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THE BIGGEST HOAX? INVESTIGATING THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE OF  
VETERAN SECONDARY TEACHERS IN NORTH MISSISSIPPI PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by  
Anna Grace Robinson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College and Mississippi  
Excellence in Teaching Program.

Oxford  
May 2023

Approved by

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Anna Grace Robinson

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to all of my current and future students who serve as a reminder of why I have committed my life to public education. You represent everything I believe is possible for our resilient Magnolia State. Never forget there is a place for you in my room.

This thesis is also dedicated to all the past versions of myself who struggled to believe that teaching was the right path for me, despite the fact that I forced my little sister and every family pet we have ever had to play ‘school’ every night. This thesis is only further confirmation that you made the right choice when you accepted a position as a cohort member of METP.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I want to thank my incredible family for always supporting me in the mountains and valleys of life. Without Sarabeth's witness, my dad's willingness to always yes, and my mom's intuitive check-ins, I would not be the woman or teacher that I am today. If I have ever known what love is, it is because of the three of you.

I want to thank my thesis advisor Dr. Amy Wells-Dolan for her support and constant encouragement throughout this writing process. Whenever I was concerned about the realities of this project, she always had a kind voice and a listening ear to lean on.

To every teacher I interviewed for this thesis, thank you does not cover my gratitude for your willingness to take time out of your incredibly busy schedules to contribute to the future of Mississippi. Our state is a better place with you in it.

Thank you to the Barksdale Family and everyone at the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College for your dedication to quality and meaningful education in Mississippi. Thank you to the School of Education and the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program for making teaching a prosperous career path and giving me some of my lifelong friends.

Thank you to every person who has ever invested in the state of Mississippi. You are the reason that I have found hope somewhere between the rolling hills, delta, and piny woods of our beautiful state.

## **ABSTRACT**

ANNA GRACE ROBINSON: The Biggest Hoax? Investigating the Work-Life Balance  
of Veteran Secondary Teachers in North Mississippi Public Schools

(Under the direction of Dr. Amy Wells-Dolan)

This thesis investigates the struggle with work-life balance among veteran secondary teachers in public North Mississippi schools. Primary research questions include a) How do veteran teachers describe the struggle with work-life balance, b) What coping strategies over their career seem helpful?, and c) What changes could be made to the educational system to better support public school teachers in their pursuit of work-life balance? At what level should those changes occur? Qualitative data was collected by interviewing five teachers from middle and high schools in the North Mississippi region and analyzed to understand emergent themes from the interviews. This research found common experiences, beliefs, and recommendations for change among the five participants concerning the ability to achieve work-life balance as educators in Mississippi public schools.

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## **Chapter One: Purpose Statement and Introduction**

As a self-proclaimed overachiever from a young age, I have spent the majority of my life recklessly overworking myself. Somewhat naturally, I was drawn to becoming a teacher from an early age and frequently spent my afternoons after kindergarten forcing my little sister and our shared animals to be my students. However, as the time to have my own classroom drew nearer, I began considering the reality that I had little to no skills to cope with being a first-year teacher. At this same time, my virtual and real worlds were flooded with #teacherquittok and friends in education leaving after very short tenures. Thus, I was inspired to begin this thesis as a selfish endeavor to scout the best work-life balance strategies to implement within my life now to prevent further harm, in addition to adding to the depth of research already conducted on this topic.

The purpose of this research is to discover how teachers in North Mississippi public middle and high schools describe the struggle with establishing and maintaining work-life balance. More than ever before, teachers are responsible for a slew of tasks that range widely which take away time from creating quality instruction and accomplishing the job they signed up for. Between new initiatives and ever-changing student discipline problems, teachers are wearing more hats than may physically be possible. In a society



where the teaching profession is demeaned in public discourse, the thesis aims to investigate an aspect of teachers' lives that affects their ability to provide quality care for their students and themselves.

The research problem is that minimal studies have been done when it comes to understanding this specific group of people: veteran middle and high school teachers in North Mississippi public schools. In a state like Mississippi, having highly qualified teachers who are passionate about their jobs is a struggle. The problem of teacher attrition demonstrates that passion for the job is not sufficient for teacher retention. When qualified, early-career teachers depart the field, the investment in their preparation is lost and the state's resources are diminished. We should care about the work-life balance of Mississippi teachers because they are the glue that is currently holding the fragile infrastructure of - public schools together, and they deserve more than they are currently being given. By conducting interviews with teachers in North Mississippi public schools, the lived experiences of those who serve our classrooms every day can better inform both research and decisions made concerning educators' work-life balance.

The goal of this research is to address a nationwide issue that renders public school teachers unable to act when it comes to advocating for their own mental health and wellness. These findings could help inform both further research and policies that could increase the livelihood of teachers.

Overall research questions:

- How do veteran teachers describe the struggle with work-life balance
- What coping strategies over their career seem helpful?
- What changes could be made to the educational system to better support public school teachers in their pursuit of work-life balance? At what level should those changes occur?

In seeking to answer my research questions, it is important for me to be transparent with you, the reader, about my underlying assumptions that have not only shaped my questions but also could, if left unchecked, cloud my analysis. I will work to set aside my assumptions during my study so as to enhance my trustworthiness as a researcher. First, I assumed that an overwhelming majority of teachers have, at some point in their careers, struggled with balancing their work and personal lives. Stemming mostly from my own experience as an observer in public school classrooms and hearing from other teachers, this assumption is related to a second assumption. My second assumption is that educators may attribute their work-life imbalances to a growing critique of public schools that has systematically devalued the role of teachers over decades. Because of this public sentiment, teachers may feel as if their job is constantly at stake as people outside of education and the classroom misunderstand the role of teachers. From the responsibility of book bans and some proposed solutions regarding gun violence in schools, teachers may feel like their roles are misconstrued when discussed by the public which could lead to undue stress. The more that the public shifts focus from the realities of teachers' lives the fewer resources society is able to devote to

addressing the issues that increase the livelihood and thus effectiveness of classroom teachers.

The second research question leads to another assumption that teachers employ a system of coping strategies that are unique to their situation over the tenure of their careers. Although these coping strategies likely change as their careers do (switching subjects, moving schools, etc.), teachers are the people who know their situations best and are able to speak with confidence about the types of coping that are most effective in balancing work and life for educators. More than this, I anticipate that there are strategies that many teachers benefit from and will frequently come up in discussions with teachers such as leaving school when the bell rings and avoiding taking schoolwork home.

Lastly, I assume that teachers will find it challenging to specifically articulate what changes are needed and where to intervene so as to prevent problems with teachers' work-life balance. Because the current status of public educators seems to be attacked on multiple fronts, some teachers may be feeling so much angst surrounding their profession that they may not be able to pinpoint the source of their work-life imbalance. I also hypothesize that teachers may naturally point out the large-scale change that can happen through the state and national governments rather than identify problems from their localized administrations or districts as the site where change should occur.

## **Chapter Two: Background**

To provide context for this research, this chapter will discuss critical background information regarding popular conceptions about work-life balance and how it affects teachers across the nation. Additionally, literature from relevant academic articles will be presented to explore what research already exists on the topic and how it informs this work. During the process of reading literature and discovering major themes, there were two main topics of focus: gendered impacts and pandemic impacts on work-life balance. Sources in this literature review include articles from education journals and online news outlets.

The first time I cognitantly remember seeing the phenomena of #teacherquittok was nearly a year into the pandemic, and I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of educators chronicling their journeys transitioning out of the classroom via social media. As a product of public schools with a younger sister still finishing her high school career, I was worried about the quality of teachers we might be left with following this perceptible mass exodus. As a future teacher, I was terrified. I spent countless hours asking myself what brought us to this point. How did we become a society that values teachers so little that we watch them leave a profession they once loved like it is the newest episode of a soap opera? What were the day-to-day realities that are forcing these teachers to leave? Was it like this before the pandemic? Are the students really as bad as everyone made them out to be? Most importantly, would I become one of these teachers?

To combat these incessant thoughts, I turned to the only place I knew could answer these burning questions: the Internet. As a way to cope with the deep fear that I would find myself with a social media page filled with my own journey out of the classroom, I compiled every list I could of how to avoid this fate. Take a walk after school to destress. Eat a healthy breakfast. Set and keep boundaries. My list was extensive.

While the small habits most of these websites listed were helpful in the short term, I noticed that a core part of this issue for teachers was the inability to achieve a longstanding, substantial work-life balance. This struggle was frequently credited to a variety of different complex work dynamics. Between each scroll on Tik Tok, I saw teachers saying increased and unreasonable expectations of classroom teachers caused their departure while another blamed a society that does not value teachers or work-life balance. These ideas were only further confirmed when I opened my email one morning while preparing to write and saw a new NPR book review of Alexandra Robbins' *The Teachers: A Year Inside America's Most Vulnerable, Important Profession*. After spending a year following three different educators, Robbins' work highlighted an issue that we can no longer ignore and demands action. She showcased the complex web of issues such as "dealing with students and their problems while juggling inadequate pay and resources, unrealistic workloads that eliminate any semblance of work/life balance, and pervasive disrespect for the profession..." (p. 2).

The impossibility of work-life balance was only worsened by the Pandemic and the implantation of distance learning, which further tangled the web of problems causing work-life imbalance. Where they previously had physical boundaries separating their

school and home lives, the pandemic forced teachers to blur the lines between the personal and the professional. This was not an idea that is unique to teachers as all types of professionals were severely impacted by the Pandemic. In a 2022 Pew Research study, a majority of participants who voluntarily returned to their workplace cited a decreased sense of productivity while remote working as their primary reason for returning early (Parker, et al., 2022). More than this, some even said that they do not have the resources at home to complete their jobs.

However, education as a profession was fundamentally different than any other field because so much of teachers' work hinges on being able to accurately gauge their students. Unlike other professionals who work as a team online, teachers work with students who have been conditioned to attend school in person and the switch to online learning was near impossible for children who lacked the emotional capacity to turn their work in or participate prior to the Pandemic. Negative impacts of the Pandemic as a teacher not only included the struggles of work-life balance and increased difficulty to complete their job, but it also directly impacted the teacher recruitment and retention model. A study of one hundred teachers found that the impacts of Covid on teacher work-life balance were immense and set off a domino effect that led to resentment and, eventually, absenteeism of teachers (Farook and Naseema, 2021). Teachers' ability to confidently deliver high-quality instruction at work was decimated by the Pandemic, and the lasting impacts of this issue are still seen today as teachers cope with students who frequently lack social and content knowledge to be on grade level.

While the Pandemic impacted all teachers, it seems as if female teachers were hit especially hard as it left many women with increased childcare and domestic

responsibilities all the while still being expected to perform at top levels as educators. Leo et al. (2022) investigated this phenomenon in a mixed methods study surveying 752 educators from New York State, and their findings indicated that women reported higher levels of stress during this work-from-home period. Although it would be reasonable to hypothesize that this happened largely due to increased childcare, this research yielded results that “indicated that gender disparities in work-life balance challenges were related to the higher stress women experienced from work and COVID-19 rather than childcare responsibilities...” (p. 12). Most interestingly, women, regardless of their parental status, reported much higher levels of stress than men of any demographic in the study. While the causes of this are not fully known, it is important to understand that women were and continue to be disproportionately affected by the fallout of the pandemic and work-life balance issues.

