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NOVICE TEACHERS' SENSEMAKING IN AN ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of
Graduate School of Leadership & Change
Antioch University

In partial fulfillment for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
by

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December 2021

NOVICE TEACHERS' SENSEMAKING IN AN ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY:
IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

This dissertation, by Hays K. Moulton, has
been approved by the committee members signed below
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Graduate School of Leadership & Change
Antioch University
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

NOVICE TEACHERS' SENSEMAKING IN AN ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

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The purpose of this research study was to examine how novice teachers make sense of the realities of their chosen profession, given their initial motivations for entering the profession. My research into teacher motivation and retention provided evidence that teachers did enter the field for altruistic reasons and that as many as 50% of all new teachers in urban schools did not last beyond five years. When they begin teaching, they find a field that is heavily impacted by strict accountability standards and required mandated testing. I used Sensemaking Theory and Self-Determination Theory to examine how beginning teachers make sense of their chosen profession, how the principles of Self-Determination Theory interact with sensemaking to influence teachers' decisions to stay or leave teaching, and whether teachers would indicate points of influence that school leaders had used to help them decide to keep teaching. I used narrative inquiry to interview 21 teachers who were in their 3rd to 6th year of teaching from public schools at different grade levels and specializations. My interviews suggest that teachers who decide early in their lives to become teachers were more likely to have trouble making sense of the urban school classroom compared to teachers who decided to become teachers as adults, especially after working in a different field. This suggests that school leaders should consider teachers' motivation to enter teaching as they design professional development opportunities and assign teachers to teams. This dissertation is available in open access at Antioch University Repository and Archive (AURA), http://aura.antioch.edu/ and OhioLINK ETD Center, http://etd.ohiolink.edu/.

Keywords: teacher retention, sensemaking, sense making, school accountability, Self-Determination Theory, teacher motivation, leadership

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my very understanding family and friends for their support and encouragement on this long journey. My wife, Kathy Moulton, was kind and considerate enough to understand that my pursuit of this degree was going to use up a major portion of my available family time for much longer than I originally promised when I started. I spent many weekends writing and researching, so I have to thank my children, Rachel and Gabe, and my grandchildren, Violet, Forrest, Amelia, and Colin, who heard far too often, "Opa is busy this weekend and can't come to visit." I want to thank my mother, Aileen Hays Moulton, who passed away before I started this work, but whose voice and inspiration was always in my mind. Aileen graduated from Smith College before World War II with a Masters in Social Work and never really got to use her degree because of the social norms and expectations that being a wife and mother brought with them in her time. She would have been a great scholar if she had had the opportunity.

When I first started in the PhD program, I was interested in trying to understand why it was so hard to get people to change how they did things. I was a school administrator working with a combination of veteran and novice teachers who all resisted changing and seemed to fear change and who longed for the "good old days." Hearing about Weick's views of sensemaking at a residency for the program struck a chord with me and helped me formulate a research idea. I began to wonder about teachers choosing to teach for one reason and finding something else altogether once they started teaching. Philomena and I talked about this and narrowed my focus for several years as she helped me work through the Learning Achievements one by one. Her gentle, sincere encouragement was a constant source of inspiration for me. Her encouragement to me to find a "Study Buddy" probably did more to help me get through than anything else.

Specifically, Angela–I thank you for all the Monday discussions over the years that helped me narrow my focus and ground my research. When Philomena could not continue as my Chair, Jon Wergin turned out to be the very Chair I needed to finish. Jon's regular questions and feedback were tremendously helpful and inspiring.

I especially need to thank the teachers who were willing to take time from their busy schedules to share their stories with me. Their dedication to their students and profession was heart-warming to see. They continue to put their students' needs first and work to build a better future.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The landscape of public education in the United States is marked by struggles between standardization and individualization. Caught in the middle of the struggle are the classroom teachers who are asked to enact the policy decisions made at the building, district, state, and federal levels. During a time period of increasing teacher attrition, accountability measures have also escalated, with increasing demands for teachers and schools to report on, and be held responsible for, student performance on standardized tests. Meanwhile, teachers are also being told they must differentiate for each child and accommodate the needs of identified special education students within a regular classroom, with support from a special education teacher who has a caseload of students who have wildly varying abilities and needs. Teachers are expected to teach all students to the same set of academic standards that are increasingly rigorous, requiring deeper levels of student understanding and demonstrations of that understanding on standardized high stakes tests. In my study I asked teachers to recount their narrative journey from deciding to become a teacher, through teacher preparation, to first teaching assignment, to professional teacher with three or four years of experience. In so doing, I sought any inflection points which bear on the teacher participants' sense of what it means to be a teacher, hoping to see if there are ways for school leadership to help teachers form a positive view of their career.

Teacher Attrition

Recent studies have shown that somewhere between 40% and 50% of teachers leave the profession within five years (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Roness, 2011). This trend has escalated, with the attrition rate for first-year teachers actually growing by one-third in the last 20 years. One result is that our children in public schools are being taught by teachers with less experience in the classroom. The most common teacher tenure in 1988 was 15 years, while in 2008 the most common year of experience was a first-year teacher (Ingersoll, 2012). How to retain and support new teachers is the subject of much research and debate in scholarly journals and administrative meetings in local districts. This is particularly true in urban and low-income schools, where teachers are as much as 50% more likely to move to another school or leave teaching completely than teachers in high income schools (Olsen & Anderson, 2007).

Pre-service teachers remain motivated to enter teaching by reasons that do not seem to have much to do with standardized tests. They have multiple reasons for wanting to teach, from the practicality of looking at teaching as a stable career choice to more idealistic reasons such as believing in the importance of fostering students' intellectual, moral, and emotional growth (Thomson et al., 2012). A desire to make a difference in children's lives is a strong motivator for prospective teachers.

Yet when teachers begin practicing their chosen profession, they find themselves in a complex world of competing demands that may challenge their initial motivations. To begin with, they are responsible for their own classroom or caseload of students. This responsibility includes their students' achievement on standardized tests, their classroom management skills, negotiating and mastering non-classroom duties, parent expectations, and school culture. Teachers as a professional group have "higher levels of professional stress and lower levels of motivation than other groups" (Han, 2018, p. 148). Levels of attrition also vary by teaching license, with special education teachers being noted for high levels of teacher attrition and burnout, particularly as years of experience accumulate (Williams & Dikes, 2015). Teachers vary in their ability to go from coping with their responsibilities to managing them and overcoming the tensions associated with teaching (Worthy, 2005; Hong et al., 2018). Early career teachers face the tensions of day-to-day survival, as well as the restrictions imposed by accountability and narrowed curricula. As they get more of a sense of ease with their day-to-day challenges, the accountability system does not diminish in its impact on their daily lives.

My research interest is looking at how teachers make sense of their profession as they start their professional lives. I have examined the impact on individuals, over time, of their decision to enter teaching and the work world they find when they actually start teaching. I have seen a wealth of research on the impact of accountability on student scores and other educational impacts. The problems associated with high teacher attrition have also been well documented. Much of the research on teacher attrition and retention focuses on the individual or school traits associated with leaving or staying as a teacher. I have not yet seen much literature on the impact of accountability on the individual teacher's sense of what it means to be a professional educator, especially in light of common motivations for entering the field. I am particularly interested in how this affects teachers in urban schools where the effects of accountability restrictions may be most profound.

The novice teacher faces the traditional tasks of lesson planning, classroom management, parent contacts, observations from principals, and navigating the building social structure, but also the pressure of student accountability measures, teacher evaluations based on student performance, and new standardized curricula. The veteran teachers face the new pressures of accountability even as they have learned to feel more confident about their day-to-day performance. Individuals grow accustomed to the reality in which they find themselves. As a teacher working in an urban middle school, I came to understand my professional roles in relation to my different constituencies—my fellow faculty, my students, my students' parents, my administration, even my friends and neighbors in my community. I felt accountable to each group through different means. For my students, I was accountable to provide lessons, structure, feedback on their work, and grades. For my students' parents, I needed to provide access to details about their children's schoolwork through conferences, phone calls, and grades. To my fellow faculty, I was responsible for holding up my end of the workload on any joint projects, making sure my students were prepared for the next grade, helping monitor the halls during class change, and some measure of consistency with my behavioral expectations. My administrators expected me to provide timely lesson plans (though they were very rarely checked), a quiet classroom, few behavior referrals, and volunteer for a few schoolwide committees. Many of those expectations were completely under my control, and if students had not learned everything they needed for the next year, I could point to their poor performance earlier in their careers.

My biggest source of satisfaction was in the relationships I had built with individual students, particularly students who had struggled, learned differently in some way, or were marginalized because of race or economic status. My role made sense to me, even if I had occasional doubts about how much my students were actually learning and whether it was important learning or just enough to pass them on. It would take a change in the context of my professional role to challenge that view and force me to spend time in role confusion before I could come to a new understanding of my profession and my individual role. The change could be as small as a change in administration or a new assignment or as large as what actually happened–the introduction of a standardized curriculum and increasingly stringent accountability measures.

Sensemaking as a Lens

Weick (1995) used the concept of sensemaking to analyze a forest fire fighting team's disastrous reaction to a sudden flare up. The firefighters being studied perished in a fire rather than discard their heavy tools and run to safety. The tools they carried on their back defined them as firefighters and were a central part of their identity. Teachers today are not faced with an out-of-control forest fire, but they are faced with continually changing professional circumstances that may challenge their deeply held beliefs about what it means to be a teacher.

Teachers at every level of experience are having to redefine themselves as professional educators. The analogy between firefighters and teachers or school administrators continues in the language that both administrators and teachers use in talking about their jobs. As a building administrator, I have often been in conversation with other administrators who talk about how they feel they are "fighting fires" all day long and not having time to do the job they want to do. These parallels led me to explore the intersection of the concept of sensemaking with the effects of increasing accountability and administrative influence in public schools, specifically in reference to novice teachers if possible.

Weick's (1995) view of sensemaking is that it is an ongoing effort to understand the world and make order out of confusion by looking at what is happening around oneself and by looking back at where one has already been. It is therefore part of a continuing personal narrative that is grounded in experience and influenced by current context. For better or for worse, one makes sense of the world and acts upon that sense. For teachers to continue in their chosen path, they will need to make sense of their position in a way that brings them some satisfaction or fulfills their original motivations. If they understand their current context in a way that is completely incongruent with their original motivations, they may choose to leave teaching or abandon their previous altruistic motivations and choose to look at teaching primarily as a fairly secure career to which they have already committed, just continue teaching. Deci and Ryan

(2000, 2017) talk about human motivation using Self-Determination Theory as a way to understand the complex factors that go into motivation. I suggest that combining Self-Determination Theory and sensemaking is a way to understand teachers' decisions to stay or leave the profession.

My foci for this research are the transitions from pre-service teacher to novice teacher to veteran teacher. I sought to find out how teachers make sense of their position in light of the demands of accountability and increasingly prescriptive curricula and their motivations for entering teaching. I examined individual teachers' attempts to understand their positions in light of their original sense of what it means to be a teacher and their lived reality of the position. Literature suggests that the effects of increased accountability are felt most explicitly in high poverty, struggling urban districts, which are also characterized by struggles with teacher retention and less experienced teachers.

Self-Determination Theory

Ryan and Deci (2017)first developed Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a way to understand the factors, extrinsic and intrinsic, that go into human development, motivation, social integration and vitality, and in their absence, lead to "fragmentation, depletion, antisocial behaviors, and unhappiness" (p. 3). The impact of SDT is observable in social contexts as well as in experimental settings. For the purposes of my study, I am interested in what light it may shed on persistence and motivation in education. A chapter of Ryan and Deci's (2017) book is devoted to the applicability of SDT to the field of education, in terms of teaching practice and its impact on children in the classroom. I am applying the principles of SDT to teachers to examine the factors that may impact their motivation and satisfaction with their career choice.

SDT attempts to explain how humans find success and motivation in their lives by meeting three basic psychological needs that are believed to be as important for individual survival as the physiological needs that our physical body needs to stay alive. It is thought that humans will tend to pursue goals and attempt tasks to the extent that pursuing those goals meets their basic needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The three basic psychological needs about which they speak are autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 10). These needs, and the individual's success in meeting them, occur in a social, experiential context, and are evaluated by the individual according to their experience of success or failure as a personal experience. One determines how to behave in the future by the manner in which a similar behavior was experienced as successful in the past. In terms of motivation and persistence, SDT suggests that the extent to which one actually experienced success in the past will help determine whether one's needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness have been met and one is motivated to persist in the face of obstacles in the future.

Methodological Considerations

Because both sensemaking and SDT involve a retrospective process as well as a perception of current context, I believe that this subject is suitable for a qualitative study that explores the narration of teacher paths as they reach their third or fourth year of experience. By listening to teachers talk about their journeys and influences along the way, I sought to understand the possible points of influence that might help a teacher understand their own role in a way that allows them to stay in the field. School leaders and building administrators have little influence over state mandates issued in response to federal direction, but they have the ability to influence local conditions that may allow a teacher to focus on the attributes of teaching that drew them to the position. My search for literature on sensemaking in education found multiple examples of studies on how teachers and administrators made sense of policy, new curricula, professional development, and increased accountability in a school context, in the context of school culture or a group of teachers. This focus is different because it looks at the emergence of one's personal sense of what it means to teach in today's world: "Sensemaking is not an event but is ongoing, focused on extracted cues driven by plausibility and tied to identity construction" (Louis et al., 2005, p. 179). Personal narratives help to capture the evolution of teacher identity over the span of years that has influenced their current view of their position: "A personal narrative (we also sometimes use the more common term life story) in our usage is a retrospective first-person account of the evolution of an individual life over time and in social context" (Maynes et la., 2008, p. 4).

Narrative inquiry as a methodology has the capability to yield insight into the individual and cultural contexts that impact a teacher's meaning making. By asking the participant to tell their own story in their own way, I hoped to discover the important events and contexts that form the teacher's understanding of their professional identity. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) make the point that "narratives are the form of representation that describes human experience as it unfolds through time" (p. 40). Craig (2003) talks about the importance of understanding the "relationship between knowledge and experience, with each informing-and being informed-by the other" (p. 9). She defines experience as the events that happen to a person, story is how they give it meaning and form, and knowledge is how they make sense of their experiences through their stories. Thus, the interplay of experience and story are embodied in how people make sense of their lives, and both experience and story are keys to understanding the contextualized knowledge of the participant.

Relevance

The decision to become a teacher is not made in a vacuum. Almost everyone in the United States attends school before they reach adulthood, forming the basis for a communally shared experience. This “shared experience” varies from one individual to another, with some parts of the experience held more in common than others, depending on native affinity to the process and larger cultural factors impacting demographic groups in different ways. As a teacher and school administrator, I sat in on many parent meetings where it was immediately clear that one negative experience from childhood can have a lasting impact into adulthood. Some individuals come through that system and know they want to be a part of it as teachers, while others seem to wish never to set foot in a school building again. The decision to become a teacher is, therefore, part of a whole life story, with antecedents both personal and cultural. The journey from decision to first teaching assignment is filled with the challenges of completing an educational program. Along the path there are inflection points that may reinforce or erode the original decision, as the teaching candidate is making sense of the profession. If one survives to become a licensed teacher, the next step to look for a permanent teaching position flows pretty naturally from all the investment of time and money already made. The first few years of a teacher’s professional career are well documented as difficult for many reasons, the current atmosphere of accountability measures and prescribed curriculum among the challenges. I studied the journey of teachers in urban and suburban schools as they experienced it and as they understand it.

I have worked in different schools with varying cultures, including smaller sub-cultures of teams or grade levels within the larger school culture. Sometimes the sub-culture within which I was working made the job a pleasure, and other times, quite the opposite was true. My research aimed to use narrative inquiry (NI) to get the teachers' stories and look for points of leadership influence, either through direct interaction or through culture building.

Positionality

As a child of the 1960s and an early adopter of strong feelings about the need for radical social change, I struggled with the magnitude of the change I sought and decided to focus my attention on social change via teaching. I wanted to seriously impact the lives of my own students and hope they would grow up to impact others, or at least reach their full potential. I worked in an urban district with marginalized students. I entered school administration to help reach a larger audience and then entered higher education to try to reach a pool of future school administrators. As a teacher, administrator, and higher education faculty member, I have come to believe in the power of a positive, student-oriented school culture. I have seen research that attributes a high impact to a trusting school climate and other studies that talk about the importance and influence of administrators on their schools' success (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Also, from personal experience, I have found that teachers have power and influence on school success beyond their classrooms. In the transition from my role as a teacher to my role as an administrator, I often felt that I had lost some of my personal authority by gaining official authority. I choose not to focus my research, therefore, on designated school leadership, but seek to find through the personal narratives of teachers the possible influence of other individual and professional actors on their sense of "teacher."

For the last six years I have worked with adults choosing teaching as a second career and currently practicing teachers aspiring to become administrators. Many of our licensure candidates are employed in schools when they enter our programs. The school districts from which these teachers have come and the districts that have accepted our student teachers have ranged from wealthy suburban districts to struggling urban districts in danger of state takeover. Regardless of the district with which they are associated, the teachers in training overwhelmingly express a desire to make personal connections with their students. The teachers and candidates from the urban districts tend to have a cynical view of their school district administrations, but still passionately express a desire to impact their students on a personal as well as an educational level.

Significance of the Study

As I will show in my literature review, the current trends in school accountability and mandated curricula are rooted in the last 40 years of increasing global competition and show no signs of disappearing. While pressure on public schools and their employees has steadily increased, privatization has entered the picture through the encouragement of school choice and charter schools using public school funds. Teachers' individual and collective performance linked directly to student achievement on standardized tests will continue to be publicly reported in explicit detail. It would seem that a career in teaching is becoming less and less desirable, as income and wealth differentials between urban and suburban communities continue to grow. In these circumstances, quality teachers are needed more than ever, and quality teachers with a desire to work and remain in urban settings are crucial to the future success of the children in those schools. My study investigated, through teachers' own narratives, how they have come to make meaning of their profession in order to understand possible sources of positive influence and encouragement for teachers in urban and high-poverty schools. I looked at the intersection of sensemaking and SDT to examine the role of perceptions of success and motivation in the formation of teachers' sensemaking.

In 1995, Weick wrote about the process of sensemaking in an organizational context. Since then, sensemaking has been studied in multiple contexts, with a library search for either “sensemaking” or “sense making” yielding 15,040 results. Qualifying it with education cuts that number in half, adding the word accountability cuts the number down to 47, and adding the methodology of narrative analysis or narrative inquiry reduced it to 17 studies. I looked at the individual’s sensemaking of their overall position within an organization, rather than the organization’s sensemaking as a whole, or teachers’ sensemaking in response to particular stimuli, such as one curriculum or a professional development opportunity. Because both sensemaking and SDT are conceived of as ongoing processes that are retrospective and influenced by the environment, a research methodology that explicitly considers those features of teachers’ stories was chosen to add to the theoretical refinement of the sensemaking and SDT literature and discover if school leadership has a significant impact on individual teachers in urban or high poverty schools.

As stated earlier, the effects of stricter accountability and tightening curriculum are particularly evident in urban and high poverty schools. While the theoretical basis of the No Child Left Behind act of 2001 was to assure that all students in the United States would achieve mastery of basic academic skills, it has seemed more like a tool to point out the inadequacies and shortcomings of urban school systems and provide a rationale for privatizing or taking over school districts by state education officials. In the last year, I have had students from two different districts that were facing state takeovers. Those teachers described an atmosphere of fear, distrust, and shortages of fully qualified teachers, especially in the areas of special education and high school science and math. The schools that need the most capable teachers appear to be having the most difficulty hiring and then retaining quality teachers. This shortage manifests itself in continuing struggles for the students in those districts, with little hope for change. Finding how some teachers have made sense of their positions in both positive and negative ways will hopefully reveal clues to help school leaders build a culture that encourages new teachers and helps them understand their role in a positive way despite the surrounding negativity and cultural headwinds.

Plan for the Study

My plan for my study was to seek participation from local urban school districts to locate 20 teachers in their third or fourth year of practice who were willing to spend an hour or so telling the story of their journey into teaching and their initial experiences as a licensed educator. The questions for the interviews were simple, sharing the purpose of my study and asking the participants to tell me their stories in their own words with minimal interruptions. I recorded and had the interviews transcribed, then analyzed each one separately, looking for points of influence on their sense of professional identity, as well as their senses of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. After an initial pass at the data, I returned to the participants to get their feedback on my analysis, giving them the opportunity to add or clarify any information they would like. Daiute (2013) offers alternative ways to analyze narratives, including values, plot, script, significance, and character mapping. I looked at more than one of the suggested analyses to find the answers I seek. Teachers' values played a large role in their sensemaking, while the significance they assign to certain events or influences either explicitly or implicitly by how they feature some aspects of their story over others revealed the influences that have formed them. In analyzing plot and script of a narrative, one is looking at the perceived important events, the temporal order of the retelling, and the problems and resolutions of their story. Analysis of character may help reveal who has had influence on the teachers as they begin their professional lives. My emphasis was on searching for the overall theme and arc of the narratives first and then breaking them down in more detailed specific ways. I read through each of the transcripts repeatedly to find themes, seeking to make notes for each read-through and then compare the different interpretive iterations for consistency.

Research Questions

Research question 1. How do beginning teachers make sense of their chosen profession in light of their initial reasons for becoming teachers?

Research question 2. What are the points of influence on a teacher's sense of professional identity that may offer school leaders the opportunity to impact beginning teachers' sensemaking?

Research question 3. How do the principles of Self-Determination Theory interact with sensemaking to influence a beginning teacher's decision to remain or leave the teaching profession?

Limitations

By its nature, a qualitative study using narrative inquiry will not be able to produce generalizations that will apply to all, or even most teachers in the United States. If successful, it will provide deeper insight into the journeys of a group of teachers in urban schools. My task is to shed light on the factors that influence teachers' sensemaking to understand how those teachers were impacted by the schools in which they began their teaching careers and whether there are variables that school leaders can influence or alter to help new teachers make sense of their career in ways that are consistent with their reasons for entering the field. My study will be useful to the degree that it reflects the truth that new teachers have experienced and adequately describes the context of the participants. I was restricted by the willingness of new teachers to participate and the availability of teachers with the required years of experience. I was interested in teachers who did not find the career to be the one they thought they were signing up for, as well as teachers who are happy with their choice, but teachers with a negative feeling about their career may be less willing to share their stories, perhaps feeling a sense of defeat and not wanting to admit it.

I limited my study to teachers in their third to fifth years of employment as fully licensed teachers in Ohio. I initially limited myself to teachers in urban or high poverty districts that are struggling with low academic achievement on standardized test reporting. I originally sought teachers from districts that had a 2018 Ohio school report grade of D or F. I later expanded to speak with four teachers from districts that were more successful on the school report cards to see if there were any marked differences. I did not choose a particular grade or subject range of licensure, seeking to get as broad a range of experience as possible. This gave me a number of local school districts from which I could recruit participants.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter II presents the research literature that has led to this study. My study is premised on the ideas that prospective teachers join the profession because of their desire to influence or make a difference in children’s lives, that accountability measures have had a strong impact on the lives of teachers and children, and that teachers have either found ways to live with those restrictions or are considering leaving teaching for another field that might offer the satisfaction they seek. My review of the literature therefore sought to establish a research foundation for those premises. My belief in the multiplying effects of poverty and increased accountability on schools in urban and high poverty areas also needed to be justified by prior research.

Additionally, I explored the literature on sensemaking and SDT and their relevance for educators.

In Chapter III, I examine the history and relevance of narrative inquiry to the study of individual sensemaking and SDT. Narrative inquiry (NI), sensemaking, and SDT are relatively recent developments in the field of social science research. This chapter explores the origins of NI and what is generally expected from the researcher employing this methodology. As a qualitative method, NI requires the researcher to establish the trustworthiness of the results and give a clear picture of the participants' contexts to help the reader understand the potential transferability of the results. I discuss the methods to be used to accomplish those tasks and how I will bracket my own biases and use member checking with my participants and involve peers in establishing the credibility of my analyses. To further establish the relevance of my findings, I discuss how I established the rigor and coherence of my study. Piantanida and Garman (2009) discuss that establishing the coherence of the data with the interpretation is a necessary element of a sound qualitative dissertation, along with adequate rigor in the form of transparent evaluation of the data and researcher reflection on the meaning of the data.

Chapter IV presents the results of my participant interviews. I present the findings from each interview, including details of the participant's setting and experience. I looked for elements of sensemaking and Self-Determination Theory in each and discuss. As answers to these questions were pursued, I was looking for patterns and themes that may indicate similarities between experience based on grade level or subject taught, district or school demographics, experience with leadership, or some other as yet unknown variable.
Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) was referenced to see if patterns emerged that indicate whether the variables of autonomy, competence, and relatedness factor into my

participants' sensemaking about their positions. These results, as well as samples of the participants' narrative transcripts, are shared in Chapter IV.

In Chapter V, I look at how my interviews uncovered any general themes in how novice teachers respond to accountability systems. Differences were found between teachers who chose to become teachers at an early age and individuals who chose teaching as adults or after working for some time in another field. Teachers also responded differently depending on their grade level and licensure area, and I discuss possible implications of those differences. Based on the general trends I found, I suggest areas for further research and limitations of my study. I found some interesting trends that could have implications for professional development and orientation for new teachers based on their motivations for entering the profession. I offer suggestions for building and district leadership to help teachers make sense of their role in light of their initial motivations for choosing teaching and ways to help teachers stay motivated to continue working with children.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

I have spent my professional career as an educator working in urban schools and witnessing the growth of ever more stringent accountability measures. I have taught in middle school special education and regular classrooms. I have been an assistant principal at a middle school and a principal at an elementary school and a middle school. During that time I have seen a steady progression towards more and more standardization and more and more accountability measures, including state mandated tests, performance-based teacher evaluations, and school report cards. Teachers and principals are now graded on their students' test scores on tests taken on computers once a year. Teachers report humanistic reasons for choosing education as a profession. They generally want to form relationships with others, especially their students. What they find when they actually land that sought-after position, is that the job is a lot more technical in nature than they expected. There are demands on them to teach to the standards and improve test scores. They also have to make adjustments to the reality of being in charge of their own classroom. They will receive some help, some mentoring, some orientation, but when their classroom door closes, they are on their own. In Ohio, they have to complete a rigorous program to move to a professional license in their first four years. If they fail that, they get one more year, after which they are no longer eligible for a professional Ohio teaching license. Between 2013 and 2017, 26% of first-time submitters failed, with a final passing rate of over 99.6% (ODE, 2017c), suggesting that the RESA program is designed to give candidates "an opportunity to reflect on their practice and receive written feedback from an unbiased, experienced Ohio educator."

In this review of the literature on teacher retention and the factors that impact novice teachers, I will examine the research on teachers' motivations for entering the profession, what research suggests about why so many teachers leave the field, and why other teachers find enough satisfaction to stay. I will discuss the rise and impact of educational accountability measures and how that has impacted teachers in the classroom. Accountability measures have been in place in one way or another long enough that their effect on teachers and school culture have been studied by numerous researchers. I will then look at the concept of sensemaking and how it applies to educators, and I will conclude with an overview of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and how it might play a role in teachers' sensemaking. As teachers graduate with their license to teach and get a position as a full-time teacher, they find a school culture with a complicated interplay of accountability demands from the state, student needs, veteran teachers with their own entrenched habits, community standards, and formal administrative structure. As they try to understand how they fit into that world, they also have to demonstrate their competence at managing a classroom of diverse students with widely varying levels of academic and social skills. They are responsible for their students' performance on high-stakes tests given at the end of the school year and in Ohio are required to complete a three-to-four-year summative assessment of their teaching skills. Teachers leave the field at a high rate within the first five years of graduation, with consequences for districts that struggle to find experienced educators, particularly in urban and high-poverty schools.

