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Burned Out or Trapped in Conscientiousness: A Case Study of Three NH Middle School Teachers

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BURNED OUT OR TRAPPED IN CONSCIENTIOUSNESS:
A CASE STUDY OF THREE NH MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In
Education

May, 2018
This dissertation has been examined and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Ph.D. in Education.

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On April 2, 2018
DEDICATION

To Ben, Nate, Sophie, Maggie, and Liv;

and, of course,

Winston

I love you all.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation marks the final stage in a long, doctoral journey, which began while I was teaching English at Campbell High School in Litchfield, NH. I could not have arrived at the finish line without the encouragement, guidance, and support of many incredible individuals whom it is my honor and privilege to know. This acknowledgement is my attempt to thank all of you for your kind words and help along the way.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION ......................................................................................................................... iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ v

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................... xi

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. xii

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................. xiii

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Interest</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of This Study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Research Questions</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of This Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of the Study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Dissertation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnout</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Work</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Toward an Empirical Definition of Burnout ..........................................................20

Antecedents of Burnout .......................................................................................22

Transactional Models of Teacher Burnout ..........................................................26

Teacher Perceptions and How They Relate to Burnout .....................................27

Teacher Self-Efficacy .............................................................................................29

Historical Roots .................................................................................................29

Defining Terms: Teacher Self-Efficacy ...............................................................32

Sources of Teacher Self-Efficacy ........................................................................34

Consistency of Teacher Self-Efficacy Beliefs ....................................................35

Teacher Self-Efficacy and Burnout .....................................................................37

Methodological Considerations .........................................................................41

Open Response Survey Questions ......................................................................43

Personal Interviews .............................................................................................46

Case Studies .........................................................................................................48

Implications for Future Research .......................................................................51

Conclusion ...........................................................................................................52

3. METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................54

Research Design ...................................................................................................54

Methods and Research Activity ..........................................................................56

The Interview Protocol .......................................................................................56

Finding and Selecting Participants ....................................................................58

Data Collection and Analysis .............................................................................60

Summary of the Methodology .............................................................................65
Limitations of Life History Research ...................................................................................66

Validity and Reliability ........................................................................................................67

Generalizability ...................................................................................................................69

Researcher Positionality ......................................................................................................70

Positionality Statement .......................................................................................................71

4. TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES OF BURNOUT: LIFE HISTORIES AND PROFILES ..........73

Introduction ........................................................................................................................73

Jason Dumonte: 5th/6th Grade Teacher ...............................................................................76

Jason’s Portrait .....................................................................................................................83

Susan McAllister: 8th Grade French Teacher .....................................................................98

Susan’s Portrait ...................................................................................................................104

Sean Castelo: 7th Grade Social Studies Teacher ...............................................................121

Sean’s Portrait .....................................................................................................................127

Conclusion ..........................................................................................................................141

5. BURNOUT: A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT ..........................................................142

Emotional Exhaustion ..........................................................................................................143

Physical and Emotional Exhaustion ...................................................................................143

The Emotional Labor of Teaching .......................................................................................145

Depersonalization/Cynicism ..............................................................................................148

Personal Accomplishment .................................................................................................150

Personal Accomplishment and Teacher and Self-Efficacy ...............................................156

Appraisal Theory: Teacher Beliefs, Perceptions, and Emotions .......................................162

Conclusion ..........................................................................................................................166
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Participant Characteristics .................................................................60
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Jason’s Burnout Map .................................................................................................................. 151
Figure 2: Susan’s Burnout Map ................................................................................................................ 152
Figure 3: Sean’s Early Burnout Map ....................................................................................................... 153
Figure 4: Sean’s Burnout Map ................................................................................................................... 155
ABSTRACT

BURNED OUT OR TRAPPED IN CONSCIENTIOUSNESS:
A CASE STUDY OF THREE NH MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS

by

Shaleen Cassily

University of New Hampshire, May, 2018

The purpose of this research was to explore the nature of teachers’ experiences of burnout and teacher self-efficacy, and the relationship between these two constructs. Although the research has demonstrated a well-established relationship between burnout and teacher self-efficacy, the exact dynamic between these two constructs is open to debate (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Additionally, most of the existing research around burnout and teacher self-efficacy is quantitative. Therefore, this study investigated these two constructs qualitatively in order to gain a deeper understanding of the way teachers construct meaning about their experiences of burnout and how they feel, think, and explain their behavior based on their perceptions of their environment and beliefs about their abilities to be successful.

Using in-depth interviews, I conducted a multicase study of three New Hampshire middle school teachers based on the following three research questions: What meaning do three New Hampshire middle school teachers ascribe to their experiences of burnout and teacher self-
efficacy? How are burnout and teacher self-efficacy manifested? How are burnout and teacher self-efficacy related?

I analyzed my results using the language and lens of audit. Audit refers to programs and technologies that aim to formalize accountability practices by focusing on standards and outcomes (Power, 1997, as cited in Shore & Wright, 2000). The main premise is that the transplantation of financial accounting practices into fields such as education have redefined accountability and transparency, as well as undermined professional autonomy for teachers – all of which have unintended dysfunctional consequences (Shore & Wright, 2015; Gill, 2009; Taubman, 2009), including burnout. By linking burnout to audit practices, I hope to move the educational psychology literature forward by historicizing and politicizing the cognitive constructs of burnout and teacher self-efficacy.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The concept of burnout first appeared with the 1960 publication of Graham Greene’s novel, *A Burnt-Out Case*. The metaphor of being “burnt-out” evoked images of the extinguishing of a fire or a candle and implied that where once a fire was burning and bright, all that remains is a smoldering pile of ash (Maslach, 1982). The use of the word burnout was also a part of the illicit drug scene in the 1970s, where it was used to describe the disastrous results of prolonged drug abuse (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2008). Freudenburger (1974), a consulting psychiatrist at St. Mark’s Free Clinic in New York’s East Village, applied the term to describe “the gradual emotional depletion, loss of motivation, and reduced commitment among volunteers” (Schaufeli et al., 2008, p. 205). Simultaneously, Maslach (1976), who was interviewing human service workers in California, discovered that workers often felt emotionally exhausted and detached from their clients; they described this state as being burned out. Furthermore, she ascertained that being burned out had important implications for caregivers’ professional identities and job performance (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Although the origin of burnout began in popular culture, it has since become a well-established academic subject. It is estimated that over 6,000 books, chapters, dissertations, and journal articles have been published on burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2008). Burnout has been studied across various fields including human services, criminal justice, medicine, social work, and education (Aloe, Shisler, Norris, Nickerson, & Rinker, 2014). McGuire (1979) first warned that
public school teachers experience significant levels of burnout. Since then, burnout, as it relates to teachers and teaching, has been discussed more than in any other professional arena (Friedman, 1991). Today burnout refers to personal feelings of failure and of being “emotionally worn or wrung out” as a result of long exposure to workplace stress (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 399), and results in “an erosion of engagement” when work that started out as “important, meaningful, and challenging” becomes “unpleasant, unfulfilling, and meaningless” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 416).

The most common, empirical definition of burnout was developed by Maslach in 1982 and identifies burnout as comprising three dimensions as a response to chronic interpersonal and emotional job stressors: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Many studies have pointed to the interactive relationship between burnout and individual and workplace factors. Such studies have investigated the roles of coping skills, self-efficacy, resiliency, emotions, teacher appraisals, and motivation on the burnout experience (Hultell, Melin, & Gustavsson, 2013; Fernet, Guay, Senecal, & Austin, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Carmona, Buunk, Peiro, Rodriguez, & Bravo, 2006; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Peeters & Rutte, 2005; Jennet, Harris, & Mesibov, 2003; Friedman, 2001; Leiter, 1991).

This study will specifically examine the relationship between burnout and teacher self-efficacy. Self-efficacy beliefs are grounded in Bandura’s social cognitive theory; thus they determine how people feel, think, and behave based on observations of their environment and beliefs about their abilities to succeed (Bandura, 1994). Self-efficacy is domain specific; thus, teacher self-efficacy refers to a teacher’s belief that she can teach all students, even the most unmotivated or challenging ones (Guskey & Passaro, 1994). A strong sense of teacher self-
efficacy suggests a protective effect for teachers when coping with difficult situations (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). Furthermore, one could assume that more self-efficacious teachers would perceive the demands of daily teaching as less threatening than would teachers who doubt their capabilities (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008).

The research has demonstrated a well-established relationship between teacher burnout and teacher self-efficacy (Fernet et al., 2015; Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Evers, Tomic, & Brouwers, 2004.) However, the exact dynamic between these two constructs is open to debate (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). What is known is that personal factors, including capacity beliefs, further our understanding of burnout as a psychological state experienced by teachers based upon their perceptions and evaluations of their environments (Leithwood, Menzies, Jentzi, & Leithwood, 1999). For these reasons, I believe it is important to study these two constructs together.

**Personal Interest**

I knew I was burned out the day in May nine years ago when I was called into my principal’s office and asked about the 18 days I had missed over the course of the school year. I stood across from him as he sat at his desk looking at a piece of paper in his hand; it was a spreadsheet listing every faculty member and the days each had requested a sub. His finger slid down the list to my name and then tapped across the row as he recounted. “Yup, 18 days.” At first I felt the slow heat of a flush rise from my neck up into my face. I was embarrassed. I had heard about other teachers facing this type of inquisition, but me? Then I remembered – I had requested only three of those days because I had to stay home with a sick child – the rest were all initiated by the indignant man across from me.
That year I was chair of the NEASC committee and organized and wrote the two-year report. I also chaired the school’s Teaching and Learning Team and served on the district’s curriculum and technology committees. As a result of this work, I had been sent to multiple workshops, conferences, and district-wide meetings, all of which occurred during the school day. In addition, I had chaperoned two field trips. When I explained this to him, he paused, and looking at me quizzically said, “Oh, I had no idea you did all of that.”

Let me be clear, burnout did not come from my work with students; it stemmed from the other demands of my job that interfered with that work. I had been running myself ragged for the better part of three years. During this time, everything had felt like an emergency and there was never enough time to balance these demands with actual teaching. I had even sacrificed my time with my own family in service of my school’s needs, as I played catch-up during the evenings and on weekends. Yet no one had noticed; this was the day I gave up.

Thus, this project was born out of my personal experiences with burnout and my belief that burnout remains a vital construct to study. As a secondary teacher who witnessed firsthand the impact of No Child Left Behind (2001) legislation, including mandated testing, data walls, daily goals, and increased surveillance of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, I experienced exhaustion, cynicism, and a decreased sense of worth. School became a negative place to be and impacted how I viewed myself as an educator; teaching no longer held meaning for me as either a professional or a person. For me, burnout resulted from the conflict between intensification of job demands and my desire to be a dedicated professional. However, because my experience was determined by my teaching context, I did not recognize how these situational factors were impacting my identity; instead I blamed myself. There had to be something lacking in me that made it impossible for me to be the energetic teacher I once was. It was only after I left the
profession that I was able to name my experience. However, my experiences are not isolated ones, but must be understood as one individual narrative among many.

**Context of This Study**

Like I describe above, in the educational psychology literature, there is the palpable sense that the demands of teaching, including accountability practices, have increased in recent years, which has resulted in elevated levels of burnout (Chang, 2009; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). However, the research does not investigate the structural reasons for this transformation of teachers’ working conditions. This is where my dissertation departs from current studies of burnout and teacher self-efficacy. Informed by my personal experiences teaching high school English, I choose to examine these cognitive constructs using the language and lens of audit. Audit refers to programs and technologies that aim to formalize accountability practices by focusing on standards and outcomes (Power, 1997, as cited in Shore & Wright, 2000).

Beginning in the field of finance, audit practices quickly migrated into other domains, including education (Taubman, 2009; Salvio & Boldt, 2009; Gill, 2009; Salvio, 2004). Cultural anthropologists were among the first to notice the widespread infiltration of audit practices in higher education as a result of the rise of neo-liberal policies in the 1980s and 90s (Power, 2003, 1994; Strathern, 2000; Shore & Wright, 2000). Much of their work is a critique of the historical and political developments that have created the current climate within which such practices are able to flourish (Hall & Lamont, 2012; Strathern, 2005; Powers, 2003, 1994). The main premise is that the transplantation of financial accounting practices into fields such as education have redefined accountability and transparency, as well as undermined professional autonomy for
teachers – all of which have unintended dysfunctional consequences (Shore & Wright, 2015; Gill, 2009; Taubman, 2009), including burnout. By linking burnout to audit practices, it is my hope to move the educational psychology literature forward by historicizing and politicizing its cognitive constructs.

To do this work, I decided to situate this study in the context of teaching middle school for the following reasons. It has long been recognized that middle school teachers experience a large degree of stress in the workplace (Sparks, 2011; Gootman, 2007), the prolonged exposure to which may lead to burnout (Jennett et al., 2003). Although middle school students are frequently caricatured as being ‘hormonal,’ ‘volatile,’ or difficult to teach, there is no denying that developmentally young adolescents present unique challenges to teachers (Gootman, 2007). In addition to emotional and physical changes, the early adolescent years are often accompanied by a negative change in motivation and a decline in academic performance for many students (Midgley, Anderman, & Hicks, 1995).

At the same time, the learning environment in middle school is becoming increasingly performance oriented: emphasis on grades, honor rolls, ability tracking (especially in math), and special privileges associated with relative ability may appear for the first time in middle school (Midgley et al., 1995). In addition, evaluation becomes more frequent and formal as students progress through the grades (Midgley et al., 1995). Simultaneously teachers’ instructional practices become more competitive and performance-based as grade levels increase (Martin, Sass, & Schmitt, 2012).

Therefore, it should not be a surprise that when compared to elementary teachers, middle school teachers use more controlling instructional strategies, are more likely to depersonalize their students, and experience lower levels of teacher self-efficacy, and job satisfaction (Martin
et al., 2012). Furthermore, the demands of teaching middle school show up in the higher attrition rates of teachers compared to elementary and high school teachers (Collette, 2015; Gootman, 2007).

**The Research Questions**

The purpose of this research is to explore the nature of teachers’ experiences of burnout, teacher self-efficacy, and the relationship between these two constructs. This study of three New Hampshire middle school teachers is based on the following three research questions:

- What meaning do New Hampshire middle school teachers ascribe to their experiences of burnout and teacher self-efficacy?
- How are burnout and teacher self-efficacy manifested?
- How are burnout and teacher self-efficacy related?

**Definitions**

**Audit:** Refers to formalized, intensive accounting programs and practices focused on efficiency, effectiveness, performance and value. First used in the financial services industry, audit has since been imported into other fields like education where audit links the instrumentality of education to business and the economy.

**Burnout:** Refers to the feelings of failure and being emotional worn out as a result of too many demands on the energy and personal resources of an individual. It includes three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment.
**Depersonalization:** This is one aspect of burnout, which occurs when an individual develops negative or cynical feelings towards his or her students or colleagues. This leads to the establishment of a detached or inappropriate attitude towards them.

**Emotional Exhaustion:** This is the key component of burnout. It occurs when an individual’s job demands deplete a teacher’s emotional resources until she can no longer give of herself or cope with job stressors.

**Neo-liberalism:** Refers the resurgent faith in the power of the free markets to secure efficient outcomes. This includes a privileging of intense market competition, less state intervention, an emphasis on individuality, and the virtue of economic performance.

**Personal Accomplishment:** This is the third dimension of burnout and refers to the tendency of an individual to evaluate her job performance negatively.

**Profile:** I use this term to refer to the stories my participants and I craft about their experiences of burnout and teacher self-efficacy.

**Self-Efficacy:** People’s beliefs or judgments about their capability to succeed or accomplish a task in specific situations. Self-efficacy influences, both positively and negatively, how an individual approaches goals, tasks, and challenges.
**Teacher self-efficacy:** Refers to a teacher’s belief or conviction that she has the capability to influence her students’ learning, including those students who may be unmotivated or challenging.

**Significance of This Study**

Despite the seemingly exhaustive treatment burnout has received in the educational psychology literature, I believe that teacher burnout remains a relevant topic in education for several reasons. Foremost, high levels of burnout characterize the teaching profession, with teachers reporting more burnout than workers in other fields (Chang, 2009; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Maslach et al., 2001). For individuals who entered the teaching profession with positive expectations, enthusiasm, and a dedication for helping students learn, burnout can be a distressing endpoint to what was supposed to be a selfless and rewarding career (Maslach & Goldburg, 1998). On a personal level, burnout can result in intense reactions of anger, anxiety, restlessness, depression, tiredness, boredom, cynicism, guilt, or psychosomatic symptoms (Friedman, 1991). In addition, researchers have linked burnout to perceived ill health (Milfont, Ameratunga, Robinson, & Merry, 2008; Hakanen et al., 2006; Bauer, Stamm, Virnich, Wissing, Muller, Wirsching, & Schaarschmidt, 2006), and a higher incidence of mental health issues (Liu & Wang, 2004).

Professionally burnout takes its toll on teachers as fatigue and cynicism may lead to ineffectiveness and poor job performance (Chang, 2009), and it is associated with low teacher self-efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; 2007). Thus teachers no longer believe they can impact student learning (Haberman, 1995). As a result, teachers who are burned out often go through the motions of teaching with no emotional commitment to the task, only doing the
minimum to stay employed (Haberman, 1995). Burned out teachers tend to use less hands-on learning activities, provide fewer positive reinforcements, and ask less engaging questions (Haberman, 1995). They also are inclined to underprepare for classes, show little toleration for frustration, display low commitment to teaching, and have excessive absenteeism (Friedman, 1991). Furthermore, burnout affects teacher-student relationships as burned out teachers withdraw from their students (Burke, Greenglass, & Schwarzer, 1996), and may adopt a rigid or inflexible attitude towards them (Friedman, 1991). All of these factors have a negative impact on the learning environment (Whitaker et al., 2015; Zhang & Sapp, 2009; Stoel & Thant, 2002).

Research also indicates that teacher attrition rates are a significant problem facing schools, particularly within high minority and/or low-income schools (Ingersoll, 2003; 2001; Kirby, Berends, & Naftel, 1999). It has been estimated that nearly 33% of all new teachers will leave the profession each year, with 50% leaving by the end of year five (Brown & Wynn, 2009; Ingersoll, 2001). This turnover rate costs districts approximately $2.2 billion each school year for recruitment and training of replacement teachers (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005; Ingersoll, 2001). This estimate does not include costs to districts for excessive teacher absenteeism or medical treatment, both of which add to the financial burden of school districts (Burke et al., 1996).

Faculty turnover and absenteeism also impede ongoing professional development, lower the quality of educational experiences, and negatively impact student learning (Sass, Flores, Claeys, & Perez, 2012; Guin, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ingersoll, 2001). In addition, high teacher turnover decreases overall school productivity, motivation, and morale (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Research demonstrates that teacher stress and attrition are strongly related to teachers’ workplace conditions (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington,
& Gu, 2007). For example, in one study, researchers found that teachers who teach in content areas subjected to high stakes testing had higher rates of attrition because of the increased stress (Sass, Flores, Claeys, & Perez, 2012). Furthermore, a high workload can predict emotional exhaustion and motivation to leave the teaching profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Leung & Lee, 2006).

With estimates in the literature suggesting that as much as 20-30% of the teaching force experience burnout (Schaufel, Daamen, & Van Mierlo, 1994, Carmona, Buunk, Peiro, Rodriguez, & Bravo, 2006), it is safe to say that burnout is a salient experience for many educators. Furthermore, it is clear that the experience of burnout produces many negative effects for teachers, schools, and the students they teach. Therefore, I believe that it is critical for researchers try to understand the experience of burnout from teachers’ perspectives, and the social, cultural, and political trends that create the conditions for it, in order to use those insights to better inform policy decisions.

**Overview of the Study**

Since the mid-1970s, most research around burnout and teacher self-efficacy has been quantitative and based on correlational and cross-sectional data derived from self-report surveys (Wheatley, 2005; Schonfeld & Santiago, 1994; Blase, 1986). One review of teacher self-efficacy research from 1998-2009 found that although the number of qualitative studies increased, qualitative and mixed methods studies only comprise, respectively, 8.7% and 14.7% of the overall sample of 218 studies they examined (Klassen, Tzu, Betts, & Gordon, 2011). This is problematic because with quantitative research, the underlying assumption is that the researcher knows what stressors and outcomes to examine, which may overlook other important variables.
In addition, quantitative research collects data at finite points in time, which makes it difficult to determine how burnout and teacher self-efficacy develop over a teacher’s professional lifespan (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). Moreover, burnout and teacher self-efficacy are personal experiences based on the individual’s perceptions and evaluations of his or her environment (Leithwood, 1999). Therefore, I believe it is imperative to investigate these constructs qualitatively.

In conceiving and designing this study, my intention was not to replicate past empirical work around burnout and teacher self-efficacy, as I believe that such work is limited. Rather, my objective was to apply a qualitative lens to what are primarily cognitive constructs. In doing so, my hope is to explore teachers’ experiences of burnout and teacher self-efficacy within their teaching contexts in a manner that would lead to a deeper understanding of the nature of teacher burnout and its relationship to teacher self-efficacy, as well as what it means to be a teacher who experiences burnout.

To do this work, I designed a multicase study to examine how burnout and teacher self-efficacy are manifested and related for three New Hampshire middle school teachers (Stake, 2006). Using Seidman’s (2013) in-depth, interview protocol, which approaches a subject from an autobiographical perspective, this study fosters an understanding of how my participants experience burnout and teacher self-efficacy over the course of their professional lifespans. Additionally, it illuminates the interpretive meaning that these teachers give to both constructs in response to different contexts, strain variables, and social, cultural, and political factors.
Organization of the Dissertation

In this initial chapter I have introduced and set the stage for my inquiry.

In Chapter Two, I first provide an overview of burnout, highlighting the early work, which led to the conceptualization of burnout as a three-dimensional syndrome. After briefly outlining antecedents of burnout and other constructs burnout is related to, I discuss the interpretive nature of the burnout experience. This is an important conceptual distinction as it implies that burnout is the result of an individual’s perception of and response to chronic stress. In the second part of this chapter, I focus on teacher self-efficacy. After tracing the early work around self-efficacy and describing how teacher self-efficacy is currently conceptualized, I summarize the relationship between burnout and teacher self-efficacy. In the final section of this chapter, I turn to methodological considerations and make an argument for why more qualitative work is needed around burnout and teacher self-efficacy.

In Chapter Three, I introduce my methodology as well as describe my methods for data collection and analysis. In the first part of this chapter, I outline my research design as a multicase study of three New Hampshire middle school teachers who are currently experiencing burnout (Stake, 2006). In the second part of this chapter, I describe the protocol for in-depth interviewing I used as my data collection method and address how I analyzed the data. Finally, I discuss the limitations of this work and how I controlled for subjectivity.

In Chapter Four I present my data. I begin by outlining a brief biographical sketch of each participant, highlighting their educational roots, their personal teacher journeys, and their beliefs about teaching. Individual teacher profiles follow each of these introductions.

In Chapter Five I explore my participants’ experiences of burnout in relation to the three dimensions of burnout and their teacher self-efficacy beliefs. I start by summarizing the three
components of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and cynicism, and personal accomplishment as experienced by my participants. Next I discuss the relationship between emotional exhaustion, personal accomplishment, and teacher self-efficacy beliefs. Finally, I turn to appraisal theory to demonstrate how my participants’ perceptions of emotions impact their experience of burnout.

I follow Chapter Five with a brief Interlude, the purpose of which is to establish a connection between burnout and teacher self-efficacy as cognitive constructs and the theoretical lens of audit. I first summarize what we have learned about my three participants having grounded their experiences in the educational psychology constructs of burnout and teacher self-efficacy. I then make an argument for re-interpreting my data from a more critical perspective by linking my participants’ experiences to psychological profiles of the auditee.

In Chapter Six I take up the work suggested in the Interlude. Part I of this chapter begins with a brief history of the rise of neo-liberal practices that created the conditions for the “explosion” of audit technologies, first in finance, and then across other professional fields (Power, 1994). Part of this discussion demonstrates how audit assumes new meanings and coercive functions when introduced into new arenas. I then specifically trace audit’s migration into the field of education and delineate its effects on both the teaching profession and teachers. Part II of this chapter looks more closely at descriptions of individuals experiencing audit. Working from psychological profiles of the auditee, I reinterpret my data to both historicize and politicize the experience of burnout.

Finally, in Chapter Seven, I summarize and conclude this dissertation. As part of this work, I revisit my findings from Chapter Five in order to re-examine the dimensions of burnout and its relationship to teacher self-efficacy using the language and theoretical lens of audit. The
goal is to make explicit the intersection between these two bodies of research. I then explore the limitations of my findings and suggest directions for future inquiry.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I introduced my topic of inquiry as the investigation of NH middle school teachers’ experiences of burnout and teacher self-efficacy. I explained that my interest in this topic arose from a personal exposure to burnout and from deep concern regarding its consequences. The purpose of this chapter is to argue for a qualitative approach to what is overwhelmingly treated as an empirical construct in the research (Mazzola, Schonfeld, & Specter, 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Blase, 1986).

First, I will provide an overview of burnout, highlighting the early work, which led to the conceptualization of burnout as a three-dimensional syndrome. This is the definition of burnout that will guide my study. Next, I will describe both personal and workplace antecedents of burnout and briefly outline what other constructs burnout is related to and/or predicts. This will be helpful for understanding the numerous variables that may impact the individual burnout experience. Finally I discuss burnout as an individual interpretation of stress in the workplace. This is an important conceptual distinction as it implies that burnout is the result of an individual’s unique perception of and response to chronic stress.

The second part of this review will focus on teacher self-efficacy. I will begin by tracing the early work on teacher self-efficacy, describing how it is currently conceptualized, and providing an overview of what it is associated with. Finally I will summarize the relationship
between burnout and teacher self-efficacy and explain why more research is needed around these two constructs.

The final section of this review turns to methodological considerations. Most of the research on these two constructs has been quantitative (Mazzola et al., 2011; Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordan, 2011). However, I will summarize the few qualitative studies, highlight the strengths and weaknesses, and argue for why more qualitative work is needed in this area.

**Burnout**

“These are tough times to be a teacher. The nature and organization of the job make teaching inherently difficult. Teachers face new challenges and opportunities from increasingly diverse and needy student populations. Demands on teachers to develop new knowledge and skills and perform new tasks are increasing rapidly. So too are expectations for school and teacher performance and accountability. Taken together, the characteristics and conditions of teaching present increasingly stressful situations for teachers, situations that may have positive or deleterious consequences for them and for their work with students.” (Smylie, 1999, p. 59)

Burnout refers to the manifestation of the feelings of failure and of being “emotionally worn or wrung out” as a result of too many demands on the energy, personal resources, or spiritual strength of a worker (Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter, 2001, p. 399). Burnout results in “an erosion of engagement that what started out as important, meaningful, and challenging work becomes unpleasant, unfulfilling, and meaningless” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 416).

**Early Work**

The early work on teacher burnout was rooted in the organizational stress literature (Smylie, 1999). Although several different conceptualizations of stress grounded this work, most researchers defined stress has a mismatch between the person and the environment or as the
result of dysfunctional role relationships (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). McGrath (1976) and Schuler (1980) further clarified stress as a condition in which a person is confronted with demands whose outcomes are important but the resolution of which remains uncertain. Thus stress is an affective response to taxing work conditions (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993).

In contrast, burnout was conceptualized as the end result of long-term exposure to stress (Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov, 2003). Much of the early work around burnout in the 1970s and early 1980s was descriptive in nature and focused on the relationship between provider and recipient in the caregiving and service occupations (Maslach et al., 2001). Three characteristics emerge when examining this initial burnout literature. First, what was meant by the term “burnout” varied widely from writer to writer (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993). Perlman and Hartman (1982) examined 48 articles written about burnout in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s and found that although the various conceptualizations of burnout share similar characteristics, they all lacked a precise definition and measure. Second, burnout as a concept was expanded to encompass every personal problem workers could experience, thus making the term superfluous (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993). Third, most burnout studies were non-empirical and were comprised mostly of personal observations of individual cases (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993). The result was a body of research riddled with conceptual disagreement with little empirical evidence to support claims (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993).

Maslach, in her early interviews with human service workers about their emotional stress found several themes, which eventually led to an empirical definition of burnout as a syndrome (Maslach et al., 2001). First, her work focused on the relationship between provider and recipient in those jobs in which the interpersonal context is the core of the profession; she discovered that
the “emotions, motives, and values between provider and recipient are the underlying interpersonal context for burnout” (Chang, 2009, p. 195).

Second, the emotional labor and work overload involved within these professions is all consuming (Maslach et al., 2001). The norms of such occupations are clear, if implicit: to be selfless, to prioritize others’ needs, to work long hours, and to give what it takes to help a client, patient, or student (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998). However, the structure of this relationship makes this work challenging. For example, many caregiving occupations focus on clients’ problems, which may or may not be easy to fix, and the provider often internalizes any failure (Maslach, 1982). In addition, many of these jobs are performed in isolation with limited or negative feedback from their clients (Maslach, 1982). Added to the pressure are clients who may be entitled or unresponsive, which increases emotional strain (Schaufeli et al., 2008). And finally, in an increasingly audited workforce, people face intensified pressure to complete more work within tighter time limits (Schaufeli, et al., 2008; Dworkin, 2001; Woods, 1999). More government regulations in the health and education fields have increased the client overload and the volume of required paperwork, which contributes to the individual stress experience (Smylie, 1999).