It is important to note though that the gendered impacts of work-life imbalance for teachers has been a long-standing issue. As a profession that is largely dominated by women and has been since the nineteenth century as the beginning of the common school era, education-related work-life balance issues are largely gendered. Educators who are women face the harsh realities of a society that expects them to have and do it all, more than their male counterparts. This topic is especially relevant in a field such as education because, fundamentally, teaching is an act of emotional and physical labor to educate other people’s children. While there is nuance required for this conversation considering not all women are mothers or wives, a large population of female teachers are dually responsible for the livelihood of their own children and their students. Because of societal expectations and the historical context of this issue, men, of all disciplines, are not

bestowed the same responsibility, despite the possibility of being more capable of carrying them out.

Published in the *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership* in 2019, Alexander Kyei Edwards & Rita Oteng set out to investigate the ways in which female teachers in Ghana were able to attain work-life balance in the trenches of an ever-changing society. Although schools and cultures vary widely from Africa to the United States, Edwards, and Oteng's research uncovered some truths worth investigating in American schools. Using a descriptive survey methodology, they found that many women in teaching positions admitted to struggling with work-life balance and attributed some of that struggle to their local education systems, reporting the need for more administrative support (Edwards & Oteng, 2019). These women noted that their highest level of need comes in the form of flexible hours to properly care for their children (Edwards & Oteng, 2019). However, this study also highlighted the way in which women in education have a specifically powerful position as role models to their students when it comes to modeling work-life balance. This study made the somewhat obvious outstandingly clear: women teachers struggle with work-life balance regardless of where they are.

Not only do women struggle with achieving their version of work-life balance across the globe, but they also seem to struggle regardless of their status in school. Jill Sperandio and Lavanya Devdas conducted a study in 2015 that described the relationship between women's lifestyle choices and their access to superintendent positions. After surveying over one hundred women in superintendent and assistant superintendent positions, they found that the requirements to occupy the superintendency are at odds



with the “lifestyle preferences of women qualified to hold the position, further exacerbating the effects of gender bias . . . ” (p. 5). Women in this study cited familial concerns such as long commutes, family relocation, or decreasing their domestic responsibilities as areas they favored over opportunities that would further their career goals. In a world that expects women to measure up to every standard of their dual roles as caregivers and professionals, this study argued that we will continue to struggle to create a balanced society without instituting change in regard to work-life balance for women.

Women in every sector of society and demographic background are acutely impacted by work-life imbalance more than their male counterparts. Increased domestic responsibilities, childcare, and societal expectations of women create a perfect storm that makes work-life balance a colossal feat for most women. Investigating the deeply gendered impacts of creating work-life balance is critical in this research not only because education is a female-dominated field, but also because without it, we ignore the realities of the world we live in.

An understanding of the influence of the Covid-19 Pandemic and gender on the ability of teachers to achieve work-life balance is the foundation that sparked the interest for the rest of this thesis. The discussion in this section is a selection of the readings I completed prior to the start of this project and cemented this topic as worthy of further research. The next section of this thesis will showcase the methods used to conduct research about teachers' work-life balance in North Mississippi.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

When I began thinking about the methodology for this research, I wanted to obtain organic information about the lived experiences of veteran teachers in North Mississippi. Semi-structured interviews conducted via video conferencing software seemed to be the best option that fit the needs of the research questions I developed. The nature of this topic as one where all educators will have their own opinions based on their own experiences lends itself well to qualitative research. More than this, individual interviews also allowed me to both derive themes of work-life balance for educators in Mississippi and understand the perspectives of the interviewees based on their career paths and other demographic factors.

During the process of trying to find interviewees for this study, I delimited the range of the research to public secondary schools in North Mississippi because of my own preparation for secondary English, and my familiarity with the school contexts and climate in North Mississippi. Additionally, I narrowed the demographics to qualify as a participant to veteran teachers, which I define as having taught for five years or longer, in public middle or high schools. Because this research is qualitative and does not attempt to draw conclusions about any specific school or district, I was not diligently trying to gain a certain number of participants from every county or level of school. Instead, my goal was simply to interview between six and eight public educators who currently work in secondary schools in North Mississippi. My hope was that I would be able to reach

saturation of ideas within six to eight interviews with an open mind to revising this number if I failed to achieve saturation with the interview data collected.

Next, I curated a list of interview questions that called back to my original overall research questions. The list of final questions I settled on was comprised of eight multipart questions that aimed not to elicit a specific response but, instead, to prompt participants to reflect and share their personal experiences. Some of the questions specifically asked the interviewees to share a story about times in their lives related to work-life balance. This method felt appropriate to the type of qualitative research I wanted to conduct as the open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to think of meaningful responses and discuss their own experience with work-life balance in a one-on-one exchange with me, the interviewer.

The questions were as follows:

- I What does work-life balance (WLB) mean to you? What are some of the most important areas in your work or life that you want to protect?
  
- II Do other teachers or administrators around you discuss WLB? If so, to what extent? Do you think that struggles with WLB affect your fellow teachers? If so, how?

III Do you struggle with WLB, and if so, in what ways? If you struggle with work-life balance, what would need to be done to help you achieve it? What does your ideal WLB look like?

IV If change is needed for you, on what level should that change occur to prevent struggles with WLB? Would it require individual changes, changes with your family or friends, school-level changes, or changes on a larger scale?

V Has your WLB changed over your teaching career? How so?

VI What advice would you give younger teachers when it comes to WLB?

VII Could you tell me about a time when you knew you were out of balance? What did you feel like? What did you think?

VIII Is there a way for work and life to overlap in a positive way? Do you have an example of a time that you felt proud of yourself for how you achieved WLB? Please tell me more about that example.

As the interviews were conducted, I followed up some of the responses with more probing questions that were intended for the interviewee to provide more context and reflection on their story. When these questions were asked, it is noted in the findings chapter of this thesis.

After creating a list of questions, I set out to create a recruitment email that fully informed potential participants of the nature of the research (see appendix B). The email included detailed information about the goals of the study and prompted participants to individually email me if they were interested in setting up a time to interview. As they responded, I emailed participants a copy of a video release form and an informed consent document that they signed prior to the start of the interviews (see appendix C).

All of the interviews were hosted on Zoom, a video conferencing platform, and recorded to be transcribed verbatim by me at a later date. Keeping the identities of interviewees confidential has been a high priority for me. To ensure that this happened, all participants were told that they could withdraw themselves from the study for any reason at any point during the process. Additionally, I explained that I would use a pseudonym in my report to protect their confidentiality.

One of the last steps in the research process was to analyze the data and sort it into emerging themes for discussion. After transcribing all of the interviews, I input the verbal data into word cloud software which depicted which words or phrases came up most frequently. I used this information to create a list of commonalities between interview findings with the goal to discuss the ramifications of such information and possibly even create a set of recommended actions for policy decisions.

Information about the study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Subjects Research for review and approval prior to the recruitment of participants and the start of interviews. After completing, revising, and submitting my IRB application on October 14, 2022, I was officially approved on October 26, 2022, to

begin my research (see Appendix A). My findings from the research are presented in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### *Introduction*

In this chapter, the results from my original research are presented by describing each interview I conducted with veteran teachers. Between the weeks of January 7, 2023, and February 13, 2023, I was able to speak with five veteran teachers from middle and high schools around North Mississippi. This group of teachers had a wide range of experience levels some with over thirty years and some with as low as five.

To identify the participants, I used purposeful convenience sampling by using my contacts in the University of Mississippi's School of Education. Initially, I received a list of ten potential candidates for individual interviews from a faculty member in the School of Education. From this original list, I yielded one interview. After this, I revisited the strategy and pulled the rest of my participants from the first and second cohorts of the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program (METP) who have all been in the classroom for at least five years.

With this process complete, I had five interviews in total. Because of the confidential nature of this subject, I have assigned each participant a pseudonym which is described in the table below. Additionally, this table displays other demographic information about the participants including their gender and ethnicity. The emergent themes from these interviews will be discussed in the next chapter while this chapter focuses directly on describing the lived experiences of the teachers I interviewed.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Alice	Woman	White
Bella	Woman	White
Camila	Woman	White
Daisy	Woman	White
Ezra	Man	White

### *Teacher Interviews*

Alice was a teacher at a Northeastern Mississippi high school teaching Algebra I, Advanced Placement Statistics, and Advanced Placement Calculus. After getting her bachelor's degree in math and art history and a master's degree in education, Alice began working as a teacher in 1989. Her thirty-three-year-long teaching career has taken place across multiple states and types of schools. She taught for ten years at a boarding school in the Northeast where she also spent time as a college counselor. Originally, she moved to Mississippi for her spouse to complete his master's degree which is when she accepted her first job at her current school. She had been teaching at that same high school for twenty-three years and had taught everything under the Math-related sun.

Being the first teacher I interviewed, I was impressed with Alice's ability to work across such different educational landscapes and found it incredibly interesting how her experiences influence her work. With such a vast knowledge of both her content area and educational pedagogies, Alice holds a plethora of knowledge that is of value to other teachers in her school and hundreds of readers of her blog, who frequently leave her



questions. When I asked Alice what work-life balance (WLB) meant to her, she seemed to take a more holistic approach.

*Work expands to fill the time. When you're a young teacher and you're not married and you don't have any kids, you may be not even paying a mortgage, so you don't have to cut the grass. You're going to spend all your time working because that's what you're going to do. And when you start having other responsibilities, then you have to really streamline your work and be as effective as you were when you had a lot of time to plan.*

Priorities when it comes to WLB depend largely on the circumstances of the teacher's personal and professional life at the time of discussion. Alice, who is married with children who are now in college, noted a much different experience than her life before when she had no children or even young children. She described that it is a constant challenge to keep her boundaries and shift priorities when they need to be shifted. Although she never directly attributed the title of "hard worker" to herself, Alice seemed to be a teacher who gives her all in the classroom and often finds herself doing work outside of the classroom or on the weekends.

*I don't mind working on Friday night. I'm teaching AP stats for the first time. I worked on problems last night. I woke up this morning, and I watched AP stats videos. I'll be over at school tomorrow working on stuff...So I just try and squeeze everything in.*

Alice's definition of work-life balance as a series of shifting priorities differs from how other participants and the literature view work-life balance. When I asked her if her priorities have shifted more towards work or professional balancing, she strongly noted

that her top priority has always been the same: being the best teacher possible for her students. Doing whatever it takes to be the most impactful teacher possible, takes precedence over most other priorities of her life, and she pushes things “down the list” if they do not align with her top priorities. The next question I asked Alice in this interview was if discussions around work-life balance come up with other teachers, and her answer shed more light on her perspective concerning WLB.

*I think that's kind of a modern construct, this work-life balance thing. I don't think that, first of all, teachers don't have time to talk to each other. If you think that you're going to be socializing with your colleagues, you're wrong... quick conversations in the hallway that is of the complaining kind of nature for the most part. They're not really intense therapy sessions on work-life balance. That hasn't been my experience anyway.*

From this interview, the primary question for me became what factors influenced Alice’s perspective on work-life balance and why it differed from the other participants. In moments like this, Alice essentially admitted to believing that work-life balance is a hoax that involves concerns that could be negated if classroom teachers work harder. Because Alice was my first interviewee in this research process, I was worried that all of the interviews would reveal a negative perspective on WLB. It is important to note that some comparisons between participants are a topic of discussion in the next chapter along with other themes that emerged from the combined interview data.

