosophy.” “Because it’s big words,” she told me jokingly. However, when I asked about her feelings toward Daily 5, the literacy framework and pedagogy for which she is a leader in the school district, Sebastian stated, “I know that’s something that I really feel like I do well. . . .If I could feel good about doing something really well, it’s ok if I’m not perfect at the other things.”

As I interviewed the other participants, whether they explicitly called it pedagogical philosophy or if they implied its relevance, they made similar statements regarding its importance: pedagogical philosophy acts as an anchor and support in times of stress. Having a strong personal pedagogical philosophy allowed the teachers to feel successful at one thing, even when they knew they weren’t being successful at everything. Lewis talked about it in relation to her comfort with the workshop model and how she would like to incorporate that into her math pedagogy, “I think I’ve gotten pretty good with reading, with being able to figure out what kids need and assess them and put them into groups based on that. And in math I’m still not quite there, but I would like to do more.” Miguel talked about her pedagogy in relation to a specifically challenging student. Arthur talked about his pedagogy as he watched the district move from one instructional focus to another.

As such, I began to realize that what I coded “pedagogical philosophy” connects to perceived competence in the commonalities of the four theories of self-concept I have studied. Alt-

though the participants' philosophies were different, the existence of their pedagogical philosophy provided the same purpose for each of the participants. They created a secure foundation amidst chaos and a place to call home as one ventured into less familiar territory with unknown curriculum, challenging students, new colleagues, and other stressors in the school workplace.

Although there is little direct research about the effect of individual teachers' pedagogical philosophy, similar studies support my findings. Bandura (1993) found that conception of ability and perceived controllability were two strong factors in determining perceived competence. In my research, the teachers' choice of their own pedagogy, as well as their belief in their controllability to utilize it, formed their perceived competence. Gagné and Deci (2005) found that autonomy-supportive work climates correlate to greater work motivation than controlled environments. So, teachers who are able to utilize and become experts in the pedagogy of their choice may feel more motivated than teachers who are forced to use a pedagogy that is chosen for them. Using Dweck's (2006) framework of growth mindset, Greg Gero (2013) found that teacher mindset was a significant variable regarding teacher professional development. If teachers felt they had a sense of agency and self-efficacy, they used performance approach techniques (moving toward the challenge to overcome it) in an effort to improve their competency. This is in contrast to teachers who showed a more fixed mindset and also used performance avoidance techniques (moving away from the problem) regarding professional development so they could remain stagnant at a place they felt less professionally threatened.

Similarly, in my research, the participants used their pedagogical philosophy to meet other challenges in their teaching and professional lives that did not necessarily have a direct correlation to their pedagogy. However, having that support helped them feel better equipped for

any challenge. As Angel said, “I know there’s challenges, then if I have this [pedagogical philosophy] really, if I know it really well, where I’m heading, then it just helps me be happier in my job.” In other words, having a strong pedagogical philosophy helps these teachers to be unfazed because their feeling of competency acts as a protective factor when frustrations and challenges occur.

Another area where there is adjacent research about the importance of pedagogical philosophy is in regard to prospective teachers and their perceived competence. Ida Katrine Riksaasen Hatlevik (2017) studied this and found that “the correlation analysis of the observed variables indicates that perceived confidence in the role as schoolteacher, theoretical understanding and mastery of the methods involved in practising teaching are closely linked together” (p. 822-823). Hatlevik’s (2017) study was longitudinal, with teachers participating for six years, from pre-service through what Hatlevik (2017) defines as *experienced*—teachers with three years of professional experience. While Hatlevik (2017) touches on traits of experienced teachers, that is not the focus of her study. In addition, she does not differentiate between veteran teachers and master teachers, so while her work is adjacent to my findings, it does not fully overlap.

The final area of adjacent research is in pedagogical philosophies chosen *for* teachers but not *by* teachers. This is a huge field of research that incorporates many educational decisions made by administrators, politicians, and other educational stakeholders. In general, teachers have little agency over the pedagogy, instructional decisions, and curriculum chosen by their districts. According to the Pennsylvania State University brief “Teacher Stress and Health” (2016), teachers feel less autonomy than any other professional occupation (p. 4). In my research, I found that

this sometimes leads to noncompliance by teachers who find their personal pedagogical philosophy does not match what they are supposed to be doing. As Miguel said, “The more we teach, the wiser you can become at making these decisions work for you or your students because you’ve had that experience to know the difference in how much I comply and how much do I not comply.” For this reason, I have nested noncompliance as part of pedagogical philosophy.