These themes were supported by evidence from field observations in which researchers noted for themselves the work overload, negative client feedback, scarcity of resources, and nonverbal distancing behaviors of the workers (Maslach et al., 2001). As a result, many of her interviewees described feeling emotionally exhausted, held negative views of their clients, and experienced crises in professional competence (Schaufeli et al., 2008). As Schaufeli et al. (2008) note, it is especially poignant that within professions dedicated to the lofty goals to help and serve others, their work came to lack personal meaning.
Toward an Empirical Definition of Burnout

Maslach’s and her colleagues’ work (1976; 1981a; 1981b; 1996) defined burnout as a syndrome resulting from prolonged exposure to stress and viewed it as situational as it arises from job demands (work overload and social interactions between caregiver and client) and a lack of resources (coping, support, autonomy, skill use, and involvement in decision making) (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998; Leiter, 1991). The most common, empirical definition of burnout was developed by Maslach in 1982 and identifies burnout as comprising three dimensions as a response to chronic interpersonal and emotional job stressors: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment.

The first aspect, emotional exhaustion, is the key component of burnout (Maslach et al., 1996), and its most obvious manifestation (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). It occurs when the demands of the job deplete a teacher’s emotional resources until he or she can no longer give of him or herself (Evers, Tomic, & Brouwers, 2004) or cope with occupational stressors (Shirom & Melamud, 2006). It includes feelings of being emotionally overextended and having depleted one’s emotional resources (Evers et al., 2004). Emotional exhaustion is also thought to be the result of intense physical, emotional, and cognitive strain (Hultell, Melin, & Gustavsson, 2013). This dimension encompasses a physical component: feelings of extreme fatigue and low energy, as though one is drained, used up, and debilitated, unable to face another day (Schwarzer & Hallum 2008).

The second aspect, depersonalization, refers to the teacher’s development of negative, callous, or cynical feelings towards her students, colleagues, or parents, which leads to a detached attitude towards them (Evers et al., 2004). Depersonalization can includes feelings of irritability, loss of idealism, or inappropriate attitudes towards others (Schwarzer & Hallum,
Visible symptoms include the use of generalizing language, derogatory labels, or physically distancing attitudes (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008).

Within burnout research, there appears to be a strong, positive relationship between emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. However, studies confirm that these dimensions are weakly correlated and are two separate measures of burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). As what is known as “compassion fatigue” sets in, teachers often feel frustrated and angry as they realized they could not keep giving of themselves or continue to be responsible for their students (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Thus they developed blaming beliefs about them, making it easier to treat students with distance and hostility (Maslach, 1982). In addition, teachers frequently referred to distancing behavior as a coping mechanism (Maslach et al., 2001). The purpose of this emotional detachment was to protect themselves from the emotional stressors and negative feelings that existed, which frequently interfered with their job performance (Maslach et al., 2001).

The third aspect, personal accomplishment\(^1\), is the tendency to evaluate one’s job performance negatively (Maslach et al., 2001). This can occur when one compares one’s original goals to current reality and finds that one is no longer doing a meaningful or important job (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). This is especially relevant to teachers as most entered the profession to make a positive difference in children’s lives (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Reduced personal accomplishment is associated with depression and an inability to cope with job demands (Maslach & Goldberg, 1996). In addition, it can be exacerbated by a lack of social support in the workplace and a lack of professional development opportunities (Maslach & Goldberg, 1996).

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\(^1\) Personal accomplishment and self-efficacy are often mistaken for the same construct. However, they are different. Perceived self-efficacy is the belief in one’s abilities to perform a task; personal accomplishment is one’s judgment about the outcome of the task (Bandura, 1997).
Originally it was thought that the three dimensions operated sequentially (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). First one becomes emotionally exhausted, which leads to depersonalization; as a result, chronic demands and cynicism erodes one’s sense of effectiveness (Maslach et al., 2001). This model seemed to make sense because exhaustion and depersonalization can interfere with effectiveness, which would naturally lead to a lower evaluation of one’s performance (Maslach et al., 2001). However, there is little support for this sequential relationship in the research (Maslach et al., 2001). Instead it appears that personal accomplishment develops synchronously with the other two dimensions and arises from a lack of resources rather than from work overload and social conflict (Maslach et al., 2001).

This study will investigated the relationship between the three dimensions of burnout. The results are discussed in Chapter 5.

**Antecedents of Burnout**

**Demographics**

Early descriptive and empirical studies attempted to identify which demographic and workplace variables are more associated with the three dimensions of burnout. Studies have examined age, gender, work experience, race, marital status, and level of education. Overall, findings have been inconsistent (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). For example, Maslach (1982) found that burnout is greater in younger workers; whereas Friedman (1991) reports that burnout rises with teachers’ age, reaches a peak in the mid-40’s, and declines after that. A reason for this discrepancy may be reflective of the relative stress of beginning a career during an intense period of change (new home, marriage, or family), the fact that many burned out teachers leave the profession, resulting in fewer, older burned out teachers, or that more experienced teachers are
less susceptible to burnout (Hultell et al., 2013; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Further complicating the matter is that several of these factors are confounding variables; for example age is closely related to work experience and gender with occupation (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). However, there are several generalizations that can be made when discussing teachers: although male and female teachers both experience burnout, they tend to do so in different ways. Women are more likely to report emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment (Lau, Yuen, & Chan, 2005; Maslach et al., 2001) whereas men tend to demonstrate depersonalization (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Lau et al., 2005) and view their students with cynicism (Schwab & Iwanicki, 1982). Married teachers tend to experience lower levels of burnout than unmarried teachers (Maslach & Jackson, 1981b), and teachers with higher levels of education tend to report higher levels of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). There is some speculation as to the causes for these differences, but I am cautious as to their findings because of the confounding variables involved. And, as of yet, there are no qualitative studies that may unpack the reasons for these differences at the individual level.

**Personality**

Several researchers have identified personality traits associated with burnout (Kokkinos, 2007; Zellers, Hochwarter, Perrewe, Hoffman, & Ford, 2004; Friedman, 2001; Maslach, 1982). In general, it is understood that a person’s internal characteristics can contribute to or protect against burnout. Motivations (for affection, approval, intimacy etc.), needs, values, self-esteem, emotional expressiveness (excitability, idealism, dedication, etc.), emotional control (ability to deal with fear, anger, rejection etc.), and personal style will affect how an individual will handle stress (Maslach, 1982; Friedman, 2001). Furthermore, a lack of hardiness² (Maslach et al., 2001),

² Hardiness is defined as an “involvement in daily activities, a sense of control over events, and openness to change” (Maslach et al., 2001).
an external locus of control\(^3\) (Maslach et al., 2001), neuroticism\(^4\) (Kokkinos, 2007), a passive coping style (Woods, 1999; Leiter, 1991), and low self-efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; 2007) all have been found to predict burnout. Moreover, some studies suggested that more idealistic teachers are more prone to burnout because they give more of themselves and are often unable to meet their own high expectations or goals making them prone to emotional exhaustion (Evers et. al., 2004; Maslach et al., 2001; Cordes & Dougherty, 1993).

Like studies investigating the relationship between demographics and burnout, there is a need to be cautious about research linking personality to burnout. First, personality is not a fixed variable and can change and develop overtime and in response to new experiences (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Teachers also evolve over the span of their careers as a result of the interaction between the self and the professional environment (Kelchtermans, 1999). Second, individuals will react differently in situations with similar stressors (Chang, 2009). Thus, I believe a phenomenological approach to the study of burnout was warranted in order to investigate how individual variables influence a person’s particular lived experience with burnout.

**Job Characteristics**

Because of the unreliability and or mutability of demographic and personality factors, many researchers investigating burnout focus on workplace variables (Chang, 2009; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). As Grayson and Alvarez (2008) note, context and school environmental issues can trigger “burnout reactions among teachers, by either facilitating or inhibiting an individual’s emotional or attitudinal characteristics” (p. 1351). Many studies have pointed to salient workplace characteristics that influence teacher stress. For example, work overload (Peeters &

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\(^3\) External locus of control is the attribution of events to others or to luck.

\(^4\) Big five personalities: neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness; and extraversion.
Rutte, 2005; Maslach & Goldberg, 1998), which includes student misbehaviors (Chang & Davis, 2009; Kokkinos, 2007; Kokkinos et. al., 2005; Evers et. al., 2004; Friedman, 2001,1995; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000), poor relationships with colleagues (Maslach, 1982), large classes (Miller, 1999), role ambiguity and role conflict (Maslach et al., 2001; Miller, 1999; Cordes & Dougherty, 1993), lack of support (Leiter, 1991), and lack of autonomy (Peeters & Rutte, 2005), are the greatest causes of teacher stress (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Furthermore, teachers who work in schools located in disadvantaged communities (Day, 2008) tend to have higher levels of burnout. In addition, burnout is affected by a variety of organizational factors: poor career structure and low salaries (Carmona et al., 2006; Schonfeld, 2001), power struggles with administrators (Hepburn & Brown, 2001), the isolation of teachers (Fullan, 2001), and a lack of opportunities for teachers to collaborate (Friedman, 1991) can contribute to a teacher’s experience of being bored, frustrated, and depleted.

In short, teacher’s perceptions of any workplace variable that contributes to work overload or inhibits teachers’ access to resources can increase strain. Another way to conceptualize this is as an imbalance between job demands and resources. When chronic job demands are greater than a teacher’s perceived resources to cope with the stress, they may become vulnerable (Leiter, 1991) and disengage from their work (Hakanen et al., 2006).

As several researchers have pointed out, the nature of schools and schooling has changed with many more demands placed upon teachers, which require them to acquire new knowledge and skills and perform new tasks rapidly (Gu & Day, 2006; Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006; Dworkin, 2001; Smylie, 1999). Added to this are expectations for teacher performativity and accountability, which exacerbates time pressures and work overload for some teachers (Gu & Day, 2006). Because time pressure and work overload are positively correlated with burnout
(Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Hakanen et al., 2006), it is important to study how individuals in my study experience them and their effects on their personal and emotional lives.

**Transactional Models of Teacher Burnout**

The subsequent research on burnout in the late 1990’s and 2000’s shifted from examining individual and organizational factors in isolation to considering the “individual stress experience within a larger organizational context of people’s relationship with their work” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 397; Chang 2009). This wave of burnout literature views the burnout experience as a transaction between individual and organizational factors; the focus is on who experiences burnout in which situations (Chang, 2009). In addition researchers want to know which variables are associated with the different dimensions of burnout. Thus the question the research is trying to understand is why different teachers working under the same conditions have different responses to stress. This has led to more complex models investigating the mediating roles of coping skills, self-efficacy, resiliency, emotions, teacher appraisals, and motivation on the burnout experience (Hultell et al., 2013; Fernet, Guay, Senecal, & Austin, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Carmona et al., 2006; Hakanen et al., 2006; Peeters & Rutte, 2005; Jennet et al., 2003; Friedman, 2001; Leiter, 1991).

However, this still does not explain why some teachers experience burnout and not others. All teachers experience stress in the workplace (Jennet et al., 2003), yet teachers are affected differently (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). For example, one teacher may feel threatened by student misbehavior while another does not (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). As Friedman (1995) and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) note, this is due to the fact that teachers’ responses to stressors are rooted in their goals and beliefs, which impact what they choose to notice in their
environment and their subsequent feelings and attitudes about it. Thus perception, which can best be understood as a “dynamic mental process,” which mediates the balance between personal values and normative demands, is important to the experience of burnout (Kelchtermans, 1999, p. 187). As such, I believe that burnout is predicated upon an individual perception of and response to stress in the workplace (Maslach et al., 2001). It is the particular interpretation of one’s personal and professional life, which leads to burnout that this study aims to unpack. The following section first addresses how teacher perceptions influence an individual’s experience of burnout. I then take up the concept of teacher self-efficacy and discuss why it is important to examine a teacher’s sense of teacher self-efficacy in the context of a teacher’s perceptions of burnout.

**Teacher Perceptions and How They Relate to Burnout**

Perception is the experience of responding to how a phenomenon, in this case, burnout, shows itself to us (Moustakas, 1994). Although personal or situational aspects may vary, teachers’ perceptions of organizational factors may contribute heavily to their feelings of burnout (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). These perceptions are mediated through the contexts in which teachers live and work (Gu & Day, 2006). Researchers generally divide these contexts into three categories: the micro or personal (related to teachers’ lives outside of school); the meso or situated (related to teachers’ lives in school); and the macro or professional (related to teachers’ values and beliefs about teaching and the interaction with these and social and policy expectations) (Gu & Day, 2006; Day, 2004; Woods, 1999). These three dimensions can best be understood as an interpretive framework through which teachers ascribe meaning to the demands placed upon them. Using this framework the research endeavors to answer how different
dimensions of a teacher’s personal and professional life situation impact the way a teacher understands an experience. For example, how do personal factors influence teachers’ perceptions of school stressors? Or how does the conflict between professional beliefs and policy expectations impact what happens in the classroom or a teacher’s interpretation of stress? Within this schema, the focus is on the teacher’s beliefs and perceptions about her professional capabilities, the work environment, and her students and how these factors affect her experience of work related stress (Cristina-Corina & Valerica, 2012). Thus the basic assumption is that a teacher’s perceptions of her work demands and resources are mediated by past experiences and impact future ones and can contribute to or inhibit the experience of burnout (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008).

It is nearly impossible to discuss teachers’ perceptions of school, teaching, and work demands without mentioning self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is grounded in Bandura’s social cognitive theory and refers to an individual’s perceived capability of exercising control and influence over what they do (1997). In this conception, “people are self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting” (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010, p. 1059). Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, and behave based on observations of their environment and beliefs about their abilities to succeed (Bandura, 1994). Self-efficacy is domain specific, thus, a strong sense of teacher self-efficacy suggests a protective effect for teachers when coping with difficult situations (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). Furthermore, one could assume that more self-efficacious teachers would perceive the demands of daily teaching as less threatening than would teachers who doubt their capabilities (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008).

The research has demonstrated a well-established relationship between burnout and self-efficacy. Several studies have investigated the role of teacher self-efficacy on teacher burnout.
and have found it to be negatively correlated (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Evers et al., 2002). However, as Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) note, there is little agreement as to the exact dynamic between the two constructs. Is this a linear relationship with low self-efficacy a predictor of burnout? Or do people who become emotionally exhausted find that their sense of self-efficacy becomes lower? Or perhaps this is a cyclical relationship with each construct acting upon and reinforcing the other?

As Bandura (1986) notes, personal factors, including capacity beliefs, further our understanding of burnout as a psychological state created by teachers through their perceptions and evaluations of their environments (Leithwood, 1999). Thus the experience of burnout includes the perception of one’s capabilities to cope with job stress. Therefore I believe that it is imperative to investigate how teacher self-efficacy develops and the relationship between a teacher’s sense of self-efficacy and her experience of burnout. The second part of this literature review addresses teacher self-efficacy.

**Teacher Self-Efficacy**

“Bandura (2000) argues that ‘among the mechanisms of self-influence, none is more focal or pervading than belief of personal efficacy’ (p. 120). To rebound from setbacks and adversity, teachers need the strength of self-efficacy beliefs: and conversely, their sustained effort and perseverance in the face of difficulty will strengthen their sense of efficacy and result in a stronger sense of resilience in the face of burnout” (Gu & Day, 2006, p. 1312).

**Historical Roots**

Teacher self-efficacy, or teachers’ expectations that they can successfully impact student outcomes, is a significant variable because it is strongly related to teacher behavior and student learning (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998; Ross,
1993). Historically this body of research has explored teacher self-efficacy from two different theoretical strands: Rotter’s social learning theory and Bandura’s social cognitive theory (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Ross, 1993). In the first strand, Rand researchers originally developed the term “teacher efficacy” based on Rotter’s (1966) work on “locus of control,” which is the “degree an individual believes that the perceived cause(s) of an intended outcome are within his or her control” (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 5). A teacher is said to have an internal locus of control if the teacher believes that he or she is competent to teach even the most challenging students; a teacher who believes that the environment (poverty, home life, social media, etc.) exerts more influence on student outcomes is said to have an external locus of control (Tschannen-Moran, 1998). In this conceptualization, teacher efficacy increases with an internal locus of control and decreases with an external one.

This discovery came about almost accidentally (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). In a study examining the School Preferred Reading Program implemented by the Los Angeles Board of Education to improve the achievements of black and Mexican-American students, Armor et al. (1976) added as an afterthought two items to a teacher questionnaire after reading Rotter’s work:

Rand Item #1: “When it comes right down to it, a teacher really can’t do much because most of a student’s motivation and performance depends on his or her home environment” (Ross, 1993). This item measures the extent to which a teacher believes that teachers and teaching are able to overcome environment factors (ie: violence, abuse, home conflict, socio-economic status, physical or cognitive needs of a student, etc.). This is referred to as general teaching efficacy (GTE) (Taschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

Rand Item #2: “If I try really hard I can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated students” (Ross, 1993). This question measures the extent to which an individual teacher believes he or she has the capability to influence student outcomes, and is referred to as personal teaching efficacy (PTE) (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).
Armor et al. (1976) added the scores from these two items to calculate a teacher’s overall teaching efficacy (TE). They found that the higher the teachers’ self-reported efficacy, the greater were their students’ gains in reading. These two items proved to be more strongly correlated with student outcomes than any other measures on the questionnaire (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

Developed simultaneously, the second strand of teacher self-efficacy is based on Bandura’s (1977, 1986) social cognitive theory of self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Woolfolk et al., 1990). Within this framework, self-efficacy is defined as people’s beliefs or judgments about their “capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Self-efficacy is important because it influences feelings, thoughts, and actions. Low self-efficacy is correlated with lower self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). Cognitively, high self-efficacy is associated with a confidence in one’s thought processes, performance, and decision-making, whereas people with a low sense of self-efficacy tend to think negatively about their accomplishments (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). Because thought shapes action, people tend to anticipate pessimistic or optimistic outcomes in-line with their self-efficacy beliefs (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). Thus self-efficacy beliefs shape the goals people set and the strategies they employ to attain them; they influence an individual’s motivation to persist in the face of obstacles; they affect how people feel about themselves in the process, and they influence the situations people choose in terms of different challenges (Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000).

5 Personal accomplishment (one of the three dimensions of burnout) and self-efficacy are often mistaken for the same construct. However, they are very different. Perceived self-efficacy is the belief in one’s abilities to perform a task; personal accomplishment is one’s judgment about the outcome of the task (Bandura, 1997).
Defining Terms: Teacher Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is task-specific, and when applied to the field of education, teacher self-efficacy represents a teacher’s “belief or conviction” that he or she “can influence how well students learn, even those who may be difficult or unmotivated” (Guskey & Passaro, 1994, 628). Teachers with high teacher self-efficacy “set higher goals for themselves, persist in difficult situations, deliver higher rates of positive feedback, spend more class time on academic instruction, provide more support for students having difficulties, and feel students can achieve despite student abilities or home circumstances (Oakes et al., 2013). Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) argue that teacher self-efficacy is a “powerful construct” related to student achievement (p. 222). Teacher self-efficacy also predicts student motivation, student self-esteem, and school effectiveness (Ross, 1998). Other research links teacher self-efficacy to a teacher’s openness to new ideas (Smylie, 1988), a teacher’s likelihood of using instructional practices that promote student engagement (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Gibson & Dembo, 1984), and a teacher’s commitment to teaching (Coladarci, 1992) among other positive outcomes.

Originally teacher self-efficacy was thought of as a single construct (Armor et al., 1976). However, social cognitive theory postulates that the concept of teacher self-efficacy is bi-dimensional and includes an efficacy expectation (the teacher’s belief that he or she can successfully complete teaching tasks) and an outcome expectation (the teacher’s belief that teaching in general will lead to certain outcomes for the students) (Bandura, 1997). Much of the early research recognized that teacher self-efficacy has two distinct components. What to name these factors (GTE and TE, internal and external locus of control, or personal expectations and outcome expectations etc.), how to conceptualize them, and how to measure the construct
resulted in years of “conceptual confusion” around teacher self-efficacy\(^6\) (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p.227).

However, Tschannen-Moran and her colleagues (1998) proposed an integrated model of teacher self-efficacy. Within their model, teacher self-efficacy is the result of an interaction between teaching task and its context (which includes a weighing of factors that make teaching difficult versus resources available) and self-perceptions of teaching competence (a personal assessment of a teacher’s own teaching capabilities). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) developed a teacher self-efficacy measure (TSES), which examines teacher self-efficacy beliefs in three domains: student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management. In addition to being closely linked to Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy, this tool is domain specific, situates teachers’ perceptions of teacher self-efficacy within the context of their classrooms, and focuses on teacher capabilities. Therefore, this is the conceptualization of teacher self-efficacy that I will use in my study (see figure 1).\(^7\) Furthermore, what this seems to suggest is that teacher self-efficacy is task specific. A teacher can feel self-efficacious with her instructional strategies but not with her classroom management, or a teacher perceives herself as self-efficacious engaging students in one class but not in another. This implies that teacher self-efficacy varies throughout a teaching day depending upon the individual task and classroom context.

\(^6\) For a detailed narrative about this debate, an analysis of the different efficacy scales, and an explanation of their findings, please see Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998 and 2001 and Klassen et al., 2011.

\(^7\) There is an ongoing debate within the literature around the “meaning and measure” of teacher efficacy (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Klassen et al., 2011). For example Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) proposes six domains of teacher efficacy, and several researchers have developed other measurement scales (CITATIONS FROM KLASSEN ET AL 2011). Klassen et al. (2011) argues that many of these scales are “conceptually suspect” and can lead to misguided theories of how teacher efficacy influences behavior (p. 37).
Sources of Teacher Self-Efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy beliefs are the result of learning processes and are cyclical in nature. In addition they can be influenced by four different sources of information: mastery experiences, physiological arousals, vicarious experiences, and verbal persuasion (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Bandura, 1997). A mastery experience, the perception that a past performance was successful, can raise future teacher self-efficacy beliefs, while the perception that the experience was a failure can lower them (Milner & Hoy, 2003). An emotional or physiological response to the experience in the form of anxiety or excitement can add to the feeling of success or failure. Vicarious experiences occur when watching another with whom one identifies perform a task. When the model performs well, the teacher self-efficacy of the observer is increased; failure on the part of the model can likewise lower the observer’s teacher self-efficacy (Milner & Hoy, 2003). Finally, verbal (or social) persuasion can take many forms and includes encouragement; feedback from students, parents, or administrators; praise; specific help; social support; and school norms of persistence and achievement (Milner & Hoy, 2003). The effect of verbal persuasion depends upon the trustworthiness of the source.

Bandura suggests that mastery experiences have the biggest impact on an individual’s sense of efficacy for a given task (1997). However, all of these experiences influence a teacher’s efforts, persistence, resilience, and experience of stress (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Bandura, 1997). As a teacher receives positive reinforcement from one area (ie: a proficiency performance, encouragement from others, or a feeling of pleasure), a new mastery performance is created, which will help shape future teacher self-efficacy beliefs. This can also work in the opposite direction: individuals who doubt their capabilities to successfully engage in a particular
activity are likely to consider such an activity as a threat and will avoid it in the future (Bandura, 1997).

**Consistency of Teacher Self-Efficacy Beliefs**

Bandura (1997) suggests that teacher self-efficacy is a stable construct; once it is established, there is little variation. As such we would expect a teacher’s self-efficacy to develop early in her career and remain unchanged throughout. But studies looking at teacher self-efficacy find minimal evidence regarding how teacher self-efficacy remains constant or solidifies over the course of a career (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). For example, Hoy and Woolfolk (1990) examined 191 student teachers’ self-efficacy over the course of a semester long teaching practicum. They found that student teachers’ sense of teacher self-efficacy in classroom management rose after their first teaching experience. This seems to indicate that mastery experiences are important for new teachers to feel efficacious, which makes sense: as new teachers experience success, they acquire more confidence with their teaching capabilities, which in turn leads to increased teacher self-efficacy beliefs.

However, another study using three waves of data collection: during the beginning of novice teachers’ teacher training, at the end of their training, and at the end of their first year as a classroom teacher showed some fluctuation (Woolfolk Hoy & Burke Spero, 2005). Teacher self-efficacy rose from wave one to wave two, but then dipped between waves two and three. This dip is correlated with the perceived lack of social support new teachers felt during their induction year. Thus it appears that verbal persuasion is impactful for new teachers’ sense of teacher self-efficacy. These results are mirrored in a study examining 105 student teachers, which found no
linear growth in student teacher self-efficacy as student teachers often experienced a setback during their practicum (Ruys, Van Keer, & Aelterman, 2011).

These inconsistent patterns are also seen in research regarding experienced teachers. For example, a mixed-methods study by Henson (2001), which looked at 11 teachers and teaching assistants over the course of one school year, found quantitative and qualitative evidence for the increase of teacher self-efficacy. However, this study is limited by its sample size. Furthermore, Klassen & Chiu (2010) reviewed three additional studies that looked at the relationship between experience and teacher self-efficacy and report that findings are mixed for the influence of experience on teacher self-efficacy. Furthermore, there are significant limitations to this work: two studies had relatively small sample sizes and the third grouped all teachers with more than ten years’ experience together, which may mask effects for longevity and teacher self-efficacy. Although this review is limited by the relative dearth of longitudinal studies, it does suggest that teacher self-efficacy does not stay constant, an idea that is supported by a small body of qualitative studies (Gabriele & Joram, 2012; Bruce & Ross, 2008; Onafowora, 2004; Milner & Woolfolk Hoy, 2003; Milner, 2002), which focus attention on factors that shape teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs and demonstrate their fluid and contextual nature (Klassen et al., 2011).

Therefore, teacher self-efficacy is not a constant construct, or an immutable personality factor, but represents the interaction between an assessment of the teaching task and the perception of one’s teaching capabilities.

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8 Ghaith & Yaghi, 1997; Ross, Cousins, and Gadalla, 1996; and Wolters & Daugherty, 2007

9 This body of qualitative work will be discussed in more detail in the final section of this literature review.
Teacher Self-Efficacy and Burnout

Over the past three decades, many researchers have drawn upon self-efficacy theory in their studies of teacher burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010, 2007; Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Fives, Hamman, & Olivarez, 2006; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Cherniss, 1993). In fact, Cherniss (1980) termed burnout a “crisis of competence,” which refers to a person’s feelings of doubt to perform well on the job. Leiter (1992) later conceptualized burnout as a “crisis in self-efficacy.” This makes conceptual sense, for as Bandura (1997) explained, teachers with low teacher self-efficacy might perceive different aspects of their environment as threatening and dwell on their inability to cope. The resultant anxiety is energy consuming and could be expected to lead to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007).

The negative relationship between teacher self-efficacy and burnout is well established in the literature (Fernet et al., 2012; Hoigaard, Giske, & Sundsli, 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010, 2007). In a narrative review of teacher self-efficacy and the three dimensions of burnout, Brown (2012) found negative relationships between teacher self-efficacy and both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and a positive relationship between teacher self-efficacy and personal accomplishment. This finding is consistent with research investigating the effect of classroom management teacher self-efficacy on burnout (Aloe et al., 2014; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). Furthermore, Wang, Hall, & Rahimi (2015) find that teachers who are efficacious in their beliefs to engage students and manage their classrooms have lower emotional exhaustion and higher personal accomplishment. Further, teachers’ sense of teacher self-efficacy to engage their students is also related to lower levels of depersonalization (Wang et al., 2015). Overall, this research indicates that teachers with a negative perception of their capabilities are also more susceptible to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal accomplishment.
Some studies suggest a directional effect of teacher self-efficacy on burnout (Wang et al., 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Evers et al., 2002; Friedman & Farber, 1992; Greenglass & Burke, 1988). Moreover, Fives et al., (2006) find that as student teachers’ sense of teacher self-efficacy increases, their levels of burnout decrease. However, data was only collected over one semester, which limits the findings. In addition, Schwarzer and Hallum (2008) further examined both the prediction of teacher self-efficacy by burnout, and the prediction of burnout by teacher self-efficacy. They concluded that only teacher self-efficacy predicts burnout. They further conceptualize teacher self-efficacy as a resource factor with job stress mediating between teacher self-efficacy and burnout. Other researchers have conceptualized teacher self-efficacy as a moderating variable between job stressors and burnout (Yu, Wang, Zhai, Dai, & Yang, 2014; Schonfeld, 2001). In these studies, as job stress increases, teachers with higher levels of teacher self-efficacy are better able to cope resulting in lower levels of burnout; thus teacher self-efficacy has a protective effect on burnout.

Nevertheless, the research is inconsistent regarding the directional effect of these two constructs (Dicke, Parker, Holzberger, Habenicht, Kunter, & Leutner, 2015). For example, Brouwers and Tomic (2000) examined the effect of classroom management teacher self-efficacy on burnout and found that emotional exhaustion predicts low teacher self-efficacy, which in turn predicts depersonalization and low personal accomplishment. One explanation for this finding is related to Bandura’s notion of mastery experiences (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). Teachers who are emotionally exhausted will likely have poor performances, which result in negative mastery experiences, which in turn reinforces low teacher self-efficacy beliefs. Furthermore, teachers who doubt their beliefs to manage a classroom would be prone to blaming their students for their misbehavior. This seems to suggest that the relationship between burnout and teacher self-
efficacy is reciprocal (Dicke et al., 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). However, this study was limited as it only collected data over five months and only looked at teacher self-efficacy beliefs for classroom management.

Dicke et al., (2015) attempted to replicate these findings in a study of 1740 beginning teachers using a bivariate change model. They found that over the course of the first year of teaching, change in one variable does correlate negatively with change in the other. However, contradictory to Brouwers et al. (2000), their research also showed that teachers who began the study with the highest levels of emotional exhaustion tended to have a high increase in teacher self-efficacy. They postulate that these results could be due to a ceiling effect: teachers with high emotional exhaustion could not report as much of an increase, thus allowing for a seemingly higher rate of change in their teacher self-efficacy. Or perhaps teachers with high emotional exhaustion also had very low levels of teacher self-efficacy at the onset and thus existed the potential for larger increases of teacher self-efficacy. The varying results all of this research clearly demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between burnout and teacher self-efficacy, and indicates the necessity of further examination.