The next teacher I interviewed was Bella who I connected with via contacts of the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program (METP). Bella worked at a high school in Desoto County and has been teaching for a total of five years. Additionally, she was a

wife and mother to two young children. She had been teaching in the same school and the same subject since her second year. When asked what work-life balance meant to her, she defined it more similarly to the literature stating that her goal was always to leave school when the bell rings and to leave schoolwork behind her at school. Similarly to Alice, she also said that her WLB had not always been the same, and having children forced her to revisit her relationship with balancing school and home. She credited an increased satisfaction with her work-life balance to becoming more intentional about the free time she does have.

*I made the decision last year to really utilize every minute of my planning period instead of decompressing or talking to a friend for 45 minutes. That has made a positive difference where I feel like it is good because if I'm just "on" during my planning period, I don't have to work outside my contract hours, and that is ideal for me.*

Bella also credited an extremely supportive administration and district with her increased ability to achieve a work-life balance that works for her. Her school administrators were not only supportive of taking mental health days as teachers need them, but Bella also said that she recently took a trip with her husband, which required her to take two days from school, without any "grief" from her principal. She said that in other districts or schools that response would be unheard of. In a similar vein, I asked Bella where she thought the most effective change when it comes to WLB might need to occur. Quickly, she said change needs to occur on a national level.

*So much of it I think is attitude from the public and education and teachers as a whole gaining respect. Also, just a little bit of grace with the fact that we are people and that so much of what's wrong with education is not in our control.*

Several other interviewees cited public opinion and a lack of understanding of teachers' responsibilities as major concerns when it comes to achieving WLB. When I prompted Bella to think more about other small-level or concrete changes that could occur to prevent struggles with WLB, she reflected on a few.

*It seems like such a silly thing, but honestly, sub shortages, and stuff like that. All of that and legislature changes with education like trying to implement consultants take away teachers' time. That impacts your work-life balance because whatever you don't get done at work, you feel like you have to take home.*

Bella's experience as a teacher who was overwhelmed in their first year but eventually learned over time how to achieve WLB is a sentiment I heard from every single participant. When I asked Bella what advice she would give to a first-year teacher, she said that she wishes she would have realized sooner that asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. As a self-proclaimed introvert and the type to "suffer in silence," Bella said she wasted invaluable time during her first year trying to figure out school-wide procedures instead of simply asking a more experienced teacher for help. Although she said lots of people gave her similar advice before she started her teaching career, she implored me to actually listen to them and heave their advice as it will be critical in being able to maintain work-life balance as you become a more experienced teacher.

More than this, Bella also shared a story about a time when she felt like her life was imbalanced with her school life. During her first year of teaching, she was preparing

for a sub as she was leaving on a weekend trip when her husband said he felt like they were “ships passing in the night.” This came after a day when she came home at nine o’clock at night after staying six hours later than the school's release time to finish sub plans. She cited this moment as a wake-up call and wondered why it took her so long to realize that living that way was not beneficial to anyone.

*And that's when I realized, is it important? My job is important, and the kids are important, but at what cost?*

On the other hand, I asked Bella about a time that she was proud of the way she achieved work-life balance, and she told me she felt proud of herself every time she walks out of the door at 3:55 (her school’s teacher release time) without feeling guilty when she gets home.

*I think all of last year probably was a big one for me, but just continuing to know I'm not going to do anything after 3:55 and just walking out the door. And honestly, I think the win there is not feeling bad about it because if you put that kind of pressure on yourself, it's so easy to feel like, oh, I didn't do enough. But at the end of the day, I know that we're going to come in tomorrow and I'm going to teach them and it may flop and it may be great, but that's true no matter how many hours I put into the lesson for tomorrow.*

I interviewed Camilla, another METP graduate, on the same day as Bella and found it beneficial to be able to immediately compare and contrast their experiences. As a fifth-year teacher at a high school in the central hills area, Camilla has always taught some combination of Algebra I and Geometry. Additionally, she was just recently married last summer but does not have any children or pets to care for. When asked to

define work-life balance, Camilla gave a definition similar to Bella's and said her ideal mix is to work hard during the school day but leave work at school. Again, I saw themes that this is a skill learned over time for all teachers, regardless of their opinions on WLB.

*My first year I felt like I cared so much. I wanted to be there all the time for the kids and I still care, but I have realized that they will be okay if they have to wait a few more hours for my answers [to an email] or for whatever. And so that's the biggest thing for me which gets easier the longer you teach. I've been lucky. I've only ever taught some combination of algebra one or geometry, so obviously I'm always trying to improve, but the majority of what I teach is planned and already ready to go. Instead of having to spend all the time planning everything, I can just spend a little time trying to improve.*

Camilla's description of how teaching the same subject area over a handful of years makes it dramatically easier to achieve work-life balance because teachers are not spending time trying to reinvent the wheel, but instead are simply improving the lessons they have already created. Most importantly though, Camilla noted that she thinks this notion of WLB as she has defined it - working outside of the classroom as little as possible- is nearly impossible for first-year teachers or even second-year teachers. This is an idea that Bella also alluded to when she gave me the advice of asking for help when I need it. Without support from administrators and other more experienced teachers, the first year of teaching for these participants was clearly a great struggle.

Unlike Alice, Camilla described multiple experiences when she discussed work-life balance with her coworkers. Immediately prior to our interview, she said she had received a voice memo from one of her friends who is also a teacher and interviewing for

a new job at a new school. In the voice memo, Camilla's friend explained how she asked the school principal what their school does to support mental health and work-life balance in an interview.

*Asking that question would've never crossed my mind in an interview, but that's really important to her and it's important to a lot of my friends and my little teacher friend group who are all in our fourth, fifth, sixth year teaching... we definitely talk about those things. I would say they talk about it a lot more than I do, and that just might be a personality difference or a life difference.*

Camilla imparted her wisdom to me when I asked her what advice she has for younger teachers, or even student teachers, on how to achieve work-life balance. Immediately, her adamant response was to not ever stay more than thirty minutes after school to finish work. She explained her students are always eager to see their grades or expect an immediate response to a question they have, which she said was somewhat true when she was in school. However, she credited the increase in school technology such as PowerSchool with her student's likelihood to always expect instant gratification when it comes to their grades or assignments. In her experience, she noted that it is impossible to be a great teacher and also be expected to churn grades and responses out like a robot. Learning that students can wait to receive their grades within a reasonable time has been her saving grace for not taking work home. In addition to this piece of advice, Camilla said that it was pivotal to delete her school email from her personal cell phone.

*Do not put your email on your phone. That's a big one. In my first year, my email popped up on my phone... I always tell my parents when I meet them, I'll respond to you within 24 hours because that's reasonable. But don't respond while you're*

*at home eating dinner with your husband or with your kids or with your roommate. Don't respond outside of hours. And as much as you can mentally handle, don't bring work home. And if you have to work outside of contracted hours, try to do it at school.*

When talking about what her ideal work-life balance looked like, she compared it to a typical office job where work is only completed in the office and everything is left there. However, she highlighted an important theme represented in this research; teaching is completely different than other office jobs. Where other professions have ample time built into the day to prepare for an occasional presentation, teachers are given one class period a day to prepare for a full day's worth of presentations. Camilla noted that one potential solution to problems like these is adding additional planning periods during the school day. When I asked her about what type of systematic changes she would like to see, she told me that her husband held elected office, so she feels like she has a unique perspective on policy solutions.

*I know this would take a magic wand, but it would be ideal to have more teachers and smaller classes. More teachers could potentially provide the opportunity for more planning time. So, I guess that would be at a state level because you need the money. It's a lot easier said than done to just whip up this amount of money to give to teachers.*

Related to this, she shared a story of how supportive her administration is of work-life balance to avoid the reality of burnout in teachers. As she was staying at school late one evening during her first year of teaching, Camilla's principal walked past her room on his way out and was shocked to find her at her desk grading papers. She was



surprised to hear him explicitly tell her to go home. While her administration has changed multiple times since then, she remarked that the overall attitude toward the importance of work-life balance has only gotten better since then.

*Our administration is 100% family first. You're a human, you're a person. You've got to do what you got to do. And so they're very supportive of us.*

At this point in my interviews, I began to see a common theme between the three participants: work-life balance is nearly impossible for the first year or two. When speaking with Camilla, I decided to directly ask her when she felt like she had worked out the kinks with how to maintain her own WLB. Although Covid interrupted her third year of teaching, she felt like she really began to find her balance in her fourth year and thinks it was probably about the same for most of the teachers she knows.

*I would say the fourth year is when I hit my stride. And I think probably the answers you're going to get to this are going to be skewed because of Covid.*

*Right? Because Covid changed everything... Probably the fourth year was when I was like, okay, I got this. I know what I'm doing.*

Just like with Bella and Camilla, I found Daisy by contacting the METP alumni who have been teaching for at least five years. As a teacher in a similar area as Camilla, Daisy is in her sixth year of teaching and had only recently made the switch to a new subject. Before the last two academic years, she taught geometry (for the first four years), but she is now teaching both honors geometry and Advanced Placement Computer Science Principles. She also was married and had two dogs. Based on her experience, she defined work-life balance in terms of keeping promises that she makes to herself.

*If I tell myself that I am not going to do something whenever I get home, that means I really need to stick with that and not just make an exception. If I don't get something done, I need to be okay with the fact that I always can do it tomorrow. And I'm okay with getting to work a little bit early to do that. I think that's okay to do that, to kind of give yourself a little bit of balance there as well. It's okay to get there early, but it's not okay to work yourself into the late hours of the night.*

Creating and making yourself uphold these boundaries was an underlying theme in most of these interviews; however, Daisy was the first to explicitly say it. Additionally, Daisy's approach to fixing the need for extra time at school by arriving early but never staying late is one of the most impactful solutions I have seen. Coming early to school addresses both the suggestion to not bring schoolwork home and completely erases the likelihood that a teacher accidentally commits an extra six hours of the day by staying after school. More than this, she has shared these ideas and collaborated with her coworkers on effective ways to attain WLB. She said that these are a large part of their weekly or monthly conversations in the halls, at professional learning community meetings, or during lunch.

*Oh yeah, they do. Teachers, absolutely, because we are in the thick of it, so we definitely encourage each other to make sure that you aren't bringing homework all the time. In a sense, we hold each other accountable for that, the teachers do and the administrators aren't as into it as the teachers are because they have other things that they worry about.*

Similar to other teachers, Daisy said that her work-life balance was a major struggle in her first and second years of teaching. She, like others, found herself staying

at the school for hours after school ended mostly because she was trying to listen to the advice she had received to not bring work into her home. However, following that rule meant that she was still working the same amount of time outside of contracted hours, but she was not spending ample time at home with her family as she wished. For her, this was also a sign of incredible imbalance, even though she was technically doing the ‘right’ thing according to the advice she had received.