To examine the literature on these subjects, I started with a search that aimed to find information about sensemaking in general, starting from Weick (1995) and searching forward to find research that used his work as a foundation for their work. As I found articles on sensemaking, I narrowed it down to articles that included education as a descriptor. As I found more information there, I narrowed the search further to include accountability, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), or performativity to focus closer on the accountability aspect of my search. I had a good deal of information, but still needed to find information to validate my belief that teachers entered the field for reasons of making a difference in the lives of children. There is abundant information on this topic, including several journals specifically dedicated to teacher education. I needed to collect a sense of the research on teacher retention and attrition, so I searched there also. Again, there is a good deal of research on this subject, but it is usually on the characteristics of the teachers who stay or leave, or the schools, or the leadership, or the children. I am not so much interested in identifying specific traits as I am in getting a picture of the progression in the lives of teachers from pre-service to novice teacher to veteran teacher as they perceive their journeys. As I continued my review of the literature, I began to look at sources of motivation that lead people to persist in their professions or organizations. Self-Determination Theory, from the work of Ryan and Deci, looked like a way to examine teachers' decisions about staying in the field. I went first to their writing, then searched for work based on their theories. Education was often the subject of this research, but I found it focused on building motivation and resilience in children and I did not find any research examining teachers themselves.

Pre-Service Teacher Expectations

As a faculty member at Antioch University Midwest, I had the opportunity to teach two classes that all candidates seeking to get their teaching license must take at the very beginning of their coursework. As part of the exploration of what it means to be a teacher in the United States, I asked them to talk about their motivation for becoming teachers. The majority of the candidates in our teacher education program are career changers who have worked in some field other than education or have worked in some capacity other than as a teacher before they entered our program. It is a very small sample of entering teachers who have selected a university program whose vision includes the words "social justice," but the students are clear that they wish to enter a field where they can find satisfaction and make a difference in the lives of others. Indeed, this motivation was so ingrained in my thinking that I was well into my search for the effects of the current, more technical, accountable nature of teaching before it occurred to me that there might be other motivations for entering the field. It was a shock to my system when I realized my assumptions might be blinding me to reality. At that point, I halted my search and determined to find some research on the motivations of teacher candidates. It was not difficult to find three articles that shared similar findings on pre-service teacher motivations.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations were found in a study that was seeking to determine which pre-service motivations would lead to staying in the profession longer (Bruinsma & Jansen, 2010). In general, the pre-service teachers surveyed were more likely to be intrinsically motivated and less likely to rate themselves as extrinsically motivated. Participants who scored higher on extrinsic motivation were more likely to have a lower sense of self-efficacy. This is interesting in the context of my research interest because the increased accountability measures are often associated with extrinsic motivators such as punishment and improvement plans for low student achievement and very explicit statistical testing goals for one's students. Often these goals stress the negative impact of low student achievement more than the positive impact of student improvement. One could infer from this study that this combination would further discourage extrinsically motivated teachers from staying in the profession.

In another study, Manuel and Hughes (2006) surveyed 79 teacher candidates about their motivations for entering the field. The overwhelming majority picked personal fulfillment, enjoyment of subject, working with young people, and lifestyle as reasons for choosing teaching. Far down the list were power, salary, and professional status. The relational aspects of teaching emerged as a very important factor for the candidates, both with students and with their soon-to-be faculty colleagues. In the open-ended responses, the candidates expressed social justice reasons for their choice, such as “making a difference to children’s lives,” and “helping others” (p. 11). In the real world, there is a lack of diversity within the teaching force, which combined with White teachers’ reluctance and lack of time to engage on the difficult conversations and reflections around the role of race in social injustice, means that teachers who want to pursue social justice often are unsure about how to accomplish that (Baily & Katradis, 2016). This lack of clarity about actually pursuing social justice is in clear contrast to the motivations many initially had when they decided to teach. Thomson et al. (2011) point to a large body of research that found that altruistic and intrinsic motivations predominate as reasons for teacher candidates to choose this field. This was another study that used surveys to gather information on motivations, gathering information on two previously developed scales. This was followed up with individual semi-structured interviews for each participant, allowing the study to get deeper meaning from the survey responses. The interviews consisted of 10 questions that allowed the interviewee to explain their answers more fully. The initial findings from the quantitative evaluation of the surveys was confirmed by the qualitative interviews. These results were duplicated for Norwegian teachers in a study that found that the meaningful nature of teaching was a dominant factor for new teachers (Roness, 2011).

Teaching has been conceived by some as a path to social justice. This motivation is less dominant in societies that are more egalitarian and more motivating as a factor for minority teacher education candidates in societies with less social mobility and greater differences in opportunities for different sub-sets of society (Nesje et al., 2017). Bryson (2017) reported that African-American pre-service teachers were often motivated to enter because of a personal experience with a family member who was a teacher or an individual teacher’s influence on them and a desire to make public schools more equitable for students of color. In developing countries, some teacher candidates were more apt to cite extrinsic motivating factors such as job security and pay, while motivations for teachers in developed countries were motivated primarily by altruistic factors such as making differences in the lives of children (Heinz, 2015). Other teachers were attracted to teaching by altruistic factors such wanting to shape the futures of their students and enhancing social equity. Sixty-three percent of the participants in one study in south Africa were altruistically motivated versus the 23% who were extrinsically motivated (Moosa, 2020).

There are nuances and subtle relationships remaining to be explored in the area of pre-service candidates' motivation to become teachers, but it seems well established that intrinsic, altruistic, and relational motivations are at the forefront of those reasons. These studies confirmed my initial belief that teachers entered the field to make a difference in children's lives and build enduring relationships.

If these altruistic reasons motivate individuals to choose a career in teaching, what is the reason that between 40% and 50% leave within the first five years (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003)? The first year of a new teacher is especially difficult in all districts, but particularly so in under-resourced urban districts, with all the demands of classroom management in the face of challenging behavior, and the day-to-day minutiae of having one's own classroom (Worthy, 2005). Apart from the students, new teachers found challenges dealing with school culture, principal leadership, and maneuvering relationships with other faculty members (Johnson, 2012). As I discuss in the next section, accountability measures have also had their impact on new teachers (Kauffman et al., 2002). Another study found that teachers had multiple reasons for deciding whether to stay in their present school, move to a new school, or leave teaching altogether and were most affected by their perception of their potential to be effective in the lives of their children (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

Clearly, new teachers face a number of challenges, but more importantly, in the context of my study, what does the current research suggest about why teachers stay? I seek to discover how teachers make sense of their professions with attention to leadership influences that may help them understand teaching in ways that are consistent with their reasons for entering the field. Brunetti (2001) addressed these motivators by surveying California high school teachers about their job satisfaction and motivations for continuing to teach. Of the surveys returned, 66% were from teachers with 15 or more years of experience, so veteran teachers were well represented in his study. In follow up interviews with 28 of the teachers, in general, he found that teachers were quite satisfied with their careers, noting interactions with students, success with students, passion for their subject matter, a sense of autonomy, and feeling that they were in a position that was important within the larger society.

In a more recent study, Tricarico et al. (2015) interviewed eight urban elementary school teachers after their first five years of teaching. The participants shared a strong passion for teaching and similar beliefs about the importance of teaching. They felt that teaching was more than just a job, it represented a calling that gave them a sense of purpose and satisfaction. Another finding was that support from school leaders was a strong factor in their success. Having little or negative support from school leaders had the opposite effect of making teachers feel discouraged with their positions. By the time of this study, accountability measures were in effect, so it is worth noting that these teachers were still motivated by the same factors found to encourage teachers to enter the field.

It is also possible that the leadership style of the building principal could play a part in whether or not teachers choose to remain in the field. Rowold et al. (2014) examined the role of leadership style in predicting job satisfaction, commitment, and perceived job performance in for-profit and nonprofit organizations. They found that nonprofit organizations were more likely to have a link between transformational leadership and job satisfaction compared to for-profit organizations, which would be in line with teachers choosing the field and staying in the field for reasons of “calling” and “making a difference.” Transformational leadership, with its emphasis on shared vision, would fit well with teachers looking to make a difference in the world and finding satisfaction with leaders who shared their vision. In a study directly examining leadership style’s relationship to job satisfaction in teachers, the link between transformational leadership and teacher job satisfaction was confirmed (Nichols, 2018).

Challenges of Urban Education for Novice Educators

Teachers who graduate with initial licenses face the immediate task of finding employment and putting their training to good use. Some teachers are drawn to urban districts because of the challenges faced by their schools and children (Fray & Gore, 2018), while others are hired by urban districts because those districts are frequently the ones that have the most openings, and then find that these schools do not operate in the same way as the schools in which they did their student teaching (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Kuriloff et al., 2019;). School administrators who hire the new teachers expect they will be able to hit the ground running and cope with any school setting, as do the teachers themselves.

Yet, urban environments present many challenges that the teachers might not have experienced in their training, such as demands for more inclusion of children with disabilities, lack of resources, food insecurity, and increased scrutiny as a result of accountability measures

(Camacho & Parham, 2019; Kuriloff, et al., 2019). Add to those issues the cultural differences between students, majority impoverished and people of color, and teachers, primarily middle class, female, and White. The result is a potential breeding ground for teacher dissatisfaction and turnover.

Haberman (1991) suggested that urban schools and other schools serving a population of students in poverty have their own distinctive pedagogy, which differs from the pedagogy taught in schools of education. He lists the core functions of pedagogy of poverty as:

- Giving information
- Asking questions
- Giving directions
- Making assignments
- Monitoring seatwork
- Reviewing assignments
- Giving tests
- Reviewing tests
- Assigning homework
- Reviewing homework
- Settling disputes
- Punishing noncompliance
- Marking papers
- Giving grades (pp. 291-292)

This pedagogy places emphasis on control of the classroom environment and the appearance of student compliance. A quiet classroom is the mark of a good teacher. This does not encourage nor reward deeper thinking and expresses low expectations of the students, giving them the opportunity to control the classroom by their choice to comply or rebel. This is also in contradiction to the work of Milner (2015), who suggests the following, which he distilled from conversations with students who were asked what teachers could do for them.

1. Teachers need to be patient with students and motivate them to learn.
2. Teachers need to increase the rigor of classes and their expectations.
3. Teachers need to dedicate themselves to their work, to plan and put forth effort, and to find joy in what they do.

4. Teachers need to communicate more often, more openly and more directly with their students. (p. 71)

The difference between the items on the list for the pedagogy of poverty as often practiced in urban schools and the suggestions from the students themselves is marked. The pedagogy of poverty is based on compliance, while the students are looking for rigorous work from dedicated teachers and the building of solid relationships based on open communication. Teachers who achieve success in urban schools insist on rigor, but form warm relationships with their students (Tricarico et al., 2015). This contrast will be one of the areas I look at as possible sources of dissonance for new teachers in urban settings.

The Evolution of Accountability Measures

The United States Constitution does not mention the subject of public education. Yet the federal government has become increasingly active in that very field. While the Constitution does not spell out a specific role for the federal government, it does give Congress and the President the ability to provide funds for targeted purposes. The federal government began to address local education with the National Defense Education Act of 1958 and has continued to use its funding resources to direct reform and educational policy through iterations of the Elementary and Secondary School Acts of 1965 and 2001, with the latest incarnation being the Race to the Top funding enacted by President Obama in 2011. Each of these laws has offered funding rewards and punishments to schools and states that would follow increasingly prescriptive paths to reforming public education to ensure higher levels of student achievement.

At the end of World War II, with Europe suffering the aftereffects of years of destructive warfare, the United States and Canada came together to offer aid to Europe in the form of the Marshall Plan. In 1947, the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) was formed to help administer that aid. Then in 1961 the OEEC was transformed into the

Organisation for Economic Development (OECD) to build on the economic successes already achieved, improve market systems, expand free trade, and impact development in member nations and in developing countries (OECD, History of OECD). The vision for the future includes examining the effects of globalization on world economies and watching out for signs of re-imposition of trade barriers.

In the mid-1990s, OECD was asked to look at the knowledge and skills of the students in the member nations' schools. OECD developed and implemented the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA was first administered in 2000, with more administrations every three years after that. As of the 2012 administration, seventy countries were participating. PISA claims to test reading, science literacy, and mathematics. Participating students also are asked about motivations, beliefs about themselves, and learning strategies. The results are written up in data laden reports and shared publicly with all participating nations. The tests are given to 15-year-old students in randomly chosen schools and will be given on computers by default in the future. All countries are given the opportunity to submit test items and any items that are considered too easy or too hard in specific countries are dropped from the test for all countries (OECD, PISA FAQ).

Clearly, the countries involved do not have a single unified curriculum upon which to base the test items, so another method was devised. The test items would seek to measure what 15-year-olds should know in order to solve problems in mathematics, science, and reading. The assumption is made that there is one set of thinking skills that can be measured which are predictive of an individual's future success in a modern, knowledge economy. The skill is refined further into a skill that will make the student more economically productive. There is little evidence to support the rationale behind the choice of skills, nor is there any research behind the choices—"In other words, they just made it up" (Larrabee, 2014, p. 3).

The result is a direct link between education and national economic success. All countries are ranked in the publicly available charts. In the United State we are tri-annually bombarded with headlines about the poor state of American schools. Comparisons are made between countries based solely on this ranking. The effect is to increase pressure for more accountability in our schools. At the same time, the World Bank was involved in assisting Latin American and African national economies burdened with unmanageable levels of high interest debt. These countries accepted structural adjustment packages from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. These adjustments often took the form of reductions in federal spending, including reductions in aid to education (Carnoy, 2000). This led to further emphasis on testing students to try to justify spending on education and look for economies of efficiency. After all, if one could demonstrate improvements in test results during times of austerity, one could seemingly sever the link between money spent and educational benefit. Reductions in spending on education tend to disadvantage those who do not have the personal family resources to make up for the lessening of public resources. This leads to greater separation of educational outcomes for students based on their economic status, exaggerating differences between social classes.

As pressure increases to demonstrate improved educational outcomes based on student performance on standardized tests, public education still relies on a trained cadre of teachers who must be committed to their students, and who operate to a large extent autonomously. The impact of globalization and neoliberal economic forces thus comes down to the individual school leaders and through them to the individual teacher. In this model, students are looked at as the product—the widgets—and public school teachers and principals are the line workers and middle managers who can be replaced if their product does not meet measurable (standardized testing) standards.

Looking at recent school reform movements across many different countries, Day (2009) came up with five elements they had in common. The very first of those was that the reform movement was a way to raise achievement standards and somehow increase economic competitiveness. He also found that they increased teacher workload and challenged existing practices, resulting in a sense of disorientation for the teachers and school administrators. Yet he found that somehow teachers were making accommodations that allowed them to stay in the profession. Some teachers in England reported that they liked the reforms, even if they reduced their sense of autonomy a bit and left them feeling more like technicians (Day, 2002).

The United States educational system became a casualty of the Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s, first with several “exposés” of how public education was faring after World War II, then with the launching and successful orbiting of the Sputnik satellite by the Soviet Union in 1957. This was the instigation for the National Defense Education Act, which provided federal funding for instruction in mathematics, science, and foreign languages. As there is no mandate for public education in the United States Constitution, this was a dramatic step toward federal involvement in public schools and it is significant that it came under the umbrella of “national defense.” For the first time, there was an express linkage between education and national security. This linkage resurfaced in 1983, when President Reagan’s White House released *A Nation at Risk*, another indictment of the educational system in this country (Owens, 2010).

Between the passage of the national Defense Education Act of 1957 and the release of *A Nation at Risk,* President Lyndon Johnson got the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed as part of his War on Poverty. The ESEA was a funding bill that appropriated money for the states to use to improve the educational opportunities for disadvantaged children. The law contained various formulas for deciding which school would be eligible for additional funding based on the percentage of children living in poverty. The schools were able to use the funds as additional revenue to supplement, not supplant local funding. One of the provisions of the initial ESEA was that it must be reauthorized every five years. In the 1994 reauthorization, the Improving American Schools Act (IASA), the federal government included support for implementing standards-based reforms, including aligning assessments with academic standards, holding schools accountable for results, and increasing aid to high-poverty schools.

Many of these provisions were retained in the next reauthorization, called No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB built on IASA but included stronger accountability measures and sanctions for individual schools and districts that did not make adequate progress toward the goal of proficiency for all students. NCLB also looked specifically at progress within racial, ethnic, economic, and educational sub-groups (Yell, 2012) and included provisions for ensuring that every teacher encountered by a student would be “highly qualified” based on education and licensure area, not necessarily on classroom performances and principal observation (Owens, 2010).

The law is probably best known for its provision that every student, regardless of sub-group, would be performing at a proficient level or better by 2014, and included sanctions such as school reorganization, replacing teaching staff, or replacing the principal if progress toward that goal was not achieved. A quick look at Ohio’s achievement data from 2002/2003 and 2009/2010 show that the goal of proficiency for all students was not going to be achieved in time to meet the law’s deadline of 2014. Figure 1 summarizes data from the state report cards for those two years. Every sub-group showed progress over the covered period, but a look at the state's Performance Index trend (a weighted score that shows how all students performed where a score of 100 could be earned if all students were proficient and the maximum score attainable is 120) reveals that much of the improvement happened between 2000 and 2005 when the state's Performance Index moved from 78.7 to 92.9, then inching up slowly to 93.3 in 2009/2010 (ODE 2003, 2010). On the 2010 report card it is also revealed that 53.6% of all districts in Ohio were not meeting the requirements of Adequate Yearly Progress.

Figure 2.1

Ohio Performance on Reading and Math 2003 and 2010

Student Groups	Reading			Math		
	% Proficient or above			% Proficient or above		
	2002/03	2009/10	Change	2002/03	2009/10	Change
African-American	53.2	59.1	+5.9	33.1	47.8	+14.7
Native American	71.7	75.6	+3.9	56.5	9.7	+13.2
Asian/ Pacific Islander	78.1	88.3	+10.2	78.3	87.8	+9.5
Hispanic	60.1	68.1	+8.0	46.7	60.3	+13.6
Multi-Racial	69.2	77.1	+7.9	53.8	68.9	+15.1
White	78	84.8	+6.8	67.7	80.1	+12.4
Econ. Disadvantaged	55.4	68.3	+12.9	40.3	60.1	+19.8
Limited Eng. Proficient	42.4	64.7	+22.3	41.3	61	+19.7
Students w. Disabilities	38.9	47.7	+8.8	31.7	39.3	+7.6

(compiled from Ohio Department of Education State Report Cards 2003 and 2010)

Clearly something more than NCLB was needed to meet the needs of Ohio's and the nation's children. Newly elected President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan presented a plan that would accept the reality of not meeting the goal of proficiency for all by 2014, and at the same time offer incentives to school districts to enact reforms to the education system. That initiative was titled “Race to the Top” (RttT). In a fact sheet released by the White House in 2009, the overall goals of the initiative were spelled out:

> The Race to the Top emphasizes the following reform areas:
>
> - **Designing and implementing rigorous standards and high-quality assessments**, by encouraging states to work jointly toward a system of common academic standards that builds toward college and career readiness, and that includes improved assessments designed to measure critical knowledge and higher-order thinking skills.
> - **Attracting and keeping great teachers and leaders in America’s classrooms**, by expanding effective support to teachers and principals; reforming and improving teacher preparation; revising teacher evaluation, compensation, and retention policies to encourage and reward effectiveness; and working to ensure that our most talented teachers are placed in the schools and subjects where they are needed the most.
> - **Supporting data systems that inform decisions and improve instruction**, by fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system, assessing and using data to drive instruction, and making data more accessible to key stakeholders.
> - **Using innovation and effective approaches to turn-around struggling schools**, by asking states to prioritize and transform persistently low-performing schools.
> - **Demonstrating and sustaining education reform**, by promoting collaborations between business leaders, educators, and other stakeholders to raise student achievement and close achievement gaps, and by expanding support for high-performing public charter schools, reinvigorating math and science education, and promoting other conditions favorable to innovation and reform. (U. S Department of Education, 2009, “Race to the Top” par. 2)

At the state and district level, the reforms called for in the RttT initiative translated into evaluation systems for teachers and principals based on student performance, adoption of the Common Core academic standards, and new state-wide assessments of student progress. In exchange for adopting these reforms, states could apply for exemption from the penalties of NCLB and receive large sums of federal funds. These mandates were adopted in Ohio and are being phased in over this year and the next. School building leaders do not have a choice over whether or not to accept these reforms. Their individual district makes that decision and each building in the district has to implement them. The building principal in Ohio is now responsible for observing every teacher in the building twice annually, including pre- and post-observation conferences. This is not a choice that can be made collaboratively between the principal and faculty, it is mandated by the state and district, and carries with financial ramifications well beyond the individual building's budget. The teachers are to be evaluated based on both the performance of their students and the results of the principal observations (OTES). This formula is mandated by the state and is being used in many other states as well as Ohio. OTES includes specific requirements for placing teachers on improvement plans, leading to possible non-renewal of teaching contracts. As the call for standards and accountability grew louder outside of the schools building, teachers and administrators were not as convinced, "the call for standards too often results in a climate that does little besides vilify teachers and their students" (Nieto, 2003, p. 9).

In 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which amended NCLB and RttT. In something of a push back from the states, ESSA provided for more flexibility on the state level in addressing the educational problems of our public schools. For example, the law specifically prohibits the federal government through the Department of Education from "mandating or incentivizing states to adopt or maintain a specific set of standards" (ODE, 2016, p. 1). This section reflects a revolt experienced by the Department of Education to a previous requirement in RttT that seemed to favor the Common Core over locally developed standards (Kirp, 2014). In another section of ESSA, the requirement that all teachers be Highly Qualified was eliminated, but states are now required to implement plans to ensure that economically disadvantaged students have equitable access to quality educations and do not have a disproportionate number of teachers teaching out of their licensure areas. States are still required to report on assessment results that are disaggregated as they were under NCLB, with some sort of "School Report Card" still published annually for every district.

Despite all the stated reasons for these changes in educational policy, the students in the United States are no closer to closing the historical educational gaps between racial and economic groups or decreasing the poverty rate. The Children's Defense Fund found that 67% of all eighth-grade public school students in the United States were unable to read at grade level. In the same publication, the CDF found that less than half of poor children were prepared for school at age five compared to 75% of wealthier children (Children's Defense Fund, 2017). The same study found that schools are still largely segregated by race and income more than 60 years since *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Within this system, both teachers and principals are more and more driven by the metric of test scores to become proficient in the technical details of teaching. Entering the profession to impact the lives of children, they find themselves obsessing over the mandated accountability measures in order to achieve success for themselves and their students. Principals and teachers face the prospect of sanctions that may even lead to the restructuring of their school and dismissal from their position. If it is true that teachers enter the field hoping to make a difference in their students' lives, the reality of the accountability system and its highly technical components may be jarring and force teachers to re-examine their chosen field. This is where the new educators experience the change in reality that pushes them into sensemaking mode. How they respond to their situation and what influences them as they move from student to teacher is the focus of my research. Which of the rings of influence surrounding them have the most influence and how do they see themselves as full time professional educators?

Sensemaking

As teachers function within their school context, they must make sense of their professional identities in circumstances different than those in which they attended school themselves, although this is less and less true as more teachers who are entering the field are veterans of the accountability regimen while they were students. The differences between the idealized view of a teacher and the day-to-day reality of teaching requires one to reframe teaching in a way that makes sense to them. If they are able to reframe it positively, they are more likely to stay, and if they reframe it negatively, the dissonance may be too much, and they may leave the profession.

School buildings are complex social environments wherein the influences of its many stakeholders can be felt. The society as a whole has a stake and makes manifest its stake through its laws, policies, and regulations. In my discussion of accountability, I will show that it is not just a community-level influence or a state-wide movement, or even a national movement, but it is actually an international movement that is playing out in strikingly similar ways across international borders and across diverse cultures. It exerts its influence at the school level within individual classes and upon individual teachers who feel the direct pressure from their peers, their students, their parents, and their administrators. I aim to look at that context and how it affects the individual, novice teacher and their ability to understand or make sense of their role as a professional educator.

Of course, I was not alone in trying to understand the changes and my place within the new system. Everyone who was teaching in a public school in Ohio eventually had to come to grips with and make sense of the new parameters around teaching or leave the profession. Weick (1995) used the concept of sensemaking to help understand individuals' behaviors within an organization and how the individual and the organization acted on each other to understand and organize their understanding of events. Sensemaking is a dynamic process that occurs especially in times of major change or ambiguity. Weick suggested seven properties that accompanied sensemaking. According to Weick, sensemaking is:

1. Grounded in identity construction

   As humans endeavor to understand the context of their lives, they look to their environment for cues to help understand who they are. As they go from one environment at their place of work to another environment at their home, they use different lenses to understand not just how to behave, but who they are. At work, they may be the boss, but at home they are a spouse and parent who has a very different sense of self and who they are.

2. Retrospective

   The sense that one has about one's place in a particular context is not based on the future, though goals and plans figure into one's sense of self but is firmly rooted on one's previous experiences. Humans exist in a chronological continuum that stretches back at least to their birth and even further in terms of cultural and societal influences. Humans innately try to make sense of the world around them by looking for connections and familiar events (Shermer, 2011), even if those connections are tenuous.

3. Enactive of the environment

   As one acts on or reacts to the environment one changes that environment. This is easy to see in everyday life and in extreme cases, such as carrying a gun through a TSA checkpoint. The everyday, bored environment is suddenly charged with danger and people are reacting in exaggerated ways to which the individual must respond and those responses in turn affect the environment and so on. In a simpler case, a teacher calls on a student and gets upset because they don’t have their homework. The student reacts to the teacher and the teacher reacts to student’s defensiveness and soon there is a confrontation that no one really wanted. One’s sense of the present is shaped by one’s own actions and affects the actions of others.

4. Social

   Sensemaking is a social process that occurs between and among other people, either present in person or imagined. Even in an internal dialogue, one is imagining and reacting to another. One person’s behavior and sense of right and wrong is strongly based in the social surroundings within which one exists. This is not to suggest that sensemaking requires a shared understanding of reality, but rather that sensemaking occurs within a social setting, so that even if one individual does not share the same sense of meaning as others, they still use the others to help make sense of the situation.

5. Ongoing

   Sensemaking is retrospective, but it is not chronologically static. “People are always in the middle of things” (Weick, 1995, p. 43). As things happen to one, it is difficult to make sense of it without looking back and trying to understand how one came to this place, and also looking ahead to what it might mean for the future. Given the events that were similar to this event in the past, and what followed them, what can be expected in the future. If something other than the expected follows, one is forced to alter one’s sense of what happened.

6. Focused on and by extracted cues

   Sensemaking occurs continually and rapidly. A teacher in a classroom makes thousands of small decisions every day based on his/her sense of what is happening in each moment. The teacher does not have time to think through each decision and use a decision-making rubric to come to each decision. Instead, the teacher will use environmental cues to help them make sense of the environment and react quickly. This becomes so automatic that an experienced teacher does not realize they are even making decisions or reacting to cues. Automobile drivers do the same thing as they are driving their vehicles. As long as the cues are familiar and seem to make sense, things go very smoothly, but when some unexpected stimulus is presented, one is required to refocus and rapidly make sense of this new setting.

7. Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy

   This last aspect of sensemaking is particularly clear in the arena of political opinion. One identifies with a particular party or ideology and uses that lens to make sense of every piece of data that comes to them through any and all media. People check the channel or newspaper before they decide whether or not to believe the information they are receiving. Accuracy is not important if the news fits one’s beliefs. In more prosaic settings, such as the classroom mentioned above, the teacher already knows most of what will happen in any day and who will say or do what. As long as the events proceed in the way the teacher expects, they can make sense of what is happening even if it is not completely accurate or reflective of the individual student’s lived reality.

Weick (1995) suggested that change and ambiguity force one to reexamine one's role and place in an organization in an attempt to understand the change and one's place in the new order. If the change is organization-wide, it forces everyone in the organization to redefine their roles and the role of the organization. As people look back on the change and consider the new reality, a new sense of meaning develops that comes from the individuals and the organization and redefines the collective and individual sense of meaning. In many ways, the schools of the United States in the late twentieth century were very similar to schools from previous eras. The standards and accountability movement changed the way teachers taught and were assessed. This major change in working conditions has required teachers to look at their own positions and the meaning of being a teacher.

As it manifests itself in schools, sensemaking has been defined as, "a process by which teachers' and administrators' interpretations of external demands culminate in formal or informal decisions about how they collectively respond to externally initiated policies" (Louis et al., 2005, p. 179). This collective response, in turn, helps mediate the individuals' responses to the external demands and how they are enacted within their classroom. Thus, the understanding of what it means to be a teacher today is defined by the local context at the same time as it is informing and shaping the local context. For teachers, the local context is understood in concentric circles, from the classroom, to the team of teachers, to the grade level or subject, to the building, to the district, to the local community. At each of these levels there are direct and indirect influencers that help determine the teacher's understanding of their profession. The teacher may believe they has great relationships with students within the classroom, and not worry about test scores, but have a poor relationship with the other teachers on his/her team, thus defining his/her role totally in the context of student interactions.

Mills et al. (2010) add to the sensemaking conversation by including the factor of relative power within and organization as a factor. They use the term, “critical sensemaking” (p. 187) to refer to their idea that one must also examine the role of power differential in sensemaking. This helps explain how the same set of events and changes can impact different individuals in very different ways. There may be some people within a school who have a more powerful voice in helping to understand the changes that are happening. This may be the official leader of the building or may also be a teacher with a lot of standing in the school community. There are also likely to be power issues in the wider community as in the local community’s understanding of the school and the broader community’s interest in viewing the school or district with a certain lens. This is true whether your district is urban and therefore perceived to be poorly functioning with a majority of students of color, or rural poor with the perception of generational poverty and disregard for the importance of school, or suburban with the perception that it is high performing, with a high percentage of students graduating and going on to prestigious universities. Each community has its own record of support for school funding with the implied endorsement or condemnation of the local schools. This factors into how one makes sense of one’s position. Mills et al. (2010) argue that critical sensemaking helps one give value to the role that agency plays in teachers’ sensemaking.

Teachers use their past experience to make sense of their current circumstances (Buchanan, 2015; Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015), but how does that previous experience impact novice teachers? They do not have a large bank of prior teaching experiences from which to draw in order to understand their current circumstances. They may rely upon their colleagues (Jimerson, 2014; Louis et al., 2005) and if they do, one would expect their framing to match the culture of the school within which they are working. Novice teachers trying to navigate their new surroundings have sometimes been subdued into compliance by a culture of accountability and compliance which can overshadow their own personal constructivist tendencies (Loh & Hu, 2014).

The feeling of shared meaning was found to be enhanced by more tightly structured change projects (Schmidt & Datnow, 2005), while less shared meaning was found with loosely structured change initiatives. With either loosely or tightly structured reforms, teachers did make individual and collective sense of the reforms. Teachers are able to make better sense of their professional development activities if the material presented is perceived as coherent with their beliefs, current practices, and sense of mission (Allen & Penuel, 2015). Some teachers were better able to deal with ambiguity than others, but coherence emerged as an important factor for all teachers. If teachers used the new strategies and interacted with peers also implementing the strategies, they are more likely to show changes in their practice (Penuel et al., 2012). Those teachers that internalize and implement new strategies often see themselves as more engaged and have a higher sense of agency than those who were reserved (Ketelaar et al., 2014).

Teachers in urban schools face enhanced challenges in making sense of their roles as accountability sanctions are often particularly difficult on urban school systems as I will discuss later. To avoid punitive sanctions, the pressure is on urban districts to narrow the curriculum and focus on successful test-taking procedures. Teachers may see themselves as technicians more than professionals as a result of the pressure to perform and narrow the curriculum to focus on the test at the expense of other matters (Ball, 2003; Dooley & Assaf, 2009; Milner, 2013). Anagnostopoulos and Rutledge (2007) found that teachers and principals did change their practices based on district sanctions but did not see effects on the students' success at passing their courses. Instead, they found that the urban teachers they studied placed responsibility for their children’s failures squarely on their students’ moral deficiencies and that helped them absolve themselves of their school’s responsibility for the students’ poor performance.

Many teachers are attracted to teaching by the motivation to make a difference in the lives of children and find a system of accountability that seems to fly in the face of the humanistic reasons for entering the field. Attrition rates are indeed high, but still teachers persist in the face of the odds. Somehow, they are able to make sense of their position in spite of it all. My research questions center on how that happens, and I also wonder if there is a way for administrators to help build a culture that encourages the new teachers to find the aspects of teaching that help them make sense of their occupation in a positive self-affirming way. One way to consider some of the aspects of human motivation and satisfaction that might be contributing factors is to consider Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a possible way to understand this phenomenon. In the next section, I will examine this theory as elaborated on by Ryan and Deci (2017), and how it might apply to my question.

Self-Determination Theory

Ryan and Deci (2017) first developed SDT as a way to understand the factors, extrinsic and intrinsic, that go into human development, motivation, social integration, and vitality, and in their absence lead to “fragmentation, depletion, antisocial behaviors, and unhappiness” (p. 3). The impact of SDT is observable in social contexts as well as in experimental settings. It is a practical theory that is readily applied and has been the basis of many scholarly articles in the last forty years, with a quick library search for Self-Determination Theory yielding over 300,000 results. For the purposes of my study, I am interested in what light it may shed on persistence and motivation in education. A chapter of Ryan and Deci’s book (2017) is devoted to the applicability of SDT to the field of education, in terms of teaching practice, and its impact on children in the classroom.

SDT is a theory that attempts to explain how humans find success and motivation in their lives by meeting three basic psychological needs that are as important for individual survival as the physiological needs that our physical body needs to stay alive. It is believed that humans will tend to pursue goals and attempt tasks to the extent that pursuing those goals meets their basic needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The three basic psychological needs about which they speak are autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 10). These needs, and the individual's success in meeting them occur in a social, experiential context, and are evaluated by the individual according to his/her experience of success or failure as a personal experience. One determines how to behave in the future by the manner in which a similar behavior was experienced as successful in the past. In terms of motivation and persistence SDT suggests that the extent to which one actually experienced success in the past will help determine whether one's needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness have been met and one is motivated to persist in the face of obstacles in the future.

Autonomy is the first of the basic psychological needs they explore. Autonomy is a way of expressing one's self-endorsement or congruence with one's own interests and aims. It is not equated with complete independence or self-reliance, but with knowing one's ambitions or goals and acting in a way that would tend to move in the direction of fulfilling those goals. As a person becomes aware of their authentic interests, stays true to them and pursues them, one's sense of autonomy increases. If, on the other hand, one finds oneself having to pursue goals that are not consistent with one's authentic intrinsic goals, one's feeling of autonomy will decrease. When the external regulation of one's behavior overcomes the internal sense of authenticity in goal pursuit, the need for autonomy will not be met and one's motivation to continue to pursue the external goals will be weaker.

Competence speaks to the basic human need to feel mastery and success at tasks. As a schoolteacher introducing a new concept to a class of children, I have often seen children who struggle in school and are unwilling to try to understand the concept, perhaps because of feelings of incompetence learned from previous repeated failures. The feeling of competence encourages one to try new things and experiment but may be fragile and can be easily defeated by failure or criticism. In its absence, the willingness to take risks is markedly diminished.

Relatedness refers to the human need to feel socially connected to others. People feel relatedness when they feel a part of a larger group which recognizes their achievements and to which they feel they can make meaningful contributions. People form social groups seemingly in all settings, from politics, to religion, to work groups, to teams. The feeling of relatedness encourages one to try for accomplishment as part of a larger mission. It is why having a vision is so important for an organization. It allows people to feel connected or related to a greater cause.

Ryan and Deci (2017) tie motivation to SDT by looking at the social contexts within which the three basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be encouraged or discouraged. The culture of an organization is seen as the environment that promotes motivation to the extent that it is "autonomy supportive," "effectance supportive," and "relationally supportive" (p. 12). They make the point that one can study people's motivations within a social environment by looking at the extent to which it manifests the supportive behaviors cited. Motivation is not a unitary phenomenon that is separate and apart from other factors but is understood only within the social context in which it is either manifest or absent. One of the ways in which this theory is useful is that it allows one to understand motivation and satisfaction in very different contexts. It is not the event that merits analysis, but the social context within which it occurs and the interplay of the three basic psychological needs that merit consideration. Therefore, one can analyze the workings of corporate world or the non-profit with the same lens.

In SDT, intrinsic motivation can thus be studied by analyzing the basic needs of competence and autonomy regardless of the specific setting. While competence and autonomy have been posited as the dominant factors in intrinsic motivation, relatedness also plays a role (Deci & Ryan, 2000). They believe that people can display intrinsic motivation for solitary activities such as solitaire or hiking alone in the woods, the confidence to do that is rooted in a secure base of relatedness developed in other parts of one's life. Indeed, SDT suggests that people internalize the values of their social groups to the extent they feel a sense of relatedness to that group.

SDT is an intriguing theory for researchers in education because it offers a way to look at how and why some students persist in their studies, while others quickly abandon any tasks that present the least difficulty. It is also attractive because of its emphasis on the social context within which persistence can flourish. As accountability has come to the forefront of educational reform, educators have looked for proven methods to improve academic outcomes and thus perform better on the accountability measures. Meta-analyses such as Marzano's works (Marzano et al., 2001; Marzano et al., 2008) found popularity in schools seeking to demonstrate their sincere attempts to improve student academic success because they seemed to offer concrete steps to success. These and other books looked at many research studies and attempted to bring their results together in one easy to understand volume that teachers and administrators could use in their practice. As a language arts teacher, one could now see that comparing and contrasting different themes or concepts might actually produce deeper understanding (Marzano et al., 2001). Yet there are still students who are clearly unmotivated and uninterested. SDT offers a way to look at establishing a classroom culture that will promote motivation and persistence.

Researchers have looked at the importance of intrinsic motivation in students and how best to foster it in different aged children, including middle and high schoolers (Booker, 2018; Lavigne et al., 2007; Li et al., 2018; Reeve, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The studies repeatedly validate the importance and impact of autonomy training on children, regardless of the demographics of the school. Children who are encouraged to feel more autonomy in their classrooms do better academically and socially. The studies have not looked at the impact of accountability and other external factors on teacher motivation. If students in the era of high stakes testing are able to perform better when their sense of autonomy is encouraged, does it follow that teachers in the same environment need to also find their own sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to find their motivation for staying in teaching?

Conclusion

My study will use narrative inquiry to hear directly from teachers about how they are able to make sense of their positions. I will look to the intersection of Self-Determination Theory and sensemaking theory to try to understand how teachers see themselves and find reasons to continue, or reasons to leave the teaching profession. Research has documented that individuals who choose teaching often have a sense that they want to make a difference in the lives of the children they teach, describing teaching as a calling. The accountability measures that started in the 1990s and continue today have had the effect of making it harder for some teachers to understand their professional lives. Opinion pages in educational journals have overflowed with articles decrying the loss of the individual teacher’s ability to shape their own classroom curriculum. Teachers who choose to continue teaching beyond their first four or five years of entering the profession speak of finding that these teachers were able to articulate an alignment between their reasons for entering and the satisfaction they were finding.

These and other studies on teacher retention are snapshots of teacher attitudes taken at one time in their careers. They indicate the current sense of the teachers' regards for their field, but do not show the evolution of those feelings. Pay scales for teachers tend to start fairly low and go up annually for the first ten or so years and then flatten out, with teachers who move to another district only being given credit for some of their years of experience in the new district. Because of this, teachers who stay in a district beyond six or seven years have a negative economic incentive to leave their district, even if they would like to. At that point, the reasons a teacher give may also be influenced by their inability to transfer to another school district and a desire to justify their choice of career.

I want to examine the progression of thinking from pre-service to licensure to three- or four-year veteran teachers. Weick (1995) suggests that sensemaking occurs at times of change and stress. The fourth or fifth year of teaching experience, as one gets a better sense of confidence in handling the day-to-day requirements of running a classroom and one has to decide whether to stay, change schools, or choose a different occupation, is a time when one has to make sense of one's choices. This occurs in a temporal and social context and my interest is in understanding the factors that influence that sensemaking. SDT tells us that people need to feel autonomy, competence, and relatedness to feel motivated to act independently (Deci & Ryan, 2017). My search for research on SDT in education found many articles on using the principles of SDT to help students in the classroom become more motivated to persist in their tasks, but no information on how the same three factors might apply to the adult in the room. It seems reasonable that discussions of persistence and teacher retention could use the same considerations of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

As I look at teachers' narratives of their journey into teaching and their first few years of experience, I would like to use SDT and sensemaking to understand their choices. Is there a common influence that was pivotal in the sensemaking of these teachers? Was there a building culture or administrator that held particular sway in their understanding of what it means to be a teacher? The teachers in urban schools have been shown to be on the extremes of both motivations for pursuing a sense of purpose and for obstacles they face. We know from the research that 40% or so of beginning teachers will opt out of teaching in their first five or six years of experience, but the decision to stay or leave is not made in isolation but is made as part of an ongoing understanding of reality and identity.

Chapter III: Methodology

My research interest is looking at how teachers make meaning of their profession as they start their professional lives. I chose to examine the impact on individuals, over time, of their decision to enter teaching and the work world they find when they actually start teaching. Is it possible to facilitate a building culture that optimizes the likelihood that novice teachers will be able to make sense of their profession in a positive way? It is likely that they will hear many negative comments on the teaching profession from veteran teachers who started when the job was not so tightly limited. In this time of accountability, is there an approach that has worked for novice teachers to see what is positive about their role as an educator? Are there common qualities that lead teachers to want to continue or get discouraged and opt out? Do the teachers who want to stay have common ways of looking at their profession or is it completely different for each individual? Are there some contextual elements about their peers, supervisors, or districts that could be shared with other educators? How has this sense of themselves as teachers emerged over time?

Data gathered from participants was meaningful to the extent that it reflected their current understanding of themselves. I no longer work in a school district, so my participants should not feel that their stories could be shared within their district. They were given reassurance that their stories, once recorded, would be available only to myself, saved on an encrypted drive kept separately from my physical computer. Transcripts were scrubbed so no identifying information was retained before they were shared with any collaborators. When the project was complete, the transcripts and notes were stored on an encrypted drive, separate from the recordings, and available only to me. Participants had the opportunity to opt in or out of the study as they wished and were consulted about my findings to offer their feedback before I finished. No participants were identified by name, school, or school district. I used their school's demographic information to establish context but was careful not to use any information that might specifically single out the district, school, or individual.

As I thought about methodologies used in exploring this topic, I was drawn to narrative inquiry (NI). This type of qualitative research was highly appropriate because it stressed the contextual nature of lived experience, in terms of chronology, physical setting, social setting, organizational culture, and previous experience. Other researchers have also used NI to study educators' lives to help illustrate their search for meaning in their profession (Atkinson, 2012). I anticipated that narrative inquiry would allow the participants in my research to step away from the standardization/conversion to numbers that is such a part of the accountability movement and seems to draw the ire of teachers. NI may have been welcomed by participants in my study because it gave them the opportunity to recount their individual lived experiences.

I explored the roots of NI within the larger sphere of qualitative methodology, explaining why it was the appropriate methodology to use in studying teachers' understanding of themselves as public school teachers in the current context of high stakes testing and accountability. Any qualitative study requires the scholar to explain how the data will be collected, analyzed, and checked for accuracy or confirmability. In the case of NI, there are well documented techniques for analyzing data that vary depending on the method of collection and the research question. I explained the steps I planned to use to analyze the narratives I collected, the rationale for my choice, and how I worked to confirm my understanding of the data collected. I intend to explicate the sample size, choice of participants, how I recruited participants, data collection, and ethical considerations that guided my study.

Role of the Researcher

For 35 years I worked in public education as a teacher and administrator. During that time, I saw the rise of ever stricter accountability measures. I saw teachers and administrators worry more and more about test results and less about individual students. I heard educators complain bitterly about the testing and the perception that they are not being given the leeway to act on their own best professional judgments. I have also worked with teachers who needed more rigid guidelines to plan their instruction. My experience has led me to believe that teachers come into the field because they want something more out of their relationships with children than good test results. I want to hear from teachers who are new to the field, entering into a profession that is already marked by accountability measures, and chose to enter anyway. These teachers likely come from a personal background in which they were regularly tested themselves. What do they find when they start teaching? Is it what they hoped for? How do they make sense of the job from the teacher's point of view?

History and Roots of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry emerged as one of the areas explored by researchers interested in qualitative research. Some form of qualitative research has been around since early ethnographers worked in the seventeenth century, primarily in the form of ethnographic studies attempting to understand the "others" with whom Europeans were coming into contact. Generally speaking, these "others" were considered to be inferior to the European colonizers. Many of these studies included themes of European superiority and cultural evolution, with the European cultures standing as the highest level of evolution. In the United States during the twentieth century, researchers began to study non-European cultural groups as they assimilated into the dominant culture (Lockyer, 2012). After World War II, during the modernist phase, researchers pursued multiple paths to understanding, with methodologies expanding rapidly into the post-modernist phase (Featherston, 2008).

Qualitative researchers set themselves apart from quantitative researchers in the focus on understanding of the identified problem, rather than prediction of future events based on their research. In quantitative research, we look for the selection of the sample, the control of the variables, and the validity of the research gathered to the question asked. In qualitative research, we look for the depth of understanding, the richness and depth of the description of the context in which data were gathered. Qualitative researchers are frequently interested in presenting the data and context as it is understood by the participants in the research. Narrative inquiry builds on this belief in the descriptive value of qualitative research. Narrative research does not look to represent the verifiable truth of a situation, as much as looking for its findings to be well "grounded" and "supportable" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 4). As qualitative researchers described the context of their research, they included the narrative themes that led to the described situations. It is difficult to describe a given setting without some explanation of its chronological development and its place in time. Thus, narratives are very difficult to avoid in qualitative research, if only because one has to spend some time to show how the current research context developed over a period of time. The current context of an event or person makes more sense if one also understands the changes and circumstances that led to the present situation (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2012).

Pinnegar and Daynes (2012) identified four "turns" leading from positivist, quantitative ways of conducting research to narrative research:

1. A change in the relationship between the researcher and the researched:

In the tradition of scientific inquiry, there is a distinct difference and separation between the researcher and the subject of the research. The researcher's understanding of the subject was only believed to be valid if the researcher was a disinterested observer. Any connection between researcher and research subject was considered suspect and evidence of corruption of the results of the research. As researchers came to believe that their participants were unique individuals within a particular context, they began to believe that they were a part of the context themselves and were thus unable to be truly free from bias. Researchers began to believe it was more honest to admit their own positionality and make it a part of the discussion.

2. A shift from the use of numbers to the use of words for data:

   The turn toward the use of words for data is an acceptance that numerical data alone do not always tell the whole story. There is a richness and nuance that can be gained from participants narrating the full range of their experiences. There continues to be value in understanding events with a common definition of variables that enables one to find correlations that may apply more universally. The use of words allows for the deeper understanding of particular circumstances that can shed light on wider phenomena. Some researchers in this area stay with the positivist paradigm by assigning numerical values to particular words or phrases and proceed to analyze their word data using mathematical formulas. Numbers themselves are words and require the research consumer to interact with them linguistically. Numbers, like any other words, have meaning only in context. Without understanding the formulas and algorithms that generated the number, the number itself is meaningless. Numbers, even very reliable and trustworthy numbers, cannot in and of themselves tell the individual stories behind the numbers (Bold, 2013; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2012).

3. A change of focus from the general to the specific:

   Educators are overwhelmed with statistics about their students, their school, their district, and their own performance in isolation and compared with others. Yet when it comes right down to it, learning occurs in one student at a time. Any classroom is likely to have a broad range of abilities and interests represented, yet the teacher is judged on the basis of their whole class or all their assigned students. This is useful information to be sure but does not necessarily inform the best strategy to reach a particular student. It is very useful, even crucial, to know Marzano's nine essential strategies for improved classroom learning (Marzano et al., 2001), but it does not tell the teacher which strategy will work with each individual. In the social sciences, there was a trend after World War II toward defining groups with broad strokes. In the United States, there were the bad guys–the communists–and the good guys, the Americans. That over-generalization broke down with the attention paid to the discrepancies within the United States between demographic sub-groups. Those differences were clearly illuminated with the use of broad quantitative data but generated more empathy and action when individual cases were highlighted. Indeed, with the beginning and growth of the feminist movement, authors and activists called for seeing the personal issues faced by women as public political concerns (Lieblichet al., 1998; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2012; Squire et al., 2017).

A widening acceptance of alternative ways of understanding positivist and post-positivist research have helped social scientists feel more comfortable about their role as scientific researchers by defining variables, using numbers to find trends, and suggesting causality. This makes social science research look like real science but may not explain the complete picture. Social scientists are not studying cells under a microscope, they are studying human beings in a complex and changing environment. As researchers see value in other cultures, they must then understand that there can be a difference in understanding of the same circumstance, depending on how one came to that moment. One's culture does make a difference in how one understands reality. If one accepts that people can come to the same situation from different directions, the next point that requires attention in order to understand their point of view is to understand their path–their narrative. Thus, narratives began to find their way into research and eventually became the focus of the research.

Differences in Narrative Approaches to Research

In the broadest sense, narratives are simply stories. They go beyond the straightforward events and characters to reveal details of the social context of the characters, the culture of the narrative setting, as well as influences that have affected the narrator before the story began and likely into the narrator's future. "The power of narrative is not so much that it is *about* life but that it interacts in life" (Daiute, 2013, p. 2). A person's narrative is a window into the whole world of the narrator and by examining the language chosen for the story, the time sequence chosen for the story, the characters chosen for the story, and the totality of the story, one can see beyond the basic story through that window into meanings beyond.

Researchers have taken two distinct approaches that have been identified as event-centered and experience centered (Squire et al., 2017). Event-centered narratives focus on important events in the past of the person telling the story. Experience based narratives look at the way events in their past have shaped their understanding of their life experience. It can examine real or even imagined events and can include reference to events that were not in the direct experience of the participant. This form of narrative inquiry can also make use of other media that tell the participants' stories, such as journals, photo albums, video albums, letters, etc. This research may seem to wander too far afield from the narrative, but at its heart it must keep the individual's narrative primary.

Researchers have branched out to study co-constructed narratives as worthy of study, providing insight into the broader culture within which the individual resides. One might examine how the participant's personal narrative changes over time as the culture around them changes. By so doing one may gain insight into the forces that work on a broader level to marginalize or favor particular groups (Esin et al., 2013).

Some researchers use NI to focus only on individual agency and individual stories. They use the individual story to illustrate one person's journey within a social context as a way to both understand the individual and the broader social context's impact on one person functioning within that context. Individual narratives are analyzed within the small interactions of everyday life through text messaging, conversation, and discourse analysis. Other NI researchers are more concerned with co-constructed narratives as a vehicle to understand unfolding or historical events (Andrews et al., 2017). Each of these approaches considers narrative to be a window into the whole of the individual as constructed by their own narrative telling of their place in society. It does not look at the technical aspects of the language and structure of the narrative, but the way the narrative reveals the individual's conception of self within a larger context (Esin et al., 2013).

Narratives are individual stories, but they rely on their social context to build meaning. In addition to the social context within which the narrative is told, there is also the immediate context of the individuals directly involved in the telling and listening process. To whom is the story told? What are the roles of the narrator and the listener? What are the histories of each? Is there language or jargon that is understood by people in the social sphere of the narrator that is not understood by the listener?

> All narratives are, in a fundamental sense, co-constructed. The audience, whether physically present or not exerts a crucial influence on what can and cannot be said, how things should be expressed, what can be taken for granted, what needs explaining, and so on. (Salmon & Riessman, 2013, p. 199)

In this dialogue between the two researchers, Riessman has proposed three questions to answer when examining the use of narrative inquiry in research.

The first question she proposes is to examine why narrative is used to explore the particular research question being posed. Does the research topic include exploring temporal and contextual issues over a span of time? Is it important in understanding the research question to look at the development and change of the narrator's story over time? Is the question informed by looking at individual stories as told by the individual, using their own voices? It is important to maintain the integrity of the form and not lose it to an over-broad definition of narrative as any story told in any format. To make itself meaningful, NI must hold its rigor and use careful, thoughtful justifications to explain why this particular method is the most useful and elucidating way to shed light on the research question, and the question must require the exploration of "lives located in specific times and places" (Salmon & Riessman, 2013, p. 255). In their second question, Salmon and Riessman look at the kind of data gathered in the study. They make a case for very close reading of the language and form of the narrative being analyzed. Their third question to use when examining a narrative study requires a close scrutiny of the context of the narrative. If the research looks at the context of the narrator, but not at the context within which the narrative was gathered, it is likely that some meaning is not explored that might have shed light on the subject.

Narrative Inquiry in Educational Research

My research interest involves looking at how teachers make sense of their roles as they enter their professional careers. The schoolroom is a complex environment that does not lend itself to the clarity of the research laboratory, with variables too numerous to count and standardization of settings and conditions close to impossible to achieve. Despite the emphasis on research-based instructional methods written into law by No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001, the generalizations, associations, and trends discovered by quantitative researchers and textbook publishers cannot shed light on the individual classroom and the interaction between one teacher and one student.

Narrative inquiry is particularly well suited to studying the lives of teachers because it gives voice to the individual narrator and places their story and context at the center of the study. The field of education and the demands on teachers change rapidly. Legislators act and react to headlines about their local schools by changing the laws that govern almost every aspect of a teacher’s life. A quick search of the Ohio School Boards Association reveals nine pages of proposed legislation that would have an effect on schools (Ohio School Boards Association, 2018). One example is HB58 “Cursive Handwriting” that would require the teaching of cursive handwriting, specifically, “the ability to print letters and words legibly by third grade and to create readable documents using legible cursive handwriting by the end of fifth grade” (Ohio Legislature, 2018, lines 74–77).

NI gives the researcher the ability to place the educators’ stories within the context of the time and place in which the stories are related. Teaching careers are subject to the whims of local, state, and national movements that may change in little or large ways the day-to-day reality of teaching. Educational research can quickly become dated because of the pace of change in education, but narrative inquiry gives the opportunity to place the same educational practice within a change process, embracing the antecedents and giving insight into the impact of change initiatives (Bold, 2013).