Three additional studies looked at the intrapersonal development of both burnout and teacher self-efficacy. First, Fernet et al. (2012) examined the changes in teachers’ perceptions of the school environment over the course of the school year (demands and resources) and found an effect on teacher self-efficacy and burnout. In particular, a positive or negative change in either school leadership or student misbehavior was correlated with a change in teachers’ sense of teacher self-efficacy, which in turn negatively predicted changes in the three burnout dimensions at the individual level. This study is important because it underscores the fact that burnout can change over time in response to changes in contextual variables. Furthermore, it demonstrates
that changes in burnout are predicted by changes in teachers’ perceptions of the school environment and to corresponding changes in teacher self-efficacy. In other words, teachers’ psychological well-being is at risk when they perceive that job demands threaten their sense of teacher self-efficacy. Unfortunately, the small number of school variables investigated limits this study.

Second, Hultell et al. (2013), using a person-based approach to examine the individual trajectories of burnout, confirmed its intra-individual development. They tracked 816 teachers over the first three years of their careers. At the group level, burnout levels were moderately low and stable. However, underlying these levels were seven different individual burnout trajectories, six of which changed significantly over time. Changes in the burnout trajectories were associated with burnout variables, including teacher self-efficacy.

Finally, Klassen and Durksen (2014) used a longitudinal intra-individual, mixed methods design to investigate the developmental trajectories of 150 pre-service teachers’ sense of teacher self-efficacy and stress. The results show that although teacher self-efficacy increased and stress decreased for the majority of participants, the trajectories of both did vary from person to person. These patterns include increased teacher self-efficacy/increased stress, decreased teacher self-efficacy/increased stress, and decreased teacher self-efficacy/decreased stress, thus confirming the inconsistency of the directional effect of these two constructs (Dicke et al., 2015).

We can see from the issues raised in this small body of research that a relationship exists between burnout and teacher self-efficacy; however, its exact nature remains unclear. Furthermore, burnout and teacher self-efficacy beliefs do appear to develop differently within individuals. To some extent this is due to differences in contextual variables. Moreover, whether certain situations or events result in burnout or changes in teacher self-efficacy depends upon the
way individual teachers experience the two constructs (Kelchtermans, 1999). Burnout and teacher self-efficacy manifest themselves as “psychological, emotional, subjective, and experiential phenomena” and are the result of teachers’ self-perceptions of the intersection between macro, meso, and micro variables (Kelchtermans, 1999). Because of the individual and contextual nature of this relationship, it is difficult to elicit or verify through quantitative work. Therefore, several researchers have called for more qualitative studies to further investigate the individual properties of these two constructs and how they impact each other (Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Day, 2008; Hultell et al., 2013). In the next section I briefly summarize and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the brief volume of qualitative work that exists.

**Methodological Considerations**

Since the mid-1970s most research around teacher self-efficacy and burnout has been quantitative and based on correlational and cross-sectional data derived from self-report surveys (Wheatley, 2005; Blase, 1986; Schonfeld & Santiago, 1994). While quantitative studies are important to educational research, such studies do have limitations. First, the underlying assumption is that the researcher knows what stressor and outcomes to include during data collection, which may overlook other important variables (Fernet et. al., 2012; Mazzola, Schonfeld, & Spector, 2011; Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). Second, quantitative instruments require respondents to answer in terms of frequency and intensity, which may not discriminate adequately between factors (Mazzola, et al., 2011). And finally, objective data often underestimates levels of adversity teachers ordinarily confront (Schonfeld & Santiago, 1994).
On the other hand, qualitative research uses open-ended methods, which give participants the opportunity to describe in detail the full meaning of stress, burnout, and teacher self-efficacy beliefs in context and from their perspectives (Gustafsson, Hassmen, Kentta, & Johansson, 2008). For example, new demands from an administrator or tensions between colleagues only take on their full meaning when they are placed against the uncertainties from previous experiences (Kelchtermans, 1999). As such, qualitative work has the potential to add depth to quantitative studies by detailing the personal experiences, thoughts, and reactions of participants (Mazzola, et al., 2011). In addition, qualitative research can help unpack the relationship between burnout and teacher self-efficacy that is often masked in quantitative studies (Klassen & Durksen, 2014). Thus, qualitative research is important as it extends the findings of quantitative work.

Klassen et al. (2011) conducted a thorough review of the teacher self-efficacy research from 1998-2009 and found that although the number of qualitative studies increased, qualitative and mixed methods studies only comprise, respectively, 8.7% and 14.7% of the overall sample of 218 studies they examined. These qualitative and mixed methods studies include a diverse array of methodologies: individual interviews, focus groups, observations, open-ended response surveys, informal conversations, and talk aloud procedures. Although no similar statistics exist for burnout research, Mazzola et al. (2011) did perform a conceptual review of 94 qualitative studies of occupational stress from 1986-2009, only three of which were related to teacher burnout or teacher stress. I located two additional qualitative studies on burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015; Miller, 1999). Furthermore, my extensive search of the UNH databases and other online resources found one-mixed methods study and no qualitative studies incorporating
both teacher efficacy and teacher burnout. Clearly there is a lack of qualitative work around these two constructs.

What follows is an analysis of the different research approaches that researchers have used to investigate teacher burnout and teacher self-efficacy qualitatively. They can be categorized as open response survey questions, personal interviews, or case studies. I briefly summarize the research findings and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

Open Response Survey Questions

As early as 1986, Blase bemoaned the lack of qualitative work around teacher stress. As a result, he developed and administered an open-ended instrument to 392 K-12 teachers to answer the following research question: What do teachers mean when they identify work-related factors as sources of stress? (1986). He found that job-related factors were considered stressful because they interfered with time resources, which led to work overload, negative emotions in teachers, and self-reported, maladaptive teaching strategies. The results support quantitative findings (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). There are two limitations to this study: first, teacher stress is a uni-dimensional construct, which does not capture the three dimensions of burnout, and second, the survey, a one-time self-reported instrument, does not record change over time.

Schonfeld and Santiago (1994) posed an optional, open-ended question to 206 novice female teachers as part of a larger, longitudinal survey. Data was collected in two waves, prior to beginning their first teaching job and again in the spring. Teachers were instructed to write anything they wished regarding their teaching experience. As a result of how open-ended this prompt was, 28 categories were established, but for the purpose of their reported findings, the

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10 Open response surveys can be difficult to classify as either a quantitative or qualitative research method. However, I included these studies in this discussion of qualitative research because they produced descriptive data, which led to a deeper understanding of stress.
authors limited their discussion to four: happiness with one’s job, interpersonal tensions and lack of colleague support; classroom management problems, and violence/security issues. Although the study captures the voices of the teachers as much of the data is reported as teacher quotes, the open nature of the question does not allow for connections to be made between stress factors and mediators, teacher emotions, or feelings of burnout.

Another open-ended survey as administered to 359 pre-school and year-one primary school teachers in England, which asked the following two questions: what do you find most stressful about your job? And what are the main reasons for being satisfied/dissatisfied with your current job? (Moriarty, Edmonds, Blatchford, and Martin, 2001). The results demonstrate that difficulties or professional compromises teachers experienced while implementing Britain’s new National Curriculum resulted in a large amount of stress and dissatisfaction. These difficulties include time spent on bureaucratic tasks, feeling disempowered, and implementing policies that are contrary to their own pedagogical understandings. Although many researchers note that the United Kingdom’s reform initiatives surpass reform efforts in the United States in scope (Woods, 1999; Smylie, 1999), this is still a significant finding in light of this study, which acknowledges the increase of work demands on teachers in recent years. This is discussed in Chapter 4.

A fourth study examined the development of teacher self-efficacy. Onafowora (2004) used a mixed methods design to explore whether or not participation in year-long professional development experience related to teachers’ instructional strategies affects the perceived teacher self-efficacy of 25 novice teachers. Qualitative data sources included an open-ended questionnaire and a transcript of a discussion group. Her results are surprising. Whereas most of the beginning teachers indicated on the teacher self-efficacy scale that they feel “self-empowered” to teach even difficult students, this is not reflected in their oral and written
comments (p. 41). When questioned closely about their actual beliefs and practices, most of her participants instead discuss being overwhelmed by classroom management and frustrated by a lack of student engagement. This gap is interesting in that it points to a disconnect between a participant’s cognitive and affective development. This underscores the importance of qualitative work.

Finally, Klassen and Durksen (2014) used a longitudinal intra-individual, mixed methods design to investigate the developmental trajectories of pre-service teachers’ sense of teacher self-efficacy and stress. Fifty-three participants were asked to respond weekly in writing to open-ended questions for eight weeks. The results show that although teacher self-efficacy increased and stress decreased for the majority of participants, the trajectories of both did vary from person to person, thus confirming the inconsistency of the directional effect of these two constructs (Dicke et al., 2015). Qualitative responses further provided explanatory information regarding coping and social support not previously recognized in the research. First, all participants with teacher self-efficacy/stress trajectories outside of the expected pattern used more professionally avoidant and physically unhealthy ways of coping with stress. Second, the social support of mentors strongly influenced, both negatively and positively, the direction of the teacher self-efficacy/burnout trajectories over time.

As is evident from the large sample size of four of these studies, open response survey questions are a good tool for accessing the opinions of many teachers all at once. Moreover, they are useful for recording spontaneous responses, which may provide unexpected answers, and reducing bias that results from predetermined survey answers (Shuman & Presser, 1979). However, they do have some limitations. First, with the exception of the study by Klassen and Durksen, they only provide a snapshot of one point in time thereby overlooking how a
phenomenon might develop or change (Kelley, Clark, Brown, & Sitzia, 2003). Second, written responses are more demanding and time-consuming for the respondent; therefore answers may be left blank or lack details and depth (Kelley et al., 2003). And finally, respondents may simply misinterpret open survey questions without a qualitative researcher present to clarify, rephrase, or redirect questions and responses (Shuman & Presser, 1979). However, as Klassen and Durksen demonstrate, they can be invaluable for highlighting explanations for quantitative findings.

**Personal Interviews**

Gabriele and Joram (2012) used a talk-aloud\textsuperscript{11} research method with ten veteran early elementary teachers to examine how teachers judge their success in implementing a new math curriculum. Teachers were first exposed to modeling and verbal persuasion during professional development to encourage them to focus on student thinking as the basis for judging their success with the implementation of the new program. As a result, when describing their self-efficacy with the new curriculum, teachers, who already had previous experience with this program, routinely described changes in student thinking as an indicator of their success. This is an interesting result because it shows that both modeling and verbal persuasion can not only impact teacher self-efficacy beliefs, but also influence teacher adherence to a program’s goals. In addition, this same result was not found for teachers new to the program. Therefore, it suggests that prior experience laid the foundation for verbal persuasion and modeling to reinforce mastery experiences.

\textsuperscript{11}“Talk-aloud” is a type of interview method in which teachers are prompted by an interviewer to reflect on a lesson she just taught. Prompts were intended to encourage complete verbalization of the teacher’s evaluation of her performance.
Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2015) used semi-structured interviews with 30 Norwegian elementary and middle school teachers and four former teachers on early retirement. The participants were asked questions about job satisfaction, challenges and strain in the profession, and reactions to and consequences of challenges and strain. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes. All of the teachers in this study, despite expressing high job satisfaction, also experienced a high degree of stress, including severe symptoms of physical and emotional exhaustion for some. Each of six schooled based sources of stress was experienced by at least half of all participants, which indicates a cumulative effect of different sources of stress on individuals. Most of the teachers interviewed related their experience of job stress to a loss of motivation and well-being. These findings confirm previous research (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; 2010; Hakanen et al., 2006).

Personal interviews provide space for the researcher to ask probing, follow-up questions as a way to extend the responses of the participants (Rapley, 2004). Both studies claimed to have done this. However, these studies are also narrow in focus. For example, the talk-aloud methodology used by Gabriele and Joram is limiting in that it only captures a teachers’ thoughts immediately after she has taught her lesson; when in fact, a teacher’s self-assessment of her performance and attributions of teacher self-efficacy sources may change with additional time to reflect and create meaning. Skaalvik and Skaalvik’s work is likewise restricted in that it only captured data from one 60-90 minute interview session. Furthermore, the semi-structured nature of their questions delimited responses to the six domains of workplace burnout understudy. A more open, biographical approach to interviewing would enable the documentation of changes

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12 Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2015) conceptualize the six school-based sources of stress as workload and time pressure, adapting to student needs, disruptive student behavior, value conflicts and lack of autonomy, teamwork, and lack of status.
within individuals over time, and it would provide space for novel ideas regarding the experience of burnout to emerge (Riessman, 2008; Kelchtermans, 1999).

**Case Studies**

Milner (2002) implemented a case study to explore the sources of teacher self-efficacy and persistence for one experienced European American teacher in a suburban high school. Over the course of nineteen years, this teacher had, at one point, questioned her ability to be an effective teacher. Using observations and semi-structured interviews, Milner found that verbal persuasion in the form of positive feedback from students, parents, and other teachers enabled this teacher to weather the crisis until she had mastery experiences and felt more efficacious. Therefore, verbal persuasion helped guide her thinking about her abilities until a mastery experience could occur. This study also highlights the fact that teacher self-efficacy can ebb and flow throughout a teacher’s professional life depending upon contextual variables in the workplace.

This last finding is supported by another case study conducted by Milner and Woolfolk Hoy (2003) in which the researchers identified and interpreted the sources of teacher self-efficacy that encouraged one African American teacher to persevere in an unsupportive environment. Data collection included observations and interviews. Throughout the course of the day, this teacher’s sense of teacher self-efficacy changed as she encountered different scenarios ranging from teachable moments with her students about race, hostility from coworkers, or support from parents. Furthermore, this teacher encountered daily strain as she undertook the teaching task to change negative stereotypes about black people within her building. This is an impossible task, which did not promise mastery experiences. However, it
was the memory of prior mastery experiences, stories of others who had persevered in difficult situations (modeling or social persuasion), and the physiological and emotional arousal that she experienced when she thought about “fighting the good fight” that sustained her throughout her long career.

Puchner, & Taylor (2006) implemented a collective case study in order to investigate the impact lesson study as a professional development model has on the intra-individual change of teacher self-efficacy of two groups of four elementary teachers. Data collection included observations, interviews, and document analysis. The theme of teacher self-efficacy emerged during the analysis as teachers reported feeling “thrilled,” “surprised,” and “in control” of student learning (p. 927). This result is mirrored in a case study by Miller (1999), in which she investigated one school’s professional, collaborative efforts to implement curriculum changes. Although Miller was investigating burnout and not teacher self-efficacy per se, she did uncover teacher self-efficacy themes as teachers reported learning new skills and changed beliefs about teaching. In addition, teachers described the buffering effect that collaboration has on feelings of emotional exhaustion. Even though teachers by the end of each study believed that they could impact student outcomes, it remains unclear whether or not participation in professional development has a long-term effect on teacher self-efficacy beliefs, or if once the social supports are removed, teachers also feel less efficacious.

Another study by Bruce and Ross (2008) used structured interviews, peer observations, online self-assessments, and participants’ field notes to examine the effects of peer coaching on

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13 Lesson study refers to a collaborative effort in which teachers come together to co-plan a series of lessons around a larger goal. During the implementation of the lessons, teachers continue to meet, debrief, revise the lessons, and plan others as an on-going process of teacher professional development.

14 The researchers do not refer to their work as a case study; however, I believe it meets the definition of one according to Yin (2003), so I placed it in this category. According to Yin, a case study is an empirical inquiry that
the implementation of new instructional strategies and twelve teachers’ teacher self-efficacy beliefs about student learning. Although the researchers found evidence of depressed teacher self-efficacy with the introduction of the program, teachers felt much more self-efficacious by the end. Since peer coaching involves verbal persuasion, vicarious experience, and emotional responses, “mastery teacher experiences were strengthened because the other three sources of efficacy were readily available” (Bruce & Ross, 2008, p. 360). This demonstrates that teacher self-efficacy can dip when new elements are introduced into the teaching environment and rise with the proper support. In addition, increased teacher self-efficacy resulted in openness to new and challenging strategies.\(^{15}\) Likewise, Cantrell and Callaway (2008) conducted interviews to explore the perceptions of teachers implementing a new literacy program. They also found that teachers who express a high sense of teacher self-efficacy tend to be more open towards implementing new pedagogy.

The strength of case study as a research approach is threefold. First, data is collected in context, which highlights the intersection of environmental variables and phenomenon (Yin, 2003). Second, case study also allows for multiple data sources to be used to provide a detailed account of the phenomenology under study (Zaidah, 2007). And third, case study addresses the connections and/or convergences among the sources that inform how specific work-place variables are evaluated and interpreted by individual teachers and how those interpretations contribute to their experience of burnout and/or teacher self-efficacy (Milner, 2002). As these case studies show teachers bring different personal variables with them to the teaching context, which influence teacher perceptions of efficacy and sources of teacher self-efficacy.

\(^{15}\) Other qualitative studies have examined teachers’ willingness to adopt new instructional strategies and increased teacher self-efficacy (Puchner & Taylor, 2006; Hadar & Brody, 2010).
Implications for Future Research

The current research demonstrates several important limitations. First, there was only one study that examines teacher stress in relationship to teacher self-efficacy (Klassen & Durksen, 2014). However, data was collected only over eight weeks. Also, collecting only brief open-ended responses over such a short period of time may have restricted the depth of insight into their participants’ experiences (Klassen & Durksen, 2014).

Second most of the qualitative work around job stress and burnout uses a one-dimensional definition of stress (Klassen & Durksen, 2014; Moriarty et al., 2001; Schonfeld & Santiago, 1994; Blasé, 1986). The one exception is Skaalvik and Skaalvik’s 2015 study. In addition, the qualitative research around stress and burnout only capture data at one point in time. Therefore, none of this research examines how stress or burnout develops over time in relationship to the three dimensions of burnout.

Third, the studies examining teacher self-efficacy only reflect the change in teacher self-efficacy over a relatively short period of time from a semester to a year. Attention to the development of teacher self-efficacy over a teacher’s entire professional lifespan is largely absent from the research. The exception is Milner’s (2002) case study, in which he asked his participant to reflect over the course of her career, but even then Milner only focused on one particular crisis she had; he did not explore the ebb and flow of her sense of teacher self-efficacy throughout her entire career.

Fourth, there is scant literature that investigates the sources of burnout and teacher self-efficacy and how they are affected by the intersection of policy demands, school context, and cultural backgrounds of the teachers understood to be the macro, meso, and micro levels of teacher experience (Woods, 1999). As Milner and Woolfolk Hoy (2003) show, teachers bring
different personal variables with them to the teaching context. How do these different variables influence teacher perceptions of teacher self-efficacy, sources of teacher self-efficacy, and the experience of burnout? These questions remain unanswered in the research.

**Conclusion**

What is known about this vast body of research is that teachers face many different strain factors (Jennet et al., 2003), including workload and time pressure, adapting to student needs, disruptive student behavior, value conflicts and lack of autonomy, teamwork, and lack of status (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015, 2010). However, not all teachers will develop burnout symptoms (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Friedman, 1995). This is due to the fact that teacher perceptions of stress greatly influence what they notice in their environments and their subsequent feelings, attitudes, and behavior (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). The underlying assumption is that a teacher’s perceptions of her work demands and resources are mediated by past experiences and impact future ones and can contribute to or inhibit the experience of burnout (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008).

The research has also documented a strong relationship between burnout and teacher self-efficacy (Fernet et al., 2015; Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Evers et al., 2004). However, the exact nature of this relationship remains unclear (Dicke et al., 2015; Klassen & Durksen, 2014; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). As Bandura (1986) notes, personal factors, including capacity beliefs, further our understanding of burnout as a psychological state created by teachers through their perceptions and evaluations of their environments (Leithwood, 1999). Thus the experience of burnout includes the perception of one’s capabilities to cope with job stress. Therefore I
believe that it is imperative to investigate how teacher self-efficacy develops and the relationship between a teacher’s sense of self-efficacy and her experience of burnout.

Given the challenges and limitations of existing research, I have designed a case study approach to examining teacher burnout and teacher self-efficacy. Using in-depth, interviews, I hope to foster an understanding of how burnout and teacher self-efficacy develop over the course of a teacher’s professional lifespan. It should also help illuminate the interpretive meaning that teachers give to both constructs in response to different contexts, strain variables, and social, cultural, and political factors. It is to that end that I will conduct the study outlined in the following chapter.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my study was to understand the nature of teacher burnout, teacher self-efficacy, and the relationship between the two. Central to this objective was to learn how three New Hampshire middle school teachers experience burnout, and the meaning they make of their experiences. In light of my aim to contextualize the experience of burnout, I framed this dissertation as a case study (Yin 2014; Stake, 2006), and I chose Seidman’s three-part interview structure to capture and represent three qualitative portraits of teachers experiencing burnout. By investigating and presenting the experience of burnout qualitatively, it is my hope to contribute to the educational psychology literature.

Research Design

According to Yin (2014), the purpose of using a case study as a research design is to make a holistic, in-depth examination of a contemporary phenomenon situated within a real-life context. The benefit of using case study over other research designs is for the researcher to understand the behavioral conditions through the participant’s perspective (Zaidah, 2007). In the context of this project, the case study seeks to answer the questions of how and why three NH middle school teachers experience and understand burnout and its effect on their sense of teacher self-efficacy. Case studies are by nature, bounded, in that they limit their exploration to a small geographic area or population. The advantage to this is that they allow for a detailed study of the
“complexity, and contextual embeddedness of individual events and phenomena” (Schram, 2006, p. 107). The aim is to develop insight of the particular in order to gain knowledge of the issue under exploration (Stake, 2006). Thus the objective of this inquiry is to gain a deeper understanding of the way teachers construct meaning about their experiences of burnout and how they feel, think, and explain their behavior based on their perceptions of their environment and beliefs about their abilities to be successful.

Specifically, this project used a multicase study to investigate burnout and teacher self-efficacy. Even though Stake (2006) suggests selecting four-ten cases for a multicase study, he also acknowledges that some studies only use 2-3 cases “for good reason” (p. 22). According to Stake (2006), “[a]n important reason for doing the multicase study is to examine how the…phenomenon performs in different environments…When cases are selected carefully, the design of a study can incorporate a diversity of contexts” (p. 23). I chose a middle school teacher from each of the following contexts: rural, suburban, and urban settings, thus limiting my study to three participants. My final product is not a cross-case analysis, but rather an in-depth exploration of the characteristics of each case, highlighting the particular context of each and how that setting influences the experiences of the phenomenon. The cases here, then, are each participant’s individual experience of burnout, and each was studied to gain an understanding of burnout as it was situated in its particular context (Stake, 2006). By comparing the constructs within different contexts, my goal was to highlight similarities and differences in service of gaining a deeper awareness of how burnout is experienced and understood (Stake, 2006).
**Methods and Research Activity**

The purpose of my study was to understand the nature of three middle school teachers’ experiences of burnout and teacher self-efficacy. The following questions guided my study:

- What meaning do three NH middle school teachers ascribe to their experiences of burnout and teacher self-efficacy?
- How are burnout and teacher self-efficacy manifested for these participants?
- How are burnout and teacher self-efficacy related for these participants?

**The Interview Protocol**

Seidman (2013) developed a three-part, in-depth interview protocol that was a good method for my work. This method is a form of life history interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology (Seidman, 2013). As such, it uses open-ended questions in order for participants to reflect on and make meaning about their experiences of the phenomenon under study. The distinguishing feature of this interview procedure is that it requires the researcher to conduct a series of three in-depth interviews with each participant. The first interview\(^\text{16}\) focuses on the participant’s life history in order to contextualize her experience. Therefore in my first interviews, I focused on asking teachers to reconstruct their lives up until they first experienced burnout. I paid particular attention to the reasons they became teachers, their professional lives up until they first experienced burnout, and any past experiences associated with stress, coping, and teacher self-efficacy.

The second interview concentrates on the concrete details of the participant’s experience of the phenomenon under study. This interview should avoid eliciting opinions and instead focus

\(^{16}\) Please see Appendix A for a proposed interview protocol.
on the myriad details of the experience. My second interviews focused on when the participants first experienced burnout, the conditions around that experience, and their teacher self-efficacy beliefs. In particular, I sought to uncover the relationship between the two constructs.

The final interview asks participants to reflect on the first and second interviews. The intent is for the participant to “make meaning” by addressing the intellectual and emotional connections between their work and life. It is this “combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details of their present experience, [that] establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they’re now doing in their lives” (Seidman, 2013, p. 22). Although the specific nature of the questions I asked were contingent upon what each participant shared in the first two interviews, in general, the overarching question in the final interview was: Given what you have reconstructed about your early life and current teaching experiences, how do you currently understand the role of burnout in your life?

Since the understanding of a phenomenon emerges from the participants’ experience (van Manen, 1990), I deliberately employed open-ended questions. Moreover, as Seidman (2013) notes, it is important when conducting in-depth interviews to ask follow-up questions for clarification, to seek concrete details, or to request illustrative stories. As I listened to my participants, I noted words I wanted them to define (ie: What does “stress” mean to you?), and places where I wanted a concrete example. In addition, I had a research agenda: to try to understand burnout from their perspectives. Therefore I brought a concrete list of questions with me to guide the interviews, particularly for the second interview in which the purpose is to seek out particular details about burnout and teacher self-efficacy. However, I found the interviews to be a fluid process, which varied depending upon the information each individual shared.
Finding and Selecting Participants

The main criterion for my study was that participants are currently reporting symptoms of burnout. In order to identify possible participants, I used self-reported measures of burnout as collected by the University of New Hampshire’s Teacher Longitudinal Survey. This project collects information using a variety of measures, including the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). Although various researchers have developed other instruments for measuring burnout, the MBI for educators remains the strongest psychometric instrument in the field today (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). This instrument measures teacher burnout through three subscales: Emotional Exhaustion (nine items), Depersonalization (five items), and Personal Accomplishment (eight items). The use of this instrument allowed me to identify NH teachers who are experiencing burnout.

The Teacher Longitudinal Survey also collects demographic information. Embedded in the survey was a box for informants to check if they were interested in a possible follow-up conversation regarding burnout. I emailed this survey out to almost every school in New Hampshire serving 6th-8th grades. As a result of the survey, I received over 30 emails from willing NH middle school teachers. Initially I confirmed their burnout status from the results of their survey. Then I pre-screened each positive respondent to ensure that I was selecting only experienced middle school teachers from a variety of teaching contexts: rural, suburban, and urban settings.

I chose these inclusion criteria for three reasons. First, many consider middle school the most difficult level to teach due to the combination of student-teacher interactions, adolescence, and proliferation of standardized testing (Sparks, 2011; Meyer, 2011; Gootman, 2007). Furthermore, in all of the research on stress, burnout, and teacher self-efficacy that I examined,
only one quantitative study specifically investigated middle school teachers’ experiences of burnout compared to elementary and high school teachers (Martin, Sass, & Schmitt, 2012). They found that middle school teachers experience greater levels of depersonalization and lower levels of teacher self-efficacy than elementary teachers. Due to the relative dearth of studies focusing on middle school teachers’ experiences of burnout, and the understanding that teaching middle school is stressful, I believe this study is timely.

Second, since workplace variables strongly influence a teacher’s perception of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001; Friedman, 1995; Leiter, 1991), I believe that teachers working in different settings will face different pressures in their work environments. I felt it was important to interview teachers from a variety of teaching contexts in order to examine the commonalities and differences of the burnout experience across three diverse teaching sites (Stake, 2006). The result of this work was a multiple case study report. As Stake (2006) notes, an important reason for doing a multicase study is to examine how the phenomenon performs in different environments, which will help reveal similarities and differences of the phenomenon across sites. Thus, the purpose here was to give depth to our understanding of burnout by examining it in multiple contexts.

My final criterion was that all of my participants had been teaching in New Hampshire for many years. As the research notes, burnout is a common experience for new teachers, and it has been suggested as a reason that many leave the profession (Brown & Wynn, 2009; Ingersoll, 2001). But the purpose of this investigation is to explore the professional life histories of burned out teachers who remain in the classroom. Therefore, longevity was important for this study.

Once I narrowed down my respondents by excluding all teachers with less than five years of NH teaching experience, I began the recruitment process via email. I initially sent out three
emails, one per demographic. I received an immediate response from my rural and urban participants. However, it took two more rounds of emails to locate a willing suburban participant. At the end of the process, Jason, Susan, and Sean agreed to meet with me for three-90 minute interviews each over the course of late spring-early summer. Interesting to note, all three are white and married, while only Jason and Sean have children.

**TABLE 1: Participant Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>SETTING</th>
<th>GRADE and SUBJECT AREA</th>
<th>YEARS TEACHING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>6th Grade</td>
<td>19 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>8th Grade French</td>
<td>14 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>7th Grade Social Studies</td>
<td>30 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data Collection and Analysis*

Interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. During the interviews, I took notes in order to record my impressions about facts, comments, or other details I found significant in the moment. In addition, I listened to each interview prior to the subsequent one. These strategies allowed me to make note of topics I wanted to follow up on and gave me the opportunity to prepare and ask clarifying questions. Furthermore, I systematically wrote integrative memos in order to record my thoughts and observations immediately after the interviews and during the analysis process. I used these memos to elaborate on ideas, explore relationships between
themes, and examine excerpts that appeared to be anomalies (Simpson, 2007). Moreover, recording my thoughts and assumptions and referring to them often throughout the process helped me to better bracket my beliefs and emotions.

