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## An elixir for veteran teachers: The power of social connections in keeping these teachers passionate and enthusiastic in their work

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# An Elixir for Veteran Teachers: The Power of Social Connections in Keeping These Teachers Passionate and Enthusiastic in Their Work

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## An Elixir for Veteran Teachers: The Power of Social Connections in Keeping These Teachers Passionate and Enthusiastic in Their Work

### Abstract

This article is based upon the premise that there are many veteran teachers who maintain positive attitudes towards teaching throughout their careers. According to The Grant Study (Waldinger, 2015), positive attitudes towards life and work stem from close relationships and adaptive behaviours that people engage in throughout adult life. This article describes a study undertaken in Australia which revealed that, in line with Grant Study findings, positive veteran teachers (aged 40-70+ years) build and maintain supportive social connections among colleagues in their school and others outside school, plus spouse (or long-term partner) and close family, that contribute to their sense of emotional and physical wellbeing. In a highly relational career such as teaching, our article highlights the credibility positive veteran teachers ascribe to their social connections, including the derived benefits in terms of their teaching and their own wellbeing. We then discuss the implications of the findings, including the role of school leadership in acknowledging the importance of, and fostering healthy social connections within their schools, as a way of sustaining engagement for all teachers.

### Keywords

Positive Veteran Teachers, Social Connections, Adaptive Strategies, Life-Long Learning, Narrative Inquiry

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# **An Elixir for Veteran Teachers: The Power of Social Connections in Keeping These Teachers Passionate and Enthusiastic in Their Work**

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*This article is based upon the premise that there are many veteran teachers who maintain positive attitudes towards teaching throughout their careers. According to The Grant Study (Waldinger, 2015), positive attitudes towards life and work stem from close relationships and adaptive behaviours that people engage in throughout adult life. This article describes a study undertaken in Australia which revealed that, in line with Grant Study findings, positive veteran teachers (aged 40-70+ years) build and maintain supportive social connections among colleagues in their school and others outside school, plus spouse (or long-term partner) and close family, that contribute to their sense of emotional and physical wellbeing. In a highly relational career such as teaching, our article highlights the credibility positive veteran teachers ascribe to their social connections, including the derived benefits in terms of their teaching and their own wellbeing. We then discuss the implications of the findings, including the role of school leadership in acknowledging the importance of, and fostering healthy social connections within their schools, as a way of sustaining engagement for all teachers. Keywords: Positive Veteran Teachers, Social Connections, Adaptive Strategies, Life-Long Learning, Narrative Inquiry*

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## **Introduction and Background**

A catalyst for our study into social connections among positive veteran teachers derives from one of the world's longest ongoing longitudinal studies into the lived experiences of male study participants. Upon examining years of longitudinal evidence from the Grant Study which commenced in 1938, principal investigator George Vaillant (1977), declared the main findings were about "specific ways in which men alter themselves and the world around them in order to adapt to life" (p. 13), and that "close relationships, not our culture, shape our adaptive processes" (p. 71). Furthermore, Vaillant highlighted the importance to people of "the quality of sustained relationships," being in possession of "adaptive mechanisms for dealing with life changes," and that "human development continues throughout adult life" (1977, p. 29). The importance of adaptive mechanisms were highlighted by a further review of The Grant Study by Malone, Cohen, Liu, Vaillant, and Waldinger (2013) who claim these mechanisms "are linked to better relationships, work satisfaction, mental health, and subjective well-being." (p. 85), and that adaptive mechanisms such as humour and altruism "diminish the emotional impact of distress, also while keeping those individuals better engaged with reality" (p. 86).

Life was considered good and fulfilling by Grant Study participants in their later lives (aged 40+ years) when (1) they had a social network of friends within and beyond their workplace, (2) within that network of friends were a few upon whom they could depend for support, and (3) they enjoyed especially safe relationships which were protective of participants' physical and mental well-being. Research team members were immediately

drawn to wondering whether the same principles might apply to positive veteran teachers. As former high school teachers and educational leaders, there was an immediate attraction for us “to imaginatively place ourselves amidst possible lives of potential participants” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 170). Accordingly, we resolved to investigate the possibility that positive veteran teachers would also identify a close social network of colleagues and friends within and beyond school, including a few within those networks who would be deeply meaningful to them, and that these relationships would be vital to their ongoing passion and enthusiasm for teaching. Further, we acknowledged these phenomena were true for ourselves and were optimistic about investigating further within the broader veteran teacher context.