To understand a teacher's current sense of what it means to be a teacher requires one to follow that teacher's path from the decision to enter the profession to their current position in their career. It is difficult to imagine a quantitative tool that would uncover the reality of the individual context of each teacher. One could develop a survey that seeks to determine the participant's feelings about their path by asking about common important events and ranking them on a numerical scale and analyzing those results over a number of teachers. That result would not give the same depth as the individual narrative that has brought the participant to the present moment. Other qualitative methods are useful in deeper understanding of individual circumstances, but do not explicitly place current reality just within a context, but within a social and temporal context. It is this temporal context that is so important in understanding teachers' lives. Clandinin and Rosiek (2012) make the point that "narratives are the form of representation that describes human experience as it unfolds through time" (p. 40). Craig (2003) talks about the importance of understanding the "relationship between knowledge and experience, with each informing-and being informed-by the other" (p. 9). She defines experience as the events that happen to a person, story is how they give it meaning and form, and knowledge is how they make sense of their experiences through their stories. Thus, the interplay of experience and story are embodied in how people make sense of their lives, and both experience and story are keys to understanding the contextualized knowledge of the participant.

Nature and Different Genres of Narrative

Broadly defined, the term *narrative* refers to the telling of a story, from a simple one sentence story to a complex life story that spans generations. A story requires someone to tell the story and someone to hear it and understand it (Bruner, 2002). The teller of the story chooses the words and events that are used to tell the story. In that sense, the story belongs to the storyteller. The research participant is able to tell their own story in their own words. “The guiding idea of dynamic narrative inquiry is that narrating mediates experience, knowledge, learning, and social change” (Daiute, 2013, p. 4). That sentence sums up the “why” of narrative research. If I, as a researcher, want to understand some aspect of human experience, why would I not want to use a method that brings together experience, knowledge, learning and social change? This meaning is not always on the surface of the narrative, and the interpretation of narratives requires the researcher to make decisions about the meaning of the story in different ways.

Truth in narrative research comes from understanding the story within a social and temporal context (Craig, 2003). The participant in the research is choosing to tell their individual story in their own way for their own reasons. This is their definition of the truth, and since the researcher is studying the individual experience of that participant, their version of the truth is the one that matters. Reliability and validity in NI have come to be defined in terms of how truthfully and openly the context of the narrative is presented. If the context is clear in terms of the participant’s story, then the researcher is free to draw conclusions and the consumer of the research is free to agree or disagree based on their understanding of narrator’s context.

Transparency on the researcher’s part goes also to an explanation of how the researcher found meaning in the narrative. Narratives are rich sources of data, encompassing what is and what is not said, the words that are chosen, the way events are sequenced, as well as the social and physical context of the narrative. “If we are interested in meaning then it is useful to know that narratives reflect human interests and support our sense-making processes” (Bold, 2013, p. 30).

Approaches to Understanding NI

Interpretation and analysis of narrative data ranges from highly detailed analyses of sentence structure and word choice to a holistic stance that looks at the narrative as one complete piece of data. Lieblich et al. (1998) use a matrix made up of the unit of analysis (a section of the narrative or the narrative as a whole) on one axis and the distinction between the form of the narrative and the content of the narrative on the other axis. They see those two dimensions intersecting and yielding four different ways to understand a narrative (p. 13):

Holistic–Content	Holistic–Form
Categorical–Content	Categorical-Form

Depending on the emphasis, it is possible to imagine the researcher using some form of quantifiable methods to understand the data. For example, in using the categorical-content approach one might organize the categories found in the data and analyze their frequency of occurrence in certain settings and draw conclusions from the numbers obtained. Either of the holistic analysis methods is more likely to be purely qualitatively discussed.

Discussing different ways to analyze narratives, Daiute (2013) includes analyzing values, plot, significance, and character mapping and time analysis. The problem or question being pursued would influence one’s choice of methods. Value analysis is a way to look at how the participants are influenced by culture, power, and social dynamics. Plot analysis helps the researcher focus on interactions between the participant and their environments. Plot analysis focuses on the individual narrator and how they emphasize or place importance on certain events within their story. Significance analysis looks at how narrators choose to emphasize certain events, either by word choice or by the depth of explication of particular narrative themes. Character mapping and time analysis examine how the narrator uses and gives importance to different characters, including themselves, and how time is compressed or expanded at different points in the narrative.

Researcher's Positionality

My views on the applicability of NI as a methodology for the study of how educators make sense of their profession is informed by my personal experience as an educator. I spent 35 years involved in P-12 education and the last six years in higher education, working with teacher candidates and students seeking leadership roles in schools. Teaching in public schools has a cyclical nature that is different from many other professions. There are specific annual events that recur year after year and longer-term milestones that are an integral part of the profession. This cyclical, spiraling quality of teaching lends itself to narrative inquiry, because it fosters the development of stories that build on each year's experience, allowing the narrator to illustrate the changes from year to year, including their own growth as a professional. If the spiral is tending to go upward, teachers may feel more willing to get through temporary rough patches such as testing regimes that take their students out of the classrooms for days at a time. On the other hand, a perceived downward spiral from last year may make it less likely that a teacher stays in the field. People choose to enter the profession for their own individual reasons, go to school to earn their credential, find a teaching position, earn their professional license in Ohio after three or four years, then renew that professional license every five years through added study or some other professional development, retiring eventually with an excellent lifelong retirement plan. At every step of that process, the teacher must make a decision to stay or leave. Staying or leaving involves small and large decisions about class and subject assignments, building transfers, changing school districts, or even choosing a different career.

Suitability of Method

As narrative inquiry seeks to establish itself in the scientific mainstream, researchers have chosen different concentrations and theoretical backgrounds to make the method more appealing to positivist scholars. Is the objective of qualitative researchers to make the methodology more appealing to the positivists? This may be true—but if so, it requires some documentation. My personal belief is that such justification is not necessary. I believe the narrative is an essential part of what it means to be human. As a species, we try to understand our place in the world through story. Before there were written ways to store and pass down knowledge, there were stories that were told and retold to help us make sense of our situations and our cultures.

My research topic is focused on how teachers make sense of their professional lives as they work through the early parts of their career. Sensemaking is the process through which people examine their lives and personal experiences and understand it within their private and professional lives. If everything in one's life is going smoothly, without incident, one stays with the previously held view of their own place in the world. If, on the other hand, there are times of crisis or major change, one is inclined to change one's view in order to make sense of the new reality. As Weick (1995) puts it, "Identities are constituted out of the process of interaction. To shift among interactions is to shift among definitions of self" (p. 20). He lists seven properties of sensemaking that help one form an identity within an organization, five of which are directly influenced by the immediate context, both socially and temporally within which one is functioning. Accepting that concept from my own personal experience, as well as the literature on identity formation, I looked at methodologies that might help illuminate both the current context of the participant and the temporal influences that have brought the participant to their current setting.

As I suggested above, the passage of time has had a profound influence on teachers' identities. I made decisions based on my sense of where I had been, what might happen next year, and the social context within which I was working. Each time I changed position, I had to think about my new position and make some sense of it in the context of everything I had done and everything I still wanted to accomplish. Effectively, I used my own self-narrated experiences to help me make sense of my new situation and my new professional identity. At each stage of my career, people projected their own feelings onto my reality. Teaching is one field with which almost everyone has had a personal experience from their one time as students themselves. Their perceptions of the teachers they had in their schools helped form their own definition of "teacher." Teachers deal with that when they interact with their students' parents. Parents remember their own successes or struggles with particular teachers or subjects and bring that with them as they discuss their own children. Teachers are making sense of their profession within their own story and within the stories of their students and their students' parents.

Over and over again, the aspects of personal histories and current context emerge as salient issues in any examination of teachers' identity formation within the context of sensemaking. It is particularly true of the specific time I would like to focus on in the professional educator's career, specifically the transition from beginning to either veteran teacher or former teacher. Many of the teacher candidates with whom I work at Antioch have made a decision to change careers and turn to teaching for more personal satisfaction. Alternately, there are teachers who have gone straight through college with the aim of becoming a teacher. They have been thinking and working on this career choice for at least two or three years in college and three years as a teacher. In either case, there is a personal story behind each decision that has led them to this time. The specific school context within which I was working was also a factor in how I made sense of my professional self.

I wanted to look into what educators highlight in their personal narratives in order to better understand what they choose to believe about their professional identity. I wanted to see what factors or events influenced that decision. Asking general questions that encourage participants to tell their own story in their own words should yield information on what the participant wants to convey and thereby what they feel is important about their identity formation. More specific interview questions are more likely to reflect what the interviewer believes is important. Through the use of a more general approach, I want to allow the participant to be the one to reveal their own sense of themselves. This does not mean to imply that it is the only truth of their lives; it means that it is in some form the truth they want to tell at that time in that setting to that person. It is their truth at that point in time.

I hope to also find out what the educators feel about their building leadership and its influence on the development of their sense of self. It may be that some educators view the building principal as superfluous to their lives and any effect of the building's leadership is difficult to ascertain and express by teachers involved in the day-to-day struggle of the beginning teacher. This may or may not emerge within the initial narrative related by the participant and may require follow up discussion after considering the first conversation. After consideration of the content and the methodology of narrative inquiry, I am convinced that there is a good match between the two for my research.

NI and Sensemaking

In this section I discuss how NI is useful for uncovering the sensemaking process in my participants and pointing me to influential factors in their understanding of their role as an educator. As described in the previous chapter, sensemaking is a way of looking at identity formation that is retrospective and is reflective of one's environment and one's understanding of that environment. Sensemaking is influenced by social interactions with peers, local workplace norms, and local acceptance of reforms or policies (Coburn, 2005). Sensemaking is a complex process that involves a person's social setting, their past, and their future. To understand how an individual is making sense of their current role as an educator, then, the researcher is bound to find a data gathering method that gives participants the ability to expose the factors that have led them to their current understanding of their role. Using NI as a methodology gives the researcher the opportunity to find and delve into those influences. The act of telling a story, and the choices one makes in the form and flow of that story can reveal the importance and priorities placed on specific events and influences in narrators' lives (Daiute, 2013), thus revealing the roots of their present sense of themselves as educators.

Data Gathering Procedures

When teachers first get their licenses and begin teaching full-time, they find a challenging environment that requires full attention merely to survive and gain confidence. New teachers bring with them their own experiences in school as they were growing up and the influences of their teacher education programs. Researchers have found that new teachers are likely to experience stress and burnout, particularly if they find themselves in placements that do not fit their own expectations (Fitchett et al., 2018). In Ohio, teachers are required to successfully pass a summative assessment of their teaching skill by the end of their fourth year or they will not be eligible for a professional teaching license. If they pass the assessment, as 99.6% of all the educators from the 2012, 2013 cohort did (ODE, 2017), they will then be in the position of deciding whether to continue teaching or leave the field. It is also well documented that as many as 40% of teachers do not stay in the field more than five years. This is the time in teachers' lives on which I want to focus my research.

I selected teachers in this range of experience as participants in the study. I wanted to see how these teachers made sense of their profession at this pivotal time in their careers. To help me understand their sense of the profession, I asked them to tell me the story of their personal journey from the time they first decided to study education to the present day. A key to understanding these stories was encouraging the narrators to tell their own story in their own way, allowing the narrator to emphasize the parts of their life story that are most important. As a way to keep my own biases out of their stories as much as possible, I asked the participants to tell their story as they want, with only minor interruptions to clarify questions about details in their narratives. I recorded the conversations on my iPhone for later transcription and took notes to help me remember where I would like clarifying questions.

Daiute (2013) suggests that narrative researchers identify a variety of stakeholders who have an interest in the research question and diverse perspectives on the subject. This consideration requires me to look for participants in different school districts and in different grade levels and licensure areas. As a qualitative study, I do not seek to arrive at any "universal truth," but rather delve deeply into the truths of a small sample of participants. A universal sample size for narrative studies has not been established, and NI has been used with very different sample sizes, from one participant to a thousand or more (Elliott, 2005). To satisfy the need for some diversity of narrative and the need to deeply analyze a small sample, I recruited 21 teachers in a variety of school districts in southwestern Ohio. From my own personal experience in an urban district, I was interested in speaking to teachers from urban districts that have struggled under accountability measures, and to get another point of view, I collected data from six teachers in districts that have earned more positive ratings on mandated report cards. I sought out the person in each district who is responsible for coordination of research in that district, get their approval, then sought out participants from their district's faculty that met my criteria. I also used my prior contacts from my principal licensure program to widen my search.

To respect the participants' voices, I asked them to tell their stories in their own way. To that end I informed my participants that they would have a chance to tell their story as they like. Therefore, the first interview with each participant started with reviewing my research interest and a brief telling of my own story to help provide context for the discussion. Each participant had the consent agreement in advance which had the main prompt I used:

> I am here to listen to your story of how you decided to become a teacher, the journey you took in becoming a teacher, and the story of your first years as a licensed teacher. It would be most helpful to me if you tell me your story in your own way. What were the highlights and difficulties you faced along the way? You can start at whatever point in your life you want to, but please bring it up to how you are feeling today.

I informed them that I would not interrupt except to clarify a detail or two, and that I was recording the discussion and taking notes for myself and to inform any following questions. I asked the participants to continue until they felt they were finished and let them know that I would be in touch in the near future to let them add anything they would like in a second discussion.

I recorded all of my interviews and had them transcribed before attempting to analyze any of the stories. In preparation for a second interview, I looked for commonalities and discrepancies among the stories. Themes of significance or common events that were found were used as the basis for further questions in a follow-up interview. In the second interview, I began by asking each participant if there was anything they had thought about and wished they could have said in the first conversation, sharing my understanding of the themes from their narrative. After having a chance to add anything they wanted, I asked more specific questions based on the first interview and my understanding of their story. Of particular interest were areas that were shared by multiple narrators but absent in others. I used any such areas that I discovered as the basis for explicit questions in my second interview. I ended the second interview by offering the possibility of one more discussion if desired, as well as presenting them with an opportunity to see my final take on the themes from my study.

Analysis of Data

Quantitative research has the goal of finding generalizations that can be applied to large numbers of people, while not necessarily meaning much to one particular person. NI, and qualitative research in general, seeks to tell a truth that can be shared and has significance for others who can recognize the context and situation of the research (Bold, 2013). I will move toward finding that truth by being explicit in my explanation of my own bias toward accountability and its influence on education, explaining that clearly in my discussion of the results. This reflexivity is especially important in NI because the act of narrating a story involves the narrator and the person with whom the story is being shared in a joint attempt at understanding, as the story being told in one context, to one person, may not be the same story that would be told at a different time, to a different person (Daiute, 2013). Before writing up the results, I built in ways to check my analysis by member-checking with my participants after the second discussion and enlisting the aid of several other educational researchers to check my findings and offer feedback along the way. I will use two faculty from higher education who work with pre-service and novice teachers and also ask for help from graduate PhD students or recent graduates from PhD programs who have pursued their own qualitative research. I offered my volunteer collaborators a chance to see the transcripts and shared with them my understanding of them to get another set of eyes on the material as check on my own bias. As a further check, I will place my findings in the context of existing research to help understand their place in the research on novice teachers.

Different narratives and research questions call for different ways of interpreting the data depending on the type of narrative being collected, the context within which the story is told, and the research question being used (Daiute, 2013). If the researcher is seeking a pattern of events among a set of participants to see if there is a common sequence that is associated with the study participants' journeys, then the plot of the narratives being told is the narrative element of most interest. Time and sequencing are of crucial importance in analyzing these stories. Some narratives can only be understood by examining their characters. In these stories, their most important aspect is not how the story unfolds, but the characters, and how those characters interact with the narrator and impact their story. In some stories, the way in which it is told is the most important aspect and reveals the meaning and significance of the narration. Participants may signal that by using phrases, words, or interjections that indicate the narrator is emphasizing or trying to deny the importance of a portion of their story. The meaning of other stories depends on the culture and values within which the story unfolds. To capture data that is not revealed in the transcripts, I took notes on the participants' posture, attitude, and general demeanor throughout their narrative.

Daiute (2013) suggests that one look for both explicit and implicit values in the narrative account. Explicit values are easier to spot, but Daiute says that implicit values can be determined in a number of ways, such as looking at repeated words and phrases, a sequence of words or phrases that builds to an implicit value statement, or values may be expressed by the participants' use of words or phrases that have extra meaning within the social context of the participant. For example, a teacher referring to "frequent flyers" instead of students with a number of behavior problems may imply that the narrator believes the students are comfortable or even happy visiting the office. Because of the nature of "teacher talk," having veteran teachers and teacher educators check my work helped insure I did not miss any important indicators that may have extra meaning in a school setting.

In order to get meaning from their stories, I read each transcript for accuracy against the recording, adding notes to reference pauses, hesitations, or other quirks in the speakers' narrations that add nuance to their tale, then read it again for an overall impression of the story the individual was telling, following the holistic–content model suggested by Lieblich et al. (1998). As I read it the second time, I highlighted and made note of themes or phrases that seemed to repeat within the individual story. For the first pass through my analysis, I treated each story as its own unique entity. After reading each one and taking notes, I went back and looked for common themes. Each participant was likely to use their own telling of their story to emphasize certain parts of that story, so I was required to look into the implicit meaning behind the words to find commonalities. Depending on the overall sense of the first reading of the interviews, I examined the narratives for critical incidents that influence the narrators' choices, following the concept of plot analysis, significance analysis, and character analysis as explained by Daiute (2013).

Finally, I turn to one of my principal reasons for choosing NI as a methodology for this research. Qualitative inquiry, and NI in particular, openly acknowledge the truth of the impact of the researcher on the research. The researcher using NI must listen to three different voices: the voice of the narrator, the theoretical framework within which the research is situated, and the researcher's own reflexive voice. Readers will not have table after table of figures to validate the research conclusions. They will have the richness of detail and attention to context, along with the researcher's clear explanations of an iterative, interpretive process, upon which to judge the conclusions.

Reporting of Data

In keeping with my research questions, I used the lens of sensemaking as a way to examine the teacher/participants' sense of themselves as teachers in light of their original expectations and the reality they find in public schools. The seven properties that Weick (1995) suggested accompanied sensemaking will be examined in my participants' stories:

1. Identity construction: What does the individual's narrative reveal about changes in identity from pre-service to novice, licensed teacher?
2. Retrospective: What factors in the past influenced the individual to choose this profession, and what milestones or factors along the journey have impacted their current understanding of themselves?
3. Enactive of the environment; How does the reality of a teaching position and its day-to-day struggles affect their understanding of teaching?

4. Social: How do the real, day to day social demands of school culture and home culture interact with the participants' vision of what their teaching life would be?
5. Ongoing: How are the participants' ideas of themselves as teachers changing and developing as time passes?
6. Focused on and by extracted cues: How does the vision of a teacher they had initially in pre-service fit in with the real world in which they find themselves? How do their initial motivations find fruition or frustration in daily school life? This will include attitudes of fellow teachers and their students.
7. Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy: This last point is the one that fits best with using NI as a methodology, as it is reliant on the participants' view of their own lived reality, not any external metric.

As answers to these questions are pursued, I was looking for patterns and themes that might indicate similarities between experience based on grade level or subject taught, district or school demographics, experience with leadership, or some other as yet unknown variable. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) was referenced to see if patterns emerged that indicate whether the variables of autonomy, competence, and relatedness factor into my participants' sensemaking about their positions. These results, as well as samples of the participants' narrative transcripts are shared in the paper.

Conclusion

My research questions are based on my own life as an educator and reflecting back on how my own sense of what that meant evolved over time. I have seen accountability measures grow and come to dominate the conversation about public education. My research is aimed at understanding how people entering the profession today make sense of teaching as a profession, given the increasingly scripted approach adopted by some districts in response to fear of reprisals based on mandated accountability and reporting. I choose to work with a methodology that honors the passage of time and the personal view of history to study my question because every teacher has been involved in education as a student, a pre-service teacher (still a student), and a novice teacher. A teacher makes sense of their decisions at every stage of the process, informed by their own past experience and their current context. NI will help me understand how they understand and make sense of their current circumstance as they decide to remain a teacher or seek another field. My own personal experience makes me hope it is possible for a building leader to facilitate a culture that is conducive to teachers' staying, so I hoped to find some evidence of a positive leadership role, but I was also open to finding out that the teachers I hear from view building administrators as minor influences on their sense of themselves as teachers.

Chapter IV: Findings

In this section, I will first present the findings of each individual interview. For each participant, I will present a review of their school demographics and a recap of their narrative. For each story, I will examine the elements of Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) found in their story to shed some light on their possible motivation to continue and discuss the seven principles of sensemaking model presented by Weick (1995). Following that, I give a brief interpretation of whether that participant found themselves having to rethink their idea of teaching as part of their identity or whether they were in sensemaking mode trying to understand their reality. Finally, I present overall findings and summarized trends and then I go into more depth on each general finding.

My plan was to interview 20 teachers in a variety of districts and a variety of assignments to look for similarities and differences. I used my contacts in local districts to suggest possible participants to me and introduce me via email. I was eventually able to interview 21 teachers. I wrote to each suggested participant, requesting half an hour of their time to talk about their careers, including the consent form as an attachment if they agreed to meet. All meetings were held in the teachers' schools, except for one that was held at a nearby coffee shop. The conversations were recorded, then transcribed professionally. After I read the transcription multiple times, I sent each participant a summary of the interview, asking if they were accurate and volunteering to meet again if interested. A few teachers corrected small mistakes, but none wanted to correct any large misunderstandings, or meet again.

Participant Demographics

Figure 4.1

School Districts and Demographics of Study Participants

Name	District typology	Subject/grade level	Gender	Grade Band	Race	When decided	Own school
MB	suburban 5	5th gd	F	ES	White, Non-Hispanic	child	suburban
KC	urban 7	1st gd	F	ES	White, Non-Hispanic	child	suburban
AF	urban 7	6th gd	F	ES	White, Non-Hispanic	child	suburban
GG	suburban 6	IS ELA	M	HS	White, Non-Hispanic	child	?
GH	urban 7	ELA	F	HS	White, Non-Hispanic	child	?
JK	urban 8	3rd gd	F	ES	White, Non-Hispanic	child	suburban
AN	urban 7	Kindergarten	F	ES	White, Non-Hispanic	child	rural
JR	urban 8	2nd gd	F	ES	Hispanic	child	Puerto Rico
EL	urban 7	3rd gd	M	ES	White, Non-Hispanic	HS	rural
AM	urban 7	IS MH	F	HS	White, Non-Hispanic	HS	rural
KN	urban 8	2nd gd	M	ES	African-American	HS	urban
MT	suburban 6	Math MS/HS	M	HS	White, Non-Hispanic	HS	rural
MW	urban 7	Health/pe	M	MS	White, Non-Hispanic	HS	suburban
SB	urban 7	2nd gd	F	ES	White, Non-Hispanic	college	suburban
GG2	urban 8	2nd gd	M	ES	Hispanic	adult	urban
NH	small town 3	IS MH	F	ES	White, Non-Hispanic	adult	middle class
CK	small town 3	1st gd	M	ES	White, Non-Hispanic	adult	rural
GK	urban 7	7th gd	M	ES	White, Non-Hispanic	adult	urban
NK	small town 3	IS MH	F	ES	White, Non-Hispanic	adult	suburban
BM	urban 7	IS Incl	M	HS	White, Non-Hispanic	adult	?
NS	urban 7	IS MH	F	MS	White, Non-Hispanic	adult	urban

Note: Subject/grade level codes used in chart – IS – Interventions Specialist, ELA – English/Language Arts, Inc – inclusion (co-teaching in a typical class), MH –Moderate/Severe self-contained class, ES – elementary school – grades K – 5, MS – middle school – grades 6 – 8, HS – high school – grades 9 – 12

Figure 4.2

Typology of Ohio School Districts

ODE Typology Code	Major Grouping	Full Descriptor
1	Rural	Rural -High Student Poverty & Small Student Population
2	Rural	Rural -Average Student Poverty & Very Small Student Population
3	Small Town	Small Town -Low Student Poverty & Small Student Population
4	Small Town	Small Town -High Student Poverty & Average Student Population Size
5	Suburban	Suburban -Low Student Poverty & Average Student Population Size
6	Suburban	Suburban -Very Low Student Poverty & Large Student Population
7	Urban	Urban -High Student Poverty & Average Student Population
8	Urban	Urban -Very High Student Poverty & Very Large Student Population

This chart uses the definitions of district typology defined by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE, 2013).

Individual Participants

Participant # 1: MB

MB took an unusual path to becoming a licensed teacher, starting at the University of Dayton, then pursuing her Masters in Education at Notre Dame University in Indiana. She attended a program there called the Alliance for Catholic Educators (ACE) with a special mission to give priority to under-resourced schools (ACE Handbook, 2019). She spent two years at a Catholic school in Tulsa, Oklahoma, living with three other students in the program, finding that to be very satisfying. MB had joined the ACE program to help students in under-resourced schools and felt that the schools where she taught in Tulsa were actually pretty well off. “I want to try and serve at a school that I was supposed to serve.” She then went to a 4th grade classroom in a Catholic school in a high poverty area in Chicago, which she found to be very challenging, despite her intentions to work in high poverty schools with children who need extra help. She found the marked difference in family backgrounds between herself and her students to be difficult to overcome. By October of that year, she was ready to quit, but her principal talked to her and helped her stay, by bringing in a consultant from the University of Chicago and explaining to her that her students experienced loss and abandonment on a regular basis and needed more continuity in their lives. She found the student behavior to be almost too much for her to handle, “I definitely wasn’t doing my best teaching, but I was just trying make it through the day.” This experience in Chicago really forced her to reexamine her motivations for teaching, “because I think I idealized it in my mind a little bit, thinking, I want to go in and help these students. And, yeah, it bothers me that it was so challenging for me.” With the help of her administrator and fellow teachers, she made it through the year in Chicago and returned to Ohio, planning not to look for a teaching job. She was approached about teaching in a school with a principal who had previously been one of her teachers, and she decided to accept the position.

MB admitted that she had idealized her role as a teacher and her possible impact on struggling students. After always wanting to be a teacher, she student taught in a suburban school, then taught in a well-resourced program as part of a cohort of like-minded, highly motivated teachers. When she was faced with the reality of schools that were truly resource-poor and students impacted by extreme poverty, she was forced to reconsider her whole image of herself as a teacher. Her image of herself as a teacher was tied to her identity as a Catholic with a desire to serve. She continued her education after getting her Bachelor’s degree in a Catholic university with an explicit mission to serve under-resourced schools and graduated from that program without ever really working in a school that tested the limits of her commitment. The crisis that she faced when she realized how wide the gulf between her own childhood and the reality of her students’ lives forced her to try to make sense of her life-long ambition to serve others as a teacher.

Her discussion about her current teaching assignment in Ohio indicates that she has not yet reconciled her previous image with the present reality. Her students are better behaved and more socialized to school, but it is also her first experience in public school with the realities of testing and teacher accountability. She is dealing with students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) in her class, and some who probably need to be on an IEP, while being held accountable for their test scores. Her first year in Ohio, she was ready to quit again by December, largely because of one child who was extremely disruptive, but finally got the help MB was seeking from the child’s family. Her year settled down after that, and then her accountability scores came out, showing poor test scores for her students and she was again questioning her choice of teaching.