*I realized that wasn't a good balance either. I don't need to be up at school for hours and hours and hours... And it was just, I think that's whenever it hit me, that was probably about my third or fourth, fourth year, I need to make sure that I'm using my time wisely.*

Again, I asked Daisy at what point she felt like she had really hit her stride in her work-life balance without having to actively think about it. Similar to Camilla, she felt like it was not until her fourth year that she had all of the kinks worked out. Her first three years were spent trying to find the systems and adjustments that worked for all of her in-school and out-of-school needs. By her fifth year, she felt like it was a breeze, even if she was teaching some new content by adding honors geometry. She felt that by that point in her career she not only had a hold over core issues in the classroom such as classroom management and student engagement, but she was also more confident in her discipline in maintaining WLB. Even when she did add in two new classes of content, she credited the strong foundation of work-life balance principles with an easier, albeit not perfect, transition.

*The lesson planning and understanding of how in-depth I needed to go [for these classes] was a little bit like starting from year one. Again, in a sense, because I*

*had been teaching regular geometry for four years, and if I had taught it my fifth year, I would've been coasting. It would've been the easiest year of my life. But changing was a nice change though, even though it was a little rough at first.*

Daisy also shared a very interesting perspective about the changes she wished to see when it comes to being able to improve work-life balance for all teachers. She viewed the issue on a sort of line of extremes. On one end, you have the individual teacher or person who has to recognize that work-life balance is a valuable skill in life. She said that, in general, people have started to recognize and honor this idea, especially the younger generations. On the other end of the spectrum, you have the largest scale change at the national level. Daisy said that the people in charge of the national education system are not quite on the same page just yet [about WLB] which is causing a riff in the way we all live. More than this, I asked her if she thought this was a value issue.

*I think they value education, but they value education to a degree that is just not flexible with the way the world is changing right now. I think they need to be a little bit more flexible, but because everybody that's older is going to not quite understand how the world is changing, and I mean, that's going to be the same way whenever I'm an old woman, too. I think that's the constant battle that's going to happen.*

In the last section of the interview, I asked her what advice she would give a younger teacher like me and to tell me a time that she knew her personal and school lives were out of balance. Interestingly, she gave me answers that mirror almost exactly other participants and at this point, I felt as if I began to reach saturation as I was hearing similar experiences from multiple people.

The advice Daisy gave me was nearly exactly what Camilla and Bella told me: do not stay late at school and do not bring work home. However, Daisy did add a new element to this advice. Overwhelmingly, she said that almost everything can wait until the next day to be completed; however, if something absolutely must be completed, it is better to bring it home and complete it as quickly as possible.

*If you absolutely need to bring something home, just go ahead and bring it home because you would be much more comfortable than staying at the school. I think that would just be the biggest thing once you're done with school, once you're ready to go ahead and go home, be where you're comfortable.*

Similar to Bella, the time that she was forced to recognize that her life was out of balance came because her partner seriously asked her to make a change. In Daisy's case, her husband told her that she needed to be home at whatever cost it came at, and he even offered to help her with schoolwork at home. It was at this moment that she realized that her work was dominating her life, and her relationship with her family was more important than whatever her work required her.

My last interview was with another METP graduate who has worked in the Mississippi Delta as a teacher for the last five years. For the first year, he taught English Language Arts but quickly became an inclusion teacher in the special education department. For the last two years, he has served as the gifted education teacher for the second to eighth grades. As for his personal life, he was married and was expecting his first child in the coming months. He also coached a few sports and served in a local ministry in Quitman County. When I asked him what work-life balance was, he had the clearest personal definition of work-life balance.

*Work-life balance I would say is just the combination of doing things you like with things you have to do, to put it simply. So, I guess finding time to do things outside of your work life that brings meaning to your life and has some level of enjoyment or a necessity, are things that you have to do if you want to be a civilized human being.*

Erza admitted to struggling with work-life balance over the tenure of his career. Similar to other participants, he said it was much more difficult at the beginning of his career, but he did admit to still finding some imbalances. Interestingly, Erza also lived in Marks, Mississippi at first and noticed that work-life balance was somewhat more difficult to achieve in a small town like Marks because there was not much to enrich the life of a young professional. More than any other participant, Erza emphasized the ‘life’ component of work-life balance which can be seen in how he defined WLB. His focus on hobbies and interests, more than simply making the effort to leave work at school, demonstrated an element of this research that I think is largely overlooked. There seems to be an underlying belief that if we work towards removing the stress of work in our personal lives success in our outside-of-work interests and hobbies will follow. However, as Ezra suggested, creating a meaningful life outside of work takes just as much intentional effort as balancing the work elements of our lives. This could be correlated with Ezra being the only male participant considering that men typically have a stronger social network for avocations like sports.

It seemed as though Ezra did speak with other teachers and his administrators about the issues of attaining work-life balance. When mingling with coworkers in the halls between classes or during afternoon duty times, Erza said that work-life balance

came up from time to time, but the conversations are typically more of a complaining nature than problem-solving to find solutions. While he acknowledged that there was some benefit to expressing concerns, he worried that only saying “I am never finished with my work” worsened the problem. Interestingly, Ezra pointed out the paradoxical nature of discussing work-life imbalances with school administrators.

*Administrators definitely do support work-life balance at my school. I would say they do talk about it and tell us to take care of ourselves and make sure to not be too stressed. But, at the same time, they also require a lot of the things of us that add to our lack of work-life balance.*

Living with the contradiction of administrators saying that teacher mental health is important, but perpetually making it difficult for educators to actually achieve it could lead Ezra and his coworkers to a defeated attitude where they feel like no matter what they do, there will always be more to do. When I asked him what change he would like to see, Ezra took a different approach than some of the other participants. He hoped to see change at the district and state level with an expressed interest in giving teachers more time in the day to accomplish necessary tasks.

*I would think statewide and districtwide would be the changes that I would like to see with a little bit more time for planning and a little bit more structure with what is being asked of teachers and giving administrators a deadline for when things can be asked of us. I don't know. I would just say that's a big complaint of mine. It's just last-minute things.*

Furthermore, Ezra used this explanation of administrative response to WLB to transition into describing a time when he felt as if it was more difficult than usual to find

balance. During his first year of teaching, an administrative error caused all of his classes to be switched. This error left him with all new students in the middle of the year and no access to the online grade book to submit their progress. Quickly, he found himself at home on a Saturday night at ten o'clock at night attempting to solve a schoolwide issue on his own. It was in that moment that he realized that he could not continue to spend time trying to solve issues he did not create and that students would survive if they had to wait a few days to see their grades. When I asked him what advice he would give a younger teacher, it mirrored this story perfectly.

*I would say if you are really excited and passionate about what you're teaching, then it won't feel like the work you have to do outside of school, won't feel as taxing because you're really excited about it. But, set limits so you don't get burnout in the middle of that first year or early into the second year. So, I think just understanding that not everything will get done in the exact amount of time and prioritizing students and student learning and falling back on your administration to help you out with the rest hopefully.*

This topic of discussion was followed by a conversation about where Ezra's work-life balance might be headed in the future. He said that with a baby on the way there was no real way to accurately understand how that factor would change his WLB, at least for the foreseeable future. All he was sure of was that in this next phase of life, the work-life balance would get pushed to the back burner. In his concluding thoughts, Ezra summed up exactly what I felt was the best way to end these interviews.

*I know that I want to look back and realize that I've enjoyed teaching as a job, but I also don't want it to have consumed my entire young adult life when I look back*



*in 10 or 15 years or however long. And so, I think my goal is to still enjoy it as a job, but also make sure that I'm prioritizing other important things in my life. And the further away I get from my first year, the easier I do feel like that is.*

Between Alice, Bella, Camilla, Daisy, and Ezra, I conducted five total interviews with experienced teachers to explore their lived experiences of trying to achieve work-life balance. In the next section, I will connect the responses thematically and discuss the implications of understanding work-life balance for teachers.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion with Literature**

Considering the purpose of this research, it adds meaning to the work as a whole to look at the themes that emerged as the interviews were conducted. This section will be guided by the original overall research questions that were listed at the beginning of this thesis in the introduction chapter. These questions center around three major ideas: how do veteran teachers describe the struggle with work-life balance, what coping strategies over their career seem helpful?, and what changes could be made to the educational system to better support public school teachers in their pursuit of work-life balance? At what level should those changes occur? Using these questions, this section will discuss participants' responses as they relate to the original assumptions that I showcased in the introduction chapter. There are two additional sections in this chapter that address other themes that came up in the literature and interviews but were not directly addressed in the original research questions.

### *Section One: Differences in Definitions and Experiences*

A central question in this research was attempting to understand how veteran teachers describe their struggle with work-life balance. The assumption I offered was that the majority of teachers do admit to struggling with the work-life imbalance and attribute some of the causes to their jobs being systematically devalued in the public over the last few years. Additionally, my preconceived notion was that teachers often feel criticized by the public and other outside forces. This leads teachers to feel as if they can rarely catch

a break and gives them little opportunity to be reminded of the reason they became teachers.

All of the teachers I interviewed demonstrated feeling some level of struggle with work-life balance at various points in their careers. Some like Alice said that work-life balance was not as much of an issue in her life as it was simply a process of knowing what she wants to do and prioritizing those things. On the other hand, others like Bella and Camilla expressed a true sense of having to fight for their own work-life balance and make significant changes in their work habits to improve their livelihood. There does seem to be an interesting divide between the teachers who have taught for five or six years and the teacher with much more experience. Because Alice has been teaching for so long it is a possibility that she is too far removed from her first and second year of teaching to still feel the effects of its difficulties like the other teachers can.

Additionally, it seems as if some of these discrepancies might be due to differences in definitions of work-life balance. Bella, Camilla, and Daisy were on nearly the exact same page when it came to how they think about work-life balance: show up to school at 7:30 in the morning and leave at 3:30 when the bell rings. Daisy had a slightly different viewpoint by adding that she felt comfortable coming to school thirty minutes early on rare occasions when work must be completed. However, Alice and Ezra had different elements in their understanding of work-life balance.

First, Alice seemed to be coming from a perspective that work-life balance is not an issue for her and never has been. She did admit that her priorities have to shift as things in her personal life change, but generally speaking, she saw the priority to always be the best teacher for her students regardless of what that might cost her. When she

defined work-life balance as a series of shifts in priorities, it was clear to me that she was talking about shifts in priorities for her personal life to accommodate the demands of her work life. As she said, she felt comfortable bringing work home and even completing it over the weekend which means that she may not be able to spend as much time with her family or accomplish other non-work-related responsibilities.

On the other hand, Ezra's definition of WLB focused more on the enrichment of his personal life than a concern for the way work often creeps into our personal lives. As he found ways to make a meaningful life, he looked to both work and life to do so. The meaning was made in his work by using his time intentionally at school and contributing to the lives of his students as a mentor and teacher. However, he also increased the feeling of satisfaction in his personal life by using his time at home to invest in his hobbies and personal relationships. Although I believe that these things are also a priority for the other teachers I interviewed, Ezra's intent expression to enrich his personal life showed a shift in values that I believe reflected that of a younger generation. It is simply not enough anymore for young people to not work while they are focused on their personal lives; they also need to feel as if when they are in 'personal' mode that there is space and energy dedicated to making use of their time in meaningful ways.