As Ari told me, when a mandate does not match his pedagogy and he knows there will not be repercussions, “I don’t feel it’s right, then I won’t do it.” Throughout the interviews and observations, participant after participant showed some level of noncompliance regarding external mandates: whether it was not teaching specific curriculum or ignoring student behavioral systems or deemphasizing district and state assessments, the participants in this research do what they feel is best based on their competency as experienced professionals. This also helps participants to feel unfazed as they simply do not concern themselves with every single expectation and instead evaluate mandates to check whether (a) they are good for students (in the participants’ philosophical beliefs), and (b) the mandates will have noticeable consequences for the teachers (such as student test scores that are checked by administrators). Because noncompliance is a sideeffect of pedagogical philosophy and competency, I have nested it as such in my analysis.

### **Deconstruction and Discussion of the Subquestions**

The primary research question of this dissertation was an exploration of the lived experiences of these teachers as well as an examination of specific qualities these teachers have. However, it is valuable to study the subquestions of this research also. These questions specifically ask how these teachers perceive themselves (their understanding of themselves), how they present themselves to the world (their understanding of others’ perceptions of them), and whether or

not there are commonalities and themes among the teachers studied in this research. The following section will guide the reader by explicitly answering those questions.

**How do these teachers perceive themselves and their environment that may be different than other teachers?** While the scope of this research did not include gathering the lived experiences of teachers who do not fit the criteria of unfazed master teachers, the participants in this study had certain self-perceptions and perceptions of their environment that seemed distinctive. First, they placed an emphasis on the importance of flexibility. Doing so allows them to survive and thrive in situations that might seem frustrating to others. In fact, while discussing problems with colleagues, lack of flexibility emerged as a recurring challenge. When I asked Ari why he thought he was described as unfazed, he told me that he thinks other teachers may “just overthink about things.” He gave me an example of colleagues complaining about the effort needed to implement a specific language arts curriculum; Ari expressed his surprise at their reaction, “What? It’s not that much. I mean, the book is practically telling you what to do so it’s not a big deal, someone is already planning for you.”

The participants also (mostly) compartmentalize successfully. They try to only concern themselves with problems they feel they can affect positively. Nevertheless, anecdotally, some of the participants noted colleagues who are unable to do so and the impact their inability to compartmentalize has on them. Arthur talked about coworkers who want what he termed a “cook-book” approach to teaching, implying they want a recipe for everything, and if the recipe is not successful, these colleagues want to discard whole systems as ineffective:

You have to have a little confidence and faith. And I don’t mean religious faith, but faith in yourself and your students. That’s what I think, and I think a lot of best practices really do work. You have to give them a shot, and a sincere shot.



Arthur continued by describing the barrage of complaints he has heard about the new math curriculum the district adopted and how affecting it has been to teachers. In retort, Arthur noted, “It’s like, ok, which one do you want? They all have this.” From Arthur’s perspective, instead of allowing the new curriculum to bother him, a reaction he had seen from multiple colleagues, he compartmentalized his response and used his own personal pedagogy to improve the materials he was provided.

While relational importance may not be distinctive to this subset of teachers, as literature indicates its importance to all teachers (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011), participants described a need for flexibility and compartmentalization in their relationships that may be distinctive. Lewis, for example, discussed her flexibility in working with colleagues whose philosophies are different from her own, “[F]or me sometimes it’s getting over like ‘Well, that’s the wrong way to do it.’ But being, all the kids are ready for first grade, they just have different ways of getting there.” So, even though Lewis may look for collaboration through online communities outside the school that support her pedagogical philosophy, she recognizes the need for her own flexibility in order to continue to work with and get along with her coworkers.

Finally, while it has been outside the scope of this research to study what, if any, pedagogical philosophies teachers have who are not part of the subset of unfazed master teachers, the participants themselves indicated they felt it might be part of their distinction. Sebastian, for example, talked about the difference between the way she sees her pedagogical philosophy, which she described as a point of success, even when other aspects of her work were not going well, in contrast to teachers without that rewarding focus:

When I try to think about people who I think don't enjoy their job. I think, do they have that? And I don't know if they do. . . . Or if they've tried some of those things, and they're like, "That doesn't work." But still haven't found one.