### **The Study Design and Purpose**

Given the extraordinary time span and volume of evidence concerning the form and function of social connections gathered in The Grant Study, we decided to frame our own study into positive veteran teachers around The Grant Study design. We chose a qualitative approach as we sought to understand and describe how positive veteran teachers maintained their passion and enthusiasm for teaching, rather than attempt to predict their behaviour (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Of particular interest to us was the narrative inquiry “subset of qualitative research” (Lyons, 2007, p. 627). According to Clandinin and Caine (2013), “Narrative inquirers add both to the public discourse, as well as to particular policies at any given time” (p. 175).

Since a key aspiration we hold is to contribute to the general community’s greater understanding of the complexities and lived experiences of positive veteran teachers, we believed narrative inquiry was an ideal research approach for our study. Specifically, narrative inquiry provided us the opportunity to focus upon positive relationships that we see as vital in our quest to encourage much deeper and intentional social connections in schools between and among all members of a school community. Further, this approach was chosen in order to “allow for the intimate and in-depth study of individuals’ experiences over time and in context and to recognise the centrality of relationships among participants and researchers” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 166). It was also adopted to indicate how an individual story illustrates the larger life influences that created it (Sauro, 2015).

In addition, the motivation behind our adoption of narrative inquiry undoubtedly stems from our shared ontological experiences from our years of high school and university teaching. Each of us has more than 20 years of teaching experience where we have honed our teaching and critical reflection skills. In the view of Clandinin and Murphy (2009), “Ontological commitment to the relational locates ethical relationships at the heart of narrative inquiry” (p. 600). Our firsthand experience of ethical relationships in our social connections in our profession, highlighted by Day and Gu (2007), Fessler and Christenson (1992), Howard and Johnson (2004), Huberman (1993), Meister (2010), Meister and Ahrens (2011), Steffy (1989), and Vonk (1989), inspired us to embrace a relational model such as narrative inquiry in our research.

Since we identify strongly with practicing teachers, we also saw an opportunity to share positive and professionally edifying good news stories about passionate and enthusiastic veteran teachers’ experiences. Therefore, an important outcome of this study has been to “inform the academy” (Josselson, 2007, p. 549), and equally important, to publicly articulate the virtues and competencies of passionate and enthusiastic veteran teachers. In highlighting the lived experiences of positive veteran teachers in relation to their social connections, questions guiding the exploration of the nature of these lived experiences include: How do social connections among colleagues impact the lives of these teachers? How do social connections among friends outside school impact these same individuals’ lives? What role does

family and any other special persons play in the lives of these veteran teachers, especially in relation to sustaining them in their careers?

### **Review of the Literature**

There is a substantial volume of research into teacher dissatisfaction, declining teacher self-efficacy and burnout (Gallant & Riley, 2014; Hong, 2012; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Pillay, Goddard, & Wilss, 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999). All of these studies highlight the alarming rate of teachers exiting the profession, with loss of self-confidence in dealing with complicated relationships in their work cited as one principle reason. However, we set out to identify veteran teachers who appear to be transcending these phenomena and who were still passionate and enthusiastic about their work and maintain a positive outlook on life.

Findings concerning relationships and connectedness emerging from the Grant Study (Vaillant, 1977; Waldinger, 2015) are not a recently described phenomenon. The focus on human relationships in organisations can be traced back to a school of thinking known as Human Relations during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. In this regard Etzioni (1964) notes that the Human Relations era “discovered the significance of friendship and social groupings of workers for the organization” (p. 20). In addition, Mackay (2013) has argued that for all people, friendship and connectedness are essential to a positive outlook on life. In relation to teachers, Palmer (2007) argues that those who maintain the ability to see beyond self-imposed constraints in their work, and who maintain high levels of connectedness to school as community, are courageous and that they need to be identified, acknowledged and celebrated. Palmer (2007) claims that when others see how courageous teachers “deal with vagaries of fate in their work place while refusing to sell out either our professions or our own identity and integrity they should be acknowledged as aspirational models for disengaged and beginning teachers” (p. 211). Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) refer to “personal courage in teachers, not personal heroics” as they take “calculated risks in conditions that offer opportunity for change” (p. 9). As with Mackay (2013) and Waldinger (2015), notions of connectedness and the quality of relationships are central to Palmer’s definition of the courageous teacher. Importantly, Palmer (2007) contends that these traits of connectedness are not fixed; they can also be learned.