It seems like most of the participants credited different sources as the cause of their struggles with WLB. However, they all did take some level of personal responsibility for their experience with imbalances, especially when it came to discussing the first two years of their careers. One possible reason for this could be that as inexperienced teachers they were more naive to the causes of WLB problems than they are now.

For example, Bella, Camilla, and Daisy took a larger-scale view to discuss what factors directly attributed to their problems with WLB. In her interview, Bella spoke about the general public's opinion of teachers and how that impacts policy decisions made concerning schools. Camilla and Daisy both took a more governmental or systematic approach to answer the question, believing that more resources should be redistributed to schools so that the burden falls less frequently on the teacher to solve issues. One example of this was the suggestion of adding more teachers in the classroom and addressing the substitute teacher shortage. Ezra fell somewhere in the middle from personal to systematic change. In his school, he experienced a lot of last-minute changes and expectations for teachers that he described as unreasonable. He said that changes both at his school and district or statewide are needed to address these concerns. Alice did not explicitly direct me in any direction as to where she believes this problem stems from as she does not see it as a pressing issue.

Looking at all of these results, I cannot see any one person who is 'right' in their assessment of the source of problems with WLB because I truly believe that it is likely a combination of all of the factors they mentioned. In an educational system like we have set up in the United States, the more conflicting entities involved in the lives of students and teachers, the more complicated the web of solutions becomes for the individual. So, it is entirely plausible that Camilla's asking for more teachers and smaller class sizes is as much a source of the issue as Ezra's concerns with teacher expectations and Bella's concern about public opinion. The fundamental truth is that teachers are wrestling with the reality that work-life imbalance causes problems for teachers across the board for a variety of complex reasons.

## *Section Two: Coping Strategies and Advice*

The next key question in this research concerned the types of personal coping strategies that teachers have found over the duration of their respective careers to try and find balance. My original assumption was that teachers would create a toolbelt of skills that help them achieve their own version of work-life balance. Additionally, I hypothesized that there were likely solutions that work for a wide range of teachers regardless of their situation. I gathered information to answer this question by asking teachers what advice they would share with a less experienced teacher with the hopes that the advice they give would give me insight into their coping strategies without having to directly ask.

Overall, the teachers implored me to not stay after school if I could help it. This was a piece of advice that four out of the five teachers told me or brought up at some point in their interview. Although it did not come without variations, Daisy said she was comfortable with coming to school early whereas Camilla was expressly against working outside of contracted hours. Additionally, the blanket piece of advice I received was not to bring work home when trying to achieve a work-life balance. The only participant who did not mention keeping schoolwork in the classroom was Alice who said that she did not mind working outside of contracted hours and frequently spent her weekends working on her content for the following week.

There were nuances to this conversation about advice applicable to most teachers. Although the information and advice everyone shared could be applied to all teachers' lives, it was clear that teachers have coped with imbalance based on their own definition

of work-life balance. For example, Camilla had one of the strictest personal definitions of WLB and avoids working outside school whenever possible. One piece of advice she left me with was to remove my email from my phone to fully switch out of school mode when you are out of the building. This is clearly reflective of her own experience and what works best for her. Even though the other teachers did not offer this advice, I have no doubt that they would also benefit from applying this practice; however, I would also go as far to say that some of the teachers in this study would not approve of this advice because of their own personal definitions of WLB.

There is a similar sentiment to be shared about Daisy's advice to bring work home if necessary instead of doing it at school and Bella's advice to not feel guilty when leaving the school at dismissal time. Overall, my preconceived ideas held true in this study. Teachers do create coping strategies based on their own unique situations and understanding of work-life balance. However, they also shared many similarities with each other enough that some advice was repeatedly given.

### *Section Three: Suggested Changes*

The last of my three overall research questions was about the types of changes that these teachers would like to see to improve their experiences with work-life balance. Initially, I thought that teachers would struggle to identify specific causes of the troubles with work-life imbalance. More than this, I thought that teachers would suggest that change is needed at a larger scale rather than directly suggest that change is needed in their school or district.

On the whole, teachers did struggle to answer the question, or at the very least it prompted genuine reflection on their behavior. Nearly every time I asked this question in interviews with participants, I was met with a pondering look or a physical pause in the conversation. There also seemed to be doubt in the participants' confidence in their own answers. It was not uncommon for a teacher to remark that they did not know if that was the answer I was looking for or that they might not be the best person to talk to about changes. Overall, I believe that this is due in part to the fact that teachers, as they said in their own words, are typically responsible for so much on any given day that they do not have the chance to reflect on the way they are living. When you are responsible for the education and livelihood of upwards of ninety students a day, it is likely not going to be a frequent occurrence to stop and think about work-life balance, let alone what causes imbalances.

Most teachers in this study did lean towards more large-scale change rather than specifically addressing the ways in which they wanted to see their districts or schools change. Ezra was the only one who expressly said he wanted to see a change in his school and district. His primary concern was that his school building administrators had a plethora of last-minute requests from teachers that impeded his ability to achieve WLB on a daily basis. Ezra acknowledged, however, that it was highly probable that these requests were coming from the larger powers rather than his specific administrations, so he suggested that districts or the state create time parameters for how quickly they can reasonably expect a classroom teacher to complete a task.

The other teachers in the study reflected discontent with large-scale organizations in charge of education in Mississippi. Camilla focused specifically on the state



government's responsibility in making the lives of teachers more manageable. As her husband was involved in statewide politics, she knew by first-hand experience that it was not easy to promote governmental change, but her suggestions were to address the teacher shortage with the hopes that it would lower classroom size and, in turn, help individual teachers reduce the demands of their work. On the other hand, Daisy looked more towards the national government and believed that there was a disconnect between those in power and the desires of those on the ground in schools. Generally speaking, she reasoned that people in positions of power are of an older generation and cannot understand the needs of younger teachers in order to create systems more in-tune with their needs. From her perspective, those in power were not as flexible in their understanding of teachers and their struggles with WLB as they should be, which she believed created issues down the line. Lastly, Bella looked at public opinion when addressing what changes she wanted to see. She felt the critique of education from the public and hoped that if everyone could understand that teachers were humans just trying to do the right thing to help students succeed some of the issues concerning WLB would diminish. Additionally, she also believed that addressing things such as the substitute teacher shortage and reducing the additional responsibilities of teachers would help in everyone's quest to achieve WLB. Alice did not contribute any sort of changes she wished to see as she did not see work-life balance as an area of concern in her experience.

When trying to determine if any of my assumptions were supported, I concluded that most teachers struggled to directly cite a source of change they believed could be effective, at least initially. Additionally, based on the experiences and recommendations of these teachers, I concluded that these teachers ceded the responsibility of change to

larger government agencies at the state and national levels. which aligned with my original assumption. Ezra's concern with his school's administration did surprise me; however, I do not think that negates the original conclusion that most teachers do not specifically address desired changes by looking at their school building administrators.

#### *Section Four: Generational Divides*

After conducting all of the interviews, I noticed that there was a significant difference in how Alice, a member of Generation X, responded to the idea of work-life balance compared to the other teachers who are all Millennials. Although my original research questions did not include anything about differences among teachers based on demographic factors, the literature review section of this thesis suggested that this is a prominent theme. This section aims to elaborate on the ways in which these interviews reflected the themes found in the literature review and concludes that the age or generational perspectives of teachers can be a determinant of their feelings about WLB.

As my first interview, I entered Alice's interview with little to no idea of how the teachers might respond to the questions, or if I had even created a list of questions that would lead to meaningful discussion. However, I did naively assume that people who signed up for interviews would have experiences with work-life imbalance and hold the belief that WLB is important in their lives. Thus, Alice's interview was quite jarring and made me wonder if I should reformulate my questions to prompt better discussion with all participants regardless of their personal beliefs about WLB. However, I realized after I conducted one other interview with Bella that Alice was an outlier in this situation. This prompted me to ponder about why she held the opinions that she did: she is from a

different generation than the other participants. Although this is a question that exceeds the boundaries of this study, I have speculated that Alice's opinions about work-life balance stem from a combination of her lived experience and the fact that she comes from a generation that historically struggles with work-life balance. Of course, this is only a working idea and I cannot be able to confidentially confirm this without further research. However, this situation does create an interesting topic for further discussion.

Members of Generation X, especially women, grew up hearing that they could have and do it all. Between having a family, a successful career, and personal happiness, women of Generation X are typically overly dedicated to their careers and do not give themselves the time to consider that their working habits are not healthy. I believed that this is the situation with Alice and why her responses about work-life balance were so different than those of the other participants. This was even reflected in a later interview with Daisy, a Millennial, when discussing at what level change should occur. Daisy specifically addressed the way that people in positions of power when it comes to education are of a different generation that does not value work-life balance in the same way as the younger two generations, Millennials, and Generation Z.

As Gen Z begins to join millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers in the workforce, conflicting views on what constitutes a work-life balance have come to a head. I have frequently heard stories from professionals outside of education relying on how difficult it is to level with their boss who is of a different generation as to why they did not answer an email at some late hour of the night. From my observations, incongruous values when it comes to maintaining work and life as a teacher can typically be seen by how late some stay at school or how much work they take home in the evenings. As we begin to see

more generations become professionals, it is likely that the importance of attaining work-life balance will continue to be up for discussion.

Drawing from a sample of forty-eight respondents, Debyani Mukherjee Rawal (2023) investigated and described how the four generations clash at work and where fundamentally different beliefs about work-life balance impact the working culture for student affairs professionals (Rawal, 2023). After having members of each generation define work-life balance, Rawal concludes that there seems to be a distinct line between the definitions of Millennials and their Gen X and Babyboomer counterparts (Rawal, 2023). Where Gen X used “knowing your limits” as their guiding light in achieving their WLB, Millennials were more direct in saying that WLB means leaving work on time and leaving work at the office (Rawal, 2023). These clear disagreements on what constitutes WLB reflected what I have seen in my own experience, even outside of the world of education. Understanding this situation in the workplace helps us understand the culture of workaholism we seem to be leaving behind and where new generations might be able to take us. Additionally, my interview data informed major themes that were often organically discussed in my interviews with Mississippi teachers, regardless of age.

As Alice herself said in her interview, work-life balance is a relatively new idea that is becoming increasingly important to workers across a variety of industries. A study observed the current WLB practices of Forbes’ Great Companies to Work For list which the magazine publishes annually (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2019). They found that while many ‘great companies’ are not reporting a significant amount of information regarding their WLB information for employees they will not be able to maintain this approach long-term (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2019). Researchers in the study suggested that all

types of companies dedicate time to investigating the best WLB practices for their employees and actively disseminating them to current and prospective employees before it is too late (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2019). As more Millennial and Gen Z teachers enter the classroom, they are asking school administrators questions about work-life balance that they might not have the answers to. Based on this research study, schools and districts should spend more time brainstorming and implementing practices that promote WLB like flexible work schedules, remote working, and extended paid leave.

Another study published in 2013, as Millennials had only been in the workforce for a few years, compared the work ethics of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers who are classroom teachers (Petty, 2013). As Baby Boomers start to retire and new generations take their place in the workforce, many school administrators are worried about the differences in values and how those changes might affect their school dynamics. In this study, they found that these differences between generations were significant enough to change the landscape for teachers and administrators alike (Petty, 2013). Despite the fact that millennials score equally as high as Boomers when it comes to being dependable, those of older generations complained about the Gen Xers and their “so-called ‘lack of work ethic’” (p. 6).