Therefore, while I cannot state whether or not pedagogical philosophy is distinctive, based on the participants' responses, it may be a unique characteristic of this subset of teachers.

In conclusion, to answer the question of how these teachers perceive themselves and their environment that may be different than other teachers, there is evidence from the participants themselves that they believe some of their distinctive characteristics would be their flexibility, ability to compartmentalize, and their pedagogical philosophy. It is also logical to see how these characteristics would help teachers to seem unfazed.

**How do they present themselves that may be different than other teachers?** In describing the way they present themselves, participants focused on inconspicuous noncompliance and perseverance. In my first interview with Lewis, she originally described herself as a "rule follower," however, throughout the interview she mentioned mandates she ignores. Finally, I asked how she integrates these two aspects of her personality. She replied:

[E]xternally I'm a rule follower, so I think of myself as that because people will think that "Oh, [Lewis] does what she's told. She does this." So that's kind of my view in my head. But I'm also one who, when I think something's stupid, then I just, "Psssh, I'm not doing that." But I guess because I don't announce it and I don't make a big deal about it, just kind of sweep it under the rug that I'm not doing what I'm told, and so I think maybe [not] rule follower, I'm probably more of a people pleaser than a rule follower. I want people to like me and I want people to think that I'm pretty easy going and stuff so I don't tend to rock the boat. That's probably more than a rule follower.

The sentiment of quietly being noncompliant was echoed in many of the interviews where participants described successful methods for ignoring mandates. In other words, telling administration that the mandates are being ignored is a surefire way to get administrators to force their adherence. However, Lewis took the question a step further and emailed me after contemplating *why* she presented herself as complying when she did not. She wrote, “I also feel that because I am pretty go with the flow and tend to fly under the radar, I get more traction when I do raise a question or complain about something” (personal communication, February 17, 2018). Therefore, while this subset of teachers may present themselves as compliant, doing so (possibly in conjunction with their success in the classroom) may give them more sway with their coworkers and administrators regarding mandates they feel the need to obstruct or prevent. This too could augment their seeming unfazed, as they complain less often than their colleagues while maintaining their own autonomy in a somewhat clandestine manner.

Separate from presenting themselves as compliant, the subset of teachers studied in this research also noted that they present themselves as hard working. This is not done in a self-serving manner but seemed more as a way a side-effect of the genuine effort these teachers put forth. This was most notable in Sebastian’s description of how she understands others perceiving her. “Something that people say to me a lot—I don’t know if that’s the same thing—is they don’t get how I do it all.” This question is understandable as Sebastian is the only participant in this study who is also a mother of two young children. Notably, none of the other participants have small children at home. Sebastian’s response to the question of how she manages these competing demands indicates her perseverance and altruism:

[S]ometimes it seems like a lot but I just see it as one more thing that I can juggle. Some days I drop balls and that's when I feel bad, but those are on my days when I'm not as optimistic. But I just see it as how can I help? If what I'm doing is helping the greater good, then I'm OK to do it. I don't see it as one more thing . . . I'm like, well I know you have a lot going on too, and you are doing what you can. We each do what we can. I just feel like I'm doing what I can to help.

Sebastian presents as hard-working but also as empathetic and compassionate to others. Other participants are seen as working hard too. Miguel talked about how she worked through the summer to get a thorough list of materials she needed to her principal to effectively teach the new math curriculum; Lewis talked about her work on two district committees for language arts, and Angel traveled to a large conference to better teach in her dual language immersion program.

Once again, like the first research subquestion, because I did not study teachers outside the subset of master teachers who seem relatively unfazed, my answer to this question has some conjecture. Nevertheless, it is notable that the participants themselves believe that one difference in the way they present in contrast to other teachers is that they may be more inconspicuously noncompliant. Similarly, without acting in a self-serving manner, the participants realize that they may also present as hardworking in way that may be different from other teachers.

**Are there themes and commonalities among master teachers who present themselves as feeling little frustration or discrepancy between external mandates and their best practices?** While this question has been answered at length throughout Chapters 4 and 5 of this study, it is worth reiterating that there are both themes and commonalities among these teachers. These themes include: pedagogical philosophy (with noncompliance as a subsection of pedagogical-

ical philosophy), perseverance (with the undertaking of opportunities as a subsection of perseverance), relational importance (with collaboration with colleagues as a subsection of relational importance), student autonomy, flexibility, growth mindset, and compartmentalization. These themes are represented in the lived experiences and essences of the participants studied, as they go about the day-to-day work of teaching.