She came back the next year after her boyfriend urged her to focus on the reasons she had chosen to teach in the first place and not just on her test scores. Her teaching team and building principal are working together to improve the scores and help their school’s report card. She did get improved scores, but then had problems with her value-added scores and worries about that, “Because now, my value added wasn’t good this year. So, I still feel that I still can’t get it.” Her school is working together to address these issues for her and other faculty in traditional ways such as teachers’ meetings and professional development and are finding innovative ways to help teachers work together using technology and message each other if they need help during the day when they cannot leave their rooms.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. Looking at her motivation to remain in teaching using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) reveals that she is struggling most with a sense of competence. After several years of practice, she still does not feel competent as a teacher, especially in light of her initial motivation to teach. Indeed, the children who need her help most and the ones she really thought she could reach are the ones she finds herself struggling with the most. She does find a sense of competence in her students when they learn something she is teaching, though she does not feel the State understands that. Her sense of relatedness is being met by support from her fellow teachers, her administration, and her students at times. At other times, she still struggles to form relationships with her students with behavior issues. Her sense of autonomy is severely threatened by the state accountability measures, which in turn leads to questioning her own competence. At the end of our interview, she speculated on her options if she left teaching or left the classroom for some other education-related position. She did not see any other clear options and felt constrained by the teaching calendar that makes it hard to seek another job, except during a narrow window of time in the summer. It almost seemed like she was saying that she would stay in teaching, but more out of a lack of viable alternative and less out of a deep commitment to continue. She did not seem to have the same sense of herself as a teacher that she started with.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. MB entered teaching for idealistic reasons and is having trouble dealing with the reality of public schools. She has found dissonance between her image of herself as a teacher and the lived reality of a teacher. This was especially true in a Catholic school in an under-resourced major urban area and is still true in a suburban district. She is frequently redefining the plausibility of staying in her career as a teacher because of these discordances. She finds herself trying to make new meaning of her decision to teach for altruistic reasons in high need districts. Her first reaction to the reality she found was to abandon her identity as a teacher altogether and was brought back into teaching by the familiarity of her own neighborhood schools. Her initial aspirations to change the world and serve children who were less fortunate than she are gone, and she is re-examining her teaching identity on an ongoing basis. In her case, her high ambitions were not a match for reality. Aside from her familiarity with her school district, she is being supported by her fellow teachers and the principal who are helping her navigate the concerns she is having.

Participant # 2: KC

KC is a teacher at an elementary school that is classified as a suburban school with low student poverty and an average student population, one of 47 districts in that category within Ohio. Her school report card reveals that 100% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 36% white, Non-Hispanic, 34% black, 19% multi-racial, 11% Hispanic, and 22% are classified as students with disabilities. Thirty-six percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Developing," 43% as "Skilled," and 21% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Twenty-four percent of her school's students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts, and Math. KC herself is Caucasian, in her fourth year of teaching.

KC knew she wanted to be a teacher her whole life, wanting to play teacher in kindergarten, "I have two dreams in life and that is to be a teacher and a mother and if I meet those two goals, I have done everything I wanted to do with my life." She talked about the "really great teachers" she had, and one in particular that really impressed her. When she remembered her, it was her appearance and personality that she talked about and that she wanted to emulate. She added that she has always wanted to work in a low-income school because she feels that, “I have a lot of patience” and could work to see beyond the child’s behavior to underlying causes, though she says that she is finding that more difficult than she first imagined. After graduating in December, she worked as a substitute teacher to get more familiarity with the local districts. She got called to her interview and got a position in her current school the next year.

Even after her experiences student teaching and substituting, she was surprised at all the additional tasks that teachers were required to do that had not been discussed during her training to become a teacher. She felt she could not even list all the meetings, teams, and reports she has to do because they have just become a part of her routine now. On top of those distractions, her main struggle is with student behavior. She cited their difficult circumstances and trauma, wondering if that was a primary reason for so many teachers leaving the field. She talked about going home and crying because of how difficult it is and feeling defeated sometimes before the day has even started. She feels that her students are not getting the education they deserve because of all the “extra stuff,” including student behavior, meetings, reports, and curriculum pacing guides that do not seem to take into account the reality of her students’ abilities. She does rely on her grade level team and administration for support and camaraderie and takes pride in all the roles she fills in a day, from mother, to counselor, to disciplinarian, and even cafeteria worker. She cited lack of support and understanding from district administrators as main reasons she thought teachers might not be staying in the field.

KC denied wanting to leave teaching, but said she understood why teachers left in such large numbers. As she was saying she wanted to keep teaching, she repeated several times that she does notwant to quit so often that it seemed clear that she has contemplated leaving teaching. If not leave teaching altogether, she is definitely thinking about leaving her district and looking for a position closer to her home with better behaved children. Health reasons and planned child raising were cited as part of her motivation for wanting to move. She fears that her students' difficulties on state tests and the resultant low scores on her evaluations will keep other districts from taking a chance on her.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. Her sense of competence in her field was clearly compromised, saying, "I know that I'm not teaching any of these kids what they deserve to be taught because of all this extra stuff that's happening." When questioned about that, she added the issue of district-mandated curriculum pacing to her concerns about student behavior. These specific requirements were a clear signal to her that she was not teaching the children as much as the district thought she should be, so every time she planned lessons or met with her grade level team, she had to confront that sense of failure. These pacing standards, along with the testing reports were, clearly impacting her feelings of autonomy as a professional educator. Her team all had the same concerns and helped keep her sane and healthy, "If I didn't have the team that I had and having to give up my time to work with somebody who was not prepared or to work with somebody who did not treat me nicely, it would be horrific." Another positive side of her experience was found in her relations with her students, "And like silly things that first graders would say. So that is very rewarding, and I think that's the reason that I'm still able to do this."

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. KC first thought of teaching because of her positive, idealized image of her own elementary school teachers. She mentioned her teacher being, "just the best and sweetest." She also mentioned her ideal teacher's physical appearance and how she looked like a Barbie Doll. KC is continually looking at her role as a teacher and seeking to redefine it in terms that allow her to maintain her own original image as a teacher. The demands on a teacher's time surprised her and distracted her from what she really wanted to be doing, discouraging her and causing her to reflect often on her career choice. She shifts the source of her problems from herself to her environment and talks about finding a better district, allowing her to continue teaching. It is interesting to note that her initial sense of the ideal teacher was a beautiful, composed, compassionate woman and her sense of what it means to be a teacher today in her district include the occupations of mother, nurse, counselor, disciplinarian, and cafeteria worker. She has had to rethink her role and make sense of it by focusing on her relationships with her students and co-workers. None of her student teaching or substituting experiences prepared her for the change in role from her expectations.

Participant # 3: AF

AF is a teacher at an elementary school that is classified as a suburban school with low student poverty and an average student population, one of 47 districts in that category within Ohio. Her school report card reveals that 100% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 36% white, Non-Hispanic, 34% black, 19% multi-racial, 11% Hispanic, and 22% are classified as students with disabilities. Thirty-six percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Developing," 43% as "Skilled," and 21% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Twenty-three percent of her school's sixth grade students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts, and 18% of the sixth graders were proficient in Math on the Ohio Achievement Assessments in 2018-2019. AF herself is Caucasian, in her fourth year of teaching.

AF knew she wanted to be a teacher her whole life, remembering the joy she had when her fourth-grade teacher was cleaning out her classroom and getting to take the materials home to play school with anyone who would go along with her, mostly her dolls, as her brothers were not interested. In high school she was able to take a class that allowed her to intern half-days in different schools, through her Joint Vocational School. She secured a job at her present school as a tutor after graduating with her teaching license in Middle Childhood Education in math and English. She felt she had trouble getting a teaching position because her licensure band is narrow and requires her to teach in 4-9 grades and only English or Math.

Her current position is as an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher in 6th grade. She finds both challenge and opportunity in the fact that the ELA curriculum is broad, requiring more independent planning, but also giving her the opportunity to branch out in ways that she could not if she were teaching math. Her district had a well-developed new teacher mentoring program when she first entered and she, like the other teachers from her district, cited that as one of the things that helped her through her first few years. She talked about her relationships with children being her favorite aspect of teaching, and her three years as a tutor as a great way to get to know all the teachers and children in the building before she was given a classroom of her own.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. AFs conversation about her teaching was very positive. She spoke about the joy she found in her daily interactions with her students and included a description of a unit she did with her students on “speed debating” that she was particularly happy about, citing specific discussions with students, “But like just listening to them talk about it and use the right language was, was awesome.” AF teaches English/Language Arts, a subject that has fewer explicit curricular demands than math, science, or social studies.

This gives her the freedom to function with more autonomy and she relishes it. She uses that autonomy to develop her own lessons based on the perceived needs of her students. This, in turn, gives her the opportunity to experience success with her own plans, building her sense of competence. Her story included the fact that she was able to learn a lot about her school, the teachers, and the children while she was tutoring. She saw considerable value in her experience of getting to work with different teachers for three years before she had her own classroom. Rather than moving into a whole new social and work environment when she got her first full-time teaching position, she already had a sense of relatedness with her colleagues and students.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. AF found the actual experience of teaching to be similar enough to what she had been expecting that she was not finding herself forced to re-examine her sense of herself as a teacher. One concern expressed about teacher preparation from several of my participants was that the reality of being in charge of one's own classroom was very different and much more difficult than student teacher or teaching a single lesson in a school. AF was unable to get a contract as soon as she received her license and had to accept a tutoring position for several years before getting her own classroom. That time enabled her to become a part of the school culture and understand more completely what it meant to be a teacher. That time helped refine her sense of a teacher's real daily existence before she was alone and responsible for a single classroom. She was able to gradually refine her sense of "teacher" so she did not have to go through a major, unexpected sensemaking experience as a newly contracted teacher.

Participant # 4: GG

GG is a teacher at a high school that is classified as a suburban school with low student poverty and an average student population, one of 46 districts in that category within Ohio. His school report card reveals that 11% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 81% white, Non-Hispanic, 4% black, 5% multi-racial, 4% Hispanic, 8% Asian, and 13% are classified as students with disabilities. One percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Developing," 19% as "Skilled," and 80% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Eighty-two percent of his school's students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts, and Math. GG himself is Caucasian, in his fourth year of teaching as an intervention specialist.

GG knew he wanted to be a teacher his whole life, explaining that his father was a coach and he could see that he was getting a lot of joy out of his work with young people and thought that if he could teach and be a coach, that would give him the ability to influence a lot of young people. When he entered college, he knew he wanted to become a teacher and decided on becoming an intervention specialist because he had always been "sympathetic for children who had disabilities," and had found ways to get along with children with disabilities and "bring them up." In college he was able to experience a variety of different environments from elementary to high school and suburban to urban districts. He found employment in his first year after graduating in a suburban high school, teaching social studies for three years, then his family moved and he got a job in a small-town district nearer his new home. He quickly realized the district was not a good fit and he saw the opportunity to move to his current district.

He is quite happy with his school and especially referenced his co-workers and their assistance in helping him with questions about students with difficulties in the area of communication. He teaches some inclusion classes with other teachers and has an advisory class that is not limited to students with IEPs, so he feels a part of the whole school community. Student non-compliance, inconsistent application of school rules, and lack of parental support are frustrations he faces in his job. He sees the job of a special educator as being an emotional support person as much as a content expert, saying that his main job is to provide a positive environment where they can come and feel safe.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. As an intervention specialist, GG works as a co-teacher in several different classrooms. One of the principal reasons for leaving his second teaching assignment was the very strong sense that he was not functioning autonomously in his co-teaching roles there, feeling a lack of respect from his peers, and being seen as a teacher's aide more than a professional educator. In speaking of his current placement, he specifically spoke of the mastery and competence he felt in working on one subject (geometry) with only two different teachers. His teaching license in special education allowed him to view the state mandated tests as so inappropriate and unhelpful for his students that he did not put too much faith in those scores, "I don't worry about it." GG spoke of his early experiences as a student in his teacher preparation program, specifically the opportunities to understand whether this career would give him the opportunity he sought to "influence kids." While he spoke of those experiences as being very valuable, he also said there were struggles associated with being in charge of his own classroom and finding his "voice." Significantly, he described these struggles as expected and experienced by all teachers, not as a huge problem for him. Along with his connections with his co-teachers, he brought up his mentoring from another teacher in his building, not just for the knowledge gained from her, but the sense of being on a productive, professional team.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. GG's identity as a teacher was grounded in his experiences coaching and playing sports. As someone who grew up with a coaching father and who participated in, and coached team sports himself, it is important to him to be part of a successful, productive team and he has left every setting where he did not feel that team spirit, emphasizing the importance of the social aspect of sensemaking to him. He expected to struggle as a teacher, so he was not deterred by early problems managing his time. Expecting to grow as a teacher, he was looking for signs of his own development as a teacher, finding his own rhythm and style. He was able to take positive action when he found himself in situations that were not satisfactory, suggesting that autonomy was important to him and something he found for himself as needed.

Participant # 5: GH

GH is a teacher at a high school in a district that is classified as an urban school with high student poverty and an average student population, one of 47 districts in that category within Ohio. Her school report card reveals that 100% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 55% white, Non-Hispanic, 26% black, 12% multi-racial, 6% Hispanic, and 20% are classified as students with disabilities. Fifty-six percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Developing," 39% as "Skilled," and 5% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Seventy-seven percent of her school's students were rated as less than proficient on the school's official Ohio School Report Card in 2018-2019. GH herself is Caucasian, in her fifth year of teaching.

GH knew she wanted to be a teacher her whole life, working in a nursing home prior to taking her teacher preparation classes. She initially went to a traditional state university to begin her education but had to switch to a school that allowed her to take classes in the evenings after her child was born. Her desire to teach was not deterred but was delayed and put on an alternate path that still allowed her to get her teaching license.

She is a freshman English teacher in a large high school that is divided into four different academies. She started the interview by talking a lot about building relationships with her students and took pride in saying that her former students often came back to talk to her. When asked what grades and subjects she taught, she told me she taught "9th grade English, I have a lot of people that just seem to float back." She really felt that the key to success in her urban high school was building solid relationships with her students. Her comments about the students coming to visit her the next year reveal that she feels that is one of her strengths as a teacher and suggest that she finds both competence and relatedness in her work. She also talked about her peers and her assigned mentor being very helpful to her and helping her feel at home. Her confidence in her content has improved over the first few years, allowing her to try new approaches that have been effective. She ventured out of traditional teaching techniques to include Project Based Learning (PBL) even before her district adopted PBL as a recommended approach. Her students are surprised by the things they learn from working on the projects. She has found success and recognition in her district with her units, helping her to feel the autonomy to try new approaches.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. Her autonomy has not been threatened by the state accountability system, partly because the state has changed reporting and testing methods so often over the past few years that it is hard to see validity in the results. She is also a younger teacher who had to take the state tests when she was in high school in order to receive her diploma, so the accountability system with all of its changes has always been a part of her experience. She dismissed the state licensure process as a series of “meaningless” tasks to check off, rather than any authentic demonstration of competence. GH was very independent and self-guided in her approach to teaching. She found enough opportunities to demonstrate competence and autonomy to get her recognition from her peers and supervisors that she was quite satisfied with her role, though she did express some frustrating times as well, when she felt like crying because her students were not living up to their potential. To balance that frustration, she talked about how happy she was when students came back to visit and talked to her about how much they had learned.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. GH expressed a lot of satisfaction in her role as a teacher, especially in terms of seeing student growth and forming relationships with her students. She was proud of the number of times her students came back to visit her and very proud of being able to show her students how much they had grown in a year. She has also struck out on her own to involve her students in PBL activities in ways that brought her positive attention from her school and district supervisors, helping her to feel competent about her teaching. She took the problem of students who struggled with their writing and reading skills and turned it into a challenge to present to herself and her students as an opportunity for them to feel better about themselves. She did not let the state accountability system define her success as a teacher. As a high school English teacher, the state curriculum standards for English Language Arts (ELA) are easier to adapt than standards for other subject areas that are more prescriptive. A quick comparison of standards for 9th grade ELA and 9th grade algebra shows how much easier it is for the teacher to interpret and vary instruction for ELA versus algebra.

> RI.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. (ODE, 2017a, p. 3)

> A.SSE.2 Use the structure of an expression to identify ways to rewrite it. For example, to factor $3x(x - 5) + 2(x - 5)$, students should recognize that the "$x - 5$" is common to both expressions being added, so it simplifies to $(3x + 2)(x - 5)$; or see $x4 - y4$ as $(x2)2 - (y2)2$, thus recognizing it as a difference of squares that can be factored as $(x2 - y2)(x2 + y2)$. (ODE, 2017b, p. 68)

This opportunity to express herself as a professional instructor with the freedom to use her judgment and interpret the standards creatively helped GH reinforce her identity as a creative individual. This opportunity to try new teaching methods coincided with her district urging teachers to start using PBL. Her early adoption of the teaching method led her district supervisors to use her success as an example for other teachers and to reinforce her identity as professional, successful teacher.

Participant # 6: JK

JK teaches in an elementary school in a district that is classified as an urban district with high student poverty and a large student population, one of eight districts in that category within Ohio. His school report card reveals that 100% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 47% white, Non-Hispanic, 21% black, 4% multi-racial, 28% Hispanic, 32% English learners, and 15% are classified as students with disabilities. Three percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Developing," 50% as "Skilled," and 47% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Fifty-seven percent of her school's students were rated as less than proficient in English Language Arts and Math on the Ohio Achievement Assessments in 2018-2019. JK herself is Caucasian, in her third year of teaching.

JK decided she wanted to be a teacher while she was still in first grade and stayed with that decision all the way through school. She got the opportunity to work with students who had learning disabilities while she was still in high school and enjoyed being able to help her tutees, while at the same time seeing for herself that there was, “a wide range of needs that were not being met for them and that infuriated me.” That cemented her decision and she chose her college on the basis of the teacher licensure program. She had already taken a number of the program’s prerequisites in high school and graduated with her BA in three years. While she was in her licensure program, she took advantage of a special program that paired the university and urban schools, giving her the opportunity to volunteer and coach young people. After graduating, she applied only to her current school, based on her comfort level with the school and the diversity of the student body: “it has a wide range of students from all over the world and I fell in love with that.” She felt that her experience with helping students with disabilities in her high performing high school, and, realizing that even students in very highly ranked schools were not always getting all the help they needed, helped her commit to teaching. JK entered the “Urban Teacher Academy” at her university and said that she was actually discouraged from seeking a job in the district she chose because her instructors thought she might not be able to relate to urban students.

She chose elementary because she had worked with high school students who were far behind and, “I wanted to be with them early so I could catch them up at that point so they didn’t have that deficiency later in life.” JK teaches third grade, an assignment which carries with it extra pressure in Ohio because of the Third Grade Reading Guarantee, but she expressed that she found pleasure in collecting data on her students and seeing how they progressed through the year. She chooses to see it as a challenge, “a statistic I want to beat.” Her school does have curriculum pacing guides she is supposed to be following, but she gets extra help for her struggling students by finding other ways to reinforce the learning. She talked about finding the right balance of kindness, empathy, and discipline for each student, and the pleasure it brought her to reach a child. She had high praise for her building administrator, helping her to feel welcome and supported.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. JK took the scrutiny under which she found herself as a third-grade teacher of reading as a challenge and the accompanying data points as a way to demonstrate her competence as a teacher. To reach that point she relied on her own sense of relatedness with her students and colleagues and other forms of evidence that were not measured by standardized tests, particularly her feedback from students and her ability to translate the abstract testing results into concrete goals for her students. She met with her students and reviewed the testing, using different colored crayons to help them chart their own progress and develop goals for each individual. The curriculum pacing guide did not fit her students' ability to make progress, but her colleagues worked together to supplement the lessons based on her students' needs, building her sense of relatedness and belonging. She found autonomy in her ability to modify the children's goal setting and individual lessons, within her class and within her grade-level team.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. JK's reality matched her expectations and she was able to develop her sense of competence from her experiences in high school tutoring through her own initial experiences. The school district she attended as a student was a very highly ranked suburban school. Despite that high standing on state testing, she noticed that some students were being left behind. Her initial instinct when she saw students who were not being well served by her high school was to take it as a challenge that she could respond to and improve on. She was highly motivated and successful in college, finishing her program in three years instead of four, and was able to volunteer in the urban school she ended up working in. Serving as a volunteer while she was still in school gave her the chance to make sense of urban education before she was directly responsible for high stakes test results. She had the opportunity to enjoy the diversity and challenge of a very diverse elementary school, so she was well aware of the culture and climate of the school before formally joining the faculty. As a faculty member, she and her team worked closely together, actively seeking to innovate and modify to meet their students' needs. Finding satisfaction in her work and feeling that she was successful kept her from having to rethink her identity and make sense in a new way.

Participant # 7: AN

AN is a teacher at an elementary school in a district that is classified as a suburban district with low student poverty and an average student population, one of 47 districts in that category within Ohio. Her school report card reveals that 100% of its students are economically disadvantaged, 36% white, Non-Hispanic, 34% black, 19% multi-racial, 11% Hispanic, and 22% are classified as students with disabilities. Thirty-six percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Developing," 43% as "Skilled," and 21% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Twenty-four percent of her school's students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts, and Math. AN herself is Caucasian, in her fourth year of teaching.

AN knew she wanted to be a teacher her whole life, though she never thought of teaching as a potential job choice. She did a lot of teaching in Sunday School, and really enjoyed it, but did not think teaching was a serious career and thought she needed to go to college to find real work. She tried different majors, but she could not find one she really liked. It was her mother who pointed out to her that she had always enjoyed working with young people and she might want to consider teaching as a career. She graduated from a community college and practiced some of what she was learning on her Sunday School class, finding much of it applicable and rewarding. After she graduated from the community college, she went to a state school that is very well known for its education programs. She entered the program and immediately got experience in actual classrooms, which she found very rewarding. Her student teaching experience was especially useful, being allowed and encouraged to visit in different classes at all grade levels. After graduating, she spent a year doing daycare, working with school-age children, and then got a job in her present school as a tutor. She tutored in the building for two years and then was hired as the kindergarten teacher and is in her fifth year in the same building now as a fully licensed teacher.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. She expressed that she found a lot of surprises as a teacher in charge of her own classroom, between student behavior, filling out paperwork, lesson plans, calling parents, and last-minute meetings. She credited her assigned mentor with helping her survive the first two years. She found a lot of support from her grade-level team and her academic coaches also, planning together and reflecting on individual students and lessons. She plans lessons to build on and reinforce the assigned curriculum for her students who are struggling. She finds a conflict with the district frequently checking to see if she is following the pacing guidelines and still meeting her students’ needs. Her students are required to take periodic tests on iPads, for which they cannot practice, and which are recorded with her name as teacher. She said that her students’ discovering that they have mastered a new skill is one of her biggest delights, while the students’ personal circumstances and individual trauma make her teaching success very difficult. She feels a need to fill in for much more than teaching academics, including buying her own snacks for her students and making up snack packages for her students to take home when they go on longer breaks from school. Despite all the struggles, her biggest joy is the relationships she builds with her students, including students with whom she has had problems at times.

AN's path to a teaching license allowed her to experience competence and pleasure in the role before she knew she was actually heading to the career. She taught in Sunday School and coached for her own pleasure, even while thinking it was not a real career choice. She was able to try out the things she was learning in school week-to-week on Sundays and find her own style. Therefore, when she actually made the choice to get her license, she already had good experiences, a pleasant frame of reference in regard to teaching, and a built-in sense of competence. Before she got her own classroom, she tutored in her building for two years, continuing to build relatedness with her building's faculty and her sense of competence with her own teaching skills. Her story included multiple references to others who had helped her with her career, from her mother to her university instructors to her peers at her current school and her assigned mentor. Her mentor was a very positive influence on her ability to feel success in first two years, not only with feedback after observation, but encouraging her to try new practices and demonstrate her successes to other teachers. She spoke very highly of her grade level team and other teachers in the building, citing instances where they were all working on a similar theme they had chosen, but each working on it in their own ways. The district's pacing guides and mandated texts are used, but not to the point of being oppressive. She was clear that some of their texts expected students to move too quickly, but made it clear that she felt free to put the needs of her students first, increasing her sense of autonomy and professionalism.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. AN did not plan to be a teacher from her childhood, but always enjoyed working with children, and it was her mother that pointed to teaching based on her previous work with children. She thus did not have a childhood ideal of what it meant to be a teacher and developed a sense of teacher identity as a young adult. She was able to develop that identity slowly through her training and then two years of tutoring in her school. As a student teacher, she was able to observe and practice giving lessons in a wide variety of classrooms, giving her experience with many different children and many different teaching styles. A typical student teacher may spend their whole student teaching tenure in one classroom with one teacher, so she had a broader definition of what it meant to be a teacher. This also contributed to her trust in her fellow teachers and commitment to working as a team to solve difficult problems. AN also spoke very highly of her assigned mentor and how her mentor had helped her explore her students' needs professionally and purposefully. Despite all her experience before she got her own classroom, she was still a little surprised by all the requirements placed on teachers that did not relate to actual student-teacher interactions. Her essential perception of the role of teacher was developed in a real setting and therefore was not that different from her expectations, so she was enthusiastic about her level of success.

Participant # 8: JR

JR is a teacher at an elementary school in a district that is classified as an urban school district with high student poverty and a large student population, one of eight districts in that category within Ohio. Her school report card reveals that 100% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 47% white, Non-Hispanic, 21% black, 4% multi-racial, 28% Hispanic, 32% English learners, and 15% are classified as students with disabilities. Three percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Developing," 50% as "Skilled," and 47% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Fifty-seven percent of his school's students were rated as less than proficient in English Language Arts and

Math on the Ohio Achievement Assessments in 2018-2019. JR herself is Hispanic, in her fourth year of teaching in Ohio.

JR always knew she wanted to be a teacher, playing teacher with her friends as a child. She reports that the reality is different from the games she used to play, citing pacing guides and district demands. She moved to Ohio from Puerto Rico, where she had taught for a private school and enjoyed more freedom in choosing her own curriculum. When she came to Ohio, she was hired to teach a bilingual class, teaching her native tongue, Spanish, but that class did not materialize. She ended up teaching a class that seemed to be made of 12 children with discipline problems from different grades and many with IEPs. She spoke very little English and had an extremely difficult year, going home upset and crying at times. Her next year was also intended to be in a dual language program, but that did not materialize either, so she taught third grade in English. She worked with her team to divide up the children and found more support that year.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. Her district asks her to gather multiple sources of data, but sometimes the data from one source does not match the information from another source. Her students are required to be on a computer program daily that she does not trust, and the children do not particularly enjoy. The students sign in daily, logging the minutes each child actually spends on the program. The actual work on the program does not stimulate the children, but their minutes are counted and monitored by the district. She expressed pleasure at seeing her students learn from her teaching, especially the students who are English Language Learners, becoming more fluent in English. JR was specific and clear about the constraints she felt from the accountability strictures from both the state and the district, using the word *demands* in reference to them. “We need to follow pacing guides; we need to organize everything according to district demands. And there is not much freedom.” There is not a sense there that she feels much autonomy. Indeed, her story of teaching in the United States is one instance after another of the school promising one thing and doing another, with no sense that she had any influence in that decision. She came to her present school because they were looking for bilingual teachers, but that opportunity never materialized. In fact, it seemed to her more like she got the class of students who were not well-suited for any other classes and very difficult to manage. Her sense of competence in her class has yet to be well established. When she spoke of her teaching experience in Puerto Rico, she was clear that she felt success and autonomy there, but Ohio was very different.

> At that time we didn't have the pressure to follow the pacing guide the way that we need to do it now. So right now the pacing guide said that I need to be working with chapter five, lesson one, I need to do that. No matter what.