What I found most interesting and important from this research is the idea that generational cohorts are not misaligned in their values because of the year they were born, instead, it is the events that happen during their lives that spark changes. Comparing Alice to the rest of the participants, this completely reflects the themes that emerged. As a member of Generation X, Alice’s childhood and life were shaped by events like the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of the personal computer where as the

other Millennial participants were drastically shaped by 9/11 and the change to being completely reliant on the internet. More than this, Alice was raised during a time when the dialogue around women joining the workforce was centered around having and doing it all. Women were told that they could have a family life where they cooked, cleaned, and raised their children after their nine-to-five job where they could be equally successful as C. E. Os and team leaders. On the other hand, millennials like Camilla and Daisy grew up watching their Gen X mothers struggling to “have it all” and, as a generation, decided they wanted something different for themselves. The combined effects of learning from their parent’s mistakes and living through times of social, political, and economic unrest leave Millennials in a position to emphasize their work-life balance.

In many ways, Alice is an outlier in her beliefs about work-life balance. Her ideas and values surrounding work-life balance showcase that she essentially believed that WLB is a hoax that most people could ‘toughen’ up to work it out. I chose “The Biggest Hoax” as the title of this thesis for two reasons. The first reason is that it reflects Alice’s and older generations’ beliefs about the phenomena; however, it also represents feelings shared by the younger teachers. Erza and Daisy both specifically cited some hopeless feelings about the state of our education system. Where Erza’s administration paradoxically impedes his ability to achieve work-life balance with last-minute requests, Daisy sees the striking differences between the people who make decisions regarding education policy and classroom teachers. All of the younger participants made some mention of feeling distraught over the future of education in attention. There never seems to be a break for classroom teachers between ever-increasing demands like sorting

classroom libraries based on new book bans or constantly seeing public opinion of teachers plummet. Work-life balance is the biggest hoax for classroom teachers, regardless of their own personal beliefs, because the possibility of realistically achieving it is becoming increasingly elusive.

#### *Section Five: Changes Over Time*

In a similar vein, none of my original research questions aimed to dive into when teachers began to feel successful in their attempts to achieve work-life balance. Nonetheless, this was an emergent theme in the research so much so that the questions typically led down a path that organically brought it up. After hearing that the participants felt successful with their ability to attain work-life balance after three years of teaching, it became clear that it was important enough to include in the discussion section of this thesis which hopes to address the reasons the teachers believed this to be true.

The first time I heard this theme come up in an interview was with Bella who said that by her fourth year of teaching in the classroom, she felt like she was in a really strong place with her work-life balance because she made gradual changes each year. Camilla essentially reflected the same feelings in her interview and said that while every year became easier, it was not until her fourth year that she really felt like all of the kinks were worked out in her work-life balance system. Interestingly, Camilla did bring up the important point of how Covid impacted her upwards trajectory of balance. Although answering this question would require further research, I imagine it is possible that Covid could have helped Camilla become firmer with her WLB routine once returning to the

classroom after seeing how much it was a struggle during remote work. Daisy and Ezra felt the same way that by the third or fourth year of teaching WLB was much more achievable.

However, Ezra did mention that because he has changed roles in school three times since working as an educator it was difficult for him to feel as if he had gotten to the “coasting” point like Camilla felt she had. While it was easier for him to create boundaries with work, it seemed that with his new subjects, he still was asked to do the same amount of work just with more contingencies around when it would be completed this time around.

Although this was not explicitly addressed in the original research questions, the idea that it takes most teachers a few years to really feel like they have an understanding of their own work-life balance is an important finding of this research. Because so many of the teachers expressed a similar experience, it is reasonable to conclude that other teachers have also lived this experience. Furthermore, this may aid in the understanding of teacher attrition in the first few years of the profession. Where older generations' attitudes about WLB led them to ‘tough it out’ or never believe in WLB in the first place, upcoming generations seem to be more unwilling to work in an unbalanced environment. A sample of ninety-eight teachers found “a significant and positive association between beginning teacher burnout and serious intentions to leave,” (O’Brien et. al., p. 13). Burnout and work-life imbalance are key factors in understanding the lived experiences of younger teachers. This is one area that would benefit from further research to better understand the depth of this truth and what reasons teacher hypotheses cause this.



## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

The primary purpose of this thesis was to explore the lived experience of veteran secondary public school teachers in North Mississippi when it comes to work-life balance. It also aimed to understand the causes that attribute to these struggles and what teachers suggest as changes that could improve their ability to achieve work-life balance. There were three overarching research questions that guided this research and were answered by five teachers during the interview phase.

The first of these questions asked how veteran teachers describe the struggle with work-life balance. The answer to this question became overwhelmingly clear when every teacher confessed that work-life balance is either an explicit battle or, at the very least, something they have to consider in their lives.

The second question aimed to understand what coping strategies during their tenure as a teacher seem helpful. All but one of the teachers expressed that they had created a 'toolbelt' of sorts to create boundaries between their school and personal lives. The strategies seemed to be divided into two categories: highly applicable and more individualistic. Some of the highly applicable strategies that almost all of the teachers said they used included both leaving school work at school and avoiding working outside of contracted hours at all costs. For the more individualistic approaches, one teacher suggested deleting your school email off of your phone and not responding to emails outside of contracted hours. Another suggestion was to come to school early in the morning for thirty minutes if something absolutely necessary needed to be done outside

of school hours. This avoids the likelihood of staying for hours on end after school lets out.

The last research aimed to understand where teachers believed changes could be made to the educational system to better support public school teachers in their pursuit of work-life balance and at what level should those changes occur. Again, there seemed to be a divide in individual perspectives and approaches. Some teachers made suggestions that had more to do with personal lifestyle changes than systematic changes at the school, district, state, or national level. Some of these included personal strategies including creating and sticking to strict boundaries to not bring work outside of contracted hours. On the other hand, most teachers suggested some combination of state and federal legislative change to prevent continued struggle with work-life balance for educators. A few of those changes included addressing the substitute and general education teacher shortage, redistribution of resources to support classroom teachers' needs, and redirecting public opinion and critique of teachers.

Lastly, two additional themes emerged from the research that were not originally addressed in the overall research questions. First, it became clear that there are major generational differences in teacher beliefs about work-life balance. The one teacher I interviewed who is from Generation X had a more skeptical attitude towards the concept WLB and admitted to working frequently outside of contracted hours. This comes in total contrast to the other four teachers who are Millennials and all had explicit concerns about their ability to achieve work-life balance. Second, it seemed that most of the teachers also found that it took between three and four years into their careers to feel confident in their

ability to thrive as educators. Although, this did depend on the number of changes during those years and was somewhat affected by the Pandemic.

There are some limitations to this research that must be considered. First, four out of five participants were members of the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program (METP), and it is possible cohort members of this program have qualities, characteristics, or preparation experiences particular to the METP experience that limit the transferability of the data when it comes to non-METP graduates. More than this, the ability to enhance the transferability of this research to different settings and with different teacher participants would be made stronger by having more teachers of different generational cohorts and gender to interview. Another limitation of this research is that all five of the participants were ethnically similar, so future research should aim to analyze the impacts of race and ethnicity on the work-life balance of Mississippi teachers. Lastly, the timing of this research possibly plays a role in understanding the limitations. If these interviews were conducted during the early pandemic or even in the spring of 2022, participants could have demonstrated a more negative view of WLB as they were coming out of the Pandemic. These are areas that would benefit from further research, specifically concerning the implications of gender, age, and race on the ability of educators to achieve work-life balance.

The practical implications of this research demonstrate the value of its originality and value-added contributions. What is likely the most important implication of this research is for younger teachers in the classroom or in preparation programs. I found the idea that most teachers feel like they achieve WLB to the best of their abilities by the third year equally discouraging as inspiring. Furthermore, the coping strategies they used

to achieve this level of work-life balance are a major takeaway for all levels of teachers. The ability of teachers to share knowledge and advice in professional settings is critical to the conversation about work-life balance.

From the early pandemic to now, teachers have undergone the widest array of demands, possibly in the last several decades of American education. Between distance learning, hybrid models, and teaching with masks, teachers have shown the world their remarkable ability to persevere and still deliver high-quality instruction to their students. Additionally, the last three years have shown us that teachers more than ever deserve the opportunity to find and achieve a work-life balance that is fitting for highly-trained professionals and to their lives. This thesis is a desperate call to all educators, especially in states like Mississippi who struggle enough without highly qualified teachers leaving the field, to examine their practices around helping teachers achieve work-life balance in school settings before it is too late before they reach burnout and are forced to leave the classroom. You deserve the opportunity to love your job without sacrificing the joy of having an enriching personal life. More than this, though, your students deserve to have a teacher who has the capacity to serve and love them to their fullest potential, not overworked and without joy. As a field, we must remember the reasons many teachers decided to become teachers and take the purposeful, practical steps to support them in taking the sometimes heart-wrenching steps to establish a work-life balance for themselves as much as our students.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A- Institutional Review Board Application



The University of Mississippi  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
*Division of Research Integrity and Compliance – Institutional Review*

*Board*

100 Barr Hall – University, MS 38677  
[irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu) 662-915-7482

### APPLICATION FOR EXEMPTION

Purpose: Many studies qualify for an abbreviated review, according to the federal regulations and university policy.

- Part I of this form screens for a brief review.
- Part II of this form completes the abbreviated IRB application.
- Part III of this form gives instructions for obtaining the required assurances.
- The IRB makes the final determination on whether you must fill out a full application.

**Always** download the most recent version of this form: <http://www.research.olemiss.edu/irb/protocol/forms>.

Prepare and send application form as a **Word** document. **E-mail the completed form and attachments (and forwarded email assurance if PI is a student) to [irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu).**

**Note:** Some class project studies may qualify for a classroom waiver of IRB Application. Instructors: see form [here](#).

### PART I – Screening

#### 1. Do any of the following apply to your study?

##### Research Methods:

- |                                                                       |                              |                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Clinical Treatment study                                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>No</b>                                                             |                              |                                     |
| Exercise                                                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>No</b>                                                             |                              |                                     |
| X-rays                                                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>No</b>                                                             |                              |                                     |
| Collection of blood, urine, other bodily fluids, or tissues           | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>No</b>                                                             |                              |                                     |
| Use of blood, urine, other bodily fluids, or tissues with identifiers | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>No</b>                                                             |                              |                                     |

Use of drugs, biological products, or medical devices <b>No</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Use of drugs, biological products, or medical devices <b>No</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Use of data collected in the European Economic Area (EEA)* <b>No</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>Targeted Subjects:</b>	
Prisoners <b>No</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>Elements of Deception:</b>	
The study uses surreptitious videotaping <b>No</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
The study gives subjects deceptive feedback, whether positive or negative <b>No</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
The study uses a research confederate (i.e., an actor playing the part of subject) <b>No</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

**If you checked Yes to any of the above, STOP HERE and fill out the [FULL IRB APPLICATION FORM](#).**

**\*Anonymous or Confidential?** Anonymous means (1) the recorded data cannot associate a subject with his/her data, and (2) the data cannot identify a subject. *Examples:* surveys with no names but with demographic data that can identify a subject (e.g., the only African-American in a class) are not anonymous.