### **Implications of Results**

While phenomenological research is not generalizable, certain results may have implications in teaching practice, school district policy, and pedagogical theory. These results include how teachers could use this information to self-analyze, how school districts could help support teachers, and how this information could affect teacher training classes.

**Implications in practice.** The implications of this research may help teachers to stave off the stress and frustrations inherent in their careers. Certain commonalities such as flexibility and compartmentalization, may help teachers who are not employing these strategies realize that these may be the *secret ingredients* unfazed teachers are using. Other commonalities, such as explicitly defined pedagogical philosophies, could help teachers who, like the participants, would be better able to return to these philosophies in times of stress as well as utilize it when they faced new challenges.

**Implications in school district policy.** Some school districts allow teachers to use professional development opportunities for a variety of subjects, others only allow teachers to attend specific trainings or classes that the district endorses. One implication of this research is that school districts may be better off allowing teachers the support to find and learn about pedagogical philosophies that feel true to them, rather than insisting they follow a mandated policy. Doing

so may help school districts to build a less frustrated and stressed staff, thereby creating a virtuous cycle of positive teacher feelings that could lead to better student learning results.

**Implications in pedagogical theory.** One implication in pedagogical theory is greater autonomy and self-analysis in teacher training. All commonalities would help teachers to recognize and use strategies that could help them to become better practitioners, however, allowing and even expecting student and novice teachers to discover and explore their own pedagogical philosophy could have profound effects on decreasing teacher stress while increasing self-motivation.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Most of the limitations and delimitations were discussed in Chapter 3. The delimitations included the fact that this research (like all qualitative research) is not generalizable, the small geographic area where my participants teach, only choosing elementary public school teachers, and the time of year when I needed to interview and observe. The limitations included the recruiting participants through only singular recommendations (from the principal), an unexpectedly skewed pool of participants from specific grade levels (half the suggestions were kindergarten or fifth grade teachers), the time constraints regarding data collection, and the possibility that certain teachers who fit the criteria might not want to participate. While most of these limitations were addressed in Chapter 3, one unexpected limitation was a recent mathematics curriculum adoption made by the district. Each of the participants mentioned their frustration or use of this curriculum, and anecdotally, I have heard similar sentiments from other teachers (not part of this research) and administrators in the district. Because of the widespread unhappiness with this curriculum, the participants might have been more aware and more vocal about their noncompliance

than they would have been in a year when a frustrating math curriculum was not being implemented.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The importance of teachers' individual pedagogical philosophies regarding their efficacy has not been studied at all. Because of this, quite a bit of further research could be warranted. First, do all teachers have pedagogical philosophies? It would be important to know whether or not all teachers have pedagogical beliefs they use as anchors. As stated, some of the participants conjectured that they do not, but presently, it is unknown if the participants in the study are unusual or the norm. Second, when do teachers' pedagogical philosophies evolve? As a veteran teacher myself and because of the hermeneutic nature of this research, as I researched and wrote this study, I also explored and analyzed how my pedagogical philosophy developed. I realized that I did not have a personal pedagogical philosophy when I graduated from my university program to become a teacher but developed a basic philosophy within the first three to five years of my teaching which has evolved and become clearer throughout my career. A longitudinal study examining how teachers develop their pedagogical philosophies would be justified. Finally, are there specific pedagogical philosophies that are objectively more effective than others? The participants in this research espoused the importance of everything from constructivism to dual-language immersion to student autonomy in primary grades. Are these all equally successful philosophies or does their efficacy depend on the environment, the students, and the teacher?

In an age when teacher autonomy is diminishing due to federal, state, and district mandates, one restriction that is impossible is determining the way a teacher thinks. And the way that teacher thinks probably affects her lived experience as well as her professional craft in a myriad

of ways. Which is the cause and which is the effect? Teachers' personal pedagogical philosophies is an unexplored but possibly significant area of study.

### **Self-Reflection**

Throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data from the participants, I was distinctly aware of my own experience as a classroom teacher. Overall, my intimate knowledge of the world of the participants helped me to understand their lived experiences. Numerous times, participants and I spoke with shortcuts that would have needed an explanation for outsiders. Miguel, for example, told me a story about administering the district reading assessment to her first graders but because of my familiarity with the program, she did not have explain to me that it was a computer based assessment, the amount of time it takes, or the challenge of helping pre-readers to successfully log into a test with both a username and password.