Her tone grew lighter when she talked about her peers and working with them, especially singling out her principal for her support in her first two years. When she was asked about her successes, she talked about identifying a student's needs and helping them learn. Another success she pointed to was seeing a Spanish speaking child begin to converse in English with his fellow students.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. JR was quite tentative as she talked about her experience teaching in her current district, contrasting it to her previous experience in a parochial school in Puerto Rico. She did discuss the pleasure she found in teaching, but I had to ask her specifically about that before she cited them. To the open-ended prompt to "Tell me about why you decided to become a teacher and how it went down," she replied immediately that it was, "first because I love it." She then went immediately into describing how different it was now from what it was and how she cannot do it the way she wants to, including all the restrictions on what and how she must teach. She used the word “different” several times to describe her teaching experience and it seemed to express her own sense of place in her school. She felt different because she spoke Spanish first, English second, did not get the class she was promised, and had to follow strict district guidelines for lesson planning and timing. She was able to get support from her peers, and depended on that for survival, but seems to be teetering on the brink of leaving teaching.

JR changed many aspects of both her personal life and her professional life in profound ways. She moved from a Spanish speaking territory of the United States, teaching in a Catholic school, to teaching in an urban elementary school in Ohio, where English was the language spoken by the overwhelming majority of students. With all the changes she was making, JR was forced into sensemaking mode professionally and personally. She was struggling to redefine herself, relying on her fellow teachers for help. She complained about the rigid standards imposed by her district in a way that another member of her team with similar years of experience did not mention. This is likely to be because she has not found a clear definition of herself as a successful professional educator. In that sense, she sees herself as someone to whom things are done, not someone who is making a significant difference in the lives of her students.

Participant # 9: EL

EL is a teacher at an elementary school in a district that is classified as an urban district with high student poverty and an average student population, one of 47 districts in that category within Ohio. His school report card reveals that 100% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 58% white, Non-Hispanic, 11% black, 15% multi-racial, 15% Hispanic, and 27% are classified as students with disabilities. Eleven percent of the building’s teachers are listed as “Developing,” 11% as “Skilled,” and 79% in the highest category of

“Accomplished” on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Forty-three percent of his school’s third grade students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts, and 38% proficient in Math. EL himself is Caucasian, in his second year of teaching under a resident educator license, though he has worked a year as a floating substitute and a year as a teacher in a charter school.

EL grew up with a mother who taught sixth grade for 18 years, spending some time in her classroom. It was natural for him to help out in her classroom throughout junior high and high school, where they came to be known as the “Dynamic Duo.” He spent enough time in some of the other classes at his mother’s school to almost be thought of as a teacher’s aide, helping students make up assessments they had missed. When the small district he was attending consolidated into one building, he spent the Christmas break helping teachers set up their classrooms and received a $1,000 scholarship to pursue teaching. He chose his college for its reputation as a good school for teacher preparation and its excellent choir. After graduation, he went to work teaching in the charter school that specialized in teaching children on IEPs, finding it to be a very difficult year and leaving after one year. He then got a job as an on-call substitute teacher for moderate-sized school district, giving him the opportunity to work in many different classrooms. That experience helped him decide what grade level he wanted to work with in his permanent assignment. He is currently in his first year as a third-grade teacher, teaching the same students all subjects in a self-contained classroom, with the extra accountability that comes with Ohio’s 3rd Grade Guarantee.

EL was pleased with the support he got from other teachers, calling the staff, “amazing,” and citing the rewards of working in a team of dedicated teachers, including a relatively inexperienced intervention specialist with whom he co-teaches for part of the day. There was a distinct difference in the amount of support and resources the public school offered its teachers compared to the charter school experience. He spoke repeatedly about the conflict between meeting his students' basic needs for security and meeting the needs of the curriculum to think more deeply about problems. He compared his students to his background, growing up in a rural farming community and found a difference in the work ethic of urban children versus rural children who have to cope with the sunup to sundown farming lifestyle.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. The frequent experience EL had in different school settings because of his mother's teaching and his long-term substitution experience helped him develop a sense of competence with his own classroom. His experience in an under-resourced charter school also helped him see the good points of his current position, even though his children still struggled. EL was quite clear about the contrast between his present position and the charter assignment in terms of his colleagues offering support in planning and understanding his students. He also found a sense of relatedness to a degree with his students but was open about having trouble understanding their behavior and motivation, framing their issues as symptoms of parental indifference and lack of security, bringing up Maslow's hierarchy of needs several times. His sense of autonomy was threatened by the state requirements but reinforced by planning with his team, and his co-teacher gave him the sense that he was planning his own course, not just blindly following the district's curriculum guides.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. EL took pride and pleasure in certain aspects of teaching that he experienced from helping his mother in her sixth-grade classroom and then helping out his former first grade teacher for several years, even after he had started college, recalling that they were known in their small district as "Batman and Robin," and talking about how she still checked up on him even now. He recounted how he had attended a high school graduation in his home district recently, realizing that a third of the children graduating were, "my kids." The year he spent as a roving substitute also helped him develop a sense that he could handle whatever came up. After graduating with his teaching license, he worked at a charter school under difficult circumstances, with little support. The contrast with his current public school and the support he found here was profound and helped him appreciate his present setting. EL has not found himself having to redefine his sense of himself as a teacher due to his long-running experience in schools and the opportunities he had to explore different settings and different styles of teaching while he was a long-term substitute teacher. His occasional problems with students were outweighed by his strong affiliation with his team and his school. He used his experience growing up as a student in a mostly rural district as way to explain student misbehavior by contrasting his perception of rural and urban values.

Participant # 10: AM

AM is a high school teacher in a district that is classified as urban with high student poverty and an average student population, one of 47 districts in that category within Ohio. Her school report card reveals that 37% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 75% white, Non-Hispanic, 11% black, 8% multi-racial, 4% Hispanic, and 13% are classified as students with disabilities. Two percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Developing," 32% as "Skilled," and 67% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Fifty-eight percent of her school's students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts, and Math. AM herself is Caucasian, in her second year of teaching.

AM came to the decision to become a teacher while she was in high school. Her mother was a case worker for the Board of Developmental Disabilities so she accompanied her mother to activities and noticed that some of the aides and helpers were providing more assistance than their clients really needed. That started her thinking that someone should be teaching the clients with disabilities to reach their full potential. After high school she became a home care provider through a center that used Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) as a primary educational approach. She realized she wanted to be around people with disabilities and “help them to communicate better and manage their behavior so they can be functional in life.” In addition to her teaching, she continues working as a provider to this day, caring for a young man with Down Syndrome. She attended a large state university for her teacher preparation, getting a variety of field placements and settling on teaching students with Multiple Handicaps (MH). She student taught in an affluent suburban area that had excellent facilities for their MH classes, including three different teachers, so the students could see different teachers and the teachers in the typical classrooms were open and welcoming to their students.

The position she took after graduation did not have a well-developed MH curriculum for their students who would soon be transitioning out of school into the community. She began building bridges to the community slowly in her first year but has taken steps to reach out more and more. She applauds the district’s support for her efforts. The district has provided her with the Unique Learning System which has lessons geared to daily living skills. Her student population does not really face the same accountability pressures as other students because they take Alternate Assessments rather than the Ohio Assessments, but she uses data taken daily on her students’ performance to hold herself accountable. Her supervisor this year has a special education background, which she finds very helpful, as last year’s supervisor did not have experience in special education, let alone MH. She finds herself in the role of advocate for her students as they transition out of K-12 education, fighting to help people understand her students’ potential to live independent productive lives.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. The state expects intervention specialists to meet accountability standards, but in my experience, the teachers and schools do not expect the same results from students identified with IEPs. Teachers in MH classrooms typically assess their students on Alternate Assessments which are more suited to their students and the modified curricula they are taking. Adding to the independence for MH teachers is the likelihood that their supervisors do not have experience or training with their student population. AM is a new teacher in a district that had a poorly developed program for her students, so her steps to improve their instruction have been met with enthusiasm by her supervisors. She is happy this year to have a supportive district supervisor and a principal with experience in special education. These circumstances lead to an enhanced sense of competence, which can be difficult to find with a student population that may still be working on basic daily living skills as 18–21-year-olds. She is in a very good situation for autonomy, with a combination of supportive supervision and looser accountability standards. She has been able to request help and resources to expand her offerings and the district is pleased to provide it in order to offer enhanced service to her students. She has found acceptance and encouragement from her building's teachers as she tries to open her students up to more opportunities with the general population.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. AM is finding a good deal of success and satisfaction in her position. She has moved into a school that did not have a very well-developed MH program prior to her arrival, so she is able to set her own standards and find acceptance within her school. Being isolated from the general school culture before her arrival, her MH class is perceived as making great strides with relatively small improvement. Her original perception that severely disabled people were not being pushed to perform at a higher level was reinforced by teaching in a classroom that reflected that perception. Because of that, she found a reality that she had expected and was not having to redefine herself. Indeed, she is in the position of defining herself for the other teachers in her building who had little previous experience with children with serious physical, emotional, and cognitive disabilities.

Participant # 11: KN

KN is a teacher at an elementary school in a district that is classified as an urban district with high student poverty and a large student population, one of eight such districts in Ohio. His school report card reveals that 100% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 47% white, Non-Hispanic, 21% black, 4% multi-racial, 28% Hispanic, 32% English learners, and 15% are classified as students with disabilities. Three percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Developing," 50% as "Skilled," and 47% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Fifty-seven percent of his school's students were rated as less than proficient in English Language Arts and Math on the Ohio Achievement Assessments in 2018-2019. KN is one of the few African American males in his building.

KN grew up with very poor experiences in elementary school. He reports that he was far behind his peers and received special education services while attending school in the district for which he now works. Despite being told over and over that he would not be successful, he decided to become a teacher between 11th and 12th grades. While he struggled in school, he did not blame his teachers and cited their impact on him as part of the reason he chose teaching. He found success in high school wrestling and went to a small liberal arts college on a partial wrestling scholarship. He described his student teaching experience in a nearby district as okay, but the school was truly dysfunctional. His first year in his current assignment was very difficult, to the point that he packed up his room at the end of the year with the expectation that he would not return. He had students who were fighting frequently, and he was assaulted by one of his students, who went on to make up stories about him. Over the summer he decided to return because of the relationships with the children.

He talked about the students struggling to keep up with the pacing guide and said that he had learned to ignore the pacing guides and base his instruction on the students' levels. He has his students track their own data and talked about the satisfaction that brought his students when they could see their progress graphically. He felt frustrated, but also challenged and motivated by the difficulties of teaching in an urban school. His status as the only male teacher up until fifth grade and one of the few African Americans on his faculty made him feel a double responsibility to stay in his school.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. His first feelings of competence in a school setting came in high school and included his successful experience on the high school wrestling team, finishing eighth in the state and earning a partial scholarship to a small private university. His student teaching experience was over-shadowed by the district's troubles with the state accountability system, as they were at risk of a state takeover if their scores did not improve. The heavy emphasis on testing there was carried into his current placement in an urban district that also faces the possibility of a state takeover. He discussed his frustrations with the district's mandates for pacing and testing without understanding the reality the teachers are seeing in their classrooms. His emphasis in his second year is to build relationships with his students from the start of the school year and not worry about strict enforcement before the students understood he cared for them. He is taking control of his lesson pacing as he feels more competent and building on student relationships this year. He is working out ways to help his students feel they are making progress by charting their own learning and it is also a source of growing competence for his own teaching skills.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. KN’s experience in his first year was difficult enough that he packed his classroom, planning not to return, putting him is sensemaking mode over the summer. To make sense of his role, he used his time to recall the positive relationships he had built to emphasize his importance as a role model for his students. Building on that definition of teacher as leader and role model, and worrying less about class control and mastering the district’s pacing guide, helped him frame his second year from the beginning of the school year. By tying his own identity as a teacher to his identity as a student, he is defining a meaningful role for himself. He is able now to focus on building long-term relationships with his students instead of worrying about distractions form students as impediments to meeting district academic milestones. His background as a competitive wrestler also helps him enjoy and confront challenges and gives him the background experience to reach for success, even after small failures.

Participant # 12: MT

MT is a teacher at a high school that is classified as a suburban school in a district with low student poverty and an average student population, one of 46 districts in that category within Ohio. His school report card reveals that 11% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 81% white, Non-Hispanic, 4% black, 5% multi-racial, 4% Hispanic, 8% Asian, and 13% are classified as students with disabilities. One percent of the building’s teachers are listed as “Developing,” 19% as “Skilled,” and 80% in the highest category of “Accomplished” on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Eighty-two percent of his school’s students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts, and Math. MT himself is Caucasian, in his sixth year of teaching as a math teacher with classes in the high school and the middle school.

MT started thinking about becoming a teacher when he was in elementary school, citing some “really good math teachers” he had in school. He did very well in school, graduating with a 4.0 GPA. His friends were entering potentially lucrative careers like engineering, but his teachers were so positive that he really wanted to be a teacher. He got a full academic scholarship to go to a state school that is well known for its teacher education programs in a program especially geared to future math and science teachers. He got the opportunity to get into classrooms right away and was placed in short-term internships in places that used math and science on a daily basis to get real work accomplished. He gave an example of working on the Toledo water department and fixing a water main break. In the last year of his program, he worked on a research project and decide he would like to become a college professor. For the first time in his life, he faced math that did not make sense to him and changed his mind on that career after a semester.

He then did some substitute teaching in a hometown Catholic school that he did not like because he was too close in age to his pupils and living in the same town made privacy difficult. He was then offered his choice of a middle school or high school position, choosing middle school. He got so busy with coaching and multiple different classes and felt on his own as the high school did not communicate with him. This was an urban school, with students who were struggling, but he spoke highly of his coworkers. He was having success with his students, but his district decided to move him to the high school without talking to him. He was given mixed messages about the move and decided he no longer wanted to work in that district, so moved to his current district. He now teaches in both the middle school and the high school, moving between the two buildings on a daily basis. He plans his lessons so his students have a good deal of freedom in how they work as long as they complete their lessons.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. MT was a very successful student in his own K-12 experience, earning a 4.0 grade average in high school and enjoying his teachers and the subjects he was taking, particularly his math classes. Math is one of the teaching licenses that is currently in demand and has been in demand for years, even going back as far as the 1950s. He faced the questions about income possibilities for teaching versus other mathematics-based careers and even faced pressure from his own math teachers to enter a more lucrative field and tried out that idea after getting his bachelor’s degree for a while before discovering it did not really suit him. The demand for math and science teachers and his own excellent grades did open doors for him, including being admitted on a full academic scholarship to a special program for future Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) teachers. His program required students to go into classrooms from the start and also gave him opportunities to do short internships in math-heavy private businesses, an experience that he felt really contributed to his sense of competence in his teaching.

His first teaching assignment in a middle school found him getting very little direction from his district, so he formulated his own curriculum. Each year at that school he had a different class assignment and had to again plan his own curriculum. He was teaching highly motivated middle school children who were competent enough in math to take high school math, so he was experiencing success with his students that was better than the high school teachers. He spoke glowingly of the rest of his middle school faculty and very negatively of the district and the high school math faculty. When the district then began talking about changing his assignment and leaking details of it to his students, then changing their minds again, he had too much and left. He is happy in his new assignment, moving every day between the middle school and the high school with a lot of autonomy and a feeling of success with his subject and his students. He does not talk as much about his current colleagues but is pleased with his students and their success.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. MT is able to maintain his focus on mathematics in his present position. He did not speak of feeling great closeness with the teachers in his schools. He spoke of the freedom he felt in traveling from one school to another, getting travel and planning time in between schools. As he discussed the benefits of the arrangement, he mentioned the freedom to just go out to his car and listen to music by himself while he ate his lunch. He had a number of complaints about his previous school, mostly about how his administrators and union representatives had misled him and used him without consulting him. He had a lot of autonomy, but not much support, with his supervisors only becoming a presence when they wanted to move him to the high school. He spoke more of his fellow teachers at the last school, especially in the context that the students had been more challenging and their accountability scores were much lower than his present school. With more motivated students, he seemed content to stay pretty much to himself and teach his classes, citing accomplishments in his classes more than he had in reference to his previous school. In his prior district, he defined his role as math teacher, student advocate, and member of a team. In his current position with more compliant, achievement-oriented students, the balance of his identity has swung to the math teacher side of his identity.

Participant # 13: MW

MW is a teacher at a middle school in a district that is classified as urban with high student poverty and an average student population, one of 47 districts in that category within Ohio. His school report card reveals that 100% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 57% white, Non-Hispanic, 20% black, 15% multi-racial, 7% Hispanic, and 20%

are classified as students with disabilities. Ten percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Developing," 48% as "Skilled," and 42% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Fifty percent of his school's students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts, and Math. MW herself is Caucasian, in his fifth year of teaching as a health/physical education teacher.

MW always knew that he liked "working with kids." As a junior in high school, he joined Future Educators of America and continued to develop his interest in teaching. He helped out a health teacher in his senior year and decided he was interested in that area. He entered a state school in their teacher preparation program and struggled the first couple of years with all the requirements in college. He student taught in a private school in a high school and then an elementary school where he butted heads with his cooperating teachers. He was able to secure a position directly after graduating and describes his first year as a "train wreck." He felt a big change in his second year and started to feel like he could let more of his personality show. As he has gone on, he has become even more comfortable and taken a larger role in the school, being an active participant in the eighth-grade team, and the school climate committee. His district appointed a full-time mentor for MW and other teachers, and he was very positive about that experience. He spoke about the pleasure of accompanying his students on a trip to Washington DC and getting to see them outside of the school day.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. MW chose a career in teaching because of feelings of relatedness with one individual high school teacher. It was the first time he really felt that he could see himself as a teacher in a way that allowed him to imagine being able to express his own personality. As he moved into his first teaching assignment, his anxiety and nervousness about being in control of his class kept him from expressing his personality and forming relations with his students, but as the year progressed and into the second year and beyond, he became more comfortable with his responsibilities and felt free to form stronger relationships with his students. He finds more relatedness by joining school-wide and district-wide committees, which he spoke of as being quite rewarding. He struggled with feeling competent in his teaching role the first year, but felt some encouragement from his teacher training, a journey that he described as very arduous and difficult. Having survived that trial, he was confident he could survive the first year. His feelings of competence were further enhanced when he attended a district-wide meeting of health/physical education teachers in which the teachers were complaining about new documentation requirements that he felt were already part of his responsibilities. As a health/PE teacher, he does not have the same level of individual accountability that reading, math, science, and social studies teachers have. He writes his own Student Learning Objectives (SLO) and is responsible for his students' performance on them. He also gets to plan with the other health/PE teacher in his building and is trusted by his principal to plan his own lessons.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. From the beginning of the interview, MW talked about teaching and working with children as a way for him to express his personality. He first considered teaching as a viable option when a high school teacher confronted him about an assignment in a sarcastic way that resonated with him and motivated him to succeed. From that time, he saw that he might be able to be himself and teach. His experiences in his training, including the rigor and strictness he felt in that program, helped him see himself as a professional educator. When he got to middle school, he found students who appreciated his sense of humor, and other teachers who were making a big deal about tasks that he considered an expected part of his job. He did struggle in his first year, but quickly found his footing in his second year and found a way to work with his students that seemed to be satisfying to him and his students. He also had some problems developing his lessons in his first year because the previous teacher had not left him with any lessons, but he worked through that with the other physical education teacher in the building. He enjoys relations with his students and also the rest of the building staff, getting involved in multiple building-wide committees. Another incident that helped him feel more competent occurred in his second year when a state representative came to their district and told them what they should be doing. He and the other physical education teacher in his building felt they were reasonable requests, while other district teachers felt the requests were excessive, leading him to believe that he was more prepared than his peers in other buildings. MW's sense of himself as a teacher followed a steady arc of growth from his own K-12 education, through his college education, through his early success as a health/PE teacher in a middle school. His rigorous teacher training and his experiences with other health/PE teachers in his district reinforced his sense of himself as a professional educator.

Participant # 14: SB

SB is a teacher at a large elementary school that is located in an urban district with high student poverty and an average student population, one of 47 districts in that category within Ohio. Her school report card reveals that 95.6% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 73% white, non-Hispanic, 20% black or multi-racial, and 20% are classified as students with disabilities. Eighty percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Accomplished" and 20% in the highest category of "Skilled" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Fifty-three percent of her school's students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts, with 47% proficient in Math. SB herself is Caucasian, teaching kindergarten in her third year of teaching.

SB did not know she wanted to enter teaching before she went to college. She knew she was good at math and thought maybe she could be an accountant, though she had trouble imagining herself sitting in an office all day as an accountant. Her roommate at the time was a social work major and wondered why anyone would choose a career where they did not feel like they were making a difference. She had another good friend who was an education major, with interesting stories to tell about her experience and she thought that might be a career where every day brought new experiences. She was able to have field experiences in a variety of districts from suburban to urban and student taught in the school where she found employment after graduation. Her impression of the large urban district schools was one of chaos and stress, so she never seriously considered one of those districts.

Her initial teaching assignment was third grade, which has a lot of pressure in Ohio because of the achievement testing and the Third Grade Reading Guarantee. She moved to second grade because of declining enrollment in third grade and growing enrollment in second. When she talked about her successes, she went straight to talking about students who started out the year as difficult behavior challenges and ended the year much improved. She also talked about knowing that every day she is helping at least one student and hopefully more. Her frustration is that she does not feel that teachers are paid salaries that are equivalent to the level of education and professionalism they have earned.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. SB's sense of competence grew from the observations she conducted in her training to her student teaching in the same school in which she is now teaching. Her first assignment after graduation was not only in the same school in which she had student taught, but also in the same grade, which helped her feel she knew what she was doing. In her second year in second grade, she is feeling much more comfortable and secure in her lesson planning. She finds competence in being able to help “at least one person,” especially if that child is one who has struggled with academics or behavior. The fact that she is employed in the same school she used for student teaching and spoke very highly of her supervising teacher gave her a built-in sense of relatedness from the beginning of her employment, and she still counts her as a “pretty good friend.” Her first year as a full-time teacher in the building, she felt overwhelmed by having fifteen teachers in third grade, all in different places and doing different things. She relied on her assistant principal and felt strongly supported and respected by her. Moving from third grade to second grade helped take some of the testing pressure of her and allows her to use more of her professional judgment.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. SB made the decision to teach because she wanted to enter a field that gave her the sense that she could make a difference in people’s lives. She enjoyed her student teaching and made a smooth transition to employment in the same school in which she had student taught. Another prominent feature of her interview was that she specifically mentioned support from her supervisor, who treated her as a professional when disputes rose with children or parents. Many teachers spoke of challenging students, but SB specifically noted the satisfaction she got from seeing these children grow socially and academically. She was able to see past student misbehavior to statements they made that indicated a strong affection, explaining that she thought the students probably did not get the same level of acceptance and affection at home. She was clear that she understood that one or two challenging students enriched her class, but that more than a few disruptive students could tilt the balance into very difficult territory.

SB’s decision to enter teaching to impact children requires her to be able to see that impact in her students. She is able to see her effect on children and particularly relishes the impact she is able to have on children who struggle with behavior or learning. As long as she can see that impact, she reinforces her sense of herself as a teacher. She feels fortunate to have student taught in the same building in which she is now teaching. She defined herself as a teacher during her student teaching and by finding a position in that same school, she is not finding herself in a position where she has to make sense of her newly formed definition of a teacher.

Participant # 15: GG2

GG2 is a teacher at an elementary school in a district that is classified as an urban district with high student poverty and a large student population, one of eight districts in that category within Ohio. His school report card reveals that 100% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 47% white, Non-Hispanic, 21% black, 4% multi-racial, 28% Hispanic, 32% English learners, and 15% are classified as students with disabilities. Three percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Developing," 50% as "Skilled," and 47% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Fifty-seven percent of his school's students were rated as less than proficient in English Language Arts and Math on the Ohio Achievement Assessments in 2018-2019. GG2 himself is Hispanic, in his fourth year of teaching.

GG2 came to the teaching profession as an adult. He initially tried to get a job with the FBI, taking the civil service exam, even though he suspected he would not get a security clearance because of family issues. He came to Ohio with little money and first tried going to school full time but could not afford to give up all income while he was studying. He finished at a school that was more flexible in their class times. He was dissatisfied with the student teaching experience, feeling he gave the school his labor and got very little in return, having to visit food pantries to make ends meet. He student taught and then worked at two different schools that he characterized as very disorganized, with students who were nearly out of control. He compared the resources available to schools in Ohio to schools in his native city on the west coast and found the Ohio schools had much less in the way of funding and support. He did find the students at his present urban school to be less disruptive than at some of the other urban schools he had experienced. When asked about accountability and prescriptive curriculum guides, he spoke of making his own decisions based on student needs and conversations with teachers in higher grade levels. He had done a lot of work to make his room rich, calm, and inviting for his students. He seems happy with his current school, even though he had thought of giving up teaching while working in some of his prior schools.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. GG2 lowered his voice and made sure our interview would be remaining anonymous when I asked him how the testing affected his teaching to tell me he ignored the testing and taught according to what he believed his students needed. In a system that fought teacher autonomy, he found his individual autonomy by ignoring the system, concentrating on his students and his fellow teachers. His competence came from feedback he got from other teachers and taking satisfaction in creating a calm and respectful learning environment. He spoke very respectfully of the teachers in his school and his school's parents. He cited his issues with parents at a couple other schools in which he had taught and student taught as examples where he found no relatedness with his parents, students, or fellow teachers, as specific reasons for not staying in those settings.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. GG2 approached obstacles as challenges to be overcome, rather than reasons to be discouraged. He viewed himself as independent and self-directed. When he talked about the district's mandates to follow curricular pacing guidelines, he made it clear that he did not follow them and instead chose his lessons based on his students' needs. He teaches in the same district, at the same grade level as another participant who spoke at length about an online reading program that she had to use every day, but did not even mention it, instead taking me to his students' cubbies to show me how he had arranged his instruction to meet their needs. He was very proud of the way he had customized his classroom to make it a calmer setting for his students. He also was happy to show me how he customized his lessons and did not rely on his district-provided materials but generated his own teaching tools using his students' needs as his guidepost. This is consistent with his earlier decisions to follow his own path, including applying to the FBI even though he knew he would not qualify, moving away from his home to attend college on the other side of the country, then finishing his teacher education while working full-time and taking evening classes. He clearly found meaning in his role as a professional teacher, working in the best interests of his students, and did not choose to follow the more restrictive rules of his district.

Participant # 16: NH

NH is a teacher at an alternative school in a district that is classified as urban with high student poverty and an average student population, one of 47 districts in that category within Ohio. Her district report card reveals that 100% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 53% white, Non-Hispanic, 24% black, 14% multi-racial, 8% Hispanic, and 19% are classified as students with disabilities. Thirty percent of the district's teachers are listed as "Developing," 37% as "Skilled," and 33% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Sixty-two percent of her district's students were rated as less than proficient on the district's official Ohio School Report Card in 2018-2019. NH herself is Caucasian, in her third year of teaching.