Once all of the interviews were completed and transcribed for an individual participant, I conducted my data analysis in the following stages. First, I marked and labeled what I found of significance and importance in each individual teacher interview; I used In Vivo coding for this stage (Saldana, 2009). Using what I marked, I created three individual profiles, or cases, according to Seidman’s (2013) protocol. These profiles are presented as first-person portraits in Chapter 4. Next, I analyzed the portraits thematically, noting connections and differences among them. Here I used Axial Coding (Saldana, 2009) to describe each category’s properties and dimensions and to explore how they relate to each other (Stake, 2006). This was an iterative process that involved examining, re-examining, articulating, and re-articulating the themes that emerged from the portraits. Finally, I wrote and presented the data. Each of these steps is described in further detail below.

**Working with Individual Interview Data**

At this stage, the focus was on fully understanding each individual’s story as a unique case. Consequently, my preliminary examination focused on each individual interview as a separate unit of analysis in order to bracket my judgment of an individual in relation to the other participants. I felt it was important at this stage to let each individual stand as a particular case before making connections and theorizing across cases. Therefore, I approached this stage one participant at a time. I began with line edits in which I deleted certain characteristics of oral speech that was distracting or presented my participants in an unflattering light; for example: uhms, likes, you knows, etc. I also redacted stutters, incomplete or redundant sentences or
phrases where deletion did not change the meaning of the text. Further, I removed references to the interviewer and substituted pseudonyms for people and places to protect my participants’ confidentiality. I then used parenthetical notation in places where I changed or added words for clarification and continuity; for example, proper nouns for personal pronouns.

After these changes, I read through each of the participant’s three interviews several times to familiarize myself with the contents. As I did this, I began to inductively mark interesting passages, keeping an open attitude and seeking what emerged as significant or important from the text itself (Seidman, 2013). After I became confident with the material, I developed labels for the text that I had marked; these labels were informed by the text and my understanding of the research literature. I paid particular attention to expressed hopes, conflict, frustration, resolution, isolation, community, and collegiality as well as to repetition and inconsistencies that occurred throughout my participants’ interviews (Seidman, 2013). At this stage, I used In Vivo coding to honor my participants’ voices and to ground the analysis from their perspective (Saldana, 2009).

After I labeled the interviews, I winnowed them down by 30-50% by cutting out passages that were redundant or tangential to the research questions. I used ellipses to indicate where I omitted text between paragraphs. I put the remaining passages together in a single transcript for each individual participant. These first draft profiles became the basis from which I crafted the final portraits.

Crafting the Profiles

Although there are many ways to share interview data (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002), Seidman (2013) argues for the creation of participant profiles, or portraits, as a way to open up the data for analysis and interpretation. My rationale for presenting my interview data this way is
fourfold. First, we interview as a way to qualitatively understand an experience from a first person point of view. By retelling an experience using the words of a participant we are privileging their voices by staying as close as possible to our source of information. In addition, as Mischler (1986) notes, the research interview is an event during which participants relate their experiences. Therefore, I believe that portraits, using the words of each participant, are the most consistent with the process of interviewing (Seidman, 2013). Second, the crafting of portraits presents each participant in context, preserving the sequence and wealth of detail of each experience and conveying a sense of time and place (Riessman, 2008). This allows for connections to be made between the participants’ thoughts, beliefs, and actions, and for each participant to have the space to clarify his or her intentions (Seidman, 2013). Third, portraits relate the experience of the phenomenon as a story. Stories are a primary way that humans have of making sense of themselves and their world (Mischler, 1986). Further, the presentation of interview data as stories provides “a coherence in the constitutive elements” of an experience, and it “links the individual’s experience to the social and organizational context within which he or she operates” (Seidman, 2013, p. 123). And finally, the crafting of individual portraits is case centered (Riessman, 2008). Approaching the data as three individual portraits, or cases, will “reveal the essential aspects of the phenomenon” across cases, which can lead to a deeper understanding of that phenomenon.

In crafting the final portraits from the first draft profiles, I tried to remain as faithful as possible to the words and storyline of my participants. Since the interviews followed the personal and professional life histories of my participants from childhood to present day experience of burnout, this how I presented the profiles. In shaping these portraits, I occasionally moved passages out of the chronological interview order in which they are otherwise presented in order
to increase clarity or cohesion within the profile. These modifications are not denoted in the text. I also made further editorial changes including omitting words or phrases within paragraphs that were redundant or unnecessary. This is indicated by ellipses. Further, I added or substituted words to smooth transitions between paragraphs or for clarification within paragraphs. These substitutions are indicated by the use of square brackets. The result of this work is three cohesive teacher profiles. At this point, I emailed the profiles to my participants to clarify and confirm the text for accuracy. Only one participant asked me to redact information; he believed one vignette of a particular teacher was identifiable. I removed this paragraph from his narrative.

After I received confirmation from my three participants, I further removed all biographical information from their profiles, including information about their philosophies of education and expectations for their students. This information formed the basis of the brief biographical sketches that I present in Chapter 4 as an introduction to each participant’s portrait.

Analysis of the Profiles

As Seidman (2013) explains, analysis of the portraits does not begin at the moment they are finalized. Rather analysis is an ongoing process that begins with our anticipation of the first round of interviews. Further, throughout the entire interview procedure the researcher is processing information in order to keep the interviews moving forward. Even winnowing down the interview data is an interpretive exercise (Riessman, 2008). But whereas in earlier stages the researcher must keep an open stance, once the portraits are complete, it is time to make explicit what the researcher learned about the phenomenon from each individual story by connecting those portraits to the experiences of others in the study (Seidman, 2013).

Here I relied on Axial coding (Saldana, 2009). I began with my earlier, preliminary labels and sought to establish categories and sub-categories. To do this, I looked for connective threads
through each individual portrait and across participants, focusing on properties and dimensions of the burnout experience. Categorical labels included general descriptive labels such as “workload” or “teaching persona” as well as specific words my participants used like “isolation” or “boundaries.” Additionally, since the goal of my study was to explore the relationship between burnout and teacher self-efficacy, I included the three dimensions of burnout and teacher self-efficacy beliefs as categories. Throughout this process, I continued to memo; writing and diagramming helped to clarify and extend relationships between categories and sub-categories (Saldana, 2009). As Saldana (2009) explains, “reflective analytic memo writing is both a code- and category-generating heuristic” (p. 160). The result of this work is a deeper understanding of the connection of burnout with teacher self-efficacy as experienced by my participants, all of which are presented in Chapter Five.

**Summary of the Methodology**

It is the storied nature of this research that attracts me to Seidman’s interview protocol. Life history, in-depth interviewing as a qualitative research method is a valuable tool for gathering information on the subjective experience of a phenomenon for particular individuals (Atkinson, 2002). I believe it is important when trying to understand other people’s perspectives to let them tell their own stories in their own voices as a valuable means to understand how they perceive their own experiences. Moreover, by placing their experiences of burnout within the context of their life histories, participants are able to organize, interpret, and make meaning of their experiences, while maintaining a sense of continuity between past events and the present (Atkinson, 2002). Thus, on the one hand, the end result of in-depth interviewing is a portrait particular to the individual experience of the participant. On the other hand, this is always in
tension with the researcher’s attempt to derive essential themes or features, of experiences of several members of a group (Simpson, 2007). As Schram (2006) reminds us, we are not merely describing the “idiosyncratic perspective” or “subjective opinion” about an experience or its meaning (p. 99). Rather the goal is to uncover the fundamental meaning about the phenomenon under study “no matter which specific individual has had it” (p. 99).

Additionally, Seidman (2103) advises that although the researcher may uncover and propose connections among events, structures, roles, and social forces operating in individuals’ lives, the portraits we shape from individual lives are necessarily limited (p. 131). They are but one snapshot of the individual experience under study; individual lives and understanding of those lives continues beyond the scope of a research project (p. 131). Furthermore, the resulting portraits are a function of a particular researcher’s interpretation (p. 131). It is not inconceivable that different researchers would uncover different stories. Therefore, although life history interviewing derives essential themes, its findings remain particular to the particular individuals who experienced the phenomena under study in that specific moment in time.

**Limitations of Life History Research**

Validity, reliability, and generalizability nested within an empirical assumption of objectivity, have long been the hallmarks of scientific research (Seidman, 2013). Although life history, in-depth interviewing is scientific in the sense that it is a systematic, explicit, and self-critical study of the subjective experience of a phenomenon (van Manen, 1990), it nonetheless is criticized for producing research that is not valid, reliable, and generalizable (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013), an oft-heard criticism of qualitative research in general (Morse, Barrett, Mayan,
Olson, & Spiers, 2002). In this section, I will briefly discuss first validity and reliability and then generalizability as they apply to this study.

**Validity and Reliability**

According to Eisner (1991), a good qualitative study helps us “understand a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic” (p. 58). Patton (2001) argues that validity and reliability are two factors that qualitative researchers need to be concerned about when designing a study. Traditionally, validity in qualitative research has depended upon the degree to which the findings reflect a one-to-one correspondence with reality (Cho & Trent, 2006) whereas reliability refers to the extent to which the findings are “dependable” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, Lincoln & Guba (1985) also contend that researchers must attend to the credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the findings (Cho & Trent, 2006). Several researchers suggest employing strategies such as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), bracketing (Moustakas, 1994), and triangulation (Denzin, 2000). In all of these processes, the assumption is that techniques or methods can be employed “by which misunderstandings can be adjusted and fixed” (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 322), and a useful measure of quality can be guaranteed (Rolfe, 2006).

Sandelowski (1993) argued that these views are too positivistic for qualitative research, as they rely on an outmoded assumption that there exists unchanging phenomenon such that it can be member-checked, triangulated, and replicated (Cho & Trent, 2006; Rolfe, 2006). Instead Sandelowski suggests that qualitative research should be linked to Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) notion of trustworthiness rather than truth and value. Moreover, Stenbacka (2001) argues that reliability, which is related to issues of measurement, is irrelevant in qualitative research.
(Golafshani, 2003). And Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that since there is no validity without reliability, a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the latter.

In rejecting the idea of reliability or dependability, Sandelowski is acknowledging that researchers’ construction of realities are inevitably reconstructions and interpretations (Cho & Trent, 2006). Neither the researcher nor the participant has direct access to the past; instead, the past is filtered through and reinterpreted from the present (Rolfe, 2006). We should not expect the researcher, participant, or outside experts to arrive at the same themes and categories (Rolfe, 2006). Further, claims made by participants are always subject to possible revision by new evidence, either on the part of the participant or the researcher (Cho & Trent, 2006). What this means for this study is that my participants’ stories of their personal and professional life histories are filtered through their current states of burnout. Thus, their interpretation of the past is different than if I had interviewed them earlier – either pre-burnout or during earlier iterations of burnout; any causal links in their stories are formed by their state of being burned out.

Therefore, it is imperative that we signify their stories as portraits rendered in a specific moment in time and reflecting a temporal understanding of their experiences.

Cho and Trent (2006) present a holistic view of validity in qualitative research, suggesting that the purpose of the qualitative research ought to be linked to both strategies and criteria to ensure space for a “flexible, useful, and integrated theory of validity supported by a broad array of qualitative researchers” (p. 325). According to their schema, I present my participants in context, using descriptive data that reflects their understandings of daily life and the phenomenon under study. My data was triangulated to the extent that it was collected from three different participants at three different points in time. The same questions were asked multiple ways to confirm, deny, and clarify my understandings of their interpretations. And, as
discussed earlier, final portraits were member checked with the participants and given to outside readers to check for clarity and coherence.

**Generalizability**

In a multicase study with a sample size of three participants, generalizability of the findings is restricted. Even though these cases were deliberately chosen to represent a range of NH middle-school contexts: rural, suburban, and urban, it is not credible to assume that each participant’s narrative is representative of all teachers teaching in similar environments (Stake, 2006). As a result, a cross-case analysis is not appropriate (Stake, 2006). However, the advantage of doing a small, multicase study is that it allows for thick, rich description of the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2003). Thus, it was my intent to demonstrate the complexity of burnout as experienced across particular settings.

One way to challenge the criticism that qualitative research is not generalizable to settings not examined (Firestone, 1993), is to think about generalizability in terms of analytic generalizing. According to Yin (2003), “in analytic generalization, the investigator is striving to generalize a particular set of results to a broader theory” (p. 39). In order to do this, the researcher presents evidence that supports, but not necessarily proves a theory (Firestone, 1993). Yin (2003) explains that the investigator first begins with a theory, selects her cases based on that theory, and then generalizes the set of results to extend the theory. For example, in the context of this study, I began with the cognitive theory of burnout, identified three individuals currently experiencing burnout, and used the end results of my study to extend the understanding of burnout and its relationship to teacher self-efficacy. Specifically, I describe and expand upon
the relationship between personal accomplishment and teacher self-efficacy. In this sense, my study is generalizable.

**Researcher Positionality**

Much of the research around establishing criteria for doing good qualitative research is concerned with controlling for its subjective nature (Seale, 1999; Sandelowski, 1993; Maxwell, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The answer seems to reside in making the process visible and open to the scrutiny of the reader to decide the merits of the findings (Seale, 1999; Sandelowski, 1993; Maxwell, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Seidman (2013) also reminds us that we need to recognize “the role of the instrument, the human interviewer” (p. 26). The researcher is part of the interpretive process as she “works through the material, selects from it, describes it, and analyzes it” (p. 26). Peshkin (1988) discusses this in terms of the multiple I positions, or personal qualities that the researcher brings to her work. These qualities have the “capacity to filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and misconstrue what transpires from the outset of a research project to its culmination in a written statement” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). Malterud (2001) sees this in terms of the researcher’s position to the research, which will “affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions” (p. 483-484). Therefore, in addition to external checks for validity, it is important that all researchers reflexively attend to their positionality in regards to their research as they develop, analyze, and discuss their findings. As discussed above, I used integrative memos to record not only methodological decisions and logistics, but to also note places where I felt my values, interests, and emotions were rubbing against the research process. Moreover, before closing this chapter
and transitioning into the teacher portraits as proffered by my participants, I offer this researcher positionality statement by way of fully acknowledging my views, values, and beliefs in relation to my research.

**Positionality Statement**

I began this dissertation project by discussing my personal experience with burnout. I felt and experienced the exhaustion and depersonalization that is noted in the educational psychology research (Maslach & Leiter, 2001). As a high school English teacher, my performance was monitored and scrutinized on a regular basis through yearly state-mandated testing; local, computer-based performance tracing of my students’ reading achievement three times per year; and the reporting out to administration of my students’ results on common assessments. In addition, I regularly found my workload intensified to support the infrastructure needed to administer and analyze assessments, and to revise curriculum in response to the results. All of this pulled me away from the classroom and the work I loved to do with students. However, as mentioned earlier, it was the lack of acknowledgement, or the felt sense that what I was doing did not matter, that drove me out of K12 teaching.

Much of my time as a graduate student at the University of New Hampshire has been spent trying to sort out and make sense of these experiences; hence the subject of burnout for this dissertation. Even though I am not looking for validation from my participants of my experiences, I nevertheless acknowledge that I bring to this work a set of assumptions that teachers experiencing burnout do so for similar reasons. As such, I approached this project reflexively attuned for ways in which I found echoes of my story in those of my participants. I foregrounded this awareness throughout the research process from my selection of data to
present to its subsequent analysis; in particular, I noted in the memos where my participants’ stories differed from my own and used these moments to explore the meaning of such instances for my participants. I believe my ability to engage critically in light of personally held beliefs is supported by my participants’ own commitment to participate and reflect on their beliefs and experiences. This openness is reflected in their thoughts and words as conveyed to me. It is to those stories that I turn to next in Chapter Four.
CHAPTER FOUR

TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES OF BURNOUT: LIFE HISTORIES AND PROFILES

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to deepen the exploration of burnout and teacher self-efficacy through a presentation of three middle school teachers’ firsthand accounts of their individual teaching contexts, their experiences of burnout, and their understanding of the relationship of burnout to their teacher self-efficacy beliefs. I have chosen to present their interview data in two ways: first, descriptively in my own words, and then as individual profiles, preserving participant voices with little editing in service of detailing the richness of their thoughts, perspectives, and experiences. Therefore, I have structured the chapter as follows: for each teacher I present a brief biographical sketch, highlighting each participant’s educational roots, their personal teacher journeys, and their beliefs about teaching. The purpose is to provide rich context. These introductions are then followed by each teacher profile.

As I have outlined in the methods chapter, these teacher portraits are presented chronologically, following the three interview structure that traces participants’ experiences from their earlier lives, through their experiences of burnout, and end with the meaning that each ascribes to the constructs under investigation here. I have included ellipsis where text is omitted within a paragraph and between paragraphs where significant amounts of text have been excluded. I also use parenthetical notation in places where I have changed words for clarification. In order to maintain the narrative flow of the portrait, I have moved some interview
data together in order to complement or deepen the insights each is proffering; these adjustments are not denoted in the text.

To explore the experiences of burnout and its relationship to teacher self-efficacy, I conducted in-depth interviews with three New Hampshire middle school teachers. As explained in Chapter 3, I located potential teacher participants through my participation with the University of New Hampshire’s Teacher Longitudinal Survey. On the survey, participants were asked to indicate whether they would be willing to talk to a UNH researcher about their experiences of teacher burnout. I initially prescreened each positive respondent to ensure that I was selecting only experienced middle school teachers from a variety of teaching contexts: urban, suburban, and rural. Then I sent out individual emails explaining the nature of this project and asking for participation. After multiple rounds of emails, Jason, Susan, and Sean agreed to meet individually with me for three – ninety minute interviews over the course of late Spring-Summer 2017.

The three teacher participants share some commonalities; of principle importance is that each is experiencing or has experienced burnout over the course of their teaching career. Each self-reported their burnout status to me via email, which was fact-checked by their responses on the Maslach Burnout Inventory as part of the Teacher Longitudinal Survey. In addition, all have been teaching in New Hampshire for many years, ranging from 14 to 30 years of middle school teaching experience. This is an important criterion for this project; as the research notes, burnout is a common experience for new teachers, and has been suggested as a reason that many leave the profession (Brown & Wynn, 2009). But the purpose of this investigation is to explore the narratives of teachers who experience burnout and remain in the classroom. All three teachers share demographic characteristics as well. They are all white and have graduate degrees in
education. Interestingly, each had an easy time learning as a child and has at least one parent who is a teacher, or who has taught in the past.

Worth highlighting are a couple of the dissimilarities. First, each participant teaches in a school context vastly different from the other two. Jason is a multi-aged 5th/6th grade teacher in a rural school of less than 100 students. Whereas the other two participants teach only one subject for multiple periods per day, Jason teaches all subjects to one, small group of students. In contrast, Susan is currently an 8th grade French teacher in a large, urban school with over 1,000 students. Her student load is over 125 students per year. And finally, Sean is an 8th grade social studies teacher in an affluent, suburban district, whose school contains approximately 450 students. As a result of this diversity, the burnout narratives that each shares emphasize different stressors, which impact their experiences of burnout. For example, Susan speaks vividly of “struggling…at-risk kids” who “won’t do their work because they just don’t want to do it”; whereas Jason talks about the curricular demands of having to teach every subject simultaneously to two grades and the “eight years [he spent] of never feeling like [he] had [his] rhythm”; while Sean has “hyper-involved parents,” “a data-driven school board,” and a “back-biting and fighting leadership team” to deal with.

Secondly, each teacher has significant personal issues, which complicate their narratives. Jason, as part of his burnout narrative, shares that he recently experienced the loss of a close family member and subsequently found himself clinically depressed “with days [he] just didn’t want to get out of bed.” Meanwhile Susan is juggling the competing demands of a spouse who also teaches and the “strain it puts on [their] marriage,” while Sean juggles the care of a “wife with significant medical issues” with the demands of answering emails and grading work in the evenings.
As expected, these contextual differences produce widely divergent profiles. But despite these differences, all three teachers speak eloquently about how burnout impacts the work that they do as teachers, and how it shapes their commitment to their students and their beliefs about teaching.

Jason Dumonte: 5th/6th Grade Teacher

Jason is a mid-career teacher in a small, rural school in New Hampshire. He grew up in a comfortable, middle-class home with two parents and an older brother. His mother was a teacher before switching careers to become a librarian. In Jason’s words:

School came pretty easily to me, so it wasn’t hard for me to do well. I didn’t mind going to school. I was kind of a goof ball – not a class clown – but I did enjoy slinging humor around. …[And] socially everything was easy for me. A couple of typical bumps along the way, but nothing like [school] was a place I didn’t want to be. …Middle school was not atrocious for me the way it can be for some people. …I think [it] was a lot of fun. High school – same thing.

Jason became a teacher via a traditional route. After a successful high school experience, Jason attended Amherst College, and it was while working at various camps during the summers that he decided to become a teacher. He “just enjoyed being around kids,” and he thought they responded well to his engaging sense of humor. However, Amherst didn’t have an education program, so he enrolled in the University of New Hampshire’s Teacher Preparation Program immediately after graduation and received his Master’s degree in Elementary Education. Although he appreciated the required, year-long internship, Jason’s relationship with his cooperating teacher (CT) was weak. His CT, “most likely burned out himself,” was “not the best resource or student teacher role model.” Jason was given the reins to teach, but he feels that “had [his CT] been someone different, [he] would have built a better set of tools” than what he
graduated with. Jason cites this lack of “tools” as a significant contributor to his feelings of burnout later in his career.

After the internship, Jason got a 6th grade position teaching in a K-6 grade elementary school in a small town in New Hampshire, where he is still teaching approximately 20 years later. His school is part of a much larger district; kids from several towns come together for grades 7-12, but his school is extremely small. When Jason first started teaching, there was only one class per grade, with an average of 10-15 students per class. He shares:

[it was] a really unique and fortunate situation that [I found myself in.] …There were going to be 13 students in my first class. They were hardworking kids from homes that supported education. It really was a very positive place to step into…not that many opportunities like that around. …So my first nine years here, that was what I had. And for the most part it went very well. I enjoyed it.

Jason had a lot of confidence his first year of teaching. Reflecting back, he recognizes that his teaching methods were “not super strong,” but at the time he felt proud of what he was doing. The other benefit that he had was the fact that he wasn’t married and didn’t have any kids. He was able “to give [his] job an incredible amount of time, often staying at work until 7, 8, 9, or sometimes 10 p.m. at night.” However, he didn’t begrudge the time he was spending; he liked developing lesson plans, honing his skills as a teacher, and engaging his students. He realizes that if he had had kids or been married, then teaching would have been hard to balance during his first years. Now, as an experienced educator, he knows “where to apply the time and where to back off and let things happen with less prep.”

Jason also developed a well-articulated philosophy of education. In his words, “I am a Vygotskian,” and he believes that students work best in social environments, “working with each other, problem-solving together, modeling for each other, and bouncing ideas off of each other.” Jason attributes part of his teaching philosophy to formative experiences he had with his own
teachers while still a student. Specifically, he mentions his 6th grade teacher who believed in active learning. Whether it was writing scripts and putting on plays for parents or visiting Cardigan Mountain for an overnight trip, Jason remembers his teacher’s ability to push them “hard to work academically for a while,” and then to have fun. This is the balance Jason strives for in his own classroom. He also found the times when they left the school building to be the most memorable ones, so Jason weaves field trips into his curriculum, including overnight excursions to Camp Merrowvista and Washington D.C.

Academically, Jason has very high expectations for his students. However, he emphasizes the process over the product. He believes it is the thinking behind the creation that is the most important aspect of learning. As he explained, this is especially important for his students as they get ready to leave their small community and enter a much larger, educational environment in 7th grade. Therefore, Jason tries to teach his students to have confidence, to trust where they think they should go, and to carve their own paths about things they are excited about and want to pursue. As a result, Jason’s curriculum is highly differentiated and includes a lot of student choice, which is evident in the vast array of student projects scattered throughout his classroom.

Jason typically has a good rapport with his students. He loves the middle school age and enjoys their developing senses of humor. Therefore, he uses a lot of humor in his teaching; he’s “not at all shy to crack jokes and let students crack jokes back.” He believes it is that “gentle back and forth, keeping things light and humorous,” that is one of the biggest hallmarks in his teaching. Just like his own 6th grade teacher, he likes to work his students hard, and then play some more.

After about 9 years teaching in his current district, Jason’s school began to experience declining enrollment, which threatened the idyllic organization of the school. Both financial
constraints and feelings of unfairness from those teaching in the larger schools in the district, pressured Jason’s administration to rework the way grades and classes were structured. As Jason notes, “the writing was on the wall…[we] needed to find some way to make [our] school bigger or [our] staff smaller.” It was then that the school decided to move from a single class per grade to a multi-age model. Instead of teaching 6th grade to 10-12 students, Jason found himself leading a class of 20-24, 5th and 6th graders. At first, Jason was enthusiastic about what he saw as a “pretty good solution.” It made sense to “get rid of some of the age barriers and focus more on student skills and things. Doing some grouping based on readiness…makes a lot of sense philosophically.” However, as Jason discovered, the reality of teaching multiple grades “is just not always real easy.” In his words:

It’s hard to develop a rhythm in a multi-age environment. You’ve got a wider range [of abilities]. …You have to be a pro [and] to really be committed. …You have to get creative…[and] not have a lot of other distractions in your life.

Jason believes that a substantial curricular and pedagogical transition, like the move to multi-age teaching, requires the intellectual work of faculty to learn about and develop new best practices. To do this successfully takes time and professional dedication.

However, it was during this time of professional transition that Jason married and started his family. The extensive care and attention a newborn needs and the subsequent exhaustion left Jason with fewer hours and less energy to devote to his teaching at a time when the demands of his job were increasing. As a result:

I found myself kind of trudging my way through it. Some years were great. I definitely felt like I had some years where things clicked really well, the right dynamics with kids. And some years were just a struggle; I just didn’t feel like the effective teacher I had been the first nine years of my life. Which then can be a self-fulfilling prophecy of feeling like, “Well, why bother to do the best job that I can? Because even when I have everything organized and put together, something is going to throw it off.” It was really hard.
At the same time that Jason was experiencing the stress of balancing the new demands of fatherhood with the competing challenges of teaching a multi-age class, his district began to enact a series of initiatives that complicated matters. The pressure to successfully implement new accountability programs quickly “became so daunting and so overwhelming,” that Jason began to experience feelings of “failure,” and “all he could see was what he wasn’t doing well.”

At this time, the aspect of his job that Jason struggled with the most was differentiating and teaching language arts to a diverse group of student ability levels. He “never felt like [he] was good at planning for and executing and evaluating and assessing and keeping track” of his students’ progress. He doesn’t believe that his “CT from UNH was very good at teaching reading and writing, so [he] never got that.” As a result, he really didn’t know how to teach reading and writing the way his district would like it to be taught. And the “guilt” that that he might not be meeting the needs of all of his students, whom he had for two years in a row, “ate away at [him], big time.”

As a result, Jason found that “without question, for a number of years…the [exhaustion] got worse as time went on.” There were many days that he felt that he was “constantly putting out fires and [feeling] like [he] wasn’t doing a great job,” which physically exhausted him so much that he eventually stopped putting the time in at home and on the weekends to be prepared to teach. Jason began to wonder if he should even be teaching, but in the rural community in which he lives, “there aren’t necessarily a lot of other jobs. …[And] it gets harder and harder to find a job that matches the salary.”

Instead of leaving the profession, Jason began to think of ways to improve his teaching. “The narrative in [his] head was “if [he] could redo [his] student teaching again and be with some rock star language arts teacher and just absorb all year long…maybe then [he’d] be able to
“...and be a successful multi-age teacher. So he planned out a sabbatical year during which he would combine graduate work in language arts with observations of teachers in action. Professionally, the year provided a much needed respite for Jason, and by the following September, he returned to his classroom rested and energized to teach. However, current reality of his teaching environment had not changed; Jason walked back into his classroom facing the same issues he had left behind for a year. In addition, his sister-in-law, with whom he was close, passed away the second week of school. As a result, Jason spiraled straight into the worst year of burnout of his professional career.

When I met Jason, it was over a year and a half after these events, and Jason is no longer burned out. The year following his sister-in-law’s death, Jason’s burnout developed into clinical depression, and Jason finally felt compelled to seek professional help. It took another several months of clinical treatment, including counseling and medication, for Jason to recover his mental and emotional equilibrium and to rediscover his purpose in teaching. Meanwhile, Jason’s school underwent another restructuring, and Jason is again teaching a stand-alone 6th grade class of 12 students, which has relieved much of the stress he felt teaching in a multi-age class. In Jason’s words:

[Two years] ago, when I was burned out, there wasn’t a whole lot of creativity. ...I wasn’t teaching well. ...My ability to have that friendly, witty rapport with students had evaporated. And I wasn’t loving what I was doing, so for a time [I] was not the person I used to be as a teacher. I was going through the motions. Wanting to figure out how to break out of that, but not finding a successful way to do it. ...[This past year] was a really interesting year because these 6th graders had me as their 5th grade teacher. And they’re able to say that there’s a lot of things that have happened in my life that have changed that have enabled me to do a better job as a teacher. ... It’s been the kind of year I remember having earlier in my career.

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I met with Jason three times over the course of four weeks during the months of May and June 2017. Upon his request, I travelled to his school for all three interviews. The school, red-bricked and nestled in an historic town of white-clad colonial homes, surrounded by rolling fields with the mountains off in the distance, could have been located anywhere in rural New England. I was momentarily surprised when, upon entering through the front doors, the secretary seemed to be expecting me. Introducing herself by her first name, she led me down the main hall to Jason’s classroom where she let slip that the entire school knew I was “the researcher from UNH” who had come to talk to Jason about being burned out. She was also quick to let me know that everyone had been very worried about him the previous year, but that he seems much happier now. It was clear that Jason’s school is a tight-knit community, and he is held in high-esteem by his colleagues.