Nevertheless, because of my knowledge of this world, combined with knowledge of myself, I tread very carefully regarding conclusions that fit too perfectly into my worldview. As I talked to the participants, I verified my understanding numerous times and asked them to explain connotations as well as denotations. I pushed only gingerly regarding answers that felt they might be more relevant to me than they might to the participants. While I would not define myself as qualified to be one of the teachers studied in this research, I would say that certain traits of the participants are also accurate for me. As I researched and analyzed, I reflected continuously to make sure those traits were not given greater weight simply because I shared them.

By the end of the data collection, participants were guiding me to a greater understanding of their lived experiences. They showed me how the themes fit together and gave me ideas and



suggestions regarding their analysis. I was able to benefit from the same hard work and perseverance the participants' coworkers, families, and students see every day. In doing so, I was able to reflect their essences without superseding their experiences, beliefs, or philosophy with my own.

## **Conclusion**

The question that this research asked was: do master teachers who seem relatively unfazed have some sort of internal structure to help them weather the day to day stressors inherent in their jobs? In order to answer this question, first I studied relevant literature regarding self-concepts. This literature included Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's self-determination theory, Carol Dweck's growth mindset, and Angela Duckworth's idea of grit. Synthesizing the literature, I found that these theories had certain resounding commonalities among some or all of them. These commonalities include perceived autonomy, perceived competence, relational importance, and hard work. Using a heuristic, hermeneutic phenomenological framework, I recruited six participants who had been defined as the sort of teacher for whom I was searching. I interviewed them twice, observed them in their classrooms and at meetings, I communicated with them through email and in person. My goal was to learn about their lived experience as a master teacher who seems unfazed. After spending this time with them, I took their interviews, observations, and documents and coded them using the methods found in Saldaña's (2009) book, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. I found specific codes that were both prevalent and frequent among the participants. These included both a priori codes such as Growth Mindset and perseverance as well as emergent codes such as pedagogical philosophy, noncompliance, relational importance, collaboration, flexibility, and compartmentalization. With this in mind, I re-examined the literature about self-concepts and explored other literature regarding successful teacher traits. Through this, the only unestablished

theme was the importance of individual pedagogical philosophy and its side-effect, noncompliance. The experience of the participants indicates that their pedagogical philosophy acts as an anchor in times of stress and as a foundation for professional growth. The idea that master teachers have a guiding pedagogy that is reflected in their lived experience, has not been studied. However, in our world of diminishing teacher autonomy, such a thought is worthy of further research. What teachers think and believe about their teaching inevitably drives their practice and is an area we should consider.

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## **Appendix A: Email Letter to Principals**

Dear Principals,

I am writing to request your help in suggesting participants in my doctoral research study. My dissertation is tentatively titled “Internal Structures, External Mandates: How the Best Teachers Stay True to Their Vocation,” and I am looking to interview and observe teachers in the XXX School District who meet the following criteria:

- Elementary school teachers
- At least five years experience
- Considered very good teachers by you and their peers (utilize best practices)
- Whose good work and attitudes are relatively unaffected by external mandates and pressures

There are no known risks to participation in this study, and it has been cleared by Concordia University’s Institutional Review Board.

If you could suggest two or three teachers, I would greatly appreciate it.

Thank you,  
Kim Kent

## **Appendix B: Email Letter to Potential Participants**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

You have been highly recommended as a great candidate participant for my doctoral research study. The purpose of my study is to explore and examine what makes you a “master teacher” and what keeps you positive in the face of external mandates and frustrations.

If you agree to participate, and I hope you will, you will be interviewed about your beliefs, philosophy, actions, and experiences in teaching. I will observe you at school and I will ask you, where possible or feasible, to share any artifacts or documents pertaining to your personal experience in teaching. Doing these things should take less than five hours of your time in total over a period of 2 months. I will conduct the study during times we agree upon. There are no risks to participating in this study and I will protect your information using codes only I can decipher. Hopefully, you could benefit by gaining a better understanding of who you are as a teacher, and I have no doubt that the information you provide will help aspiring master teachers.

Please let me know whether or not you might be interested.