Despite descriptions of courageous teachers, little sustained research appears to have been undertaken into the characteristics of positive veteran teachers per se. Studies by Meister (2010), and Meister and Ahrens (2011) in the United States and Howard and Johnson (2004) in Australia are unique in this regard, since they support the premise of connectedness among veteran teachers. The study by Howard and Johnson (2004) into 10 veteran teachers presented four main conclusions: (1) that veteran teachers were most stressed when “dealing with students who are poor, hungry, abused or neglected;” while simultaneously maintaining a strong moral purpose “in their ability to control what happens to them” (p. 409), (2) that veteran teachers also maintained “strong connections with people who care what happens to them;” (3) that these teachers were unanimous in claiming “strong support from colleagues and school leadership;” and, (4) they expressed a pride “in achievement and a sense of one’s own competence in areas of personal importance and significance” (pp. 412-413).

Meister (2010) interviewed 10 veteran teachers in Pennsylvania and noted their declared “strong connection with students; their intentional contact with humanity” and, their “community of friends...that are often a product of the school’s culture and norms” (pp. 891-894). The study was directed towards how these teachers “remained motivated and highly effective in their teaching” in the face of mandated change for schools to become “top-notch learning institutions” (pp. 880-881). In a separate study into the impact of plateauing on four

veteran teachers, Meister and Ahrens (2011) concluded, “principals must recognize the benefits teachers experience when provided the opportunities to network informally with their colleagues” (p. 777). Germaine to our study was the finding by Meister and Ahrens (2011) that those veteran teachers who avoided plateauing “built their own support systems and utilised them when faced with adversity.” and that all four veteran teachers “turned to their families, or significant other when they needed support” (pp. 774-776).

Other researchers (Day & Gu, 2007, 2009; Fessler & Christenson, 1992; Huberman, 1993; Steffy, 1989; Vonk, 1989) have identified passionate and enthusiastic teachers as progressing through career phases of personal development. It is during these personal and professional growth and development phases that the criterion of adaptability becomes an important coping mechanism, especially for veteran teachers. A major assertion of Waldinger (2015) is that supportive relationships are key to sustaining positive lived experiences over time and that the criterion of group connectedness appears to relate directly to participants expressing high levels of job satisfaction, including a commitment to seek and foster meaningful work and community relationships. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) contend that connectedness in quality relationships among teachers is a process of moving from balkanisation to contrived collegiality. They describe balkanisation a characteristic of a school “culture made up of separate and sometimes competing groups” (p. 52), whereas contrived collegiality “is characterised by a set of formal, specific, bureaucratic procedures to increase the attention being given to joint teacher planning, consultation and other forms of working together” (p. 58). Learning to work collaboratively is stressed by Meister (2010) who reinforces Barth’s (1990, as cited in Meister) belief that “collegiality brings about better decisions, including implementation thereof and higher level of morale and trust among adults” (p. 883).

In summary, literature surrounding the Grant Study highlights the centrality of social connectedness in the lives of people who declare life to be good and meaningful. Connectedness was perceived to be vital in negotiating progressive stages of adult growth and development. In this process, coping mechanisms such as adaptability reportedly helped participants deal with life changes. In relation to positive veteran teachers, the somewhat limited literature in this area acknowledges adaptive mechanisms including the intentional habit of reflecting upon their profession for ongoing learning, and a heightened capacity to work collaboratively. Strong social connections are also reported as paramount as veteran teachers manage change and maintain balance in their work and personal lives.

## **Methods and Methodology**

This study was predicated upon the premise that positive veteran teachers would identify a social network of friends within and outside their workplace central to sustaining them in their roles as teachers. Further, within that network of friends would be a few upon whom they could depend for support and with whom they enjoyed especially safe relationships which were protective of their physical and mental well-being.