Jason’s classroom is large and bright with windows the length of two walls, underneath which are shelves overflowing with books and other school supplies. A third wall holds cubbies and hooks; the fourth wall is taken up by a chalkboard, in front of which is a demonstration table complete with a sink and gas outlet for a Bunsen burner. Desks are arranged in groups, and scattered throughout the room are dozens of student projects in various stages of completion, including a life-sized replica of an alligator, and student work covers any remaining wall space. It is clearly a classroom where active learning happens on a daily basis.

As our conversation unfolded, Jason presented himself as a thoughtful, student-centered practitioner, who cares deeply for his students. He was open and frank about his experiences with burnout, and several times I recognized myself in his experiences; it was frequently difficult to “bracket” myself from his story. The narrative that follows begins with Jason’s first years as a
multi-age 5th and 6th grade teacher, describes his experiences of burnout, and concludes with his understandings and interpretations of these experiences.

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Jason’s Portrait

[After about nine years of working in this district, we began to experience] declining enrollment. And the writing was on the wall…[we] needed to find some way to make [our] school bigger or [our] staff smaller. And we came up with a pretty good solution; it was to learn about, embrace, and enact the multi-age environment…Getting rid of some of the age barriers and focusing more on just student skills and things and doing some grouping based on readiness in that regard makes a lot of sense philosophically, but it’s just not always real easy…

[So I began teaching a multiage class of 5th and 6th graders.] From an academic planning point of view, I would try to take a positive spin on things and say, “Well, it’s not a whole lot of fun to teach the same thing every single year. So it’s kind of exciting to be able to switch things up… And, well, I guess I still sort of believe that; that it’s kind of nice to take a break from things and come back to it. [But] it’s hard to develop a rhythm in a multi-age environment. And you’ve got a wide range [of abilities…You have to be a pro [and] to really be committed…You have to get creative…[and] not have a lot of other distractions in your life.

At the same time [that the school made this transition,] my wife and I were starting our family; my son was born that fall. I was exhausted… So that [first multi-age] class had to experience a substitute teacher stepping into that role for eight weeks. That was kind of a mess…
[Overall] there were definitely rough stretches and things, and [times] things…would go smoothly. And I didn’t feel like I was a super successful teacher, even though my wife would always remind me, “Is your community telling you you’re not doing your job well? Is your principal telling you you’re not doing your job well?” “No, they’re not, but I know I’m not.” And so you’re your own biggest critic.

[And I found myself] kind of trudging my way through it…Eight years of never feeling like I really had my rhythm, wanting to do well by the multi-age model, but not sure that I was truly pulling it off…And I don’t know that I knew I was burning out as I was burning out…because sometimes as a teacher you just suck it up and go. You don’t spend a whole lot of time advocating for yourself because you feel you’re coming across as a whiner or something like that…

When my wife and I were first married and we didn’t have kids, I felt like I was a really good teacher. I hit home runs a lot of the time, and Melanie would sometimes come into school with me on the weekends…or I’d come home at the end of the day and tell her about my day at school…[But] then, you know, other parts of life complicate it and make it difficult to do the same amazing level of commitment that you could…[And] as we had kids of our own…[we were] that much more tired…And a part of it might be that the multi-age was that much harder…and larger…But I was struggling that much more…
So I think I started talking less [at home] about what my classroom was like or my day was like. … I felt like the things that were on my mind when I came home weren’t successes, they were failures. And if I just started talking about them, it was either to vent or to look for sympathy…There are probably years where [my wife] couldn’t even name five of my students. …So then it’s stressful because…we’re losing communication that we would have had. Plus we’re trying to raise kids at the same time;…whatever conversational space we have is about our own family…

[And this move to multi-age classrooms] was in the heyday of No Child Left Behind…And so you’ve got all this data coming at you. And you kind of live and die by the sword. You get all excited when your test scores are strong, and you get all depressed when the test scores are bad. And you’re really not sure why they’re good one year and bad the next…But when you’re the only [teacher for two grade levels],…you literally go to a staff meeting and the principal will be like, “Hey, you’re awesome. What an example you are of what good teaching looks like.” And then two years later it might be like, “You need to get your act together because this does not look good. We’re lucky we’re under the radar because we’re so small.” But it really didn’t have a whole lot to do with my teaching from one year to the next…

And…[another] piece [about] being in this school is that it’s small. You don’t have another [grade level] teacher to go to and be like, “Hey, I cannot figure out how to do this. What do you do for this?” or “Do you have any good ideas for a writing project right now? Because I feel like I’m just treading water and the kids aren’t engaged.”…Here you’re kind of your own island…
Because we’re a small school, we don’t have… Title I and [other] supports in place [as do the larger schools in our district], yet at the same time you’re still expected to do all of the things, document everything the same way that they are down there because they’re going to dictate what assessments we use, what programs we are using. So some [initiatives] lend themselves better to single grades with full time interventionists who are in the building. We don’t have any of that, so we’re kind of an island up here…

But we go to the [district] professional development meetings, and the [district] says, “We’re all gonna do this. This is how it’s meant to be done, this is what you have to do… We’re all gonna be jumping through these same hoops because we know it’s good for kids…

One of the best things they do [at professional development meetings] is… to have another colleague show how he or she does it in their classroom. And you’re like, “Ah, wow. This person is amazing. I need to do that in my classroom.” But they’re doing that with language arts, and this other person is doing this in math. This person is doing this with social studies. And you’re saying, “I need to take what she does and what he does and put it all into my room.” … You start thinking you’re supposed to be the “every person” that you’re supposed to be the best of everything that there is. You just keep hearing that all the time as a teacher. You’re supposed to want to duplicate the best of everything you’ve ever seen. And that’s a big expectation to live up to.

[In addition, the district needs to respond to the] hoops set up by the state and the federal government. So, you know, moving to competencies right now is like a top-down push. So our
district can’t not make that initiative, an initiative. It needs to be what we’re working on right now, but we’ve had to ditch some other things that we started working on a couple of years ago in order to make some time and space for that...[And it’s] kind of a survival skill to say, how much of my time and energy should I really put into this? Because is it really something we’re gonna hold onto? And is it really gonna give us the bang for the buck that we’re being asked to spend?

[The result is] all these [initiatives] that we’ve set out as a district, these programs that we’re trying to implement, things that we’re supposed to be doing...It’s so daunting and so overwhelming...and my school district acted like we were all doing [them]. I’m not doing them all...Yet no one cares, no one is paying attention, but if they really ask me if I’m doing my job, that answer is “no,” according to what I’ve been told to do. Then I feel like a fraud...

So [I tried to] find that happy medium, to remind myself what [I was] doing well and to recognize that not everybody is probably doing that...To find part that [I could] be proud of, I guess, is the best way to survive it, but when you’re in the thick of feeling like a failure, all you can see, all I could see was what I wasn’t doing...

And when you have...kids for two years in a row, then you start taking all that stuff that much more seriously. If I’m not going to be good at one [particular part of the curriculum] where are they getting it from? Nowhere. Now they’ve gone two years with none of that, or a very bad version of that...It’s just a hard place to feel like you are not meeting the academic needs of all
of your students…If you’re honest with yourself and honest with your administrators about what you are actually doing during the day, you kind of feel like a failure…

And then you feel guilty. You feel like, Oh my gosh, if they had a different teacher next year who could fill in that gap, maybe we’d be okay.” So, while it’s wonderful to be able to stay with kids for two years in a row and really get to know them well and know their strengths and weaknesses and build off that, if you aren’t able to change the part that isn’t working for that kid, now you carry the weight…And that ate away at me, big time.

Without question, for a number of years I do think the [exhaustion] got worse as time went on. You know, sometimes you have a good class…so you weren’t dealing with the headaches or managing a classroom interpersonally… But…[other times] you’re constantly putting out fires and you feel like you’re not doing a great job where [a previous teacher] did, … [So] you just go home and you’re bushed and that made it harder to feel like you wanted to put in the time at home to be ready for the next day…

And I stopped going to school on Sundays…It was almost like a visceral feeling of, “I don’t want to go to my classroom. It’s not a place that I’m proud of or feeling great about, so why would I spend three hours there on Sunday?” And then the Sunday syndrome feeling sets in really deep, “Monday is going to stink. Not only do I not want to go back, but I’m not ready to go back. And if ideally we had a fun weekend,…[then it’s] 36-ish hours of stress-free living, followed by “Oh, we’re going to do this again for five days?”…
I can think of a year [when] I had already started wondering, “Should I still be teaching?”… But [I] had these young kids; childcare costs a lot of money, planning for college, all that kind of stuff. And I thought, “I just can’t quit. I need to figure something out.” …But in New Hampshire, there aren’t necessarily a lot of other jobs. Especially the longer you’ve been teaching, the more money you’re making, which is wonderful. But it gets harder and harder to find a job that matches that salary…

[Then] there was a student, who in second grade, [had] behaviors…that were really difficult to deal with. And you saw it coming. Second grade was hard for him. Third grade wasn’t any easier… [When] he got to my grade, the first couple weeks went pretty well…Then things got dark and…we just didn’t know how to handle him, and we didn’t have the resources…It was awful to watch him struggle so much. It was awful to feel like the majority of your energy was being absorbed by this one individual when you had 19 others who also wanted your attention and needed your help. And it was tough to watch the rest of the kids suffer in this situation. Two years are a really long time…The second year of that experience was a big part of the year that I said I needed to quit…The emotional burnout was super strong…[and] pushed me to the point where I wasn’t sure that I wanted to teach anymore. Or maybe I wasn’t sure that I wanted to be a classroom teacher anymore; I still wasn’t really ready to walk away from education all together.

The thing I was having the hardest time with actually was language arts…I never felt like I was good at planning for and executing and evaluating and assessing and keeping track of where we had to go next…I don’t think my collaborating teacher from UNH was very good at teaching reading and writing, so I never got that. And, while I enjoy reading, I don’t really write for
entertainment myself; …I’m not a creative writer by nature…I think [kids this age] know how to write; …they can write volumes… [So it’s [about] knowing how to harness [their writing without] stifling their creativity, but at the same time not to let them just create 27 pages of randomness…I really didn’t know how [to do this].

The narrative that was in my head was, “If I could redo my student teaching again and be with some rock star language arts teacher and just absorb all year long…maybe then I’d be able to come back here and hit home runs…And so I…[planned my] sabbatical…I was going to take four graduate classes, all based on some targeted language arts instruction…And I was going to go and observe teachers who are good language arts teachers around the state…

[The year was] heavenly…But I knew I was coming back to the exact same thing I walked away from… [So] I had this [two-year plan] for all the things I learned [and] how I could implement them…And [then in September] my sister-in-law passed away…That’s how I started that year.

My wife and I have a really good marriage, [but] it was definitely stressed last year…She was grieving. My kids were grieving. I was grieving, and it was hard. It was like, “What’s going on?”…

Meanwhile…I just tailspinned myself right back into this classroom that has been really hard for me. [After my sabbatical,] I should have known exactly what to do to teach language arts. That shouldn’t have been stressful anymore, but it wasn’t perfect. I was doing some things well, some things differently, but still falling back to some of the same old stuff I’d done before that I knew
wasn’t what I wanted to be doing, partly out of survival and partly out of being like, “I’m exhausted and I can’t plan this new great thing that I have that I think could work. It’s not going to happen. What do I still have in the hard drive?”…

[For me,] emotional [and physical] exhaustion was the first thing that I started feeling…

Physically, the biggest thing for me was sleep. I didn’t have a real problem falling asleep; I had a problem staying asleep…I would go to bed around 10:30, wake up often at 12:30 or 1:00 in the morning, and I could physically feel my brain ramping up into this worried state,…[school issues] and personal issues coming together to cause stress or whatever. But it literally felt like a physical reaction, a physical event in my brain. And there was no way I was falling back to sleep; it just wasn’t going to happen. But yet the alarm goes off, and I have to go teach.

And there were some times where I’d feel a ringing in my ears, a tingling through my scalp. I’d look at what I’m doing in front of me, but I can’t see my own hands. I’m going through the motions, but I’m not really paying attention to what my family’s voices are around me. Kids are talking about their day; people are checking in with me, like, “You know we got this this afternoon?” “Yeah, yeah, I got it.” But I’m a shell. I’m an organized, smart enough, committed enough human being that I’m still pulling it off…[But] it was basically me just trying to find a way to make sure that everything can’t go off the rails. And then, as far as preparing for those days, I’d sometimes stay up really late preparing for the next day or for that week or that next stretch of time ahead of me, but not efficiently, not effectively. And so I’d go to bed late, not get that much sleep, be that worse off the next day.
And that’s that spiral of now you’re tired and now you’re not teaching as well the next day and now you’re snapping at your family when thing aren’t going well at [school or] at home. And then you’re asking yourself, “What kind of parent am I being? What kind of teacher am I being? What kind of husband am I being?”

[The second] big piece [of burnout], for me, was the lack of being good at my job. [Because] when I was feeling burned out, I was less prepared. I walked into the building knowing that I was not fully prepared for the day. And then inevitably things started to unwrap. If you don’t really know where your day is going perfectly, it’s tough to have a good day…When kids see the day starting to not click, obviously they’re less engaged and more likely to entertain themselves by…just screwing around. And so then I found myself slipping more into authoritarian mode in an attempt to regain control and hope that we can just get through the next whatever amount of time or to the end of the day…

When I was really exhausted, I’m sure I wasn’t that articulate…And I didn’t have a good ability to listen well to students when I was in my really roughest place…I remember times last year for sure seeing their faces being like, “This is not helping at all.” And in my own mind, as I’m talking, thinking, “Are you even doing a good job of teaching right now? You’re not. These kids don’t understand this and you cannot help them understand it any better…
And then you end up in that terrible spiral of feeling like you’re not doing a good job, knowing that you have the responsibility, not sleeping well, not able to do a good job, knowing that you’re not doing a good job, not sleeping well. And…it gets worse and worse and worse…

So then the third piece of burnout is when you throw your hands up in the air and say, “Why bother?” … I mean I even remember telling myself at times…you come out of college, you feel like, “Hey I want to be the best teacher you can be, right? That’s the goal; you didn’t sign up to be mediocre. You signed up because you wanted to be really good. And whatever experiences you’ve had in life have told you that you have potential to be a strong teacher, you think you’re going to be great…And so, yeah, I would say disengagement, depersonalization are probably the outcomes of the [exhaustion and feeling like a failure].

And I had moments where I would…know that I wasn’t engaged in that moment; I wasn’t paying attention to what I was doing… [At times,] some kid would try to talk to me about what they were doing work-wise, [or] read me a story that I’m trying to help them revise, and I could barely comprehend what they were talking about, my own brain was feeling like it wasn’t 100% there. And then I would suggest something and they were like, “What? No.” It’s kind of like a “Why am I even sharing this with you?” kind of feeling.

[And there were days] I just didn’t want to get out of bed. It was like stepping into the day [knowing that it] was going to be a constant onslaught of disappointments to myself of not being a good teacher, not being a good dad. Not that I was terrible at these things; I was still showing up. I was still at the baseball game, and…I wasn’t missing work…And so to have that feeling of,
“Okay, well, am I that teacher who is just collecting a paycheck?” …It’s not fair. You don’t feel like you’re doing a service. And you feel like a fraud and you feel like these kids don’t deserve that…

I remember sitting at a teacher’s room table barely able to process the conversation. I was so tired and so feeling frustrated, having Sunday syndrome about returning to the classroom after lunch…And that’s not good. If you’re wondering how you’re going to get through the next two hours, that’s not good at all. I could see feeling a little [reluctant] about April vacation at the end of the school year [when] you know it’s going to be busy…But if you’re worried about getting through the afternoon, that’s another tough place to be…

[And personally], I stopped exercising to speak of. I’ve always been pretty physically fit and a big runner and big hiker, but I pretty much stopped doing that…I wasn’t waking up and going running in the morning; I wasn’t looking forward to that kind of stuff. I didn’t ever become fully reclusive, like some people are depressed and don’t leave the house. I didn’t do that; I’m a pretty social person by nature, but I wasn’t engaged…I wasn’t loving [my favorite activities.] And I probably wasn’t a whole lot of fun to be around…

Mostly, [my sense of teacher self-efficacy] was really low….I remember a couple of different things. I remember hearing from the outside my own voice, and being like, “What the heck are you saying?” That’s where the sleep deprivation piece was huge, you know, marbles in my mouth, not even communicating well with other people and…being shocked by it but not having any way to deal with it…
I also remember, a number of times, I’d start some project thinking it might be interesting or it might keep us going for a while… And it was like I’d opened up some can of worms that I could never put the lid back on because I hadn’t really thought the whole thing through… [And because] I didn’t even know what I was doing the next week…it did not have a clear beginning, middle, and end, and so it was a colossal waste of time…It might have some good little pieces in it, but it wasn’t worth doing as a whole…

I think enough of the students were frustrated with the experience that they were having that…I didn’t have their full trust. I had lost [the ability to motivate them]. I might tell them what to do, but I didn’t really even believe they were going to do it, or care to do it, or try to do it.

For me, I was most critical of myself when I felt like I wasn’t teaching well…You see it on the faces of your students whether they’re engaged or not and that kind of hits you in the gut, too… Kids act out for a reason. If you have more behavior problems in your classroom, it’s often because they aren’t engaged… [And] sometimes kids disengage because they’re like, “Oh, I don’t feel good because I’m not understanding this and feeling the success that I want.”…

So, yeah, I struggled partly with engagement last year because some of the stuff I would come up with didn’t have good continuity. So even the kids are saying, “Where are we going with this?” …Seeing students disengaged can also be personally hurtful. What’s it like to be [in this classroom], like it stinks. And I kind of own that…
[And I wondered] “What am I doing? Why am I on this path?... If you’re not a good teacher, why be a teacher at all? There’s nothing worse than a bad teacher who keeps collecting a paycheck. That’s both in the media and in real life. You hear that story, and I was starting to feel like that’s the teacher I was becoming, or had become maybe is a better way to explain that. But it wasn’t the teacher I had always been. It wasn’t like I had been terrible from the start and never got the hint. I had been good for a long time, and then it slowly got worse, and then quickly got bad...And it’s the same sort of feeling [you have] when your administration has all these expectations and you’re not fulfilling them all. And even if they’re not paying attention, you’re still feeling guilty.

Last year was the most difficult year, so it had the biggest need for me to act. It was partly the most difficult year because of my sister-in-law’s death and the challenges my own son was having in school, but those gave me a more culturally acceptable reason to pursue help…People understand if you say, “Oh, my god, you know, this death in my family really rocked me. …But being really open and honest [about burnout], I think as a society we kind of don’t go there. Teachers, I think, are very often told, “Hey, you signed up for it, do it…There’s this sense that teachers become teachers because they want to give, give, give…

So I met with my doctor [in the early spring]…and filled out psychological surveys and [was told], “Yeah, you have clinical depression. You are depressed.” … My depression was partly spurned by the death in the family, partly spurned by being in a career that was exhausting and [in which] I wasn’t feeling successful…Teaching the multi-age group is so hard if you’re trying to do well that it beat me up…
It’s been one of the best things I’ve ever done because tons of people have come up to me and told me, “Good for you. Me, too.” Or “The same thing happened to my brother”…And I wouldn’t have known that all those other people were also struggling…if I hadn’t started sharing my story a little bit… [I have been] fortunate…in that I had a really strong therapeutic response to medication. [And] I had a good counselor with whom I made a good connection.

And this year,…[I’m not teaching a multi-age class, just 6th grade]. So, it’s funny having this conversation at this point, coming to the end of this year, but it’s been a different kind of year for me. It’s been the kind of year I remember having earlier in my career…

I feel that I know where my students are; I know what I need to do to…when I sit down to have a writing conference or something with a student, I know where we’re going, I know what I need to be working on. Do I need to pull a couple of kids together to work on a skill that they’re lacking? I have identified it. It’s not because I have some crazy system of checklists and things, but I just know my students much better academically than I was able to when I was [burned out]…

And, yeah,…I do feel like I’m able to teach well. You know, we’ve got a fun thing going. I’m kind of a storyteller, and I love connecting something we’re talking about in class to something I think will resonate with them…And when I’m at my best,…I feel like I’m actually teaching from my heart…And that’s happening a lot right now because I’m thinking more clearly. I have a better vision for where we’re going.
Susan McAllister: 8th Grade French Teacher

Although originally from Buffalo, New York, Susan has been living and teaching in New Hampshire for the past 14 years; she is currently employed in a large, urban middle school. Susan, the second of four children, grew up in a comfortable, upper-middle class home where education was highly valued, and Susan was encouraged to do well in school. Her mother was a teacher for 36 years, experienced burnout herself, and has been a source of support for Susan over the years. Her father began his career as a physics teacher before switching to computer engineering. However, he frequently told Susan “not to go into teaching. He said, ‘Don’t do it. It’s not worth it.” But despite his advice, Susan became a teacher and “knew the first week that [teaching] was a good fit.”

Her own educational experiences are best described as complicated. She attended public school through grade 8 and then went to a Catholic, all-girls high school. While she remembers the schoolwork being easy, she was also very lonely. Susan describes herself as “really bright,” which led to her academic success, but she wasn’t well-liked by her peers and shunned social situations such as lunch, Physical Education, and any classroom activities that required interaction with other students. She shared:

Very recently I’ve become upset realizing that there were clear signs that something was wrong with me, and no one did anything about it. Growing up, my world was black and white: I had trouble with gray…I couldn’t understand people very well, and…I learned to mimic in situations, how to make a certain face.

Although never officially diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum, Susan is confident that she has what might be termed as mild Asperger’s Syndrome. The experience of feeling different from others has impacted the work she does as a teacher; she designs her curriculum to make sure her classroom is inclusive for all learners. She also feels able to “connect with difficult”
students because she understands what it is like not to fit in. When questioned about whether or not she believes Asperger’s has contributed to her burnout, she replies in the negative. She feels that she has done a “tremendous amount of work” overcoming this deficit, and, indeed, Susan does not present as a person on the Autistic spectrum.

Upon graduating from high school, Susan went to the University of Connecticut where she studied to be a Graphic Designer. She also loved taking French classes, and after spending a semester in Paris, she had enough credits for a dual major in French. Following college graduation, Susan searched for jobs as a graphic designer but was unsuccessful. A friend told her that their former high school was looking for a French teacher; Susan applied and was hired. Once Susan realized how much she enjoyed teaching, she enrolled in a Master’s program at SUNY Buffalo in order to become a certified teacher; her plan was to switch to the public school system as soon as possible because of the substantial pay and benefits increase she would receive.

Although Susan found her content courses to be “practical and realistic,” she describes the rest of the graduate experience as “completely pointless.” As she explains, most of the courses were “highly theoretical” and never addressed the real world issues she currently faces daily in her classroom. In her words,

“They never covered, ‘What do you do if you’re in a room, and you have three ADHD students, and two oppositional defiant students, and three kids who are learning disabled, and one kid who’s kind of deaf, and two who don’t want to be there, and four girls who are really upset because their boyfriends all went out?’”

However, Susan does not directly cite the program’s weaknesses as a contributing factor to her burnout. Instead, this quote more accurately reflects the stress of the daily demands Susan encounters in her current school.
After Susan finished her program, she moved to New Hampshire to live close to a sister who had already relocated, and she has been teaching here ever since. As a French teacher, Susan has found job security to be a challenge. Due to declining enrollments and budget cuts, many NH districts are currently reducing the number of curricular programs, and French is often the first to go. As a result, Susan has had to change jobs frequently and estimates that her career in NH spans “six schools, five districts, 10 principals, and over 1200 students.” This has made it hard for Susan to establish both roots in a school community and curricular continuity. Susan began teaching at another school in her current district three years ago. However, that position was temporary and only renewed each year depending upon student enrollment in French, so when a permanent position opened up last year across town, Susan made the switch. She now teaches 8th grade French in a large, diverse middle school: 33% of the student population self-report as non-white and 50% of students receive free or reduced lunch.

Susan doesn’t “take teaching lightly.” She became a teacher because she wants to do it well. So when she lesson plans, she takes into consideration multiple factors: Bloom’s taxonomy, curriculum standards, her students’ current skill levels, styles of learning, IEPs and 504 Plans, what needs to be scaffolded, and possible distractions such as an approaching vacation, weather conditions, and other activities in the building. All of these factors affect how she plans for and designs her lessons. “And it’s exhausting!” The first ten years of her career, before she married, Susan estimates that she spent 2-4 hours every night and an additional 10+ hours on the weekends lesson planning and grading. However, now that she is married, she feels pressure to reduce her workload at home in order to spend time with her spouse.

Over the years, Susan has developed a strong philosophy of education. She believes all kids can learn, even those who struggle. She intentionally designs her classes to take into account
that “everybody’s a different kind of learner; they’re all coming from different places.” And although she acknowledges that she can’t make class “the way you want” all of the time, she can try to make it “the way you like things” some of the times, so there are ways for different students to buy in. She is also confident that she can reach all students, and describes herself as a “super hero” in the classroom. As long as a student is willing to work with her, she believes that she can help them learn anything.

As a result, Susan has strong relationships with her students. And, due to her own experiences, she feels that she connects “very, very well with struggling students, kids who don’t do well, kids who don’t get along in class, and kids who do not play school well.” This wasn’t true in the beginning when, as a new teacher, she felt the need to be the authoritative figure in the classroom and was “a lot more intimidating.” However, she is aware that she has mellowed because her students “are always on [her]. …They stop by and they visit and they want food and they want pencils and they want hugs.” Even though she doesn’t “do hugs,” it is clear from her descriptions that her students find her to be a compassionate, accessible adult in their building.

The struggle for Susan is that “every single one of [her] kids is needy” and demands a lot of emotional attention from her, and it’s “frustrating” and “exhausting.” She sometimes wishes she would return to being really strict and intimidating, but she recognizes that her current students don’t have many connections to positive adults and refuses to alienate them. As she states, “They need to like some adult, and they need to see adults who are professional so that they know that that’s out there. But really, does it have to be me?”

Despite her self-assurance, Susan admits that she is “less confident with [her] current population than in previous districts” and doesn’t feel truly prepared. She finds it difficult to understand her students’ backgrounds, the struggles that they may face at home, and how they
impact her students’ experiences in the classroom. She understands that it is not about her students not caring to learn French, but that there may be other things in their lives that take precedence over schoolwork. Taking this into account, Susan is rethinking instruction, curricular content, homework, and time frames, but “because [her] teacher program never taught [her] how people’s lives affect their learning, [she has] to do a lot of independent work on that.”

As a result, Susan has found that her expectations for her students have changed. She still expects that students will leave her class “being able to communicate in French better than they could when they started” and have “a better appreciation for the fact that not everyone in the world is like them.” However, whereas in the past she also required students to produce neat work, be organized, and show up with the assigned textbook and school supplies, she finds that these are completely unrealistic for her current student population. And, even though her students are expected to be well-behaved and do the prescribed work while in her classroom, many are apathetic about whether or not they will pass the class. Because she cares so much about her students and their futures, this causes a lot of stress for Susan. Even though she recognizes the fact that a teacher cannot make a student want to learn, she finds it “exhausting and frustrating” to watch her students make bad choices and not be able to control the outcome. “It wears [her] out” on a daily basis.

Susan describes herself as having been burned out for her entire professional career. As she explains, “[she] can’t imagine how to do good teaching without putting in a tremendous amount of time,” and no matter where one teaches, there are always going to be stressors: interactions with students, parents, and peers; “ridiculous time constraints”; and administrative demands, so it’s really about “learning how to cope with burnout...because it’s never going away.” However, Susan does acknowledge that her current position is even more demanding
than previous ones. In addition to an at-risk student population, Susan cites the lack of support she receives from colleagues and administrators as contributing factors to her burnout.

The other factor that Susan is currently dealing with is the reality of being married to another teacher. Both she and her husband are exhausted on a daily basis during the school year, which “puts a strain on [their] marriage.” However, whereas her husband has learned to balance the time commitments of work and family life, Susan sees her identities as wife and teacher to be in conflict with each other. In her words:

I’ve had to come to terms with disliking myself because I’m either going to dislike myself as a teacher that I’m not doing enough as a teacher, or I’m going to dislike myself as a wife because I’m not doing enough as a wife…And so I’m going to dislike myself either way. I have decided I care more about being a wife than being the perfect teacher.

Susan does believe that her work/home-life “balance is better,” than when she was first married, and she acknowledges that “the more [she] learn[s] to separate [these two roles], the less burnout she experiences. However, Susan recognizes that she has more work to do. Part of the challenge for Susan is that her identity as a teacher has been so much a part of her that it left little room for the development of a “non-teacher self.” As she states, “Teaching is what I am.” Thus, as she pulls back, she has “to find more of [herself] to fill” when she’s “not her teacher self.”

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I met with Susan three times during the month of June 2017. For convenience, I reserved a comfortable conference room at the University of New Hampshire’s Manchester campus. Susan met with me late in the afternoons on her way home from teaching. Despite having to drive out of her way to speak with me, Susan noted that the room, bright and air conditioned, was a calming respite after having taught all day in a hot, steamy classroom. Our first meeting, Susan arrived flushed and dressed in plaid pajamas with scuffed, fuzzy slippers on her feet,
explaining that it was “PJ Day” at her school. As Susan began her narrative, the compassion she has for her students was immediately palpable, and it was no longer a surprise that she had dressed up for spirit week.