Kim Kent



## **Appendix C: Consent Form**

### **CONSENT FORM**

**Research Study Title:** Internal Structures, External Mandates: How the Best Teachers Stay True to Their Vocation

**Principal Investigator:** Kimberly Kent

**Research Institution:** Concordia University

**Faculty Advisor:** Angela Owusu-Ansah

#### **Purpose and what you will be doing:**

The purpose of my study is to explore and examine what creates internal satisfaction for “master teachers;” the factors that help you work to your potential in the face of external mandates. We expect approximately eight volunteers. No one will be paid to be in the study. We will begin enrollment on August 27, 2017 and end enrollment on October 13, 2017. Should you consent to be in the study, you will be interviewed regarding your beliefs, philosophy, actions, and experiences in teaching; you will be observed while teaching and at school while not actively engaging with students; and you may possibly share documents pertaining to your personal experience in teaching. Doing these things should take less than five hours of your time.

#### **Risks:**

There are no risks to participating in this study other than providing your information. However, we will protect your information. Any personal information you provide will be coded so it cannot be linked to you. Any name or identifying information you give will be kept securely via electronic encryption on my password protected computer locked inside the cabinet in my office. When we or any of our investigators look at the data, none of the data will have your name or

identifying information. We will only use a secret code to analyze the data. We will not identify you in any publication or report. Your information will be kept private at all times and then all study documents will be destroyed 3 years after we conclude this study.

**Benefits:**

Information you provide will help will help aspiring master teachers. You could benefit this by gaining a better understanding of who you are as a teacher.

**Confidentiality:**

This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. The only exception to this is if you tell us about abuse or neglect that makes us seriously concerned for your immediate health and safety.

**Right to Withdraw:**

Your participation is greatly appreciated, but we acknowledge that the questions we are asking are personal in nature. You are free at any point to choose not to engage with or withdraw from the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This study is not required and there is no penalty for not participating. If at any time you experience a negative emotion from answering the questions, we will stop asking you questions.

**Contact Information:**

You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Kimberly Kent at email, [Researcher email redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email [obranche@cu-portland.edu](mailto:obranche@cu-portland.edu) or call 503-493-6390).

**Your Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Name Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Name Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature Date

Investigator: Kimberly Kent; email: [Researcher email redacted]

c/o: Professor: Angela Owusu-Ansah; email: aowusu-ansah@cu-portland.edu

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## Appendix D: Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in this study, and thank you in advance for your participation.

Focus question: How do some teachers maintain a high level of internal motivation for teaching in the face of challenging external mandates and frustrations?

Participant's Assigned Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Job Description: \_\_\_\_\_

*Hello, my name is Kim Kent, and my research involves exploring the experience of master teachers. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes, and I will audiotape it. In the final study you will be given a pseudonym. Do you have any questions before we begin?*

### Interview Questions

- How would you describe what it is like for you to be a teacher? What do you do? How do you feel about it?
- Could you tell me about your experience of trying to work to your potential as an educator in this school district and this school? (The purpose of this is to understand how the participant views her experience and her circumstances.)
- Can you think of a story or anecdote that epitomizes how you experience being a teacher?
- Could you describe any changes in your mindset through your career?
- You have been described as a teacher who uses best practices successfully. Could you describe what that looks and sounds like to you and in your classroom?

- You have been described as a teacher who seems unfazed. What do think you do (or not do) so that you are described that way?
- Could you describe a time when you felt particularly successful using best practices?
- Could you describe a time when you felt things weren't going particularly well?
- You have also been described as a teacher who is relatively unfazed by external mandates and pressures. Can you remember a time when you were told about a new external mandate (iReady testing, SBAC, math studio, etc.), what was your reaction? How did it impact your planning and instruction? What do you remember about how you experienced the information?
- How have you experienced the discrepancy between best practices and external mandates? (Are there certain events that cause a stronger feeling of discrepancy? What are they? How do the participants experience this phenomenon?)
- To what past experiences in your life do you attribute your success as a master teacher?
- What frustrates you about teaching? What causes you to soar as a teacher?
- Could you tell me about your perception of the course of your career?
- Because of this, you feel....

## **Appendix E: Statement of Original Work**

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

### **Statement of academic integrity.**

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

### **Explanations:**

#### ***What does “fraudulent” mean?***

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

#### ***What is “unauthorized” assistance?***

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

### Statement of Original Work (Continued)

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University- Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
1. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*

Digital Signature

Kimberly Gayle Kent

Name (Typed)

Kimberly Gayle Kent

Date

10/19/2018