### **Participants**

We selected participants for this study via a survey specifically developed to identify positive veteran teachers (Lowe, Gray, Prout, Jefferson, & Shaw, 2019). The survey itself was created around four hypothetical researcher-designed constructs: 1) experimentation, 2) challenge-accepting, 3) comfort in the role and 4) leadership. Sixteen items (four for each construct) were derived primarily from Grant Study items described by Vaillant (1977) and Huberman (1989, 1993). After piloting, the survey was then completed by 145 veteran teachers in Western Australia, via an on-line portal. Exploratory (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor

Analysis (CFA) largely confirmed the veracity of three of the constructs, with experimentation and challenge-accepting loading together. We were confident in the validity of our survey, and from the 145 respondents, 66 were identified as positive veteran teachers. Further, those who completed the survey were given the option of indicating whether they would be interested and available for follow-up interviews.

Of the 66 who scored highly on the survey and indicated their interest in being interviewed, all were duly contacted and ultimately 11 took part. Three participants were teaching in the city of Perth, Western Australia (WA), and eight in regional WA. Six teachers were based in secondary schools; three were primary (elementary) schoolteachers and two taught pre-school to year (grade) 12. Six teachers were in their early to late 40s, three were in their 50s and two in their 60s. Two of the teachers were male and nine were female, reflecting the current gender demographic of teachers in Western Australian schools.

Interview questions were largely derived from the Grant Study (Vaillant, 1977), and a copy of the Interview Schedule is included as Appendix A). In the four weeks preceding interviews, we provided each participant with an outline of the interview questions. Finally, the study was conducted with ethics approval from our university and the relevant teaching authorities in West Australia. We ascribed pseudonyms for the 11 study participants.

### **Interviewing in narrative inquiry**

We employed similar processes to those utilized by Meister (2010) in which she described the purpose of interviews as helping understand the others' experience while acknowledging the role of the interviewer in asking meaningful and thought-provoking questions. As such, we were cognizant that "qualitative researchers often connect with participants at a very deep level" which sometimes requires them "to step back and provide empathy and support," often "in silence, the researcher sitting, being there for the participant" (Corbin & Morse, 2003, p. 343). With respect to participant experiences in qualitative research, Wolgemuth et al. (2014) note "a growing body of literature points to the potential value of interviews as opportunities for self-reflection, appraisal, catharsis, being listened to, responded to emphatically, and being validated" (p. 354). Like Meister (2010), we anticipated our interviewees would feel free, and in fact welcome, the opportunity to be listened to as they told their stories, once they understood the nature of our research aims (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Sauro, 2015; Vaillant, 1977; Waldinger 2015).

### **Data analysis**

Detailed notes were compiled during interviews, including requests for clarification if we were unsure of the meaning or detail the participants were endeavouring to express. After interviews, we transcribed written notes into a more detailed and permanent record. As Josselson (2007) states, "In the data gathering phase the researcher clarifies and explores personal meanings of the participants' experiences" (p. 549). To ensure trustworthiness and rigour, we emailed transcripts to participants, asking them to check for clarity of the information they shared, and inviting them to make further comments, or share other insights, as they felt so inclined.

Following a thorough member checking process (Liamputtong, 2013), we then analysed the transcripts following protocols highlighted by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The sequence of activities for the analysis of interview data was as follows: (1) data was collected through interview and transcripts generated, (2) data was reviewed through a process of selecting, sorting and sifting through each individual transcript to identify similar phrases and ideas, (3) identified commonalities within each transcript were grouped to form



categories of generalised information (this was represented in a data matrix of categories and their supporting phrases) and, (4) the process was repeated for the remaining transcripts before data matrices were compared to identify common emerging themes.

## Findings

In this section our findings are presented under four headings: (1) social connections in school, (2) social connections outside school, (3) depth and perceived quality of social connections; and (4) long term relationships and overall well-being.