Perhaps what was most striking in Susan’s narrative is the ambivalence she feels about teaching, her students, and the need to establish boundaries between work and home. Throughout her story, she contradicts herself. For example, she clearly loves her students, but is conflicted about the time and attention they demand from her and wishes they would leave her alone. Likewise, she wants to be able to cut back on the amount of time she spends preparing her lessons outside of school, but struggles to actually reduce her workload, noting that to teach well takes a lot of time and feels that burnout is the natural condition of good teachers. However, this is something that she will have to rectify because she would like to have children and knows that it’s not possible under current conditions. The narrative that follows highlights these conditions and Susan’s understanding of the central role that burnout plays in her life.

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**Susan’s Portrait**

[I] went into teaching because [I] want to do it well. And to do it well means you have to give up a lot of other things. If you want to be like the teachers in the teacher movies, you have to abandon your family, and abandon your other hobbies, because you’re going to get sucked into teaching and teacher prep all the time…The first 10 years or so that I started teaching before I was married, I would probably do 2-3 hours a night, sometimes up to 4 additional hours a night, and then a good 4 to 10 hours on the weekends…
I’m doing what I am expected to do. And it’s exhausting. Part of it is that you’re on for six hours. Part of it is you’re always having to work ahead and catch up and stay in the moment at the same time. And all – every single one of my kids is needy. All of them need my attention, either because they’re demanding my attention or because they don’t want me to notice them because they don’t want anyone to notice what’s going on. So I’ve got the super quiet ones who are trying to blend into the background who you have to worry about because something is wrong, and then you have everybody else who says, “Me, me, I have a question.” So I don’t have off time. Ever…

And when you teach, you don’t just teach because there are all these other roles you have to do… [For example], you have to be an advisor, and I take that role very seriously. And I spend a lot of time and energy trying to help my kids figure out what’s next, and what’s after what’s next. So I’ve got 8th graders, and we’ve talked extensively about all these options that are out in the high school that we have because our high school has so many options…But it takes time and effort. There isn’t a program out there to help you teach kids how to become better people and how to get them beyond the day to day business…

[Unfortunately], I don’t get the [students in class] who are really passionate about [my] subject. In middle school, they really don’t have any other choices. So I’ve got a bunch of kids who really aren’t prepared for the course I’m teaching, or who aren’t interested in the course I’m teaching, and have nowhere else to go. And I’m teaching a class that doesn’t affect their middle school grades, and the only thing it affects if they do well they can get out of something. But if they don’t do well, it doesn’t matter. They take it again.
So my apathy level is exacerbating because I have classes where 90% of the kids won’t do their work because they just don’t want to do it! …I feel like I’m starting to lose whatever magic classroom management I had that worked before. It is not working the same way with this [group of students], and I don’t know if I’m just too tired to try and keep up with it, or if I just have a different kind of kid that it’s just not connecting for them… [But] I’m like, “Well, if you don’t want to learn, I don’t know what to tell you! …What I can’t do is I can’t make you want it. So my biggest frustration is apathetic learners and kids who don’t care. Because I can’t make them care. I can get their attention, I can get them to complete assignments, or I can get them to sit quietly. But if they don’t want to learn, I can’t force them.

And I feel unsuccessful at work…because I have a 20% failure rate, which I’ve never had before. But I’m also in circumstances with a bunch of kids who never should have enrolled in the course. They weren’t prepared for it. They didn’t want it, and they certainly weren’t ready for the responsibility of competencies when [in the past] they’ve just been promoted because the year ended…So it’s very hard [for them] to now be in a situation where they’re not passing and they don’t mind that they’re not…So they won’t even attempt the work…They just sit there…So I do appreciate that for the most part they’re not behavior issues for me, but it’s very hard to have class with kids day after day after day knowing this is just an exercise in futility, and that they won’t even attempt an assignment anymore.

[However,] I do not feel compelled to force kids to pass because there need to those choices…But it’s very hard to not stop someone from failing because you want them to be
successful…And I don’t know if that’s me giving up or me just getting wiser because it kind of feels like both…On good days, it just wears me out because I’m sad. On bad days, I feel like I’m a failure because they didn’t make it, and I didn’t try hard enough. And I know I tried…I know…if I’m logical about it, they were given hundreds and hundreds of opportunities…But it is very hard to watch people make bad choices and not be able to control it. Emotionally it’s draining. It’s harder to keep control of my emotions on other things when that’s bothering me. There are some days where I can rationalize it to the point where I say, “I had to let them choose.” …It’s hard.

And I want them to be able to become something so great, and I’m the only one who wants it. And that’s exhausting and frustrating and makes me want to pull away from them…but I’m getting judged on their success, but I’m the only one who seems to care if they succeed, which is very frustrating…And nobody ever sees the amount of effort that went into trying to give them opportunities and how many opportunities they just pass up. So I get to that point where I say, “Well, I don’t even know why I’m trying…Why? Why am I trying so hard to get kids to learn?” It would be easier if I just used the textbook and said, “Okay, today’s lesson, these are the three activities. Complete them and you get your credit.” But that’s not really learning, that’s sitting. …So I guess no matter how exhausted I get, I want them to be able to walk out with skills, not sit time. So I guess it doesn’t matter how exhausted I get, …I can’t stop myself from trying to force [learning]…

And so, I find that I am changing my expectations based on my grade level and the district I’m in. And I’m sure part of it is also my own age and experience because things I would stress over
when I was younger, I just don’t have the energy left to care that much anymore…I used to expect that my students would come to class with pencil and paper and the textbook assigned. I have in the last couple of years, just given up on that entirely because that’s unrealistic with my students. Half of them bring supplies. And of them, half…don’t want to bother looking in their bag to get the pencil…

And things I could get through with students 10-15 years ago, I just can’t seem to get through it. I don’t know what the difference is, but I can’t get through the same amount of material that I could get through with students before… And to some extent, I’m like, “Nope, this group, they’re just not going to get through this unit.” And it’s hard because I take it much harder than my students would probably realize because I’m not alone in a system. My students are going on to somewhere else and…people are judging me based on what they produce…

I’ve been told that people used to have more expectations and they were watered down, watered down, watered down because it’s not worth the fight. And I am just not exhausted enough to give up yet. And I don’t know if I will be because…there’s just enough stubborn, and there’s just enough times where I see change that it keeps me from giving up entirely. I can’t live with myself if I water everything down. And I’ve had to compromise on things like expecting people to bring pencils to class, but I haven’t given up on expecting kids to think. It’s exhausting, …but they get better at thinking by the end of the year. I don’t know if they’re going to appreciate it, but I know they’re walking into the world better prepared, which is what I really came here for. …
So those expectations I used to have, “You will be neat. You will be organized. You will have your supplies,” yeah, I don’t have those anymore. I mean, I still hope for those. I encourage them. I teach those skills in hopes that maybe eventually it’ll click…And I just keep paper. I keep pencils. I keep everything in my room, so that when they say, “I need a piece of paper,” it’s over there…So I’m not expecting them to come in with their homework at this point anymore. That would be great! But it’s not realistic. But I do expect that while they’re in my room, they’re going to do some learning. My expectations for my students is that they come out of my class being able to communicate in French better than they could when they started, and having a better appreciation for the fact that not everyone in the world is like them…

The rest of burnout doesn’t come from the kids [and teaching]. It comes from all the stupid stuff that goes with it, with the pointless meetings that go on and on that could have been taken care of in a memo or stupid paperwork that you think, “Why am I even taking care of this, and why am I keeping track of this?” …[For example] when I’m supposed to have a 14-minute advisory, but they want me to keep track of money orders, and ticket sales, and reading slips. And, oh yeah, there’s a dance coming up, and I’m supposed to be promoting a t-shirt that nobody wants to buy. And I’m supposed to be checking in on their grades when we’re 15 days away from graduation, and grades don’t matter because you’re going to pass everyone anyways. And I’m supposed to be having this time with them intimately and emotionally to connect to them in 14 minutes, 6 of which are taken up by announcements. Well, no, I can’t be successful at that, and it’s frustrating to not be successful day after day when you’re set up in a situation where you can’t be successful.
Your principal and your administrators do make a difference – a significant difference on the healthiness of the school and the staff…On the weeks I have morning duty, I see [the principal and vice-principal] every day…On the weeks I don’t have morning duty, I don’t see them unless there’s a problem…So I don’t think I really see them much. And I’m okay with that… I know that our faculty is quite wary of the principal because you don’t know what mood you’re going to get. Which I have found is pretty consistent with principals across the districts I’ve ever worked in. They seem to be a group of people who you never know what mood you’re going to get, and the mood will determine, much more so than any policy, what’s going to happen…

There was this rule that we couldn’t go in and see the principal until we scheduled an appointment with the secretary, which was really frustrating…and off-putting…So I don’t try. I just send emails; I figure that’s a safer way to go…

[The culture of the school] we’re very good at. But we don’t spend a whole lot of time working on school. And in fact, we have to test so often, that it’s hard to stay consistent because we’re either testing for a week straight, or we’re on vacation. Or the quarter’s ending, or whatever. And so, there’s never a really good chunk of time to just work with kids.

And because [our student population] is so at-risk, [my school is] very, very focused on making kids happy, to the expense of academics, to the expense of teachers, …it’s about making kids feel good about themselves…The idea is that there are so many other issues going on, that we need them to feel like they’re successful in school, that they’re safe in school…We lose a lot of time in our day, and our schedules are always feeling like we’re rewarding good behavior…We call [our program] R2 in my current building. I lose six class days a year to these reward
systems...And I think it works for this tiny, little sliver of kids who once made a mistake and now they don’t want to have that problem again. But it basically just divides my behaves with can’t-behaves, and the can’t-behaves never get the reward because they can’t behave and they know it, so they just make life more miserable for themselves and for everybody else. And then we’re rewarding a bunch of kids for doing exactly what they were supposed to do, so they expect a reward for anything.

In addition, core teachers…always plan things, [special events or extra recess], and will not necessarily notify me because I’m not a core teacher. Because I work with different combinations of kids than other teachers, I kind of have a team, but not really, so there are times that I get excluded from those meetings…It doesn’t make scheduling easy, so they just say, “Well, you’ll just have to deal with it because we want to schedule this way.”

And so I get very frustrated because I’m also in a situation where my class receives high school credit and nobody else’s does, so I’m held to these high school standards that nobody else is, so when they sacrifice class time, it’s not as crucial for them because it doesn’t count as much in the long run…All of these 8th graders are going to freshmen classes except mine because French II is not a freshman class; it is a freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior class. So they have to be where they’re supposed to be because they’re going to be mixed [with older students]…

[Recently]my school district switched to competencies, but the middle school did not, …except my classes [because students receive high school credit]. I get a lot of dismissive comments at the middle school about the veracity of competency-based grading. They don’t really know it.
They just tend to be dismissive, but I can appreciate that for people who haven’t really had to experience it yet. But it’s exhausting. I think I explain competencies two, three times a week…my staff doesn’t understand it, my kids didn’t understand it, my parents don’t understand it and they don’t like it because it’s not what they’re used to. But it’s a much more natural way to think about learning. It’s not a natural way to grade…

So, I’m trying to work with this new concept while knowing that not everyone’s on board for it. Some people are actively trying to work against it because they want what they recognize… And there are staff members who either can’t comprehend the new system or don’t want to learn something new. And some of them will actively pursue trying to destroy it to try and bring back what was. And then [I’m] caught in the middle…

[In addition, because] I’m teaching in a school where everything is being run by traditional grades except my classes…the computer system can’t record my grades as is doesn’t know how to analyze the numbers properly…[So I was told] that since “we’re not really sure how to put your grades in, we’re just not going to have your grade count towards our different behavior standings and honor roll…or determine whether they are eligible for things. And at the end of the year when the grade finally counts, we’ll put them in.” Just a little bit of an issue there because you know, my kids don’t have to be passing my class and can still be involved in other activities.

…I would appreciate more support from my colleagues. But my circumstances don’t put me into any particular team or group because I’m not a unified art, but I’m also not an English class or math, science, or social studies, so I’m kind of in groups, but not really…[And] I don’t have any
friends at my current building. So I miss that support because it does help when you have a couple people at the school [to talk to] because they just understand the circumstances so well...

But the [faculty at the] school I’m in right now is an interesting combination of the Stepford Wives and disgruntledness. On the last surveys my school had a very low faculty morale. Really low morale rate…[But the faculty] all seem weird happy, but it’s Stepford Wives happy. Where, they’ve all been with the program so long they just accept the program and all of its idiosyncrasies. And I’m saying, “But this doesn’t make any sense.” And I’m the weird one, so I just need to kind of keep going. They say they’re upset, but they don’t come across as very upset. And they say they’re not supported, but they don’t appear that way in conversations. They seem happy with each other…

It would help if the people around me cared about my professional achievements. I don’t believe there’s anyone who cares right now…I’m speaking at a national conference for the second time in three years this summer, and my colleagues don’t care. Nobody seems to even know… [So] I’m finding this [year] that I’m just like, “Nope. Just go away and do your thing.”…I don’t like myself for it, but at the same time, I’ve had to go into survival mode…I find it’s just easier to stay away from everybody, and not because there’s all this drama…I just don’t like them. And so, to keep myself in a better mind frame, I just stay away from everybody…And that’s not hard. Because, as a teacher, it’s pretty easy to isolate yourself. Just stay in your room, and no one comes to you. Except for my students, who won’t even leave me alone during lunch…
[Usually in the classroom] I’ve always thought that I was amazing…I think I’m a super hero…I came into my first day of teaching and was like, “I’ve got this,” and I have no idea why I thought that…[But] I know how to teach. I know how to get people engaged. I know how to manage a classroom…When I’m feeling good about those three aspects, things don’t bother me. Even stressors, like the mount of stress that goes into this job, when I’m feeling good [in those areas], the stress can happen, and I just kind of bounce back from it.

But I find that when any of those [instruction, engagement, or management] are out of balance, when I’m feeling like I’m out of sorts in one of those areas, that’s when I want to pull back. I want to just have the kids leave me alone. I’m snappier. I’m emotionally more up and down. I want to cry more often. I want to be away from people more often. And when those three things are going well, I find it’s easy to deal with all of the obnoxious stuff that you have to deal with on a daily basis. There are still days when stuff is going well you’re going, “Come on, I have to do what?” But it’s one of those where you get frustrated for the moment, and you can deal with it and then kind of move on…It doesn’t feel like it’s so much of an attack because my classroom feels like a refuge. Like, “Yup, this is what I’m good at, this is what I do, and being in that refuge all day is not a problem.” But…when I’m already tired from my classes not working right, …the strain will make me more irritable, less able to deal with challenges, wanting to give kids a task to do instead of interact with them…

I do know how to teach well. How to teach doesn’t really change. Good teaching is good teaching, and it was good teaching in the 70’s when my mother did it as it is right now when I’m doing it. And engagement, again, is good teaching, so what worked 40 years ago is going to
work in 20 years...And we know more about how kids learn [and how to] engage them, but once you know that, you’re good.

The part that I’m finding that keeps changing is the classroom management...The kids I have now, they’re not biologically the same as 15 years ago...They have no handle of being bored. They don’t have downtime. They don’t have the creativity that they used to because they simply are never bored long enough to get creative. They’re looking for entertainment all the time because that’s all they know. And so I’m trying to find a classroom management plan that fits into an entertainment mind frame...because what worked 15 years ago may work, but it’s probably not as effective as other things now...And I’m going to have to keep reinventing it because the kids I’m getting in 15 years are going to be different than the kids I have now...That’s just exhausting. It would be nice if kids would just be polite and do their work, but all of my kids don’t know how to be polite. And so we have to go over basics like, “We do not hit each other.”...

When my classroom management isn’t working, I don’t want to deal with [students]. I’m certainly losing my emotional strength because I’m getting emotionally, not only physically, but more emotionally exhausted because [the management] piece isn’t working. I don’t think if I’m emotionally exhausted then my classroom management falls apart or my skill falls apart because they generally don’t.

[And this year] I’m starting to wear out because classroom management is an issue. Having [students] who don’t have supplies, don’t seem to value education as something that will help
them, and trying to work with the circumstances I’m in where there are no bells and grades are king of optional-ish, makes it feel like what I do doesn’t matter. And so because of that, I am depressed. I don’t want to be there. I don’t want to work with them. I don’t want to push them. I get physically and emotionally exhausted faster because I’m in a hostile environment where me as a person isn’t valued and what I have to offer no one’s interested in it. And so I spend extra time trying to care, and I’m finding that I don’t know why I’m caring anymore.

It’s exhausting…Physically I’m gaining weight. My muscles hurt more. My back…I mean, to the point where my back hurts more. My hair hurts on the really bad weeks. I don’t have the enthusiasm to exercise. My exhaustion is so high I don’t choose good foods. When it’s really bad, my food choices go down or I simply won’t eat at all…My health – it just gets bad.

Emotionally…I get bitter faster and lose my patience. And most days I can hide that really well, but there are points when I can’t…My nerves are much more sensitive and the little things that I could have dealt with, I can’t. I’ve walked into my classes…[and said] “I am sorry, guys. I’m done. So if you want to behave, that’s great. Let’s get this done. But if you don’t, just leave now. I’m done. I can’t take the comments. I can’t take the feedback. I can’t take the disruption. I’m done.” …Vacations are a big part of being able to recover…because I’m going so hard all the time that I’m just exhausted. So having that chance to do a week off is just enough to see me through the next four to six weeks before there’s another break…And then I can take the nonsense for another day, or a week, or a month before I go, “No. I’m done.”
[There are days] I’m so tired I want to fall asleep in class…And so I get to my lunch period and my kids want me to open up my room so that they can come and sit because it’s loud in the cafeteria and they’d rather hang out, and I have to say no because I need to turn off the lights and sit in a dark room for 20 minutes just to get my heartbeat back down so I can face the afternoon.

And so my prep periods are not as productive as I want them to be because I’m trying to recover and make the photocopies when the line isn’t bad and prep…print out the document for a week from now to make sure it’s proofed…so I come out of the day exhausted…Just the sheer amount of decisions I had to go through in one day to keep chaos from overtaking puts such a strain on my body that I will fall asleep in the care on the ride home. I will have to pull over to sleep for 5, 10 minutes just to manage to drive the 30 minutes home…

[Exhaustion] strains [my marriage]. I have the benefit of having a husband who’s also in education, so we can understand each other’s exhaustion much better than someone who’s partnered with somebody who’s not an educator…But it still puts a strain on [our relationship] because we’re not at the same points of exhaustion at the same time…I’m passing out on a Tuesday and now I’m revved up and he passes out on a Friday because we’re not in the same school, so we’re not living the same circumstances…He doesn’t want anyone to talk to him for an hour and a half after he gets home. He wants to put the TV on and pass out. He doesn’t want to answer any questions; he doesn’t want to talk to anyone. He’s starving, but I’m getting home and I don’t have a dinner ready. He’s going to eat stuff because we both have that situation where you’re hungry and you’re tired and you have nothing left to give yourself. You just pass out. Once every couple weeks, one of us will just sleep through the night. We’ll get home at 5:00
and just not wake up until the next morning. And then you’re kind of good for a couple of days. And then eventually it goes back and you’re just…you’re exhausted again. Vacations become critical because that’s the only time you get any decent sleep…

And it does put a strain, and that’s one of the things I’ve had to try and work on more is that I was so used to just working straight out and being a teacher with everything that I did, and the exhaustion coming out. When I get exhausted, I just can’t hold onto my emotions and then I would lash out at him. And he understands where it’s coming from, but at the same time, he doesn’t want to be lashed out at. So I’ve had to work on how to deal with that.

When I [was first] married, I was [working the same hours], but it really messed up my marriage relationship because I wasn’t ever available for him, and I was exhausted all the time…It was easy to say to my husband, “I’ll just go to school for an hour on a Sunday afternoon,” and six hours later, I was still there working on stuff. It sucks up as much time as it possibly can. [But my husband] keeps saying, “You’re spending way too much time doing this. You do not need to be doing all this. It’s not that complicated.” And I [know] that part of it is, and part of it is I just need to stop. This needs to be more of a job than a calling. I didn’t marry my job. I’m not being called by God to do this. It’s a job, and it needs to be a job.

[Today] my balance is better…partially because I feel better about the material, and partially because I’m tired, so I just don’t care that much. And partially because my home life is in direct conflict with trying to work all the time…I’m still way too over-committed, but especially this past year, I’ve come to realize just exactly where the over-commitment is, and I’m really looking
forward to being able to give up some of those extra-curriculars…to give myself more balance, more downtime. I’m really bad at downtime, and my husband’s really good at downtime, so we’re working out a middle ground for both of us…

[The problem with downtime is that] I don’t like myself as much as a teacher. I think less of myself as a teacher because I’m not doing everything I could be doing. I’m not being the best possible teacher [my students] could have. And so I feel like they are losing out because I’m not doing enough, but I’ve had to come to terms with disliking myself because I’m either going to dislike myself as a teacher that I’m not doing enough as a teacher, or I’m going to dislike myself as a wife because I’m not doing enough as a wife…I think of them as completely separate things. …And so I’m going to dislike myself either way. I have decided I care more about being a wife than being the perfect teacher…

The more I learn to separate [these two roles], the less burnout. So even though this [grade] is probably one of the tougher groups I’ve ever had to work with, my burnout has been less, simply because I’m not as invested time wise…And the more time I put in, the more emotional investment there is, which makes the stakes of [instruction, engagement, and management] higher because if I’m spending that much time, and if any of those are out of balance, it’s even worse… [Plus] the more time I spend [at school], the more emotional I get when I get home.

At the end of August, I start watching all the cheesy teacher movies [like Dead Poet’s Society]. And I remember when I was younger trying to be them. And in the last couple of years, I’m like, “No, I’m not going to be that because I don’t want to be only a teacher. I also want to be a
wife...I can’t be them because to do that you have to give everything else up. There’s no other life but you and your students. You basically live for your students. So I still watch the movies because they get me in the mood to take on another year. But I found that I’m a little bit more critical watching them, “I still like the sentiment but you’re not getting my life. I refuse to give over my life to you.” And that’s what it has felt like since day one…

In the future, I think the goal would be to get more balance and to pull back more. Not to the point where I’m uninterested in where I work, but simply to make more of my identity about being my non-teacher self than my teacher identity. Because I started teaching with my teacher identity being so much a part of me, there really wasn’t anything there. And as I pull back, I have to find more of myself to fill because I’m not my teacher self when I’m at home…

I would be a happier person…but I can’t imagine how to do good teaching without putting in a tremendous amount of time because there is no magic answer…There are too many pieces to it. There are interactions with students, and interactions with parents, and interactions with peers, and ridiculous time constraints, and ridiculous…that’s one of the biggest things about teaching – learning how to cope with burnout and how to cope with it in its different forms because it’s never going away. You’re always going to have kids who don’t want to be in your room, and parents who think that you’re an idiot, and administrators who don’t know what you’re doing, and colleagues who are more burned out than you who are cynical about you trying. So you just have to find ways to get over it…
I’ve thought about [leaving the profession], but…I don’t know how to be anything but a teacher. …This is what I am…[And] despite the stress I’m under, I make a difference. I think it’s the little moments like getting the kid to take notes for five minutes after he threw his bag. And the kid who says he’s not even going to attempt [to learn French] and then manages to get a B because he has caught on to something. Or the kid who comes back two years later and says, “Yeah. So you know how I made your life miserable, and I hated your class and really wasn’t passing that much? It turns out you’re really good at this because…I can [help] my other friends two years after this…And there’s pride in that.

Sean Castelo: 7th Grade Social Studies Teacher

Sean, a social studies teacher for approximately three decades, has been teaching middle school in the same wealthy, suburban district in Southern New Hampshire for the past 20 years. Sean grew up in a large, Portuguese family in Southern Massachusetts. His father was a high school chemistry teacher, so education was valued in Sean’s family. The fourth of five children, he went to public school through grade 8, which he found to be very easy. As he remembers, he frequently brought comic books to class, so he wouldn’t be bored when he completed the work. The private, Catholic high school he attended, however, was very competitive, and Sean found that he had to work hard to maintain his grades. As he explains, “I was not used to it at all. I struggled my first couple years; I didn’t have any study skills or anything, so it [didn’t] come easy. …It kicked my butt, and it forced me to learn how to learn.”

After graduation, Sean attended college in New Hampshire; he credits his academic success in college on the “tough, tough teachers” who prepared him well in high school. Sean cites these formative experiences as guideposts for his own teaching. He realizes that for students
to be successful at the competitive high school in his district, he has “to start setting the ground
work for things like study habits, time management, and organization.” He really believes that a
big part of his job, aside from teaching content, is to teach students the skills they will need to be
successful in high school and beyond.

Sean became a teacher via a circuitous route. His degree is in Political Science because
he wanted to work in the government, and after he graduated from college, he returned home to
work in the local supermarket while he searched for a job in his field. His parents were upset
with him because of all of the money they had paid for a private education, so when a former
college friend’s mother, who worked in a small, private school in NH, mentioned that they
needed a middle school social studies teacher “bad,” he applied for the job. He was hired and
moved to back to NH. His plan was to teach for a couple years, get his act together, and then
move on to what he really wanted to do. Now it’s 30 years later, and Sean is still teaching,
“although if [he] had known then what [he] knows now, [he] probably would have thought twice
about doing it.” However, at the time he just really wanted to “put [his] degree to some use.”

In Sean’s words, “teaching is hard.” He remembers a teacher once telling him that
“education is a profession that eats its young,” and that has always stuck with him. It certainly is
an apt phrase to describe his first three years in the profession, which Sean says were “awful.”
He started teaching in the 5th and 6th grades with a “warped perception of what teaching would be
like.” He assumed that he would write an assignment on the board, wait while his students
quietly did their work, and then collect and grade it. As he explains:

I was shocked. These were upper-middle class, well-behaved, well-traveled kids,
and they ran me ragged. …They figured out pretty quickly that I did not have the same
bag of tricks that the other teachers did, and it was hard; it was real hard. …I was
working with people who had been teaching successfully for years and years, and I
wasn’t. I would look around, and the teachers were all doing amazing, amazing things,
and I didn’t have that tool kit. And so, I seriously struggled. …I just didn’t have the management at all.

Although Sean had been promised that the school would mentor him, it did not occur. He was expected to figure it out on his own. To make matters worse, Sean was too embarrassed to ask for help; he simply did not want to admit to anyone, including his father, that he was struggling. The couple of times Sean did reach out to his principal for support, she told him that he needed “to be like Sarah,” and “he needs to be warm but fair,” but she did not tell him what he needed to do “to be like Sarah” or show him how to be “warm but fair.” As a result, during those first years Sean never developed good classroom management techniques or instructional strategies, and he “burned out.”

During this time, Sean met and married his wife. When his son was born at the end of his third year of teaching, Sean left his job. Some friends were opening up a daycare, and they asked him to be the kindergarten teacher. Since Sean felt like a “failure” in his current position, he welcomed this opportunity. Not only was he able to be with his son during the day, but he was also able to work on his classroom management skills with younger students. In addition, Sean started taking classes and received his certification in Elementary Education, K-8, which made a significant difference to his teaching skills and boosted his confidence.

At the end of three years, the principal of his former school asked him back, and when he returned to teaching middle school, it was “a whole different situation.” He had the “toolbox,” and he had the “bag of tricks” that he didn’t have that first time, and over the next several years, Sean believes he developed into a really good teacher. When he felt that he was ready, Sean switched to teaching public school in his current district, where he has been teaching 8th grade social studies for 20 years. Over those years, Sean went on to receive his Master’s degree in Teaching Secondary Social Studies and his C.A.G.S.
Currently Sean states that his teaching philosophy is very simple: he wants students to “learn history,” to “learn to love history,” and to “have a good time doing it.” And he finds that the older he gets, the more he focuses on the last two because he knows that is what will stick with students more than the content. As he notes:

As a first-year teacher, I wanted them to learn their history, and I didn’t have time for the other stuff. I was struggling, and I was too busy. But now, that’s where I put my focus. I know that Math and English teachers have it different because of the high-stakes testing, but I’m not tested, and I benefit from that.

Sean also feels that one of his strengths as a teacher is the relationships he forms with kids. Since he works on a team, he gets to know his students and their families really well. He recognizes that nobody really remembers their 8th grade History curriculum, but they might remember their 8th grade History teacher if that teacher had a personal impact on them. “That’s the most important thing a teacher can do – build those relationships…and make a kid feel valued. The content will come and go, but the relationships won’t. That’ll stay.”

Not surprisingly, Sean describes himself as a “super, super-engaged teacher.” He works hard to create classrooms that are “smooth-running, relevant, engaging places.” He believes that what makes him a successful teacher is his ability to entertain while teaching, and that takes a lot of time and effort to plan. Sean also describes himself as a story-teller and feels lucky that history naturally lends itself to that. He has a curriculum to follow, but tackles it through stories, legends, and gossip, and his students love it. He is also on the lookout for kitschy stuff he can bring in. For example, he has a bust of Henry VIII, and when a student presses the button, it plays Herman’s Hermit’s “Henry VIII.”

One of the biggest issues Sean has dealt with over the years is the change in technology and how that has impacted education. For example, “the poster stuff is pretty much out. Nobody does a poster anymore. But the kids will create videos for YouTube channels, or they’ll send
[him] a link to their own website.” Sean spends a significant amount of time looking for new ideas online and creating new materials to match student interest. Although he admits that it would be much easier to teach from a textbook or to pull materials out of a file cabinet, he doesn’t. Instead his lessons are all teacher-created and aligned to his style.