She attended a very liberal college that allowed students to take classes in many disciplines, so she graduated with no specific focus. She wanted to work in a deaf school and was able to work in the Colorado School for the Deaf while in college and really enjoyed it. She did not want to move after graduating and started taking classes in nursing because her mother had been a nurse. Family circumstances caused her to move back to Ohio and she started working in a pre-school, but decided she needed pursue a formal credential, settling on Special Education. She worked at a Charter School as an intervention specialist for one and a half years until she had some disagreements with the administration. She is happy with her current placement and feels respected and valued there. She worries about the future working there as there are conversations about drastic changes in how they are going to deliver their services.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. NH had a strong desire to function autonomously. Her major complaint about her previous school was that she was not granted the freedom to function independently, even as a teacher’s aide. She was insulted to be asked to do clerical jobs while she was learning about her students and building a sense of competence. She left that position as soon as she earned her license and found a job teaching emotionally disturbed children in a separate facility. In her district, that meant a great deal of freedom to function as she saw best, with minimal oversight as long as things in her class seemed to be going smoothly. Her students were not expected to pass all the tests and their accountability actually went back to their home schools, so that was not a direct pressure she felt. When she first took her present position, she was taking over for another teacher who was leaving in the middle of the year, after being unable to control her students. She spoke of how poorly behaved her students were when she started, with one student throwing stuff across the room during the lesson she taught as part of her interview. She maintained a calm demeanor and she thought that was probably why she was able to get the position. She spoke proudly of her students' achievements, especially in light of their behavior when she first started with them. She did not speak much of her other teachers but spoke at length about her relationships with her students.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. NH had a strong need to feel competent and independent. As she told her story, she spoke of many changes of position or career, frequently citing a sense that she was no longer appreciated enough for her worth to the organization. Her details about each step in her career journey included a challenge she was given, and her success in overcoming that challenge. She spoke about recognition from others within her organization at each site and then how she was eventually not given the autonomy she felt she deserved and moved to another position. She was clear that she felt she earned the respect of her supervisors and would move on if they did not give her the proper respect. As she spoke about her plans for the next year, there was a tentative tone to her talk, and a clear fear that it might not suit her if it did not go the way she wanted. The core of her identity seemed to be her own sense of herself as an accomplished individual in all of her positions who deserved more respect than she was given.

Participant # 17: CK

CK is a teacher at an elementary school in a district that is classified as a small-town district with low student poverty and a small student population, one of 111 districts in that category within Ohio. His school report card reveals that 29% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 85% white, Non-Hispanic, 4% black, 7% multi-racial, 3% Hispanic, and 10% are classified as students with disabilities. Zero percent of the building's teachers are listed as “Developing,” 19% as “Skilled,” and 81% in the highest category of “Accomplished” on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Seventy-four percent of his school's students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts and Math. CK himself is Caucasian, in his fourth year of teaching.

CK entered teaching after several years working in banking. He had originally been interested in a career in teaching, but was attending college on a football scholarship, so he did not have time for all of the school placements he would have had to attend during the school day. His experience in banking colored his perceptions of teaching and the challenges of that profession. He spoke repeatedly of the way his fellow teachers complained about things that just seemed part of the job to him. He took a good deal of pride in his ability to relate to his students and their parents. He talked in particular about his pleasure in finding ways to reach children who were considered "difficult" by other teachers.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. As he discussed his background in private banking, he stressed the increase in autonomy he felt in his current position. His recollections of banking often centered on his lack of control over his career and decisions, in contrast to his teaching life. He felt that his ability to see measurable progress in his students was different than his banking career, in which he often did not know whether he was successful. His biggest pleasure when he was in banking came from working directly with clients to help them solve problems with their finances and he was able to build relationships with his students and his faculty.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. CK grounded everything about his identity as a teacher in his experiences in private business working in banks and in his college career as a football player who went to school on an athletic scholarship. He is a six-foot tall, 300 pound male teaching first grade in a building with few other male teachers and none in the primary grades. His attitude was that teaching had its struggles but was considerably more satisfying than his banking experience. His past work with customers struggling with their finances helped him understand how to help parents struggling with their children. He felt that his banking supervisors were sometimes arbitrary and demanding in ways that made his principal seem very supportive and helpful. He appreciated all the input from his principal and his peers but was dismissive of their complaints about excessive demands. His experience with the arbitrary accountability he found in banking made him less concerned about the accountability system that governs schools. He said that he appreciated knowing exactly what was expected of him and being able to get feedback from his tests and evaluations that reflected those expectations. As he spoke, his pleasure in his student interactions and their relationships with him were clear indicators of how he continued to make sense of his role as a teacher.

Participant # 18: GK

GK is a teacher at a middle school in a district that is classified as urban with high student poverty and an average student population, one of 47 districts in that category within Ohio. His school report card reveals that 100% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 60% white, Non-Hispanic, 17% black, 13% multi-racial, 10% Hispanic, and 26% are classified as students with disabilities. Thirty-six percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Developing," 36% as "Skilled," and 27% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Fifty-five percent of her school's students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts, and Math. GK himself is Caucasian, in his fourth year of teaching.

GK came to the decision to become a teacher as an adult. He had been working in his wife's family business when he and his wife divorced, leaving him without a purpose. He began volunteering at a program for elementary school children and found it to be to his liking and something that he did well. He eventually talked with the program’s director, who urged him to pursue teaching, which he did at a local university, getting a license to teach grades 6-9 in social studies or English. While student teaching at one school, he made the acquaintance of curriculum coaches at another local school and went to that school when he graduated. He found success on the metrics from the state tests, even though he did not try to tailor his teaching directly to the tests. He cited his relationships with his team of teachers, his mentor and good relations with his academic coach as aspects that had helped make his early years successful. He believes his job as a middle school teacher is to help his students grow both academically and socially. Relationships were important to him and he felt it was important to treat his students with respect. He enjoys pointing out to his students that they use colorful language all the time and he is asking them to understand how others have used colorful language in their writing. Though he felt the students were challenging at times, he felt his team of teachers helped him balance out his work well.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. Because GK did not start out with a teaching career in mind, he developed a sense of competence in working with children over a period of time, in different environments. He started with low stakes, low responsibility interactions, moving gradually to more responsibility to deciding to teach, to feeling success at teaching. He found success in his students’ test scores which showed him doing well in “value-added” categories. As he developed a sense of confidence in his competence, he was able to discuss his teaching professionally with his curriculum coaches and argue the merits of his lessons. He found autonomy in teaching English/Language Arts because the standards for his subject can be satisfied with a variety of content. His sense of relatedness is found in his relations with the rest of his faculty and his students. He valued his relationship with his students and attributed his ability to form relationships with them to his success on student test metrics. He defined his role as a middle school teacher in terms of his relationships with students and teaching his students to be more successful in their own relationships with peers.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. GK turned to teaching as a refuge from his personal struggles, finding relationships and competence to replace his feelings of loss from his own broken marriage and disruption of his role as a father. He spoke frequently and appreciatively about his team and how well they worked together. When he referenced his own individual achievements according to the tests, he also included credit for his whole team. he placed a great deal of importance on the relationships he was building with his students and his team, specifically stating that his, "primary focus is relationships." He spoke a lot about a disagreement with his academic coach, indicating that he felt his coach was not giving him the credit he had earned as a professional. The impact of early success on state accountability measures seemed to help him stake claim to his sense of himself as a successful professional educator.

It is interesting that he defaulted to his co-teachers' perceptions that students used to be much easier to teach a few years ago. He is in his fourth-year teaching and already expresses that he sees a change in the mindsets of the kids in that, "They have this entitled kind of attitude." Despite that perception, he believes that having a great team that feels like family gives him a sense of belonging that he is looking for after the dissolution of his own family.

Participant # 19: NK

NK is a teacher at a middle school in a district that is classified as small town with low student poverty and a small student population, one of 11 districts in that category within Ohio. Her school report card reveals that 44% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 84% white, non-Hispanic, 0% black, 11% multi-racial, and 11% are classified as students with disabilities. Sixty-one percent of the building’s teachers are listed as “Accomplished” and 39% in the highest category of “Skilled” On the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Seventy-one percent of her school’s 7th grade students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts, with 64% proficient in Math. NK herself is Caucasian, in her first year of teaching as a fully licensed teacher, with three years’ experience teaching in a charter school as an intervention specialist before that.

NK related how she had initially worked as a case worker for elderly Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (MRDD) clients after graduating from college and then switched to collegiate coaching, before deciding to pursue a teaching license as an intervention specialist. She also considered becoming a lawyer because she thought that would be a good choice for advocating for others. She worked in a private Montessori school for three years while she was getting her teaching license but had some concerns because of the requirement that parents had to pay to enroll their children or get a voucher from the state. The Montessori school had not had the same pressure under the state accountability program, though they did administer the tests, but did not put too much emphasis on them or prepare for them. She appreciated the educational philosophy, but not the leadership, so she looked for another school and came to one where her daughter could attend.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. She teaches in a Multi-Handicapped (MH) classroom that is somewhat separate from the rest of school, but she has found the other teachers to be receptive to including her students as much as possible. She feels that she has the autonomy she wants and is still able to reach out to the rest of the school as needed. NK finds autonomy in her teaching license. The MH classes were once totally separate from regular school buildings but have been brought into the typical school buildings in the last ten to 15 years since the passage of the latest revisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 2004 and 2015. Changes to federal special education law required schools to include children on Individual Education Plans to participate in the typical school activities to the greatest extent possible, so schools started placing their MH units in mainstream buildings instead of housing them separately. While the units moved into the schools, it has taken longer for them to be integrated into the culture of the schools. MH teachers, therefore had more autonomy and less pressure within the accountability structure. When NK took her present position, there was not a well-defined role within the building for her students. She has been working to establish a more inclusive environment and has been encouraged to do so by her administration. She finds autonomy in this area and also competence because her early efforts have met with success and acceptance in the building. The other faculty in the building are very complimentary about her efforts to include her students.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. NK seemed satisfied with her experience, but also somewhat detached from her school. She spoke about how well her class was going but seemed to be saying that it was not very challenging to her. Speaking about her decision to teach and choosing this particular school seemed to be motivated as much by finding a place for her daughter to go to school and the pay and benefits, as by the class she was teaching. Her initial reason for choosing to teach was to find a career that allowed her to advocate for people. She is able to do that in her current position as teacher in a middle school MH classroom, saying that she likes finding people’s strengths and encouraging them to grow. She does not mind the relative isolation of teaching in a MH classroom, saying 90% of the time she enjoys being off by herself, saying that the administration supports her most of the time, but just does not know what her students need. She specified that she was happy with her current placement, but qualified it by saying, “for now.” In her conversation, she spoke several times about not having to work very hard. She feels her strength as a teacher truly resides in her ability to work with students who present behavioral issues and thinks she would definitely transfer if an opportunity to work in, “a behavioral position” came up.

Participant # 20: BM

BM is a teacher at a high school in a district that is classified as urban with high student poverty and an average student population, one of 47 districts in that category within Ohio. Her school report card reveals that 37% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 75% white, Non-Hispanic, 11% black, 8% multi-racial, 4% Hispanic, and 13% are classified as students with disabilities. Two percent of the building’s teachers are listed as “Developing,” 32% as “Skilled,” and 67% in the highest category of “Accomplished” on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Fifty-eight percent of her school’s students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts and Math. BM himself is Caucasian, in his fourth year of teaching as an intervention specialist.

When he entered college, he thought he wanted to be a writer, but realized that would be a difficult career in which to make a living wage. He played baseball and looked around at different career possibilities and settled on becoming an early childhood educator, partially because his mother was a building secretary at a local charter school that specialized in teaching children with disabilities. The more he thought about being a teacher, the more he thought special education might be the best fit for him. He left that college after his baseball coach got fired, taking some classes at a local community college before transferring to a nearby private university in exercise science. He had a conversation with his mother as he was on his way to sign up for the exercise science classes and realized that special education was the way he wanted to go. The charter school at which his mother worked gave him a job while he was still in school and his university worked with him so he could work and go to school at the same time.

After graduating, he had multiple interviews and accepted a position in a grade 4-6 building, with ten students, no aides, and no planning period. His started off with a family death, so he missed the first week and went to work before he was really ready. He was offered another position at the end of that school year in the same district but accepted a position in another district as a high school math intervention specialist. He teaches some classes as a co-teacher and some resource room classes. He finds that his co-teachers vary in their acceptance of his role as a co-teacher. In his third year in this high school, he has taken on the additional roles of head baseball coach, athletics site manager for fall and winter, and head IEP writer. He is motivated to integrate his students more into the general school population and frustrated by the fact that his students who are identified as having special educational needs are required to take the same tests with minor accommodations.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. As a high school intervention specialist with two sections of self-contained math and three sections that he co-teaches, he finds different levels of autonomy in each class. In the resource room classes, he decides what and how he is going to cover the material. He spoke highly of one of the teachers with whom he co-teaches, but spoke of feeling like he was treated like an aide in another class, “just here to check the box.” He feels confined by the accountability system and the need to teach struggling students very difficult math topics they are not likely to need later, but on which they will be tested. His sense of competence in his teaching has been challenged by his coaching and other duties. He accepted a position as the head baseball coach and athletic facilities manager for half of the school year, which both occupy a lot of his time. He also accepts every opportunity to take substitute teacher duties during the day for which he gets extra pay. He is adjusting to all the demands on his time by trying to ration his workload and confine it to school hours as much as possible. He gets satisfaction from students returning to see him and telling him about their successes. He did not say much about collaboration with other teachers or feeling a strong sense of being a part of the culture of the building, though he participates in multiple facets of the building life.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. BM struggles with the difference between what he is expected to teach to his special education students in high school math classes and their apparent ability to understand and master the topics. Teaching the quadratic formula to students who do not know their basic math facts is difficult for him to justify. He moderates that problem by co-teaching with a regular math teacher, so he has a mix of student abilities to work with and teaching in a self-contained class where he can modify the curriculum as needed. The promise of co-teaching in a full partnership is something that he has found fulfilled at times and other times it is more elusive, with him being treated as a glorified aide. The teachers' salary scale was an issue for him, with him taking on extra duties for small stipends, such as offering to substitute on his plan period, writing IEPs for the other Intervention Specialists in the building, and serving as the school's Athletic Director during the fall sports seasons. Though he had difficulty making sense of some of the material he was asked to teach, his biggest joy came from watching his students grow up from their freshmen to senior years. As an Intervention Specialist, he gets to work with some of his students over multiple years and thus gets to see their growth firsthand. When I explicitly asked him about what he enjoyed about teaching, he talked about student growth and pivoted quickly to say it was frustrating and "an unfair profession. I mean people take it for granted." He went on to talk about how educators were not really held accountable for poor performance, and that educators do not take their profession seriously enough.

Participant # 21: NS

NS is a teacher at a middle school in a district that is classified as urban with high student poverty and an average student population, one of 47 districts in that category within Ohio. Her school report card reveals that 100% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 57% white, Non-Hispanic, 20% black, 15% multi-racial, 7% Hispanic, and 20% are classified as students with disabilities. Ten percent of the building's teachers are listed as "Developing," 48% as "Skilled," and 42% in the highest category of "Accomplished" on the Ohio teacher evaluation rating scale. Fifty percent of her school's students were rated as proficient in English Language Arts, and Math. NS herself is Caucasian, in her sixth year of teaching.

NS came to the decision to become a teacher as an adult. She took advantage of post-secondary opportunities in high school and was able to have one year of college finished before she actually enrolled in college. During that time, she was considering a nursing career and actually taking classes at a community college with her mother as a classmate. After her first year, she went to a residential college that is well known for its education program. Her initial ambition had been to become a pediatric oncologist, but as she heard more from her mother about the messy side of nursing, she decided to choose another field, so she explored the education possibilities at her college and decided on special education. She loved "every minute of it" and volunteered in Special Olympics and other opportunities in schools.

She graduated with a license as an intervention specialist and got a job in her current school. She co-taught some classes and had some self-contained classes. When the building teacher with the multi-handicapped room retired the next year, she moved into that position, and is in that room for her fifth year. The tradition in the classroom had been toward isolation and NS has moved it steadily in the direction of more inclusion in the building. While I was talking to her in her room, the assistant principal stopped by and chatted casually with each of the children. She does not feel isolated from the rest of the faculty and believes her time as an inclusion teacher probably helped with that. She likes that every day is different, with new challenges always arising, and that she has very frequent contact with the parents of her students. She feels less pressure from accountability because her students do not take the state assessments, but have Alternate Assessments more geared to their needs, have multiple health problems, and other factors that impair their learning, so she feels free to plan her lessons based on what she believes is correct. Her only question about staying in her current position is concern that her family may move to a home that is 100 miles from her school.

Elements of Self-Determination Theory. NS's journey to becoming a teacher began with exploring more medically oriented careers and ended with her teaching Multiple Handicapped (MH) students, including students with serious medical problems. Her beginnings in medical studies seem well suited to her developing sense of competence in her chosen field. In my personal experience as a teacher and administrator, teachers used their own feelings of inadequacy for handling medical problems as reasons to avoid students who had multiple handicaps. Moving from medicine to special education with a concentration in low incidence disabilities was a natural path for her and her preparation program helped by placing her in schools very early in her program, as well as her eagerness to volunteer in schools and with Special Olympics. To some extent, MH classes and their teachers have still maintained separation from the schools, even as they have moved into regular school buildings. NS connections to the larger school community and a sense of relatedness were helped by her starting in her current building as an eighth-grade language arts teachers, co-teaching some classes and having other classes as self-contained special education units. She shared lessons with the other Language Arts teachers and got to know them well, so she already had a social base when she moved in her second year to the MH unit. Her sense of relatedness extends to her parents because of the fragile medical situations of her students and the need to communicate daily about those medical events. Because her students are on Alternative Testing and modified curricula due to their specific medical and educational needs, she is able to set her own agenda more than teachers in regular education or mild to moderate special education.

Sensemaking Properties Found in Interview. NS was very committed to her identity as a teacher. She seemed to be on a straight path from her motivation to study teaching to the realization of that ambition. She felt valued in her school and could see her effect on the students under her care and the school in general. Her definition of herself as a teacher was finding actualization in her reality. She saw her identity as a professional teacher reflected by her school's faculty and administration. She spent a year as a co-teacher in other classes before going to a self-contained class, using that experience to further integrate her students into the larger schools, and establishing herself as a respected expert on her students' needs. Because of the obvious needs of her students, her daily disruptions were not discouraging to her, but confirmation that she was succeeding in a challenging position. The ability to work with her students' parents, therapists, and other teachers reinforce her image of herself as a team member and expert in her field.

Overall Trends and Findings

For this study, I was able to interview 21 different teachers in the first few years of their careers. Their class assignments ranged from elementary to high school, from self-contained special education to co-teacher, from multiple subjects to specific subjects. Eleven participants were female and 10 male. Only one of my participants was African American, despite the fact that 13 taught in districts with large minority populations. Two participants were native speakers of Spanish who had moved to Ohio from areas with majority Hispanic populations. One thing that was very clear was that each of the teachers came to that decision for their own reasons and each had their own individual story. For that reason, it is difficult to offer clear generalizations that apply to all. There were trends in how the teachers viewed their roles that are worth discussing further.

Self-Determination Theory

SDT suggests that humans have three basic psychological needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence that have clear effects on one's sense of well-being, motivation, and satisfaction. The participants in my study had the most commonality in finding relatedness in their role as a teacher. Almost every teacher featured the relational aspect of teaching as a primary motivation for becoming a teacher and even stronger support for continuing as a teacher. Teachers such as KC, who expressed the most concern about their careers were very likely to discuss the strength they found from their peers and the relationships formed with their students, parents, or mentors. Several teachers talked about struggling especially in their first year and cited their teaching team, mentor, or administration with rescuing them and helping them understand their position. JR and MB talked about planning to find another career after an especially difficult first year but returned because of bonds they had formed with either students or peers. Even some of the teachers who expected to struggle in their first year were surprised by the difficulties they found and relied on relations with their peers to help them through. KC, GG, JK, and six other teachers who worked on teams that functioned well were vocal about the importance of their colleagues in helping them feel successful. These teachers were proud of their teams and several talked about the qualities of their own teacher teams versus the other teachers in their building. Five teachers mentioned their principals or other supervisors as essential to their survival in their first year in response to my question about any first-year problems and assistance they had gotten to help. Generally speaking though, the teachers were more likely to mention their peers than their supervisors.

The relationships formed with students or witnessing student growth were cited as important for JK, GH, AN, and other teachers. KN, the one African American teacher, was packed up and ready to resign after his first year but returned finally because of his perceptions that his students of color would benefit from forming relationships with him serving as a clear role model for them. Most of my participants taught in urban districts with students who struggled academically or behaviorally. Of the 21 teachers I interviewed, 15 were able to talk about satisfaction with individual student success. Regardless of accountability pressures, GG2, EL, and other teachers who made individual connections with students were most likely to express satisfaction with teaching. Several talked about feeling very happy and fulfilled by seeing changes in difficult students and enjoyed that challenge as long as the number of severely struggling students did not exceed an undefined threshold.

SB, MB, and two of the other teachers were struggling with feeling a lack of competence in the face of what they perceived to be extreme student needs, even while speaking of occasional success with individual students. MB and KC talked about quitting or transferring to another district because there were just too many students who had behavior problems for them to concentrate on teaching the curriculum. This expression of a struggle to maintain order in their classrooms was a theme that came up again and again, even among teachers who were not talking about leaving. KC told me she could see why teachers would quit, even though she was planning to stay. There was a pervasive feeling among most of the teachers that they were simply asked to do more for their students than was possible. State accountability standards were very discouraging for some teachers. Ohio teachers are evaluated on a system that places half of their final score on their students' success on annual testing. Those tests are standardized for many grades and subjects and developed by the individual district for other grades or subjects. Each teacher gets an evaluation that reflects the student growth measure assigned by the testing system and color coded to reflected whether the teacher's students were above the expected level of growth (green), on level, (light brown), or below expected (dark brown). Teachers at either end of the scale mentioned their value-added scores as points of pride (JK and GK) or frustration (MB, KC, and KN). Teachers who focused first on the relational side of teaching were more able to give themselves some leeway on the academic side of teaching and feel competence because they believed they were helping students develop social skills that were more important than strictly academic skills.

Feelings of autonomy were linked to both relatedness and competence. JK and GG2 had a strong sense of relatedness and were able to talk about the accountability standards as if they were an annoyance that got in the way of their real job. They were likely to point to progress made by individuals as proof they were doing well and not worry about test. The competence and reinforcement gained from their teaching teams helped some teachers express their autonomy as part of their team identity. Teachers who were more concerned about following the established curriculum guides and improving their test scores, such as MB, KC, JR, were more liable to say they felt constrained and limited by the standards. They felt they were not reaching the individual students that needed their help the most and seemed to talk more about student misbehavior.

Sensemaking Properties

The concept of sensemaking applies at times of change or dissonance in people's lives. The teachers in my study were selected because they are at early points in their careers, at a point between initial licensure and becoming a professional educator with a five-year license. AF and other teachers who found what they expected of their professions did not need to redefine their image of teaching, while teachers who were surprised by what they found were required to make new meaning of their roles or seek another career.

The most common area of the teacher identity that differed from expectation was in the way students behaved or struggled with academic progress. MB personified a severe example of this, despite the fact that one of her motivations for becoming a teacher centered on her desire to make a difference in the lives of underserved children. The participants in my study were overwhelmingly Caucasian with positive memories of their own school experience as students. In many cases, the schools in which they were teaching were urban and struggling to keep up with the state standards. As typically compliant and interested students themselves, their interactions with their teachers had been pleasant and encouraging. KC, AN, and EL were among the teachers with positions in urban schools and personal experiences in rural schools who commented on the difference between their current students and their own memories of being a K-12 student. As teachers themselves, they found themselves in frequent angry, negative interactions with students who were having problems keeping up and not being able to spend as much time as they wanted with the compliant students. The restrictions imposed by district and state curriculum guides, accompanied by frequent standardized testing, led to doubts and questioning of their basic identities, especially as they retrospectively examine their definition of teacher.

Teachers in my study seemed to rely on some principles of sensemaking more than others as they tried to understand their roles. Social cues were especially prevalent in teacher conversations as they tried to define their positions relying on help from their coworkers for survival in their first year or two and looking to their teams to help understand why reality seemed to be different from their preconceptions. Typically, teachers spend most of the day isolated from other teachers, with their students for social feedback. When that feedback is mostly negative, they often turn to their peers to help them understand their setting. The explanations for their difficulties may not be backed up by data or systematic research but is accepted by the teaching community as a whole and varies from school to school and even within schools by teacher teams. Part of the re-definition reinforced by peers includes a sense of separation from their students as somehow less motivated or less socially able than they were as students.

Intersection of Sensemaking and Self-Determination Theory

SDT speaks to personal motivation while sensemaking theory speaks to identity formation. Taken together, they present a more complete picture than either alone. Teachers with strong senses of the three major components of SDT were typically satisfied with their roles and not forced to redefine themselves. Teachers who struggled with their competence, autonomy, or relatedness were likely to have to re-examine themselves as teachers. Once they were in sensemaking mode, they often turned to their peers to help them understand their profession. Teachers who were overwhelmed by feeling a lack of competence and autonomy were likely to want to either retire or find a different district. Some teachers reported relying on social or technical support from administrators, peers, or academic coaches in getting through a difficult situation, but still did not feel competent enough to continue teaching. In the next chapter, I will examine how both frameworks may contribute to an understanding of teachers in an era of high accountability.

Chapter V: Discussion

In the years since standardized testing and accountability measures became the norm in Ohio schools, the scope of accountability has grown from a statewide set of standards in some academic areas with reporting of school success on a limited number of tests, to standards for every discipline and student test scores resulting in consequences for individual teachers and districts as a whole. Repeated struggles with test scores have resulted in state takeovers of whole districts. Teachers and administrators have responded by paying closer attention to the standards and the tests at all grade levels. Research has indicated that teachers enter the field for reasons that are not reflected in test scores alone (Bruinsma & Jansen, 2010; Manuel & Hughes, 2006; Thomson et al., 2010). The difference between teachers' motivations for entering the field and the reality of standardized curricula and testing is at the root of my research questions. I began my study with three research questions:

Research question 1. How do beginning teachers make sense of their chosen profession in light of their initial reasons for becoming teachers?

Research question 2. What are the points of influence on a teacher's sense of professional identity that may offer school leaders the opportunity to impact beginning teachers' sensemaking?

Research question 3. How do the principles of Self-Determination Theory interact with sensemaking to influence a beginning teacher's decision to remain or leave the teaching profession?

To explore those questions, I interviewed 21 teachers who were in their first few years of teaching, expecting to find out how teachers were able to deal with the reality of the profession at a crucial time of their careers, just as they were getting used to the day-to-day demands of the job and before they have so many years of experience that they are committed to staying in the field in order to get the retirement benefits of a teacher’s pension. I used the sensemaking framework proposed by Weick (1995) as a basis for my inquiry. Weick suggests that individuals have a sense of themselves that they keep intact unless something disturbs that and requires them to rethink their identity and find new meaning to help them understand their changed circumstances. Sensemaking occurs over a period of time and relies on environmental and retrospective cues to arrive at new conclusions. Individuals who do not find any dissonance between their current reality and their sense of themselves within that context do not actively engage in sensemaking. To understand those teachers better, I also used Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a framework to examine teachers’ motivations to maintain their current sense of identity or redefine themselves. SDT suggests that all humans have the basic needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Both SDT and sensemaking are heavily reliant on one’s social context to understand their motivations and sense of self.

Sensemaking involves an attempt to understand one’s present situation using cues from multiple sources and occurs at times of change in one’s life. If everything in one’s life is going smoothly on autopilot, there is no particular reason to bother looking closely at one’s situation in life. It is at times of change in one’s circumstances that one has to make sense of a new reality (Weick, 1995). My research questions sought to understand how teachers make sense of their careers at the present time. The literature on teacher retention suggests that nearly one-half of licensed teachers are not teaching by their fifth year after graduation (Tricarico et al., 2015; Schaefer et al., 2012). Something has happened to these teachers who spent four to six years in college, training to be teachers and spending thousands of dollars, to take them away from their chosen field and look elsewhere for employment.