### 1. Social connections in school

*“School connections are crucial to personal survival.”*

All participants valued their social connections within the schools in which they worked and acknowledged that the nature and function of these connections evolved over time. Indeed, participants stated that the mutual understanding, support, feedback and sense of purpose gained from these connections was esteemed to them personally and professionally. David, for example, identified around 10-20 members of staff with whom he shared a sense of "doing something noble as teachers." For Rachel and Narelle, the principal's leadership was valued in establishing social connections and the resulting sense of community this fostered. Rachel stated that the principal was "strategic in building teams among teachers for school year groups and for modelling a leadership role for all staff." Participants appreciated the role of the school's leadership in promoting the value of developing social networks, particularly for new staff or staff needing additional support. Furthermore, the value placed on social networks by school leadership was seen by participants as having far reaching effects and as Ray noted, the "trust stemming from belonging to social groups was a vital factor in staff growing in their own confidence as leaders."

Indeed, "trust" within social groups was discussed widely by participants as a key influence on their pursuit of leadership positions. Joan, for example, observed key people who saw her passion, enthusiasm and knowledge of teaching, coupled with her strong communication skills, as vital assets she had for ongoing career development. It is evident that participants thrived with the support and encouragement from a trusted colleague, providing confidence to lead and extend themselves.

The sense of belonging gained from social group memberships resonated across participant stories. Narelle described the Social Club at her school "as a vital link for all staff to feel a sense of belonging and worth in the school." Participants identified particular colleagues from their school social groups who they believed were fundamental to their well-being. Tanya explained, "School connections are crucial to personal survival and for encouraging advancement and learning for becoming a leader in teaching." Similarly, these types of connections have been pivotal for Maxine in her current role as principal. The importance of shared values amongst social connections was deemed valuable by participants and as Maxine explained, "these social connections in school have been challenging and stimulating and have kept me on my edge. They are all about accountability." Indeed, for all participants in our study, strong social connections with colleagues have been integral to their pursuit of ongoing learning.

Furthermore, social connections in the early years of teaching was discussed widely by participants. Some stated that these connections had been essential to their survival and developing self-efficacy, particularly when teaching in isolated and/or regional schools. The sense of community and support gained from their colleagues was evident for all, as Amy

noted, “I was one of approximately 10 teachers in their 20s in a small regional town; all living together in shared housing; sitting around on the floor marking together; planning lessons together; living life together.” It is evident that these experiences of strong connectedness made a significant impression on Amy and her colleagues, ultimately leading to, as Amy stated poignantly, “look out for and mentor beginning teachers.”

## 2. Social connections outside school

*“I’m seeking older and more mature women with common shared values and similar work experiences.”*

Not unlike connectedness in school, the social connections positive veteran teachers sought outside school appeared reflective of their career stage and of their personal needs. We saw examples of intentional and planned social connections as evident in Joan’s high-stake community engagement, stemming from a former Churchill Fellow who encouraged her in a recent successful application to study Community Education in Canada and the United States. Joan said that she “instinctively joined Rotary as a good way to consolidate community connections into stronger relationships.” For Narelle, her social connections outside school were equally impactful during her 12 years teaching in rural and remote areas of Western Australia where she learned a number of invaluable life lessons, including:

The need to take a laid back attitude to work/life; that time management is not the issue she thought it was; and, that you cannot survive in teaching without strong social connections outside your school. In a remote community you need the support of the community to survive; you need to ask for help; you cannot know it all.

For participants such as Kayla and Narelle, their perspective about the personal nature of their social connections outside school were reflective of their human growth and development amidst changing personal and social circumstances. Kayla stated:

I studied teaching in early to mid ‘90s and am still friends with some of these people. However, I have noticed with time that the nature of this social group has changed for me; I moved from fun groups and the trivial of my 20s and early 30s to now seeking older and more mature women with common shared values and similar work experiences.

It is evident that this smaller group of more mature peers are important for Kayla’s emotional well-being given their understanding of the inherent stresses and pressures of teaching. However, other participants actively pursued social connections with those quite separate to the education sector as they provided a way to disengage from work. Ray, for example, valued the ability to speak candidly with these connections without feeling judged. He believed that these connections saw the “real Ray.”