Despite the fun and games that he has with his students, Sean has high expectations. He believes that it goes back to the “warm but fair” policy that his former principal tried to instill; when it is time to work, he expects that students will buckle down and get to work. In his words:

> We have fun in my class, but I still expect [students] to do well; I expect them to do their work and take the work seriously, to respect the subject, and to invest in it.
> …And I expect them to be able to see that line [between] we’re going to have fun, but now we’re going to stop and do some work. Now I can do that, and as a new teacher I couldn’t. That’s a high-wire act that I think comes with experience, and I think that’s difficult for newer teachers. It was certainly difficult for me.

Physically, Sean finds teaching to be “exhausting,” but he enjoys the time he spends with his students and working in his classroom. However, he sadly acknowledges that “the stuff [he] loves about teaching…is getting smaller and smaller as the years go by.” Instead, Sean feels that he has become a “paperwork pusher” as the accountability demands of his school board have increased teacher workloads in recent years. In particular, he finds that testing is “doing in the job of education” and is “not what teaching should be.” Added to these frustrations is a “backbiting and fighting leadership team,” which leads to a lack of consistency in the building, and “hyper-involved parents.” Whereas in the past Sean might have been able to close the door to his classroom when the tone in the building became challenging, with the advent of technology, he finds that he is “on all of the time,” and it is expected that he be immediately responsive to the demands of parents and the administration.

All of this leads to a pervasive mental exhaustion that renders Sean “vulnerable” to burnout. In fact, he believes that teachers “view everything through the lens of burnout,” so what
matters is how a teacher chooses to deal with it; it’s all about perspective. He deliberately tries not to let “[burnout] become the focus of his thinking.” Complicating matters is the fact that Sean returns home every night to a spouse with a significant physical illness and the demands of caring for her and running the household. To compensate, Sean speaks eloquently of establishing boundaries between home and work. When he’s at home, he’s at home; when he’s at school, he’s at school. This is a deliberate choice that Sean makes and one that he feels effectively allows him to cope with burnout. In fact, at the end of our time together, Sean declared, “I’m not currently burned out.” However, it is clear in Sean’s narrative that burnout has been a constant specter in his life, and throughout his career he has struggled with its impact on him personally and professionally. This was most evident when, at several points in his narrative, he rhetorically asked himself, “Can I do this for another ten years?”

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I met with Sean three times during the month of July in the same conference room Susan and I had used on the University of New Hampshire’s Manchester campus. On the first day I arrived 15 minutes early and found Sean waiting for me in the lobby. As we walked toward the conference room where the interview would take place, Sean told me how much he was looking forward to talking about his experiences of burnout, and I found him earnest and forthcoming. As he noted, he believes that teacher burnout is a pervasive experience for many teachers, but one that is lived in silence; according to Sean, “no one talks about it.” And, over the course of our time together, Sean mentioned several times, how much he enjoyed our interview sessions. Once he mentioned that it felt like “therapy” and made him feel “lighter.”

What characterizes Sean’s narrative is the lens he uses to view his experiences: past versus present vignettes. He rhetorically divides his story into “then” and “now” moments,
whether he is speaking of his professional development or the increasing administrative demands placed on teachers in his district, and I heard many echoes from my own burnout story reverberating throughout his tale. Several times I had to silently remind myself not to chime in.

Sean’s portrait picks up with his description of parental pressure he faces in his current district, describes the administrative pressures, and ends with his understandings of burnout and its impact on his feelings of teacher self-efficacy.

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**Sean’s Portrait**

I’ll be honest with you, I feel like academic expectations are about 80% parents and only 20% me…My current district is a very affluent community. The expectations are very high for students and teachers. The kids are high-achieving and world-traveled… [And] because this is a very affluent community, …[and] because of the investment they’ve made in the schools, I don’t have to push [students] very hard…If a kid’s doing poorly, parents will be on it long before I’m on it. Because of the online grade book, parents see the grades right away, and kids know. So rare is the kid I have to push because the parents aren’t pushing him already…

And that’s why sometimes I struggle with parents. Parents will value the kid only by the grade, and the grade really means nothing to me…At open house I clearly tell the parents, “I don’t really care whether the kid gets an A or not. I want them to learn some history, and I want them to learn to like history. I want them to have a good experience in middle school. And you can focus on the grades; I really don’t.”
But we have hyper-involved parents. [For example], I had a meeting with parent whose kid had slacked off for a couple of weeks and so the grade had dipped and the mother was all over me. I met with her and she said, “You’ve heard of a helicopter parent. I’m an Apache helicopter.” She was super-aggressive in my face...

I think in my district [parents] are more focused on grades because middle school grades determine kids’ high school classes. Their high school classes determine their college eligibility. …I don’t think it’s like that everywhere, but because I’m in such an affluent district, parents are super grade focused. [Students] have to have all A’s all the time, or they’ll come after you…I remember not so long ago, when an A student got a C, that was their fault. And now, if an A student gets a C, it’s my fault…

I feel like it didn’t used to be this way…Now we have parents calling over the summer talking about SAT scores. “What are you going to do to prep them for the SATs?” I never remember middle school parents talking about SAT scores…And as soon as one kid gets into the accelerated math program, then all of his friends have to as well…And even the band teachers have to deal with that type of thing where parents are going to fight for spots in Honors Band because they want to be able to say, “My kid’s in Honors Band.” …So many of these parents feel that it’s a reflection of them…

There were years when I would go all year and not hear from 95% of the parents. I’d make a phone call once or twice, and now it’s like I’m getting emails all the time. You get emails on the weekend, and overnight, and when you’re on vacation. And you have to have really clear
guidelines because they’ll want at you all the time, and it certainly wasn’t like that when I started…

And parents say things in emails that I don’t think they’d say in person, ….but email allows them that kind of distance…I can feel like I’m doing my very best, and 99 out of 100 kids are happy, and then I get that one zinger email from a parent, and it makes me feel like I don’t need this. And I can remember times where I am driving home replaying that email in my mind over and over and over again…That type of being beat up, like you’re doing your very best and you’re getting beat up all the time as a teacher. And you just have to learn how to survive that. I think having colleague support is super important.

So I love teaching. That’s why I do it. But the stuff I love about teaching, I feel is getting smaller and smaller as the years go by. The good news is that I’ve been at it for so long that I kind of have it down. But over the years there’s more and more big asks to do and I find myself sometime frustrated with the fact that I feel like less of a teacher and more of a paperwork pusher person. I like going into my room and shutting the door and doing my thing, but I find that’s only a small part of what I do now. The rest of it is becoming bigger and bigger I’ve found as the years go by…

I [first] felt like this when I moved from private school to the public school system. That was overwhelming [because of] the sheer amount of paperwork that was suddenly thrown my way. After about three or four years I began to think it was too much. I wasn’t doing what I wanted to do, which was to teach history. Instead I was spending most of my time attending meetings…and
filling out paperwork. I began to feel like the effort I was putting in was not worth the reward I was getting back…And then [over the years] the amount of paperwork, the amount of meetings, the amount of mandates, the amount of responsibilities, the lack of authority actually did get worse…I just feel like my ability to deal with it has gotten better…

Like I make sure that my work is targeted and it’s relevant and it’s something I can assess and give back to [students] in a timely manner so that it’s good work for them, it’s good work for me. It’s about planning, preparing, and prioritizing to make sure…my workload is manageable…so that I don’t burn myself out…But there are parts of my workload I have no control over, which can make my workload more unmanageable…

[For example], we have 45 minutes each day for common plan time. It used to be that we would use that time to talk about kids, to plan interdisciplinary units, to talk about upcoming field trips, things like that…It used to be inviolate…What I find now is that common plan time almost every day is used for parent meetings or special education meetings. We almost never meet, just the five of us to plan…

And I’m also involved in the union, so my prep period is oftentimes taken up with meetings between administration and teachers, and because of our administration, that happens a lot…I know that I signed up for this, but I could literally go days and days and days, and except for a half-hour lunch, not have any time off…So all of the stuff I would do then has to be done before school or after school…At home is when I’ll enter grades, answer emails, things like that. I’ll do with my laptop on the couch stuff I used to do during my prep period…
I guess this is when I feel most burned out... when my performance in the classroom is less valued and less important to whomever than my ability to complete paperwork on time and do all sorts of things that have nothing to do with teaching history... There’s this record-keeping that was never a part of my job before... [For example], since I’ve been teaching almost 30 years now, special education has become a huge thing. [My district] is cutting special ed. staff to save money, so now the [classroom] teachers have all of the paperwork and responsibilities... It’s incredibly frustrating, and... it makes me think, I can retire in 10 years. Can I do this for another 10 years?...

[Furthermore], testing is really doing in the job of education... [Even though] I teach History, I worry about History testing. I know [some history teachers] who have decided that, in order to support the English curriculum, from now on their History classes are going to be writing classes. I would resist that with everything in me if I was told I had to start doing it that way, too. I don’t think History should be taught like English and Math are because I think you’ll drain the life out of it...

But [even though] I teach History, and I’m not tested, I still feel there’s that accountability piece because of the online gradebook. When I’m giving a test and school ends at 2:15, and at 2:20 I get emails saying, “What did my kid get?” And they want to know when is it going to go in the online gradebook. All of that didn’t exist 18 years ago, but [now] there’s that accountability where we’re on all the time...
I also feel like administration has become top heavy. When I first started at my school almost 20 years ago, we had a principal for a school of 400 students. Now we have a principal and two assistant principals. We have three administrators for a school of 400. That’s a lot of people looking over your shoulder all the time…

[And] the whole data movement is really taking autonomy away from teachers. Where now everyone has to do the same thing at the same time…I struggle against this all the time. Because I think our history teachers are wildly different, but equally successful with kids. But we’re constantly being told, “You need to be more and more alike and less and less different and I think that that does a disservice to kids…”

We have a data-driven school board. So we have to come up with a common assessment that we all give at the same time. We all have to compile the data and submit to the principal, and he has to submit it to the school board. [I have to have] 80% of my students get an 80% or higher on the common assessment to show that I am a good teacher. This just is not what I think teaching should be. Where do those numbers come from? They seem pretty arbitrary to me…

[In addition], the school board annually gives each principal money to give out as $1,000 bonuses to teachers at the end of the year…They used to give it out to teachers in secret, so most teachers didn’t know who did or did not receive it. Now they have to say who’s getting it, and they have to put it in the school board report to the public…That $1,000 has become super divisive. It’s not good for morale…
When I first started teaching, I felt like teaching was an art, and teachers were told, “Play to your strengths. Your strength is story-telling and making this interesting.” And now I feel like teaching has become a science. Recently I was on a district-wide committee to come up with a new observation model. They wanted a list of things that made a good teacher, so that somebody could check the boxes. Couldn’t you walk in to a really great, engaged classroom and not check off any of those boxes? I feel that we’re losing the art of teaching for the science of it, and I worry about that trend…And I buck it as hard as I can because I think that teachers are the best when they play to their strengths, and we’re losing that for the sake of conformity. I fight that real hard…

[But over] the last three or four years, it’s gotten so bad. The principal and assistant principal both left, …and I don’t feel like my [new administration] are the best people for the job…The two of them don’t get along with each other. Neither of them gets along or agrees with the faculty…[What] was a high-performing, well-run ship with a clear captain [is] now a back-biting and fighting leadership team. Where I always say, “I close my door and I am great,” once I step outside that door, Lord knows what’s going to happen. There’s no consistency with the rules…so you just never know if they’re going to follow through…

And they definitely have a “do as you’re told” philosophy of leading. If anyone questions a decision, they take it as an affront to their authority in the building…I just never know what to expect from either of them. The could turn on a dime. And so it’s emotionally hard for me to have to work with them because I just never know what it’s going to be like…
[When] my administrator walks in my room, I immediately put up my guards. I don’t know what’s going to happen. They could be in there to say something nice. They could be in there to really rip me one. I’ve never really felt this way with administration before…He’ll walk in and he’ll say, “Do you have a minute?” And I always say, “Do I need my union rep?” Because I don’t know if he’s coming in to ask me what I watched on TV last night or to come up with something disciplinary…

And I’m not the only one. All the teachers are walking on eggshells around our administrators because you just don’t know…[And] it’s hard. It can be hard. It’s draining to not know what to expect from [an] administrator. Within the last few years, all the older teachers have been retiring because they just can’t deal with it anymore…But I’m tenured, I’ve been here 20 years; I don’t give a shit. I’ll be honest with you. If I see something I don’t like, I’m going to call them on it. So they don’t like me very much, which is fine because I think they’ve done a job on the building that’s shameful…

[The administration] is of two minds about me. They think I’m a great teacher, an asset to the building. I make them look good. But they hate the fact that I’m willing to call them on their B.S. My assistant principal once said to me, “Why don’t you just do what you’re told?” …My principal would love to see me go to another district. “If you need…if you want to leave, I’ll write you a letter that glows like the sun,” he’s told me. …I think because my reputation is so solid in the community, in the building, with other staff members, they can’t touch me, and I think that bothers them, too…
The union [recently] organized a climate survey because so many complaints have gone to the superintendent. The results were pretty stark about what the staff feels about our leadership team, and we’re all hoping that the superintendent is going to do something about it. …Teachers don’t feel supported. …[According to the survey], 90% feel that working with kids is a highlight of the job, working with colleagues is a highlight of the job, but working with administration is a huge stressor…It’s a school that’s in turmoil…and I’m hoping that we’re going to see some movement on some of these issues in the coming year…

[Even without these demands], teaching is exhausting…Physically, it’s a lot of work. I do 10,000 steps a day when I’m teaching. [In the summer] my Fitbit says I do 2,000 steps per day. [During school] I do 2,000 steps by second period. So there’s a lot physically to it.

But I feel like mentally, I go home mentally exhausted…To be a good teacher you have to be in it all the time. I find it mentally exhausting that I have to be ready for any question that may come up. You can’t let go for even a second to be a good teacher…you have to be on all the time…If you think that you’re done at 2:30 and you have summers off, you are in the wrong profession…

I often go to bed really early. But the mental stuff – I’ll come home and my wife will say, “I left the bills on the table,” and I’m like, “I can’t go to a website right now and pay bills. I’ll do that before they’re due.” There are just things that I can’t even think about when I get home. Like I’m halfway to a doctorate and I can’t bring myself to take those last classes because I can’t imagine…I find that my workday is too exhausting, and I don’t think it’s physically exhausting. I
feel that it’s mentally exhausting to go home and have to read these books and take these classes and write these papers. And my daughter will send me a paper, “Could you proofread this for me?” And I think “Oh, my God, the last thing I want to do right now is proofread a paper.” It’s because I come home, and I’m exhausted. I’m done. Mentally exhausted…

I try to compartmentalize everything. I never go home and tell about the nasty little things that happened during the day as a teacher. I leave that for school…[And] When I’m at school, I’m at school…

There are times when I think, “Thank God I have that 45-minute commute because I need time to listen to the radio and let go before I go home…because I’m the type of person who burns short, but hot. So I will obsess about that email…[or] the lousy exchange with my principal, …and I need that time to rant and rave before I can look at it from a more objective way…But I am the master at compartmentalizing home and school. I am the master of locking it in a box at 3:00 when I get home and keeping it there until I bring it back to school. And I don’t bring home to work with me; as great as my classroom always looks, I don’t have pictures of my wife and kids on my desk, I don’t tell stories about my dog or my vacations…I just feel like each situation has its own stresses, and I just don’t want to have to deal with all of it at the same time…[So] I leave home at home, and I leave school at school. That’s the way I do it….And I think that has really helped with that burnout where I just don’t let it simmer…you know? I am able to leave it at the door…
[But exhaustion and cynicism] can begin to wear on you. As a teacher, I think you view everything through the lens of burnout. If it goes unchecked, you view everything you do through that lens. Then you start to think this isn’t the right profession for me. [And] everything you do reinforces that belief. That this isn’t the right career for me.

[But] I think that the feelings of emotional exhaustion and cynicism come from somewhere. Right? I think they come from the belief that you’re not doing a very good job… I would think that if you think you’re not a good teacher then the amount of energy it takes to do that job, you’d eventually burnout. I mean, if you think you’re not a very good teacher, and you’re just going to work every day and doing what it takes to be a good teacher in a class with 25 kids, that would be emotionally draining, physically draining. It would make you want to not be with those kids, just want to get away.

And I think that may have been why I left [teaching] after three years. I just felt like I wasn’t any good, and the thought of going to work every day, it just became too much. So I left the profession for a couple of years… So I think your view of your own teacher self-efficacy affects burnout. How you look at your own effectiveness in the classroom would lead to burnout, but I don’t see it going the other direction…

But I also see how exhaustion and cynicism can come from not being in a very good place rather than not having a high self-efficacy. I think teachers who are in a school where they’re not happy, [even] if [they] know [they’re] a good teacher, but [they’re] not happy where [they] are, that that could lead to emotional exhaustion and cynicism. The times when I most felt like I
wanted to leave the profession, when I was burned out, it wasn’t because I’m not a good teacher; I knew I was a good teacher. It’s because the profession had become so much more than what I wanted it to be. So my opinion of myself as a teacher was strong. It was everything else that was making me think I just can’t do this anymore. It wasn’t because I thought I was a bad teacher, or that I was becoming a bad teacher…It was everything else that was driving me crazy. It was driving me out of the business…So I don’t think burnout really impacts my [teacher] self-efficacy…

The three parts of [teacher] self-efficacy are very interrelated. And I think classroom management [is key] to instruction and engagement. If you have classroom management, you have management in your instruction, and that is what leads to engagement…A big piece to effective instruction is managing it. As a new teacher I did not have the management…I feel like I had the instruction, but I didn’t have the management, so I lost the engagement of the kids. They weren’t engaged because my classroom management was a nightmare. But I feel that once I got the management, then the instruction was better and the engagement came along with that.

…

I feel like now, I know I’m a good teacher because people tell me I am. I left [teaching] after three years because I felt like I wasn’t very good. And nobody was telling me anything different. So my [teacher] self-efficacy beliefs really do come externally. I know I’m a good teacher because my students and their parents and the other teachers who work with me tell me that I am because of what they can see in the kids. Well, I guess [self-efficacy beliefs] come from me, too. They come from me, too, because I can see the kids liking my class. I can see the kids enjoying
my class. I can see the kids learning history and talking about history and coming back to me to talk about history and stuff. But when I first was a teacher I didn’t see that. [It wasn’t] until the principal came and said, “I want you back.” That’s really the first time I had somebody I had worked with come and tell me they thought I was doing a good job.

I’m shocked by the fact that my feelings of self-efficacy do not come from within but from without. But I think that if you leave it up to yourself, you could be wrong. You could be completely misreading what’s going on. [For example], I know plenty of teachers who think they are good teachers, and they’re not. If you leave teachers alone, they’re going to think they’re great. They’re going to think they’re doing well. So I feel like my [teacher self-efficacy beliefs] come from the outside. If I was suddenly told, the kids don’t like your class and the parents are upset with you, I would really take that to heart.

But I’m not currently burned out. But I’ll tell you, I think that burnout is something that you experience at certain points in your career, and you either kind of get over it or you don’t…But I understand why people at a certain point in their career begin to say, “There has to be more than this,” because I’ve felt that way myself…[And] I remember thinking, is this what I really want to keep doing? And it gets harder because I think in the last 30 years, education has gotten much, much harder for teachers, so I can [understand] people saying, “It’s just not worth it. It’s just not worth it.”…

And I imagine the next ten years are going to be incredibly hard on teachers. If the last ten years are any indication of the growing amount of responsibility and the shrinking authority that
teachers have,…then I think it’s going to get harder and harder. And I think we’re going to see either more and more people leave the profession or just deciding they don’t want it…

I never let the feeling that I need to get out of this profession take over. Because I don’t want to leave the profession. When I’m feeling burned out, I just have to figure out how I am going to make it work for me. I don’t let [burnout] become the focus of my thinking…

When I am most vulnerable…what kind of keeps me going are the interpersonal relationships that I have developed among my colleagues. That…support keeps me going when I feel the physical exhaustion, the detachment, and the cynicism…I used to feel like I was on an island unto my own, and now I realize that in order to survive teaching, you really need the help of [other teachers]. [And] really the group of people I work with keeps me grounded…The fact that I have great colleagues is what helps get me over the cynicism, that gets me out of my own head to what I was thinking, into what I am doing.

[In addition], I think it’s perspective. That this too shall pass, you know? I think it was worse at the beginning when I first started teaching because I always assumed it was me…And now I realize that most of the things that go wrong I have very little control over…So I think that perspective, that comes with time and experience is really what gets me through…I think I’ve become more seasoned. You think of what that word means. A seasoned teacher. You think of wood that’s seasoned. It stands up to the elements and I just think that I don’t let those little thing bother me anymore because now I know that nothing is permanent, nothing lasts forever. …Teachers are like farmers. We always think next year will be better…You get the summer
vacation, and you go back, you try again, and you try harder. You learn a lot, and you do better and you just keep doing that until it’s okay.

**Conclusion**

Although each of the three participants teaches in a different school context, they each have experienced an increase of work demands and school-based initiatives, which impact the way they perform their job. In the next chapter, I examine the interplay between burnout and teacher self-efficacy.
CHAPTER FIVE

BURNOUT: A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT

The goal of this study was to understand the nature of middle-school teachers’ experiences with burnout and its relationship to their sense of teacher self-efficacy.

According to the educational psychology literature, all teachers experience stress in the workplace (Jennet et al., 2003), yet only some develop burnout. This is due to the fact that teachers’ responses to stressors are rooted in their goals and beliefs, which impact what they notice in their environment and their subsequent feelings and attitudes about it (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Friedman, 1995). Thus, teacher perception is important to the experience of burnout (Kelchtermans, 1999). It is the interplay between, and the interpretation of, one’s personal and professional life, which leads to burnout that this study aims to unpack.

In this chapter, I explore my participants’ experiences of burnout in relation to the three dimensions of burnout and their teacher self-efficacy beliefs. I start by summarizing the three components of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and cynicism, and personal accomplishment as experienced by my participants. Next I discuss the relationship between burnout, personal accomplishment, and teacher self-efficacy beliefs. Finally, I turn to appraisal theory to demonstrate how my participants’ perceptions of emotions impact their experience of burnout.

Throughout this chapter, I use my participants’ words whenever possible in the service of uncovering the meanings they attach to burnout, teacher self-efficacy, and contextual variables.
that impact their experiences. In doing so, I make every attempt to honor my participants’ voices and stay true to their perspectives.

**Emotional Exhaustion**

Emotional Exhaustion is the core element of burnout, and refers to the state of depleted energy caused by excessive emotional demands made on people interacting with clients (Maslach et al., 2001). Indeed, all three participants experienced intense emotional exhaustion, and this was the focus of much of their interviews with me. As is noted in the research literature, the emotional strain of teaching can be all consuming (Sutton, 2007; Maslach et al., 2001; Hargreaves, 1998). And many studies have examined teacher emotions in relation to student behavior, emotional labor, teacher identity, mentoring, discrete emotions, and school reform (Chang, 2009). Although it is widely accepted that teachers can experience emotional exhaustion, there are few studies that unpack teachers’ emotional experiences in the context of burnout (Chang, 2009).

**Physical and Emotional Exhaustion**

It is through the participants’ physical and emotional responses to burnout that they first experience the phenomenon. For all three, teaching is a profession that is “draining,” and its demands “wear” on them. Jason notes that physical exhaustion began when he had his first child and he transitioned to teaching in a multi-aged classroom. And, “without question, for a number of years…the [exhaustion] got worse.” The year his sister-in-law died, when Jason was the most burned out, sleep was his biggest issue. He “would go to bed around 10:30, wake up often at 12:30 or 1:00 in the morning, and [he] could physically feel [his] brain ramping up into this

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17 For an exhaustive list of references, please see Chang, 2009, p. 203.
worried state…It literally felt like a physical reaction, a physical event in [his] brain.” This led to a host of negative, bodily sensations: “a ringing in [his] ears; a tingling through [his] scalp.” Teaching without sleep made Jason feel like he was a “shell” of himself, and when he spoke to students, it was as if he had “marbles in [his] mouth.” Susan, too, describes the complete exhaustion that overtakes her on a regular basis, noting that there are days “when [she’s] so tired [she] want[s] to fall asleep in class.” In fact, “just the sheer amount of decisions [she has] to go through in one day to keep chaos from overtaking puts such a strain on [her] body that [she] will fall asleep in the car on the ride home.” She often pulls over to the side of the road to sleep for five or ten minutes just to manage the 30-minute drive. In addition, the sensation of burnout permeates throughout her body. In her words:

Physically I’m gaining weight. My muscles hurt more. My back…I mean, to the point where my back hurts more. My hair hurts on the really bad weeks…I don’t choose good foods. When it’s really bad, my food choices go down or I simply won’t eat at all…My health – it just gets bad.

Out of the three participants, Sean was most reticent to discuss how burnout physically made him feel, and he provided few details beyond being “exhausted” on a regular basis. However, he does mention the physicality of teaching and how many steps he logs in a day on his Fitbit. He also notes that he returns home every day “mentally exhausted” from being on all day, and as a result, he often “go[es] to bed really early.” Regardless of how reluctant Sean was to discuss the intimate sensations of burnout, his body gave him away. When Sean would talk about feeling exhausted, his facial features drooped and his shoulders hunched as if he were reliving the sensations. When asked about my assumption, he replied, “Yes, I can still feel the exhaustion”; burnout was still palpable despite the fact that it was July.

Furthermore, the experience of negative emotions in the context of burnout is felt in the body. For example, the guilt Jason felt “ate away at him big time.” Susan explains how watching
kids fail “wears [her] out because [she’s] sad,” and Sean details the emotional exhaustion he
feels when interacting with his administrators. All of them describe this state as being
“emotionally exhausted.”

The Emotional Labor of Teaching

The emotional labor of teaching is well documented (Schutz, Cross, Hong, & Osbon,
requirement of an employee to project a particular emotion in the context of his or her work,
regardless of what the employee may actually feel (Hochschild, 1983). In the context of
teaching, the norms of the profession obligate teachers to prioritize the needs of their students and
maintain close relationships with them (Hargreaves, 1998). Further, teaching requires that
teachers be in relation, not only with students, but also parents, colleagues, and administrators at
all times (Hargreaves, 2002). Within these relationships, a multitude of issues evoke my
participants’ emotional responses such as feelings of guilt, frustration, worry, and sadness. The
intimacy of these relationships, combined with the expectations of appropriate emotional
responses by teachers, pressure teachers to display suitable emotions, regardless of what they
may actually be feeling (Chang, 2009; Schutz et al., 2007). The rules, most often unspoken, that
regulate teacher emotions are referred to as display rules (Zembylas, 2003; Morris & Feldman,
1996). Display rules act as the standard for what is considered to be appropriate emotional
expression (Schutz et al., 2007). The emotional labor, including the effort, planning, frequency,
and control, required by teachers to adhere to display rules is related to emotional exhaustion
(Morris & Felman, 1996).
The emotional labor of the three participants is evident throughout their profiles. For Jason, this manifested in intense visceral feelings of not being able to meet the needs of all of his students. He “carr[ied] the weight” of this knowledge, which “ate away at [him], big time.” When talking about two difficult years with a challenging student, Jason relates that it was “awful to watch him struggle and the other kids suffer.” In addition, the physical exhaustion he felt led to deteriorating relationships with his students. For example, when Jason “was really exhausted,…[he] wasn’t that articulate…and…didn’t have a good ability to listen well to students.” When he was in his “really roughest places,” Jason remembers seeing himself as he imagined others saw him. For example:

I remember times last year for sure seeing [my students’] faces being like, “This is not helping at all.” And in my own mind, as I’m talking, thinking, “Are you even doing a good job of teaching right now? You’re not. These kids don’t understand this and you cannot help them understand it any better.”

In moments like this, the frustration on his students’ faces contributed to Jason’s perception of himself as a poor teacher.

Further, Jason mentions the silence surrounding burnout; he did not speak about his emotional experiences because the cultural norms dictated that he remain quiet about his feelings. In his words, “You don’t spend a whole lot of time advocating for yourself because you feel you’re coming across as a whiner or something like that.” In this way, Jason controlled his emotional displays, and he suffered extreme emotional exhaustion in silence. In addition, he did not seek help for burnout until his sister-in-law died because death, unlike emotional strain in teaching, is a culturally acceptable reason to ask for help. In his words:

People understand if you say, “Oh, my god, you know, this death in my family really rocked me…but being really open and honest about burnout, I think as a society we kind of don’t go there. Teachers, I think, are very often told, “Hey, you signed up for it, do it.”
Susan’s profile reads as a giant struggle to maintain control of her emotions in the context of her relationships with her students, colleagues, and husband. In fact, Susan discusses the relational aspect of her burnout experience in highly fraught language. According to her, “every one of [her] kids is needy” or “at-risk”; “all of them need [her] attention,” and she feels obligated to “have to worry about them.” Susan believes that it is her job to change the lives of her disadvantaged students, “to teach kids how to become better people.” As is clear from this language, Susan’s relationship with her students is problematic. Susan is not inviting her students to be in relation with her; instead, she fashions herself as the authority in the classroom who believes she knows what is best for them, and she feels “sad” and “frustrated” when they don’t measure up to her standards.

Moreover, Susan is frequently “frustrated” by her colleagues; and worries about her relationship with her husband. Susan speaks several times about the difficulty of trying “to keep control of [her] emotions…Most days [she] can hide [her feelings] really well, but there are points that [she] can’t” control them. When Susan is tired from managing her relationships with her students, she finds that she cannot hold onto her emotions at home and “lashes out” at her husband. This inappropriate display at home results in more pressure on Susan from her husband to manage her involvement at work; this increases the amount of emotional labor Susan must enact to balance work and home life, which likely increases her exhaustion.