Becoming a teacher with a classroom responsibility and studying to become a teacher are very different things. Student teachers work in a classroom with routines and practices that have been established by a seasoned veteran. Student teachers are not graded on the testing results achieved by their students on standardized tests held late in the school year and not reported until the next school year. Student teachers leave at the end of their assignment and graduate with a license to teach by themselves in their own classroom. Depending on their license, they have an easy or difficult time finding a position, but they will no longer have all the support they had during their training. Novice teachers find themselves in novel settings and have to make sense of their chosen career, while often feeling overwhelmed by their new duties and responsibilities. Ohio licenses new teachers as four-year Resident Educators who must complete a series of tasks during their first four years before getting a five-year Professional Teaching License.

Teachers' decisions about continuing or quitting the field may also depend on their motivation to continue working through the typical early career struggles. To help understand my participants' motivations, I turned to SDT as a framework to explore their willingness to continue through early problems and ambiguities and find their own identities as professional teachers. As I reviewed the transcripts, I looked for mentions of competence or doubt, belonging, and feelings of autonomy.

Because sensemaking occurs at times of change, I chose to interview teachers in their first five to six years of practice. Weick characterizes sensemaking as having seven properties. He states that sensemaking is:

1. Grounded in identity construction
2. Retrospective
3. Enactive of sensible environments
4. Social
5. Ongoing
6. Focused on and by extracted cues

7. Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995, p. 17)

I used narrative inquiry (NI) as a methodology, because it allows participants to relate the story of their journey from choosing to teach, to training to teach, to teaching in a classroom. By asking participants to tell their own story in their own way, they can emphasize the parts of their story that are most important to them. I asked each participant to tell me about their journey from wanting to become a teacher, to university training, to their current position. I told them they could tell their story in any way they wanted, chronologically or not, and that I would not interrupt, but would ask clarifying or encouraging questions as I felt needed.

My plan was to interview at least 20 teachers in a variety of districts and a variety of assignments to look for similarities and differences. I used my contacts in local districts to suggest possible participants to me and introduce me via email. I wrote to each suggested participant, requesting half an hour of their time to talk about their careers, including the consent form as an attachment if they agreed to meet. All meetings were held in the teachers' schools, except for one held at a nearby coffee shop. The conversations were recorded, then transcribed professionally. After I read the transcription multiple times, I sent each participant a summary of the interview, asking if they were accurate and volunteering to meet again if interested. A few teachers corrected small mistakes, but none wanted to correct any large misunderstandings or meet again. I was eventually able to secure 21 interviews. I asked them to tell me about their journey to become a teacher, and how they were doing in their present setting. I asked clarifying questions or prompting questions if needed but encouraged them to tell their story in any order that felt best to them.

Interaction of Self-Determination Theory and Sensemaking

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has been used in education to look at how students can be motivated to perform better, but I did not find instances where SDT was used to help understand teachers' motivations to stay in the profession. The three major components of SDT—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—would appear to be under threat in the current high stakes accountability structure of K-12 education.

School and district administrations operate under the possibility of being sanctioned if standardized test scores do not improve on a yearly basis, until all students are proficient at a specified level. Possible sanctions can range from bad publicity on published tests, with negative effects on local property values, to complete takeover of a school district by the state education department. This district pressure is passed down to pressure on the individual teacher in their classroom. As discussed in my literature review, this can lead to a narrowing of curriculum and a highly prescriptive teaching environment, especially in districts that are nearing some of the more severe restrictions. This is a direct threat to a teacher's ability to plan and act autonomously, either on their own, or within their teaching team.

As a teacher under scrutiny by the current accountability system, one's competence is reduced to a score on a standardized test, which may be publicly shared within one's community, and is definitely a part of one's annual evaluation. The raw test scores are intended to be augmented by "value-added" scores which are intended to show a student's growth compared to a typical student testing at the same baseline scores. The hope is that the excellent teacher will add more than expected growth to the student's scores after one year of instruction. This calculation is hidden and mysterious to the teachers, though. It is also not the score that is reported most often in the public media coverage of a district's test scores. For simplicity's sake, newspapers and television stations tend to report the overall scores of a district compared to other districts within their reporting area. These overall scores are generally not very positive in struggling high poverty urban districts and thus reinforce their negative image.

The last component of motivation discussed in SDT is a sense of relatedness. Teachers can find a sense of relatedness in their interactions with students or in their teaching teams. In large urban districts, teachers often speak of discipline issues they face and how those issues impede their ability to teach their students. The other source of relatedness for teachers is their co-workers and administrators.

Sensemaking is an occasional occurrence that comes into play when one's understanding of reality comes into conflict with the lived experience of reality. SDT allows one to examine the ongoing status of one's motivation to continue on a specific path. Taken together, the two frameworks help shed light on how teachers view their chosen profession and their own continued careers in teaching. My interest in using the two lenses to examine teacher retention is to not only see what causes teachers to reframe their professional identities with sensemaking, if that is occurring, but also to see what forces might be motivating and sustaining teachers, or conversely, discouraging them.

Trends Noticed

The teachers I interviewed who were most discouraged about teaching included some teachers who decided to teach when they were very young and felt the urge to help out children they perceived as less fortunate. The most extreme example of this was MB, who brought her own positive experiences in Catholic schools with her in her desire to help out children in high poverty schools. She even enrolled in a graduate school that specifically trained teachers to work in under-resourced schools. Her actual experience working in an inner-city Chicago parochial school was considerably more difficult than she anticipated, with the children being far needier and the school even less resourced than expected. Barely making it through one year, she returned to Ohio, planning to give up teaching altogether. KC had a similar path in that she also felt that she had always wanted to be a teacher from the time she was in elementary school. She too thought she had the “patience” to work in a low-income school. She spoke of one teacher who “looked like a Barbie doll, with hair that was big and curly every day and she was the best and the sweetest.” She found actual teaching to be very difficult, with a lot of tasks that took her away from the classroom. Others, who chose teaching as children, were still positive about teaching. They often shared more experience in schools before becoming licensed and being on their own. Examples include two children of teachers who spent a lot of time with their parents in their schools, helping out and getting to know the cultures. Others in this category spent time as tutors after college before getting their own classroom.

At another extreme were teachers who did not decide to become teachers until they were well into their college studies, or even later as adults. Several of these teachers talked about looking for a sense of meaning in their work, including one who was working in banking and not happy about it, one who was working for his wife’s family in a job that he had not really chosen, another who was in college pursuing accounting without any real passion, and one who was on a path to academia and decided to put his knowledge to practical use teaching others in high school. Each of these individuals had alternate experiences to help them frame their teaching careers.

Teachers also varied in their reactions to standardized testing and accountability measures. There was a range of responses, from some teachers who completely ignored the testing, to teachers who felt very discouraged by their scores. One teacher who expressed support for testing came from a background in private business and was pleased that the testing gave him direct feedback that he felt was useful and clear. Another small group of teachers who did not worry about testing were intervention specialists who were already more focused on individual student success and the goals they set for each student based on measured performance. In particular, teachers of children with multiple handicaps did not pay as much attention to state assessments or accountability measures. Many of their students are given individualized tests, and often, the building administrators do not have much experience with very low incidence handicaps and do not really know what to expect from these children. The teachers from urban districts often complained about their perception that standardized tests did not take into account the struggles their students faced and were therefore unfair to the children and the teachers. The teachers I interviewed did not mention the “value-added” concept as a way to give them more opportunity to show success.

On top of concerns about testing unfairness in urban districts, these teachers frequently talked about problems with student discipline that took time away from teaching the standards for which they were accountable. The discipline problems that distracted them from valuable teaching time did not seem to be helped by building administrators. Several teachers talked about feeling they were essentially on their own trying to work with difficult students. In their discussion, they placed the blame outside of their own school though, more often citing the district, state, or federal requirements than their own building administrators.

Many of the teachers talked about feeling overwhelmed with all of their duties and responsibilities during their first few years of teaching. Many spoke glowingly of their colleagues and the support they received from them, citing that support as the way they were able to survive that difficult period. The teachers who reported struggling to relate to their students found relationships that sustained them with their peers. Building administrators were infrequently mentioned as sources of relatedness and support, though several teachers reported they were given a great deal of support from the building principal. Teachers from one district all independently touted the benefits of their mentoring program as a source of support. This mentoring strengthened all three factors in SDT motivation. By talking professionally about their choices and options, they strengthened their feelings of competence. By meeting regularly one-to-one with the same person over a period of time, they strengthened a bond of relatedness that could exist outside of the school culture. By meeting to discuss their pedagogical choices, then following through on their decisions separately from the other teachers, their sense of autonomy was strengthened.

Appropriateness of Methodology

My original research interest formed as I watched teachers struggle with accountability measures and the narrowing of curriculum and instruction that often accompanies that accountability. The concept of sensemaking as outlined by Weick (1995) resonated with me, because it examines behavior within the framework of the passage of time and the social context of the individual. Weick’s approach looks at an individual’s sense of identity as a relatively static sense that requires some outside action to jar it loose and remake it as conditions change. It is visible over a passage of time and within a social context. By using narrative inquiry (NI), I hoped to understand my participants’ understanding of their identity and its formation over time, through their stories. As I read the literature on teacher retention and sensemaking, I began to wonder about the role of teacher motivation in retention. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017) has been used as a lens to examine student motivation, but not applied to teachers. My feeling was that teachers who were not changing their sense of themselves as teachers might still be struggling with motivation to remain teachers. SDT might also offer a gateway to look at ways that educational leaders could encourage teachers to find ways to enhance their resilience. Listening to teachers' stories could also highlight moments or practices that had impacted teachers' motivations.

The participants were eager to discuss their paths to become teachers and their struggles along the way. I tried to encourage them to tell their own stories in their way, but most required occasional prompts to complete their stories. If they did not include references to accountability or the influence of their building leadership, I did ask about that because it was relevant to my question. Following the receipt of the transcripts, I was able to examine each one using both the principles of sensemaking and SDT. Because participants were encouraged to tell their own story, I was able to examine the frequency and depth of each of the characteristics of SDT and sensemaking in their discussions, thereby giving insight into its importance in their individual professional life. Encouraging participants to discuss their careers in their own way highlighted how important their connections with peers and students were, which might not have emerged if I had worked simply from a list of questions about accountability, which had been my original focus.

Implications for Leadership Practice

Despite the variance in participants' narratives, the trends that emerged have messages for educational leaders at the building and district level. The clear prevalence of the importance of relationships with students and peers indicate that administrators should pay special attention to building a culture of support for teachers in their buildings. Reflecting the importance of a sense of competence and autonomy, the building leaders can work to build that culture around the shared culture of a professional learning community. An effective mentor, not directly associated with their supervisor, was named by several teachers as instrumental to their development from first-year teacher to veteran. To help teachers continue to see themselves as professional educators focused on individual student growth, leaders need to act as mediators between the accountability system and the teacher, not the enforcer of state and federal policy.

Providing Support

The participants with whom I spoke clearly turned to their peers for support and also used them to help them make sense of the struggles they were having. Particularly striking in that regard was one teacher with four years of experience who made reference to how much the children's behavior had changed since he started teaching. He said that in the context of talking about comments he heard from other teachers and agreeing that he was seeing it also. Others spoke very highly of their teacher teams, often including language that indicated their own team was somehow functioning better than some of the other grades or teams, as if to say that their job is impossible, but they have a great team and love their students, so it is bearable. Supervisors who assign teachers to grades or teams would be well served to look at the function of the team on which a new teacher is placed. It is particularly important to place new teachers on teams that have a positive approach to their students as their team will be the main source of support for the new teacher and the new teacher will likely adopt some of the attitudes and culture of the current team members. This is especially true for younger teachers who are coming straight through the education system into teaching.

Student Relationships

Consistent with the research, teachers spoke very highly of their relationships with students and the rewards they derived from those relationships, but they felt the education system built in obstacles to those relationships. The obstacles came from two sources, students and the accountability systems. The teachers who were least bothered by the accountability system were also the teachers who were most successful at forming and fostering relationships with their students and less likely to rely on their peers for support. The participants in my study did become teachers to form positive relationships and influence young people. When those relationships and influence are not possible, teachers have to make sense of their profession another way. Relationships with students and peers are the inflection point upon which educational leaders therefore need to exercise influence. At the same time, local leaders, especially district leaders, are even more directly under scrutiny and threat of sanction with the accountability measures in place since No Child Left Behind was passed. The mediating potential of the leadership between the teacher and the state and federal laws is therefore pressured by the leaders' concern over their own possible sanctions. This has led to a documented increase in narrowing curricular requirements and standards with the hope that they will lead to higher test scores (Costigan, 2005; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Desimone, 2013; Milner, 2013).

My study suggests that building and district leaders must help teachers find success in their relationships with children and positive relationships with their peers. High student social needs and low academic ability are barriers to building strong student relationships and clear-cut evidence of academic success. My participants in high need urban schools often expressed those frustrations. Teachers in those schools who expressed feelings of success also spoke of satisfaction with their classroom management. The opposite was also true, in that teachers who seemed on the verge of leaving the profession talked about their frustrations with student behavior and a lack of support for those children. Assigning formal mentors is one way to assist teachers with this challenge. The teachers from the district that had a formal mentoring system, with dedicated mentors who were not on the building staff, all talked about the mentoring as being very helpful to their developing a sense of competence, as well as having someone to relate to openly and honestly. The mentor was able to observe without judgment and help the new teachers develop their classroom management skills as well as their teaching skills. Unfortunately, that program was cut for the 2019-20 school year. The cost of hiring and training full-time, designated mentors must be weighed against the cost of replacing teachers who cannot find success when they are isolated in their own classrooms. Ohio's first Standard for Professional Development (Ohio, 2015) calls for schools to develop cultures of continuous improvement while Standard 6.2.1 asks schools to differentiate support for teachers. In my study, teachers who decided early were more likely to turn to peers for support so school leaders should pay special attention to those teachers who are likely to be most susceptible to the possible negative opinions of veteran teachers on their team. Full-time, independent mentors were particularly effective in helping the early deciding teachers in my study develop senses of competency and relatedness, even in schools that struggled with student misbehavior and low academic performance. Instilling in new teachers a culture of continuous improvement will pay off for years to come, as novice teachers become the dominant school influence, replacing retiring veterans.

Principal Influence

None of the districts from which my participants came still have well-developed mentoring programs and often assign a curriculum coach or a veteran teacher to that role in exchange for a small stipend. Given the perceived magnitude of the student behavior problems expressed by these teachers, it is important for building leaders to see assistance with classroom management as a priority for new teachers. Supervisors should see that assistance as more than just a way to keep children out of the office, but as crucial to helping teachers continue to understand themselves as teachers and not “managers.” Though my participants did not typically bring up their principals as a factor in their success, those who talked about struggling in their first few years talked about perceived pressure on them to handle their classrooms and made references to bothering the office with their students who were misbehaving. Kim (2019) studied early career teachers and found that principal support for teacher behavior management skills “may be the most salient aspect of principal behavior to prevent early career teacher turnover” (p. 131). Regular informal visits to classrooms of new teachers and explicit attention to management skills before and outside of specific student problems will help teachers see themselves as colleagues, developing their skills and competence along with their principals, rather than seeing themselves as a source of behavior referrals and emergency interventions.

Transition to Teaching

Leaders need to help teachers transition from their early vision of their role as a teacher to the daily reality of teaching. Teachers who were most successful and optimistic in my study were those who had the opportunity to ease into their assignments through numerous real-world experiences, either during their formal training, volunteering before starting their training, or tutoring full time in the building in which they were eventually employed. Teacher preparation programs, especially those that serve typical college students newly out of high school, need to form relationships with a variety of teachers who are willing to have teacher preparation candidates placed in their classes long enough to get a sense of all the requirements that teachers face daily. No newly licensed teacher should be surprised by all the expectations outside of the daily lessons. Once teachers are hired, they should be teamed up with current teachers who can help them anticipate the non-classroom demands and cope with them as they arise. This can help with teachers' needs to feel relatedness and the importance of social interactions in the formation of their sense of the teaching role. This pairing needs to be done with an awareness of the possible negative effect of some veteran teachers' tendencies to assume almost a combat veteran approach to their assignments. I found that some of my participants were already echoing veteran teacher complaints about the "changing behavior" of their students. Nurturing a building culture that sustains a positive attitude toward teaching and children is one way to counteract that negativity. The principal can assist by building informal collegial relationships with new teachers as I discussed above.

Early Deciders versus Late/Adult Deciders

When teachers are hired, they are often asked about many aspects of their experience and their attitudes toward students and teaching. My study suggests that additional discussion about a teacher's initial motivation for entering the teaching field and their image of a teacher could be very helpful in working with the newly hired teacher. Teachers who decided to enter the field as very young people may need more support in understanding the real world of the teacher's daily tasks, as opposed to someone deciding to change professions as an adult. The occasion of a sensemaking dissonance was more common in the early deciders than with the late or adult deciders. The adult deciders expressed that they had made an informed decision to become a teacher and were not intimidated by the reality they found. Some of these individuals had spent several years in a school as para-professionals, so were fully aware of the circumstances surrounding teaching in an accountability setting. Others had spent time in a non-teaching field that left them feeling purposeless and found their purpose in teaching. Adult or late deciders were more likely to talk about finding their sense of relatedness and competence in their interactions with their students and were less concerned about their status on the accountability measures. Building leaders would be well served to take these differences into account. Early deciders will need to have more mentoring, especially to help them frame their identity as a teacher who is successful in forming productive relationships with children that will lead to higher performance on official metrics. Supervisors need to take a long-term approach to success and mediate the influence of negative veteran teachers as well as possible poor scores on state tests. Adult or late deciders may be better served by skill-based mentoring that seeks to expand specific pedagogical and management skills with less concentration on helping them frame their identity and more concentration on encouraging them to experiment and grow as teachers.

Staff Meetings

Staff meetings devoted to teaching students better ways to take tests only reinforce the teachers’ perceptions that test scores are more important than building teacher-student relationships. Instead, building leaders need to include test taking skills as an adjunct to building the relationships that both teachers and students crave. Test taking skills should be framed as a way to help students show the knowledge they have gained, not fool the test graders into thinking one’s students have cracked the code of successful test taking. Stressing the importance of building strong relationships with their students will also benefit one of the other most common hurdles facing novice teachers—the issue of disruptive student behavior. This is especially important in schools serving low socio-economic status (SES) students in urban districts and ethnic minority students (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015; Roorda et al., 2011). In addition, positive school climates characterized by strong relationships between students and faculty have been associated with mediating the effect of low SES students with poor academic performance (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Placing too much emphasis on building strong test scores at the expense of building strong relationships is likely to be counterproductive on all fronts.

Limitations of the Study

As with most qualitative studies, the pool of respondents for this study was small, only 21 teachers. In order to select even that small number, I relied on connections I had made through teaching in a graduate program for training principals and educational leaders. I initially reached out to a number of local districts, including the nearby urban districts without specifically targeting individuals with whom I had previous relationships. I was not successful in securing any participants through that route, so I reached out to graduates from our teacher and principal preparation programs for leads to others in their buildings. I also sought help from former adjuncts who were in administrative positions in local districts, as well as former colleagues from my own years as a principal in a local district. I explained the purpose of my study to each person from whom I solicited recruiting assistance and did not ask my contacts to select successful teachers, but I would not be surprised if the teachers were referred to me at least partially because they might reflect well on a former graduate student or colleague. I know that my participants were not all happy and contented warriors, pleased with their administration, but they were aware of my relationship with their supervisors or principals and it might have colored the way they spoke of that person's leadership, despite my assurances of confidentiality.

Fifteeb of the participants in this study came from urban districts that ranged from 73% economically disadvantaged students in one district to 100% economically disadvantaged in the other two districts. The largest district reported 75% non-white students on the latest published state report cards, with the other districts reporting 47% and 27% non-white students. Only one of my participants was African American and two were Hispanic. The one African American male in an urban district spoke of how his own background as an African American student who had struggled in school influenced his sense of self as a teacher and role model, going as far as to say he returned after a difficult first year because of a sense of obligation to his African American students who also struggled. The two Hispanic teachers discussed their heritage as part of their motivation to continue. As I was seeking participants for my study, I reached out to former students of color to ask them for help securing participants as well as both a general call to urban administrations and specifically reaching out to African American administrators. I also attempted to find the demographic statistics of the teaching corps in the districts I was approaching to find a representative sample. While such information is publicly available about the students in each district in Ohio, the faculty demographic information is confined to educational level, with no published information about ethnic or racial background of the faculty. Being able to interview more teachers of color might have shed light on the relative importance of recruiting teachers who match the demographics of their district. Having more input from non-white teachers might have revealed useful data about how teachers' identification with their students might influence teacher identity and motivation. The districts themselves recognize the issue, with one urban district unanimously adopting a racial justice plan that includes a requirement for the superintendent to "aggressively recruit and develop teachers and staff who reflect the diversity of students." The plan also instructs the superintendent to specifically identify the person who will carry this program forward. (Dayton Public Schools, 2020, p. 2)

Suggestions for Further Study

This study examined early career teachers with the lenses of sensemaking and SDT, as a way to explore teachers' formations of their professional identities. I found indications that teachers' early influences seemed to be important in their formation of their concept of "teacher." I used narrative inquiry to explore the ongoing formation of their professional identity, but that methodology necessitated a small group of participants. A larger sample that searched for correlations between factors influencing teachers' decisions to enter the profession and their current satisfaction with their decision could be very instructive, as would asking about positive and negative influences in relationship to their desire to continue teaching. This could be especially useful in a mixed methods study that followed up a survey with specific interviews about trends uncovered in the survey.

Despite my efforts to find participants who were more reflective of their school systems' demographic makeup, all but three of my 21 participants were Caucasian and only one was African American. He was open about his motivation to give back to his community as an African American male, but because the large majority of my participants did not represent the districts in which they were teaching, it is not possible to see if a population more representative of their schools and districts might have had a different perspective on their career choice. As sensemaking and SDT are heavily reliant on the context within which the individual functions, a teacher's sense of identity with their community could play a significant role in their ability to make sense of their role.

The teaching field has historically been dominated by women, especially in the elementary grades. The participants in my study were evenly divided between women and men, with 12 females and 9 males. Differences emerge as one examines the grade level and subject areas taught. Elementary teachers were twice as likely to be female as male and all of the subject matter specialists were male, with intervention specialists being slightly more likely to be female. Equally as interesting, seven of the eight participants who decided to become teachers at an early age were female. Because most of their own teachers were women at the time they decided to become teachers, it would seem appropriate to explore the role that gender identification played in their decision and their sensemaking as licensed teachers.

I did not talk with individuals who decided to leave teaching. If a sample could be gathered, it would be very interesting to do the same study with those people. Their information could be very meaningful, especially by comparing and contrasting their data with the teachers who were still working in a classroom. Another group of teachers to study would be teachers with 5–15 years of experience, who have decided to continue in the field despite all the obstacles. Those teachers have made sense of their profession in a way that encourages them to stay in the field and exploring that process would yield interesting data.

As I interviewed teachers with different licensure areas, I saw some trends that could merit further study. Special education teachers, especially those working with low-incidence populations, seemed to be less concerned with accountability and more likely to report feelings of competence and autonomy as well as congruence with their prior notions of teaching. Subject specific high school teachers seemed to be most concerned with the academic progress of their students and less concerned with relationships with their peers than elementary teachers. The grade band with the highest sense of frustration or concern about accountability versus student behavior and dissonance between prior and current image of the profession seemed to be the grade bands between 3rd and 8th, also the grade bands with the most explicit high stakes accountability restrictions. This may suggest that the higher stakes are for accountability, the more likely it is that teachers find incongruity between their motivation and reality. It is likely that school districts have data reflecting grade levels that have the highest teacher turnover, and it would be interesting to compare those data with specific inquiry into the relationship between motivation and reality by grade level and subject area. For example, some of the teachers with whom I spoke discussed feelings of relief at not teaching in the third grade because of Ohio’s emphasis on third grade reading tests.

I found that some of the teachers who were least bothered by the accountability system were also the teachers who were most successful at forming and fostering relationships with their students and less likely to rely on their peers for support. The importance of a sense of autonomy in dealing with external accountability merits further study. Is a sense of autonomy something that a teacher brings with them into the classroom, or is it a product of the experiences, school culture, and mentoring of the novice teacher? It appears that external accountability will be a part of the real world of our educational system well into the future, so it would be interesting to look for relationships between autonomy and academic achievement. Evidence of a relationship would encourage teachers and administrators to develop their identities as professional educators.

The relationship between teacher attitudes toward the accountability requirements and student success is also worthy of investigation. A narrow focus on compliance is very helpful at the beginning of an accountability system's imposition. Teachers should be aware of the standards on which their students will be assessed but focusing on test taking skills at the expense of deeper understanding will only help the scores so much. Results will plateau unless teaching and learning are transformed. The tendency of school administrators to feel the pressure of the system and apply it directly to their teachers without considering their teachers' motivations and rewards will not increase test scores, but based on my study, will discourage teachers' feelings of autonomy and competence. Studying this relationship further may help provide administrators with persuasive material to fight the efforts to narrow curriculum and restrict teacher autonomy.

Conclusion

This study confirmed many aspects of the existing literature on teacher retention and motivation. It added to the understanding of the topic by using the lenses of sensemaking and Self-Determination Theory to develop a more complete understanding of why teachers persist in their chosen profession and provided specific suggestions for school leaders to help teachers understand their roles in the accountability environment that is particularly impactful in urban districts. The transition from student teacher to the first few years of teaching as a fully licensed teacher was very difficult for many of the participants in this study and using motivation theory to understand how teachers persist through that transition is an important way to help find ways to guide teachers through that passage. This is especially helpful when combined with sensemaking as it helps explain how teachers see themselves professionally to help them find the motivation to persist.

Building and district leadership need to understand that teachers are an important part of the final student academic outcomes, not just pieces of machinery that can be fine-tuned to produce a better finished product. Principals should be aware that teachers are motivated and reinforced by student relationships as much as by student test scores. The teachers in my study who reported the most satisfaction from student relationships also reported satisfaction with their students’ test scores. It is not clear whether teachers with success on test scores feel more freedom to teach as they wish or if teachers who concentrate on building relationships and engaging lessons have more successful test scores as a result. This is another reason for principals and building leaders to concentrate on building collegial relationships with teachers so they can be encouraged to find meaning in their interactions with students as much as in their test results.

My study sought to understand how novice teachers made sense of their chosen profession in light of the accountability restrictions under which schools currently operate, and whether motivation theory could provide some insight on teacher retention. Conversations with teachers confirmed the continuing importance of relationships with both teachers and students in teacher satisfaction and motivation to continue. Key findings included the differences between early deciders motivated by childhood perceptions of teaching and second career late deciders with more experience in the work force. Teachers in high school and in special education typically had a greater sense of autonomy and less dependence on accountability metrics. Given the differences in motivations, school leaders need to develop individualized improvement plans for each teacher, taking into account their motivations for teaching and identities as teachers.

Highly motivated, talented, and dedicated teachers are needed more than ever as our schools struggle to prepare all our students for a future that is likely to require higher and higher education levels. It is critical to address novice teachers' identities and motivations before they decide it is not the job they dreamed of or become enculturated into the negative culture that is all too frequently found in the struggling schools that need the best teachers available. My study suggests that assets put into the individualized professional development I have discussed, including strong mentoring programs, could go a long way toward retaining the best novice teachers and building the cultures of continuous improvement advocated in standards for professional development of teachers (Ohio, 2015).

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