## 3. Depth and perceived quality of social connections

*“I prefer a few good people I can trust.”*

What became apparent to us during interviews was the value all participants placed on depth and quality of relationships over quantity, and that small quality connections existed both

inside and outside the school environment. Participants described drawing on these quality relationships during times of personal and professional stress. Rachel, for example, reflected:

Experiencing my marriage breakdown and all the trauma of this broken relationship. During this time my work colleagues were highly supportive and respectful of my emotional needs, and their pastoral care enabled me to keep a balance between my teaching responsibilities and the need for authentic emotional support.

The depth and quality of connections was similarly highlighted by Mary, particularly in her beginning years of teaching where she acknowledged the emotional support she gained from her social network “kept things from getting on top of her.”

All participants stated that the development of quality social connections took time and commitment, as noted for example by Eve: “[social connections] can take time and a willingness on the part of all players to want to grow and develop. I prefer a few good people I can trust.” Indeed, participants acknowledged the two-way nature of quality relationships; giving as well as drawing support. Amy described quality social connections as “vital for self-preservation” and in order for connections to provide the support she needed, she needed to learn how to really listen and connect with colleagues. Participants agreed that while developing quality social connections was time consuming, it was also a source of satisfaction.

#### **4. Long term relationships and wellbeing**

*“I appreciate good feedback from my husband.”*

Participants also stated that long-term relationships with either a parent, spouse or close friend was vital for their wellbeing and sense of professional self. For example, David explained that his spouse and children were particularly crucial as they provided essential “encouragement to help relax and to mentally get away from thinking about work.” Tanya stated that her husband was a “vital source of support, especially when things get out of whack.” Participants described their long-term relationships as essential to their physical and mental wellbeing, particularly during times of stress.

Further, participants described practical support within their long-term relationships. Maxine’s spouse encouraged her to maintain good physical and mental health: “I appreciate good feedback from my husband. I am conscious of being well and my husband encourages good eating and exercise habits.” Mary’s spouse encouraged her to de-brief with colleagues prior to coming home from work. In speaking about her family, she said “these people have integrity and I trust them. I do trust their honesty and their views/opinions/ethics.”

Participants ascribed the value of connections to not only support their own work/life balance but to also enable them to support others. Narelle reflected, “These connections are vital in maintaining a healthy work/life balance, including helping me support a spouse who is working through his own work and health issues.” In other words, participants understood their ability to support others was in some ways attributed to the support they received from valued connections.

With respect to supportive long-term relationships over the course of their careers, some participants spoke of a drive for achievement stretching back to family values as outcomes of these relationships. David stated, “I must acknowledge the role of my parents who both came from humble beginnings with an ethic of hard work and generosity.” Joan similarly recalled the importance of her father to her community mindedness and sociability. She explained:

As a renowned people person I have people upon whom I can depend for out of school counsel, including dad, other close family, and colleagues. I attribute my community mindedness to dad's example of a hard worker who was also committed to action and adventure for kids, and driven to build a strong community for his own family, and for other families in his sphere of influence. I saw this commitment and decided, I can also do that.

## Discussion

As stated previously, the catalyst for this study was The Grant Study. Findings of the Grant Study into what participants declared made life meaningful and worthwhile included engagement in quality social groups that enabled them to maintain adaptive strategies to deal with changing circumstances throughout their adult lives (Vaillant, 1977). Further reviews of the Grant Study findings have reported "adaptive strategies such as humour and altruism led to participants reporting better work satisfaction, mental health, subjective wellbeing, and engagement with reality" (Malone et al., 2013, pp. 85-86). Findings from our study suggest that positive and enthusiastic veteran teachers largely reflect these wider Grant Study findings, while presenting their own unique variations reflective of the nature of teaching as a career.

### Social connections

Positive veteran teachers interviewed in our study identified numerous benefits stemming from their engagement in social groups throughout their careers. These included the strategic importance they placed upon encouragement for their career aspirations and personal development throughout their lives, and their sense of belonging in social groups that strengthened their efficacy and belief about the importance of their work. In addition, positive veteran teachers described either the organic nature of these social connections, or the role of school leadership in fostering them. In turn, membership of social groups strengthened participant beliefs about making a difference in students' lives, including having the courage to initiate joint ventures in communities to extend educational opportunities as well as a desire to "reach back" to mentor younger teachers.