**\*Sensitive Information?** Sensitive information includes but is not limited to (1) information that risks damage to a subject's reputation; (2) information that involves criminal or civil liability; (3) information that can affect a subject's employability; and (4) information involving a person's financial standing. *Examples:* Surveys that ask about porn use, illegal drug or alcohol use, religion, use of alcohol while driving, AIDS, cancer, etc. contain sensitive information.

**\*European Economic Area** - Collection of data in the European Economic Area (the 28 states of the European Union and Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland). Special considerations apply - if data are not 100% anonymous. See [GDRP Guidance](#) for more information

**If using Qualtrics for anonymous surveys, [see guidance here](#).**

2. The **ONLY** involvement of human subjects will be in the following categories (check all that apply)

**PLEASE READ CAREFULLY: MUCH CHANGED WITH NEW REGULATIONS, JANUARY 2019**

1) **Educational Research**: Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices. Research is not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

2) **Surveys, Interviews, Educational Tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), Observation of Public Behavior (including video or auditory recording). AT LEAST ONE OF THE FOLLOWING MUST BE CHECKED**

(i) Information recorded by the investigator cannot readily identify the subject (either directly or indirectly)

(ii) Disclosure of subjects' responses outside the research could **NOT** reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, educational advancement, employability, or reputation

(iii) Information recorded by the investigator includes identifiers and the investigator specifies strong security measures to protect the data (e.g., encryption for electronic data; multiple locks for paper data). Minors are **NOT** permitted under this sub-category

Public observation involving minors with no investigator interaction. Minors are **ONLY** permitted under these conditions.

3) **Benign Behavioral Interventions (BBI)**: Research involving interventions in conjunction with collection of information from an adult subject through verbal or written responses (including data entry) or audiovisual recording, if the subject prospectively agrees to the intervention and information collection.

- BBI is limited to communication or interpersonal contact; cognitive, intellectual, educational, or behavioral tasks; manipulation of the physical, sensory, social or emotional environment
- Intervention Requirements:
  - brief duration (maximum intervention = 3 hours within one day; data collection may extend more hours & over days)

- painless/harmless (transient performance task-related stress, anxiety, or boredom are acceptable)
- not physically invasive (no activity tracker, blood pressure, pulse, etc.)
- unlikely to have a significant adverse lasting impact on subjects
- unlikely that subjects will find interventions offensive or embarrassing
- no deception / omission of information, such as study purpose, unless subject prospectively agrees

**AT LEAST ONE OF THE FOLLOWING MUST BE CHECKED**

- (A) Recorded information cannot readily identify the subject (either directly or indirectly)
  - (B) Any disclosure of subjects' responses outside the research could **NOT** reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation
  - (C) Information is recorded with identifiers and the investigator specifies strong security measures to protect the data (e.g., encryption for electronic data; multiple locks for paper data)
- 4) **Biospecimen Secondary Research**: Secondary Research for which consent is not required: use of identifiable information or identifiable biospecimens that have been or will be collected for some other 'primary' or 'initial' activity, if **ONE** of the following is met: (i) biospecimens or information is publicly available; (ii) information recorded by the investigator cannot readily, directly or indirectly identify the subject, and the investigator does not contact the subject or re-identify the subject; (iii) collection and analysis involving investigator's use of identifiable health information when use is regulated by HIPAA; or (iv) research information collected by or on behalf of the federal government using government-generated or -collected information obtained for non-research activities.
- 5) **Research and Demonstration Projects on Federal Programs**: The study is conducted pursuant to specific federal statutory authority and examines certain federal programs that deliver a public benefit [call IRB for details if you think your study may fit].
- 6) **Food Tasting/Evaluation**: Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

PART II — Abbreviated Application

3. **Project Title:** Investigation of the Work-Life Balance of Veteran Teachers in North Mississippi

4. **Principal Investigator:**  Dr.  Ms.  Mr. Anna Grace Robinson

**Department:** School Of Education **Department Chair's email (for cc of approval):**  
tbrady@olemiss.edu

**Work Phone:** 901-674-9599 **Home or Mobile Phone:** n/a

**E-Mail Address:** arobins6@go.olemiss.edu

**If Principal Investigator is a student:**

**Graduate student:**

- Dissertation  Master's thesis  
 Other graduate project

**Undergraduate student:**

- Senior thesis:  SMBHC  
 Croft Institute  Other undergraduate project

**Research Advisor:** Dr. Amy Wells Dolan (required for student researchers)

**Department:** School of Education **Work Phone:** 662-915-5710

**E-Mail Address:** aewells@olemiss.edu **Home or Cell Phone:** 662-202-4311

5. **Funding Source:**

Is this project funded?  Yes  No

If Yes, is the funding:

**Internal:**  **Source:** Click to enter  
**External:**  **Pending/Agency:** Click to enter  
 **Awarded/Agency:** Click to enter

PI(s) on external funding: Click to enter

6. List ALL personnel involved with this research who will have contact with human subjects or with their identifiable data. All personnel listed here must complete [CITI training OR the Alternative to CITI \(ATC\) training](#) before this application will be processed\*.

NAME	POSITION/TITLE	ROLE ON PROJECT	Training completed:	
			CITI or ATC	
PI Anna Grace Robinson	Student	Researcher	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Advisor Dr. Amy Wells Dolan	Associate Dean	Advisor	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Click to enter	Select	Click to enter	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Click to enter	Select	Click to enter	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If space is needed to list additional project personnel, submit [Appendix A](#).  
 \*See [Exempt Human Research Policy](#) for training exceptions

### Research Methodology/Procedures

7. Check all procedures below that apply to your study:

<input type="checkbox"/> Pre-existing data or biological samples ⇒	<p>- Source of data: <a href="#">Click to enter</a></p> <p>- Do data/samples have identifiers? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes* <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>- Describe how data will be secured (e.g., encryption for electronic data; multiple locks for paper data). <a href="#">Click to enter</a></p> <p>*Minors are <b>NOT</b> permitted under this sub-category.            * PHI will require a full form application and a HIPAA waiver authorization request.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Observation	
<input type="checkbox"/> Oral history	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Interview ⇒      ⇒	<p><a href="#">Attach interview questions.</a></p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Focus group ⇒      ⇒	<p><a href="#">Attach topic and questions.</a></p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Questionnaire or survey ⇒      ⇒	<p><a href="#">Attach questionnaire or survey.</a>  <b>If online, describe platform (e.g., Qualtrics):</b>  <a href="#">Click to enter</a></p>

<input type="checkbox"/> Audio recording or videotaping ⇒ ⇒  <input type="checkbox"/> The study has misleading or deceptive: ⇒ (1) study descriptions; (2) procedure explanations; and/or (3) survey instructions/rationales.	Use and attach a <a href="#">release form</a> if you plan to disseminate <b>quoted</b> comments or taped content. (This covers you and UM legally – Not for IRB purposes)  In the abstract, provide complete details and a rationale for employing misleading/deception information. Include <a href="#">Appendix D</a> in your attachments.
<b>8. Consent Procedures:</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> Oral ⇒ ⇒ ⇒ <input type="checkbox"/> Information Sheet/Cover Letter ⇒ ⇒ <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable, Explain: Click to enter	Attach script.  Attach. ( <b>No subject signatures required</b> , see <a href="#">example here</a> : Go to Examples and Templates, then 'Sample Information Sheet')

**9. Project Summary**

**Briefly summarize your project using non-technical, jargon-free language that can be understood by non-scientists.**

See <http://www.research.olemiss.edu/irb-forms> for abstract examples.

Give a brief statement of the research question supporting the reasons for, and importance of, the research: The primary focus of this research is to explore the lived experiences of veteran secondary public school teachers in North Mississippi when it comes to work-life balance. Teachers have historically reported struggling with navigating the battle of separating work and life. Not all populations of teachers are equally at risk for developing an imbalance between their work and life seen in a 2014 journal article that found teachers working in “the lowest-performing schools, teach at the elementary level, and/or fall at the ends of the teaching experience spectrum” are most likely to exhibit workaholic tendencies (Reysen, et. al, 2014). More than this, there seem to be specific factors that impact work-life balance more than others, including supportive administration, school culture, leisure activities, and emotion-focused coping strategies (Tapp, 2018). Research regarding work-life balance struggles have often been approached with the mindset that work invades life, but more recently there has been a shift to “progress to a more holistic understanding of life” (Eikhof, 2007). Because of this, my research is aimed at better understanding how this issue specifically impacts veteran teachers in North Mississippi and what changes would be beneficial for them and their students. I want to gain a more holistic understanding of what aspects of work and life create stress for teachers and what, if any, solutions they have found to combat these negative affects. My goal is to understand their lived experiences as professionals and understand how their work-life balance has changed during their careers. As

a researcher, I want to learn more about this issue as an emerging teacher and gather advice that will better prepare me to enter my own classroom fully knowledgeable of the struggles to come.

Eikhof, D. R., Warhurst, C., & Haunschild, A. (2007). Introduction: What work? what life? what balance?: Critical reflections on the work-life balance debate. *Employee Relations*, 29(4), 325-333. doi:<https://doi-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/10.1108/01425450710839452>

Reysen, Rebekah; Niemeyer, S. Ryan; Winburn, Amanda; and Monroe, Ann (2014) "The Relationship between Workaholic Tendencies and Stage of Development in a K-12 Teacher Population," *Journal of Contemporary Research in Education: Vol. 2 : No. 2* , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jcere/vol2/iss2/7>

Tapp, K. (2018). *Giving your best to work and life: Factors that impact principal work-life balance* (Order No. 10817682). Available from ProQuest One Academic. (2043997423). Retrieved from <http://umiss.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/giving-your-best-work-life-factors-that-impact/docview/2043997423/se-2>

**Describe the ages and characteristics of your proposed subjects and how you will recruit them (attach recruitment script or materials to the application):** Although the ages of the subjects will vary, they will all be over the age of 18 and qualify as veteran teachers in North Mississippi. For the purposes of this research, a veteran teacher will be described as someone who has been in the classroom for more than five years in a public secondary setting (7th- 12th grade). Subjects will be recruited through connections from the School of Education professionals with contacts in local schools in North Mississippi and snowball sampling will be conducted as more participants begin the interview process. After identification, they will be contacted via email to inquire if they are interested in participating in the study and asked to verify that they fit the demographics for the study.

For studies using only adult subjects, state how you will ensure they are 18+:

- First question on survey/interview
- Other: consent forms**
- Not applicable

**Briefly describe the research design AND carefully explain how your study will meet each of the requirements of the category criteria you checked on Page 2:**

This research is a qualitative case study that will use the tradition of open-ended questions to conduct individual interviews with practicing teachers who have been in the field for 5 years and are willing to discuss their experiences. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom video conferencing platform to record, discuss, and transcribe interviews. From this, the Principle Investigator will gather transcriptions for deep reading and analysis to identify unique insights and common themes described by the participants. In my report or honors thesis, my findings will be written up and connections will be made to the available literature on teachers' work-life balance. Subjects' personal information will not be able to be reasonably recognized by readers of the report because each subject will be given a pseudonym that protects their identity and any information they share. Because subjects' personal information will not be identifiable from the final report, they will also not be situated in a position that might cause them to be under threat of civil liability. Additionally, all information stored digitally will be encrypted so that only the researcher will have access to it and stored for up to five years and subsequently destroyed.