Participant reflections concerning the agency they ascribed to social connections were largely consistent with the literature. For example, Fullan and Hargreaves (1991), Mackay, (2013), Meister (2010), Meister and Ahrens (2011), Palmer (2007), and Vaillant (1977) all noted the importance of adaptive mechanisms and courage by teachers to see beyond constraints in their work. In essence, these authors observe that if management or leadership in a school does not encourage collegiality work, positive veteran teachers will still adapt and forge their own support networks. In our study, while Amy, Eve, Tanya, Mary and Kayla described consciously creating their own supportive social connections, others, including David, Rachel, Narelle and Ray were grateful for the role of their principals in facilitating these connections in their school, and the positive outcomes engendered accordingly. The active role of the principal in fostering collegiality is advocated by Meister (2010) as being "closely related to four specific behaviours of principals; namely, (a) states expectations explicitly for cooperation among teachers, (b) models collegiality, (c) rewards collegiality, and (d) protects teachers who initially engage in collegial behaviour" (p. 884).

Although there was a slight shift within our participants' minds as to the function of social connections within and outside school, they maintained that both social networks enabled them to sustain their passion and enthusiasm for their work and to stay focused upon managing a healthy and effective work/life balance. Participants also perceived their role as teachers as "noble," thus reflecting the view held by Malone, et al., 2013), that "altruism helps

keep individuals better engaged with reality” (p. 86). The process of intentional contact with social groups outside the workplace also largely conformed with findings by Howard and Johnson (2004), Meister (2010), Meister and Aherns (2011), and Waldinger (2015), reinforcing the declared belief of our participants that these connections kept them grounded and helped them maintain and manage a reasonable and healthy work/life balance.

### **Depth, perceived quality and wellbeing stemming from social connections**

Statements by our participants relating to self-preservation, emotional support, finding a niche, sense of belonging, the therapeutic nature of these groups and growing in confidence point to a depth of social connections that takes time to develop and a commitment to mutual respect and camaraderie by all parties involved. As Eve so poignantly stated, “I prefer a few good people I can trust.” This statement largely aligns with Grant Report finding that those who identify a good life enjoy depth and quality in their social connections. Similarly, these observations aligned with the literature apropos close relationships rather than culture shaping adaptive processes (Vaillant, 1977). Specifically, adaptive process refers to the determination of positive veteran teachers to intentionally seek social lasting connections for building their own support systems, especially when faced with adversity. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991), Howard and Johnson (2004) and Meister and Ahrens (2011) all refer to positive veteran teachers having confidence to take calculated risks in conditions that offer opportunity for change. It was the depth and quality of social connections that gave positive veteran teachers the declared sense of wellbeing and confidence to carry on in the face of challenge and adversity.

Positive veteran teachers including Rachel, Dan, Joan, Mary, Maxine and Narelle highlighted the role of spouse and family in providing unconditional support for their work throughout their careers. This may ultimately also be reflective of Grant Report findings, where Waldinger (2015) reported that as study participants aged in relation to supportive and close family ties, they presented with numerous health benefits over their fellow participants. Others in our study including Eve, Ray, Tanya and Kayla included people with whom they could just be themselves in this social group, suggesting that quality social networks can be broader than just immediate family and/or partner.

In summary, findings for our study largely confirmed previous literature relating to the efficacy of close and long-term relationships for sustaining veteran teachers. This includes findings by Howard and Johnson (2004) that effective veteran teachers “have caring networks of family and friends outside school, including partners with whom that can talk about their work” and Meister and Ahrens (2011) that “all four of the veteran teachers turned to their families, or significant other when they needed support” (p. 776). What makes our study unique is the amplification ascribed by our participants to these social connections, their unconditional, non-judgemental nature and their evolution over time.

### **Recommendations**

Our article affirms synergies between the perceived importance of social connections described in Grant Study of people from all walks of life, and a narrative report of the lived experiences of 11 positive veteran teachers who participated in our study. Findings from our study indicated that veteran teachers remain passionate and enthusiastic in their work when they were actively engaged in collegial social networks. In addition, these veteran teachers employed strategic adaptive processes within their social networks which resulted in them reporting high job satisfaction and mental and physical wellbeing. The ability to adapt anchored

positive veteran teachers in a view of reality that contributed to their passion and altruism towards their teaching.