Give a *detailed* description of the procedure(s) subjects will undergo (from their perspective):

Subjects will receive an email from the researcher with a detailed explanation of the study and its goals. If they desire to participate in the study, they will reach out to the PI directly to arrange a time for interviews. Prior to the start of the interview, the participant will receive the consent form and photo/video release form to be reviewed and signed to ensure the safety of the subject. These forms will be emailed back to the researcher for safekeeping. After this, they will receive a Zoom link via email from the PI. Participants will pick a private setting of their choosing to conduct the interview which could be but is not limited to a home office, their classroom, or another quiet space. Once on the prearranged Zoom call, the PI will begin with brief introductions of themselves and of the research. At this point, the researcher will ask for consent to begin recording, and then, remind the subject again of the procedures for the interview along with any risks possible and remind the subject that they are free to withdraw from the study at any point. The PI will then begin asking questions from the list of preapproved questions, stopping as needed to clarify the subject's answers and asking probing questions when needed to encourage the subject to expand their answer. These questions will prompt subjects to reflect on their experiences in the classroom and outside in their personal lives. After all questions have been asked by the PI, the PI will ask the subject if they have any further questions and remind them again that they can contact the PI after the end of the interview at any point to withdraw from the study.

**10. Appendix Checklist:**

**A. Additional Personnel not listed on first page of application?**

No

Yes – complete [Appendix A](#)

**B. Will the research be conducted in schools or child care facilities?**

No

Yes – complete [Appendix B](#)

**C. Does your research involve deception or omission of elements of consent?**

No

Yes – complete [Appendix D](#)

**D. Will your research be conducted outside of the United States?**

No

Yes – complete [Appendix E](#)

**E. Will your research involve [protected health information \(PHI\)](#)?**

No

Yes – complete [Appendix F](#) if applicable

**11. Attachments Checklist:**

**Did you submit:**

**a. survey or questionnaires?**

**Yes**       **Not Applicable**

**b. interview questions?**

**Yes**       **Not Applicable**

**c. focus group topics?**

**Yes**       **Not Applicable**

**d. recruitment email, announcement, or script?**

**Yes**       **Not Applicable: No subject contact**

**e. informed consent information letter or script?**

**Yes**       **Not Applicable: No subject contact**

**f. permissions for locations outside the University?\***

**Yes**       **Not Applicable**

**\*if giving a survey, whether on or off campus, please ensure the person giving permission (e.g., the teacher of a class) has an explicit opportunity to see the survey before they give their permission for its distribution**

**12. If using class points as incentives, are there alternative assignments available for earning points that involve comparable time and effort?**

**Yes**       **Not Applicable**

**13. If using an anonymous survey through Qualtrics and giving incentives in a separate survey, have you read and conducted the testing of the surveys according to the [procedures here?](#)**

**Yes**       **Not Applicable**

**PART III: ASSURANCES**

**Conflict Of Interest And Fiscal Responsibility**

**Do you or any person responsible for the design, conduct, or reporting of this study have an economic interest in, or act as an officer or a director of any outside entity whose financial interests may reasonably appear to be affected by this research?**

**YES**      ⇨      ⇨      **If Yes, please describe any potential conflict of interest. [Click to enter](#)**

**NO**

**Do you or any person responsible for this study have existing financial holdings or relationships with the sponsor of this study?**

- YES    ⇒    ⇒    If Yes, please describe any potential conflict of interest. [Click to enter](#)
- NO
- N/A

### Principal Investigator Assurance

#### PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR'S ASSURANCE

I certify that the information provided in the application is complete and correct. As Principal Investigator, I have the ultimate responsibility for the protection of the rights and welfare of the human participants, conduct of the research, and the ethical performance of the project. I will comply with all UM policies and procedures, as well as with all applicable federal, state, and local laws regarding the protection of participants in human research, including, but not limited to the following:

- Informed consent will be obtained from the participants, if applicable and appropriate;
- Any proposed modifications to the research protocol that may affect its designation as an exempt (brief) protocol application will be reported to the IRB for approval prior to being implemented.
- Adverse events and/or unanticipated problems will be reported to the IRB as required.

I certify that I, and all key personnel, have completed the required initial and/or refresher CITI or CITI Alternative courses in the ethical principles and regulatory requirements for the protection of human research participants.

Typed signature/name of Principal Investigator    Anna Grace Robinson  
10/14/22

Date

#### RESEARCH ADVISOR'S\* ASSURANCE (REQUIRED FOR STUDENT PROJECTS)

Email your Advisor with the following:

1. Email subject line: "IRB Advisor Approval Request from (your name)"
2. Your IRB submission materials as attachments
3. Copy and paste the statements below into the body of the email
4. Save the reply email from your Advisor as a pdf and submit via the online portal along with your IRB submission materials.
5. The online submission portal can be found at : <https://research.olemiss.edu/irb/submit>

**\*The research advisor must be a UM faculty member. The faculty member is considered the responsible party for the ethical performance and regulatory compliance of the research project.**

**Please review my attached protocol submission. Your reply email to me will constitute your acknowledgement of the assurances below.**

Thank you,  
[type your name here]

**As the Research Advisor, I certify that the student investigator is knowledgeable about the regulations and policies governing research with human participants and has sufficient training and experience to conduct this particular research in accordance with the approved protocol.**

**I agree to meet with the investigator on a regular basis to monitor research progress.**

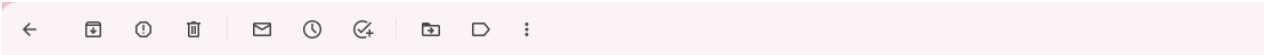
**Should problems arise during the course of research, I agree to be available, personally, to supervise the investigator in solving them.**

**I will ensure that the investigator will promptly report incidents (including adverse events and unanticipated problems) to the IRB.**

**If I will be unavailable, for example, on sabbatical leave or vacation, I will arrange for an alternate faculty member to assume responsibility during my absence, and I will advise the IRB by email of such arrangements.**

**I have completed the required CITI course(s) in the ethical principles and regulatory requirements for the protection of human research participants.**

Adviser's Assurance:



IRB Advisor Approval Request from Anna Grace Robinson Inbox x



**Anna Grace Robinson**

Please review my attached protocol submission. Your reply email to me will constitute your acknowledgment of the assurances below. Thank you, Anna Grace Robinson



**Amy Wells Dolan**

to me ▾

**Dear Anna Grace and the IRB:**

As the Research Advisor, I certify that the student investigator is knowledgeable about the regulations and policies governing research with human participants and has sufficient training and experience to conduct this particular research in accordance with the approved protocol.

I agree to meet with the investigator on a regular basis to monitor research progress. Should problems arise during the course of research, I agree to be available, personally, to supervise the investigator in solving them.

I will ensure that the investigator will promptly report incidents (including adverse events and unanticipated problems) to the IRB.

If I will be unavailable, for example, on sabbatical leave or vacation, I will arrange for an alternate faculty member to assume responsibility during my absence, and I will advise the IRB by email of such arrangements.

I have completed the required CITI course(s) in the ethical principles and regulatory requirements for the protection of human research participants.

Thank you,  
AWD

**Amy E. Wells Dolan, Ph.D.**

Associate Dean and Professor of Higher Education  
School of Education

The University of Mississippi

P.O. Box 1848

49 Guyton Drive

University, MS 38677-1848

U.S.A.

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[awells@olemiss.edu](mailto:awells@olemiss.edu) | [education.olemiss.edu](http://education.olemiss.edu)

\*\*\*

Thank you so much!

Thank you!

I approve!

↩ Reply

➦ Forward

*Appendix B- Recruitment Materials:*

Hi,

Are you a public school teacher in a middle or high school in North Mississippi? Have you been teaching for at least five years? If so, you may be able to help an upcoming University of Mississippi graduate complete her senior thesis.

Secondary English Education major, [Anna Grace Robinson](#), is looking for 8-10 veteran teachers who fit these descriptions to interview during the holiday break. Her thesis investigates the work-life balance of veteran teachers in North Mississippi and aims to have genuine conversations about your lived experiences around work-life balance.

Interviews will happen over Zoom the week of XXX and will last around one hour. They will consist of a handful of interview questions that allow you to reflect on your experience with work-life balance during your teaching career.

If you are interested, please contact Anna Grace at [arobins6@go.olemiss.edu](mailto:arobins6@go.olemiss.edu)

Thank you for your interest!

## MODEL INFORMATION SHEET

**Title:** Work-Life Balance for Veteran Teachers in North Mississippi

**Investigator**

Anna Grace Robinson  
[arobins6@go.olemiss.edu](mailto:arobins6@go.olemiss.edu)  
(901)674-9599

**Advisor**

Amy Wells-Dolan, Ph.D.  
School of Education  
211 Guyton Hall  
The University of Mississippi  
(662) 915-5710

*By checking this box I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.*

**Description**

The purpose of this research project is to determine how veteran teachers in North Mississippi feel about their work life balance. We would like to ask you a few questions about work life balance. You will not be asked for your name or any other identifying information.

**Cost and Payments**

Interviews will take around one hour to conduct.

**Risks and Benefits**

You may feel uncomfortable with some of the questions (Do you struggle with work-life balance? If so, in what ways?). We do not think that there are any other risks.

**Confidentiality**

No identifiable information will be recorded, therefore we do not think you can be identified from this study.

**Right to Withdraw**

You do not have to take part in this study and you may stop participation at any time. If you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, all you have to do is to tell Ms. Anna Grace Robinson or Dr. Wells-Dolan in person, by letter, or by telephone (contact information listed above). You may skip any questions you prefer not to answer.

**IRB Approval**

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or [irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu).

**Statement of Consent**

I have read and understand the above information. By completing the survey/interview, I consent to participate in the study.



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MISSISSIPPI

Research and  
Sponsored Programs

**PHOTO/VIDEO CONSENT & RELEASE FORM**

Work Life Balance for Veteran Teachers in North Mississippi

**Researcher(s): Anna Grace Robinson (PI) and Amy Wells-Dolan (Advisor)**

**Contact Information:** [\[arobins6@go.olemiss.edu\]](mailto:arobins6@go.olemiss.edu)

**Participant Consent:**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, am 18 years of age or older, and grant the researcher designated above from University of Mississippi (“UM”) permission to record my likeness and voice on a video, audio, photographic, digital, electronic or any other medium (collectively referred to as ‘the recordings’) and to use the recordings as part of the above titled IRB approved research study.

I acknowledge that all rights, title, and interest to the recordings will belong to UM. I hereby waive any right to inspect or approve the finished recordings now or in the future, whether that use is known to me or unknown, and I waive any right to royalties or other compensation arising from or related to the use of the recordings. The foregoing in no way relinquishes any intellectual property rights I may have to the content presented in the recordings.

I give permission for the researcher to distribute and/or use the recordings made as part of this research study in research presentations, publications, for educational uses, or through any other venue as long as my name is not used.

Printed Name:

Date:

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**If Participant is under 18 years old, consent must be provided by the parent or legal guardian:**

Printed Name:

Date:

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**UM Researcher:**