Accordingly, the first recommendation stemming from this study is that school principals understand the important role they have to play in encouraging, affirming and nurturing social connections among their staff. However, we also recognise that not all principals may be equipped to do so. There is a need for effective professional development for both principals and teachers into understanding the value of social connections for sustaining the teaching workforce, especially as they age. This in turn must impact positively on student learning outcomes.

Consistent with Grant Study findings is our second recommendation based upon our findings that positive veteran teachers identified a select group of people upon whom they relied for life-long support and feedback about their overall work/life balance. Participants in our study acknowledged that these relationships are rare and take time to cultivate. Accordingly, we recommend a policy of mentoring by positive veteran teachers for early career teachers, not just in a professional capacity but in a social one for sustaining longevity and enthusiasm for the profession.

Finally, we make a salient plea for school leaders to foster and encourage appropriate collegiality among all teachers based upon Eve's reflection concerning "a politically correct phenomenon" in her new school where she felt "we have to watch what we say and how we act, and that sometimes we modify our (professional) and social connections in school, according to how teachers will interpret what we say and how they might communicate those interpretations and assumptions." Eve's experience relates to the nature of collegiality and the way it is offered. She notes that,

Giving feedback about their performance to teachers can boomerang on you as the person providing feedback, and on the school generally. This can be the case with some staff who may be rusted on the school culture and who are unable, or unwilling to learn and to grow with the school.

Therefore, we caution that with a greater understanding of the role and value of social connection for all teachers comes a caveat surrounding its implementation.

### **Conclusion**

Based upon the key findings of the Grant Study, we set out to investigate the role of social connection specific to the lives of positive veteran teachers. Our study largely confirmed Grant Study findings in that positive veteran teachers also ascribe strong social connections within and outside their workplace. Our participants all described a significant few within those circles, including spouse and close family members, upon whom they could depend for support and encouragement. In addition, some of our participants thrived in schools where collegiality was actively encouraged, in turn enhancing their own altruistic approach to their work and a self-belief that they were engaged in an influential and worthwhile career. These findings offer encouragement to us as researchers for communicating more widely to educational jurisdictions conditions by which passionate and enthusiastic veteran teachers in our schools survive and thrive. An important finding stemming from this study is recognition of the potential of school leaders in fostering, affirming and supporting social connection, thus helping all teachers develop and maintain effective adaptive mechanisms for coping with the increasing demands of teaching in the twenty-first century. However, of equal importance is a general understanding and communication of the potential of social connectedness and quality

relationships both inside and outside school in terms of affirming and sustaining all teachers throughout their professional lives.

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## Appendix A

Six sections containing 15 open-ended questions were developed to guide the interviews:

### **Social Connections – in and outside your school**

- 1) Tell me about the social group connections you have in your school
- 2) Are there *specific ways* in which your social connections in schools have impinged, positively or negatively upon your teaching career?
- 3) What about social groups you have outside school – how important have they been to your ongoing teaching career?

### **Qualities and depth of your Social Connections**

- 4) As you reflect upon all your social connections, do you identify specific people, or a smaller ‘close circle’ of friends and can you identify characteristics of these people that are significant to you?

### **Family and Heroes**

- 5) How important have family/spouse/special heroes been to your success in teaching?

### **Teacher Functions**

- 6) How comfortable are you in your role – satisfaction?
- 7) Would you comment upon ways in which you have experimented to improve your teaching?
- 8) In what ways has teaching been challenging for you?
- 9) How supportive of your work have leaders been over the years?

### **Your Health and Social Connections**

- 10) If you were your own ‘health expert’ how would you describe your current physical health?
- 11) For the period of your teaching career how do you believe teaching has impacted upon your overall physical health?
- 12) Has teaching impacted upon your emotional health? If so, were there people within your social connections who were important to you then?
- 13) Are there tips you might have for colleagues you think may be struggling with their emotional well-being?

### **Finally**

- 14) As you reflect upon your teaching career to date, what do you believe are the most effective coping strategies any teacher can adopt?
- 15) What advice would you give yourself if you were starting your teaching career this year?

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