The biggest stressors for Sean are his relationships with his administrators, which he finds “frustrating” because they seem to value Sean’s ability to handle the paperwork more than his ability to teach. Sean relates, “I feel most burned out when my performance in the classroom is less valued and less important to whomever than my ability to complete paperwork on time and do all sorts of things that have nothing to do with teaching history.” It is clear that Sean and
his administrators do not share the same educational values and priorities. Thus Sean describes his relationship with his administrators as “emotionally hard” and “draining” to have to work with them.

Unlike Jason and Susan, Sean does not feel the need to repress his emotional responses, and in fact, Sean describes flaunting display rules. For example, Sean doesn’t “give a shit” and feels free to “call them out” when they do something with which he does not agree. Even though Sean does not feel the need to repress his emotions in this context, he frequently challenges his administrators. As Morris and Feldman (1996) note, the frequency of emotional displays increases exhaustion. For example, Sean describes his work with the union, in which he can go “days and days” with his prep period consumed by adversarial meetings between administration and other teachers. The frequency with which Sean must exert emotional labor to resist attempts of the administration to regulate his emotional displays negatively impacts Sean’s emotional exhaustion.

**Depersonalization/Cynicism**

Depersonalization refers to the teacher’s development of negative, callous, or cynical feelings toward her students, colleagues, administrators, or parents, which leads to a detached attitude towards them (Evers et al., 2004). Depersonalization can include feelings of irritability, loss of idealism, or inappropriate attitudes toward others (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). Several studies have found depersonalization to be a coping method to deal with the emotional exhaustion inherent in intense, negative relationships (Taris, Van Horn, Schaufeli, & Schreurs, 2004; Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Woolfolk Hoy, & Mackley, 2000; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). It
may be that teachers, who are already emotionally exhausted, need to put distance between themselves and others to protect themselves against burnout.

This was certainly true in regards to several distancing strategies utilized by my participants. Moreover, these strategies can be read as attempts to manage the amount of emotional labor each participant must expend. For example, Jason stopped going to work on Sundays; his classroom was no longer a place he was proud of, so he avoided it and the negative emotions it evoked. Soon Jason did not want to be in his classroom on Mondays or even to return to it after lunch; he worried about how he was going to make it through the week or the day. The emotional labor for Jason to return to this space and teach increased his emotional exhaustion. Thus his visceral desire to avoid it represents an unspoken wish to protect himself.

Susan deliberately chooses to stay away from her colleagues because according to her, it keeps her “in a better frame of mind.” As a result, Susan views her classroom as a refuge from all of the obnoxious stuff she has to deal with. In framing her classroom as a refuge, Susan is endowing it as a safe, emotional space. The difficulty is that when things are not working well with students in her classroom, she experiences it as “an attack” and it makes her emotionally vulnerable to burnout. In this context, Susan talks about wishing she could adopt distancing strategies from her students; she recognizes that it would help her to feel less emotionally drained. However, this does not fit her beliefs about teaching. As a result, she feels an impetus to keep “trying to force learning” and “spend[s] extra time trying to care,” which increases her emotional exhaustion.

Sean, too, experiences his room as a refuge, and believes that when he “close[s] [his] door, [he] is great.” Sean literally shuts out the stress from his classroom, and as a result, manages his level of burnout while teaching. This strategy is part of Sean’s larger ability to
compartmentalize the various stressors in his life. As mentioned in Chapter Four, Sean maintains strict boundaries between the various stressors in his life; this enables him to manage how much stress he is exposed to at one time.

**Personal Accomplishment**

In the burnout literature, personal accomplishment refers to the tendency to evaluate one’s job performance negatively (Maslach et al., 2001). Earlier research asserts that personal accomplishment develops synchronously from the other two dimensions of burnout and arises from a perceived lack of resources rather than from work overload and conflictual relationships (Maslach et al., 2001). However, this study finds that personal accomplishment, as expressed by the participants’ perceptions of “failure” or “success,” is negatively or positively related to emotional exhaustion. To be clear, it was the participants’ appraisal of their job performance, which led to emotional exhaustion, which occurred prior to the development of depersonalization or cynicism.

Jason details his experience of personal accomplishment as a sense of “failure,” which for him was a direct result of being too tired to teach. Jason describes it as

that terrible spiral of feeling like you’re not doing a good job, knowing that you have the responsibility, not sleeping well, not able to do a good job, knowing that you’re not doing a good job, not sleeping well. And…it gets worse and worse and worse.

The disconnect between Jason’s desire to be successful and the reality of his perceived failure, deeply affected Jason. Watching his students disengage as a result of his poor teaching “hit [him] in the gut” and was “personally hurtful.” In addition, Jason also felt that he was not a good husband or father. Everyday Jason brought the stress from school home with him only to confront his grieving family. He describes the emotional burnout as “stepping into the day
[knowing that it] was going to be a constant onslaught of disappointments to myself of not being a good teacher, not being a good dad.”

The result was that his experience of emotional burnout was “super strong,” and his feelings of guilt “pushed [him] to the point where [he] didn’t know if [he] wanted to be teaching anymore.” This led to a distancing of himself from those relationships that were emotionally harmful. In Jason’s words, “the third piece of burnout is when you throw your hands up in the air and say, “Why bother?” For him, disengagement from his students and family, and a cynical attitude towards his work, were the outcomes of his exhaustion and feeling like a failure: he quit going to school on Sundays; he no longer wanted to return to his classroom after lunch; he was unable to pay attention to his students; and some days, he did not want to get out of bed.

**Figure 1: Jason’s Burnout Map**

Exhaustion → Reduced Personal Accomplishment → Depersonalization and Cynicism

↓

Increased Emotional Exhaustion

For Jason, burnout began with physical and emotional exhaustion. Then his perceptions of reduced personal accomplishment led to increased emotional exhaustion and his subsequent detachment from students and family members and a cynical attitude towards his work.

It is, perhaps, Susan’s disconnect with her students that contributes to her feelings of failure and reduced personal accomplishment. Susan has defined both academic and lifelong success for her students, and when they do not meet these expectations, she feels “unsuccessful.” Several times during her interviews, Susan described how emotionally challenging it is for her to recognize that she cannot control her students. For example:

I do not feel compelled to force kids to pass because there need to be those
choices…But it’s very hard to not stop someone from failing because you want them to be successful…And I don’t know if that’s me giving up or me just getting wiser because it kind of feels like both…On good days, it just wears me out because I’m sad. On bad days, I feel like I’m a failure because they didn’t make it, and I didn’t try hard enough. And I know I tried…if I’m logical about it, they were given hundreds and hundreds of opportunities.

Despite these opportunities, Susan is met by what she perceives is students’ “apathy” and an unwillingness to care. “Having [students]…who don’t seem to value education as something that will help them…makes it feel like what [she does] doesn’t matter.” The results are intense, emotional feelings for Susan, which she describes as “losing [her] emotional strength.” She finds it “harder to control [her] emotions,” and she is “snappier,” and she gets “bitter faster.”

The consequence of Susan’s sense of reduced personal accomplishment is depersonalization and cynicism. Using callous, negative language, she speaks of her students as “kids who don’t care…who don’t mind that they’re failing.” Because Susan holds negative thoughts about her students, she frequently feels like she “[doesn’t] want to be there. [She doesn’t] want to work with them.” She mentions times when she walked into her classroom and announced, “I’m sorry, guys. I’m done…I can’t take the comments. I can’t take the feedback. I can’t take the disruption. I’m done.” In addition, Susan expresses cynical beliefs about her job. For example, she references the “obnoxious stuff [she] has to deal with on a daily basis” more than once.

**Figure 2: Susan’s Burnout Map**

Exhaustion : Inability to Meet → Reduced Personal → Increased → Depersonalization (Always Perceived Emotional Accomplishment Emotional and Cynicism Present) Demands Exhaustion
For Susan, physical and emotional exhaustion is always present; it is part of the job. Instead, it was the perception of her inability to impact her students’ achievement and value system, which led to her feelings of reduced personal accomplishment. This increased her emotional exhaustion and resulted in depersonalization and cynicism.

Sean acknowledges that teaching is a difficult profession, which he discusses in terms of effort in, reward out. He believes that teaching is emotionally draining, which can lead to feelings of emotional exhaustion and cynicism. For example, he states:

I think [emotional exhaustion and cynicism] come from the belief that you’re not doing a very good job… I would think that if you think you’re not a good teacher then the amount of energy it takes to do that job, you’d eventually burnout. I mean, if you think you’re not a very good teacher, and you’re just going to work every day and doing what it takes to be a good teacher in a class with 25 kids, that would be emotionally draining, physically draining. It would make you want to not be with those kids, just want to get away.

When Sean first began teaching, he “left after three years because [he] felt like he wasn’t very good. And nobody was telling [him] anything different… The thought of going to work every day, it just became too much.” The disconnect between his desire to be a good teacher, and the reality of students who “ran [him] ragged” caused Sean to struggle during his first years, of which the consequence was a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. A big part of Sean’s stress resulted from his desire to hide his efforts from others, including his father. In Sean’s words, he “did not want anyone to know what a bad teacher [he] was,” which unfortunately prohibited Sean from seeking the help and support he needed. The resulting feelings were those of frustration and failure.

**Figure 3: Sean’s Early Burnout Map**

Exhaustion : Reduced Personal Accomplishment → Depersonalization and Cynicism
It was Sean’s perception of his inability to teach well that led to his experience of reduced personal accomplishment and subsequent depersonalization and cynicism.

Now more than 25 years later, Sean still finds teaching exhausting, but rates his sense of personal accomplishment high. He strongly believes that he is a good teacher:

I know I’m a good teacher because my students and their parents and the other teachers who work with me tell me that I am… I can see the kids liking my class. I can see the kids enjoying my class. I can see the kids learning history and talking about history and coming back to me to talk about history.

Sean sees his students doing well and enjoying his class, which informs Sean’s opinions about his ability to be a good teacher. It is this belief that operates as a protective effect for Sean when other elements of his teaching life produce stress. For example, Sean talks about an “Apache helicopter” parent who became “super-aggressive” in his face, and parent emails that leave him feeling “[he’s] getting beat up all the time” despite “doing [his] very best.” In these instances, having colleague support is “super important” because they can keep him “grounded” in his beliefs that he is a good teacher.

As mentioned earlier, Sean has a volatile relationship with what he believes is a “top heavy” administration “looking over [his] shoulder all the time.” In addition, Sean perceives their “‘do as you’re told’ philosophy of leading” as an attempt to “take[] away the autonomy of teachers.” This is evident in Sean’s belief that teaching in his district “has become a science…for the sake of conformity.” It is the intrusion of the administration into his curricular space that Sean finds “emotionally hard” because it does not reflect Sean’s beliefs about good teaching.

Not only is it the breakdown of this relationship that leaves Sean “mentally exhausted” and “vulnerable” to burnout, but also another contributing factor is the sense that the “arbitrary” work demands are out of Sean’s control. Sean describes his attempt to resist them as “a struggle”
or “a fight,” which frequently pits him against his administrators. To be constantly at odds with his administrators is mentally exhausting, leaving Sean prone to “rant and rave” on his drive home. Furthermore, several times during our interviews, Sean questioned whether or not he “can do this for another 10 years.”

**Figure 4: Sean’s Burnout Map**

- Normal Work → Exhaustion: High Sense of Personal Accomplishment → Low Emotional Burnout
- Demands of Administration → High Emotional Exhaustion → High Level of Emotional Burnout → Cynicism

During the time I spent with Sean, two very different burnout stories emerged; therefore, I suggest that he experiences burnout along two simultaneous trajectories. This is evident in the way he discusses his work with students on the one hand and his relationship with administration on the other. In the former case, Sean’s profile details the work he does to plan and teach his students. Although he puts a significant effort into preparing and teaching, and feels exhausted by this work, it is not beyond what he expects. Furthermore, Sean feels a sense of control over his workload and finds it personally rewarding. In addition, Sean has a high sense of personal accomplishment, reflected in his students’ obvious enjoyment of his class, a reward for the amount of effort he puts into this work. The result is low emotional burnout. However, in the latter case, Sean must cope daily with what he perceives to be excessive and arbitrary demands of his administrative team. This leaves him with a high level of emotional exhaustion, which, unmitigated by protective factors, can become emotional burnout, resulting in cynical feelings.
about the future of the profession. Moreover, Sean is quite capable of compartmentalizing
different aspects of his personal and professional lives. What is important to note is that Sean
separates the work he does with students from his relationship with his administrators. It is when
Sean perceives the creep of administrative demands into his classroom that Sean is most
vulnerable to burnout.

Until now, my discussion about the experience of burnout has focused on my
participants’ perceptions about their teaching contexts and their beliefs about their teacher selves.
However, this does not explain why some teachers will rate their performance positively while
others rate theirs negatively. Thus the question remains, what informs their teacher beliefs and
how does this impact their perceptions and subsequent experiences of burnout? This is where I
turn to the social cognitive theory of teacher self-efficacy.

**Personal Accomplishment and Teacher Self-Efficacy**

Social cognitive theory posits that self-efficacy is an individual’s belief in his or her
capability to exercise control over challenging demands, and it is domain specific (Bandura,
1997). Therefore, teacher self-efficacy is conceptualized as a teacher’s “belief or conviction” that
he or she “can influence how well students learn, even those who may be difficult or
unmotivated” (Guskey & Passaro, 1994, p. 628). The negative relationship between teacher self-
efficacy and burnout is well established in the literature (Fernet et al., 2012; Hoigaard et al.,
2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010, 2007). Thus, teachers with higher levels of teacher self-
efficacy experience lower levels of burnout, and the inverse is also true. Furthermore, teacher
self-efficacy is often thought of as a protective factor against burnout (Lee, Seo, Hladkyj, Lovell,
Much of the research around burnout suggests an overlap between the constructs of teacher self-efficacy and personal accomplishment (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). In fact Chang (2009) defined personal accomplishment in terms of self-efficacy, while Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) exclude personal accomplishment from their analysis and focus solely on the relationship of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization to teacher self-efficacy. However, recent work by Shoji, Cieslak, Smoktunowicz, Rogala, Benight, and Luszczynska (2015) demonstrates that self-efficacy and personal accomplishment are conceptually distinct. Whereas personal accomplishment “is of retrospective character, and it represents the outcomes of actions” (i.e.: the appraisal of how well one performed his or her job), “self-efficacy beliefs are of prospective and operative character” (i.e.: the appraisal of how well one will be able to perform his or her job in the future) (Shoji et al., 2015, p. 3). In other words, personal accomplishment refers to past events; teacher efficacy to future ones. Furthermore, Shoji et al. (2015) found that personal accomplishment formed a stronger link to self-efficacy than did the other two dimensions of burnout. This study supports that work.

When asked about teacher self-efficacy beliefs, the distinction between teacher self-efficacy and personal accomplishment was conceptually difficult for the participants to understand, and many times when discussing their teacher self-efficacy beliefs, they referred to past events in which they judged their success, either positively or negatively. A good illustration of this is when Jason comments, “Mostly, [my sense of teacher self-efficacy] was really low…I remember a couple of different things. I remember hearing from the outside of my own voice, and being like, ‘What the heck are you saying?’” Although asked about his teacher self-efficacy, Jason is clearly evaluating his personal accomplishment in that particular moment. Another example comes from Susan, when she was discussing her teacher self-efficacy beliefs in terms of
instruction, management, and engagement, she states, “when any of those…are out of balance, when I’m feeling like I’m out of sorts in one of those areas, that’s when I want to pull back.” Clearly, she is evaluating past events and not future ones. And Sean explains, “I think that the feelings of emotional exhaustion and cynicism come from somewhere. Right? I think they come from the belief that you’re not doing a very good job.” This demonstrates a retrospective assessment of his performance. It is clear that he, too, has confounded teacher self-efficacy with personal accomplishment.

This is not to say, however, that the three participants did not exhibit teacher self-efficacy beliefs, but rather these beliefs are mediated through their sense of personal accomplishment. For example, Jason talks about teaching for eight years in a multi-age class and never feeling like he had his rhythm and was “not sure that [he] was truly pulling it off.” As a result, Jason experienced a negative sense of personal accomplishment. This impacted his future beliefs about his teacher self-efficacy, which is evident when he states, “So [I tried to] find that happy medium, to remind myself what [I was] doing well and…[t]o find the part that [I could] be proud of.” Had he been successful, Jason’s attempt to focus on what he does well would have helped to formulate a positive sense of teacher self-efficacy for future teaching events. Unfortunately, Jason’s low sense of personal accomplishment reinforced a low sense of teacher self-efficacy, making it impossible for him to imagine a positive outcome of his teaching. In addition, Jason had many negative experiences trying to teach language arts to a wide array of student abilities, and his sense of personal accomplishment in this area was very low. This impacted his teacher self-efficacy beliefs about his future ability to teach language arts. After his sabbatical year, Jason returned to the classroom with a high sense of teacher self-efficacy to implement a two-year plan to improve his language arts instruction. He had high hopes for the upcoming school
year, and threw himself into his work. Unfortunately, his grief from his sister-in-law’s death drained his emotional strength, leaving little left over for his teaching. Thus, Jason “tailspinned…right back into this classroom that ha[d] been really hard for [him].” He felt that he “should have known exactly what to do to teach language arts…but it wasn’t perfect.” Negative perceptions about his job performance, compounded by emotional exhaustion, led to low teacher self-efficacy beliefs and a pervasive sense that he could not “plan this new great thing that [he has] that [he] think[s] could work. It [was] not going to happen.”

Susan’s teacher self-efficacy beliefs are also mediated through her sense of personal accomplishment. When Susan experiences teaching as a failure to motivate her students, what she refers to as “classroom management,” she feels a lack of personal accomplishment. Moreover, this reinforces her teacher self-efficacy beliefs, which is evident when she states, “Nope, this group, they’re just not going to get through this unit.” Her low personal accomplishment reinforces her negative beliefs that she is not capable of influencing future student outcomes.

In contrast, Sean has a high sense of personal accomplishment. Therefore, Sean’s “opinion of [himself] as a teacher [is] strong,” which is indicative of his strong sense of teacher self-efficacy. Sean truly believes in his capabilities for instructing all students. This seems to demonstrate the protective effect accorded to teacher self-efficacy in the literature. Because Sean’s personal beliefs about his teacher self-efficacy are high, he does not experience teaching setbacks as threatening, and encounters relatively low burnout in the teaching context.

In the literature there are many questions regarding the directionality of burnout in relationship to teacher self-efficacy beliefs (Dicke et al., 2015; Klassen & Durksen, 2014; Hultell et al., 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). If we take the view that the
teacher is comprised of both cognitive and emotional dimensions, which exist simultaneously and are displayed as appraisals and judgments of job demands and notions about him or herself as a teacher, then teacher self-efficacy beliefs affect how a teacher positions him or herself in relation to students and job demands. More self-efficacious teachers will perceive challenging situations as less threatening than teachers with lower levels of teacher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Indeed much of the earlier research around teacher self-efficacy and burnout demonstrates that teacher self-efficacy impacts burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Evers et al., 2002; Friedman & Farber, 1992; Greenglass & Burke, 1988).

Two things problematize this research. First, because teachers live and work in within multiple contexts, which are always changing, it is logical that their teacher self-efficacy beliefs will also fluctuate in response to contextual factors (Siwatu, 2011; Klassen et al., 2011). Second, a teacher’s beliefs are always shifting in response to new affective and direct experiential knowledge. As is noted in the literature, teacher self-efficacy beliefs are the result of learning processes and are influenced by mastery experiences, physiological arousal, verbal persuasion, and vicarious experiences that arise within the teaching context (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Bandura, 1997). These occur during teaching tasks and affect one’s sense of personal accomplishment. Therefore, I believe that teacher self-efficacy and burnout have a reciprocal relationship mediated through a teacher’s perceptions of his or her personal accomplishment. As teaching tasks occur, a teacher judges him or herself to be successful or not. This judgment is influenced by teacher self-efficacy beliefs. However, perceived failure, particularly over time, can result in negative emotions, which lead to burnout, and result in negative beliefs about one’s abilities, which results in a lower sense of teacher self-efficacy. Thus, burnout and teacher self-efficacy impact each other.
This was evident in the Jason’s and Susan’s profiles. Both of these teachers began their teaching careers with high levels of teacher self-efficacy. Jason explains:

I had a fair amount of confidence going into my first year of teaching…I was pretty proud of what I was doing… I knew how to meet individual kids’ needs; I was able to really connect with students, and for the most part I believe I was teaching really well.

The first several years of Jason’s career were successful ones, which reinforced his high level of teacher self-efficacy. Unfortunately, changes at work and home increased Jason’s exhaustion, and he found himself less prepared for teaching. Over the next eight years, his sense of personal accomplishment fell, as evidenced by his increasing feelings of failure, which lowered his teacher self-efficacy beliefs and increased his emotional exhaustion. At this point, Jason no longer believed he had the capability to teach his students and impact their learning. The result of this cyclical pattern was burnout.

Susan, too, describes how she felt very self-efficacious when she first began teaching. In her words:

I knew the first week that [teaching] was a good fit…From the very beginning when I started teaching, I have connected very, very well with struggling students, kids who don’t do well, kids who don’t get along in class, kids who do not play school well…And I believe all kids can learn…I can explain anything. Anything. Just give me enough time to figure out how a student needs it. But I really do think anybody can learn.

Susan’s words demonstrate two things. First, her sense of teacher self-efficacy was high in the beginning of her career. Second, Susan maintains a general self-efficacy belief for teaching; her overall view of her general capability to reach students and impact their learning is high. Perhaps this is why she returns to teaching every fall, despite being extremely burned out over the course of the school year. And, indeed, Susan describes starting every school year hopeful for a successful year.
However, as is evident in her profile, Susan’s teacher self-efficacy beliefs for the work that she is currently doing with the students in her classroom is low. She admits that she is “less confident with [her] current group of students” and details times when she struggles to motivate and teach her students. Even though Susan begins each year with a high sense of teacher self-efficacy, as her students fail to meet her expectations and become increasingly uncooperative, her sense of personal accomplishment declines and her emotional exhaustion increases. Her successive failures also impact her teacher self-efficacy beliefs until she reaches the point where she no longer believes she can make a difference with her students, which further influences the level of emotional burnout she feels.

My participants’ profiles highlight the fact that there is a reciprocal relationship between burnout and teacher self-efficacy. Nonetheless, the question remains, why will some teachers experience burnout while others, in the same situation, will not? To answer this question, I turn to appraisal theory.

**Appraisal Theory: Teacher Beliefs, Perceptions, and Emotions**

As is evident throughout this analysis, teacher perception is an integral component to how teachers understand themselves in relation to others, job demands, and their environment, and it includes both a cognitive and an affective dimension (Zadra & Clore, 2011). Appraisal theory is the psychological supposition that emotions are a result of our perceptions, or evaluations, of a particular situation (de Sousa, 2017). This theory asserts that perception involves two distinct processes: a judgment of the situation, and the emotions they elicit (Smith & Lazarus, 1990; Roseman & Smith, 2001). For example, a teacher appraises a lesson as successful; therefore, she
feels happiness, excitement, or anticipation for the next lesson. Likewise, if a teacher judges a lesson negatively, then she may feel dejection, sadness, anger, or reluctance to try again.

In this premise, emotions are a response to interpretations of events; they are not a result of the events themselves (Chang, 2009). Appraisal occurs on two registers: the embodied (Zembylas, 2003), and the cognitive (Smith & Kirby, 2001). This is not to say that cognition implies deliberate intention; rather, an appraisal is a perception like vision or touch and operates at a low cognitive level (Roseman & Smith, 2001). Furthermore, Lazarus (1991) notes, appraisals can be conscious or unconscious. Kahneman’s (2011) work also proposes that there are two different processes involved in formulating judgments. The first is fast, intuitive, and emotional; the second is slow, deliberate, and logical. Moreover, he examines the pervasive influence of intuitive impressions on our thoughts and behavior, and details how people tend to rely on impressions, rarely employing the slower, more methodical approach to evaluating a situation. Therefore, teachers’ appraisals often occur in the immediacy of the teaching context and are frequently influenced by factors of which they are unaware.

Lazarus (1991) broke these factors into discrete categories: relevance (importance of the event), goal congruence (consistency with one’s goals), accountability (who is responsible for the event), coping potential (how well one can deal with the event), and future expectancy (how likely the event is to change in the future). The first two are especially important for determining the emotional impact of an incident or interaction (Chang, 2009). The more a teacher judges an incident or interaction to be important or not aligned with his or her goals, the greater the emotional impact the incident will have Lazarus, 1991; Chang, 2009). The remaining factors involve teachers’ evaluations of resources and options for coping (Lazarus, 1991). The intensity
and frequency of negative emotions that arise from appraisals contribute to a teacher’s emotional exhaustion and his or her ensuing feelings of burnout (Carson, 2006; Chang, 2009).

Much of the subsequent research on appraisals has focused on which factor produces which emotion (Chang, 2009). What is important for this study is that the most common emotions associated with teacher burnout are anxiety, frustration, anger, guilt, and shame (Chang, 2009; Sutton, 2007; Carson, 2007; Bullough, Young, & Draper, 2006; Van Veen, Sleegers, & Van de Ven, 2005; Zembylas, 2003; Weiner, 1995). To be sure, these emotions thread their ways through all of the teacher profiles.

It is possible to see how my participants’ appraisal of the five factors influences their emotional responses. For example, the importance of teaching and making a difference in students’ lives was highly relevant for all three participants. Thus, when they judge themselves to be unsuccessful, they experience extreme guilt. This was especially fraught for Susan, who strongly purports to care for her students, and in fact believes that she is the “only one who cares.” Therefore, Susan had a high degree of relevance for her relationships with students, and when it was not reciprocated, she felt an intense emotional response and experienced burnout.

Goal congruence is also important in determining the significance of an emotional encounter, and when the participants do not perceive the goals of the administration to be aligned with theirs, they feel frustration. This was most evident in Sean’s profile and his descriptions of the emotional toll that fighting back against district initiatives and administrative oversight exacts on his body. This led to Sean’s current feelings of burnout.

For my three participants, the question of accountability was also significant. Jason, in particular, felt extreme feelings of guilt for not meeting his students’ needs, while Susan became frustrated and angry with her students when she was not able to motivate them. Both believed

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18 For an exhaustive list of studies, please see Chang, 2009, pp. 205-209.
they are accountable for their students’ outcomes. Yet, their emotional responses differed as a function of the other characteristics that comprise their teacher self and their understanding of their professional responsibility towards students (Weiner, 1995). For example, Jason perceives that it is his professional duty to help students; therefore he believes he should have tried harder, resulting in guilt when he feels he relinquished this responsibility (Weiner, 1995). Susan, however, believes that students share the responsibility for their outcomes, and thus, she was frustrated and angry when they failed (Weiner, 1995).

Interestingly, in the beginning of his career, Sean experienced shame when he perceived that he did not have the toolbox to teach his students. This is evident by his refusal to share his struggles with his father. However, he now realizes that with most of the things that go wrong, he has very little control. He attributes this to perspective and experience:

I think I’ve become more seasoned. You think of what that word means: a seasoned teacher. You think of wood that’s seasoned. It stands up to the elements, and I just think that I don’t let those little things bother me anymore because now I know that nothing is permanent, nothing last forever.

This outlook helps to keep Sean’s appraisals of a situation manageable; little ruffles him in the teaching context. It clearly demonstrates his belief that not only is he not responsible for the negative aspects of teaching, but also that he has the ability to cope and the awareness that nothing lasts forever. Stressful situations are bound to change. Perhaps this is what his protects Sean from being overwhelmed by burnout and keeps him from disengaging with his students and work.

As these profiles demonstrate, the ways teachers perceive and evaluate events are filtered through their beliefs about the teaching profession, their capabilities, including teacher self-

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19 The difference between guilt and shame is best thought of as the difference between the perceived locus of control; guilt results when an individual perceives that he has the ability to control the situation, whereas with shame, the individual perceives the situation is uncontrollable (Chang, 2009).
efficacy beliefs, and their environment (Gu et al., 2006; Day, 2005; Woods, 1999). When engaging in a teaching activity, these dimensions are key organizing constructs for appraisals; in short, guideposts that provide directionality to teachers’ thoughts and emotions (Schutz et al., 2007) and directly impact emotional exhaustion and burnout (Chang, 2009; Carson, 2006). The reverse relationship, whereby emotions influence beliefs also occurs (Frijda, Mamstead, & Bem, 2000). In fact, Ashton & Gregoire, 2003 contend that emotions are integral to belief change. If schools can influence a teacher’s experience of positive emotions, it may be possible to impact his or her sense of teacher self-efficacy and to protect against burnout. This has important implications for helping teachers to develop coping strategies, which I discuss in more detail in the final chapter.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examined burnout as a psychological construct and its relationship to teacher self-efficacy. I started by summarizing the three components of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and cynicism, and personal accomplishment as experienced by my participants. Next I discussed the relationship between burnout, personal accomplishment, and teacher self-efficacy beliefs. Finally, using the lens of appraisal theory, I demonstrated how my participants’ perceptions, appraisals, and emotions impact their experience of burnout.

My participants’ profiles indicate that there is a strong, reciprocal relationship between emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment: exhaustion can result in a lower sense of personal accomplishment, which then increases emotional exhaustion. Moreover, personal accomplishment is experienced as a separate construct from teacher self-efficacy; in fact, for my participants, personal accomplishment mediated their sense of teacher self-efficacy. And finally,
underlying all of my participants’ experiences were their perceptions and appraisals, which positioned them as more or less likely to experience burnout.

In the brief Interlude that follows, I summarize what we have learned about my three participants having grounded their experiences in the educational psychology constructs of burnout and teacher self-efficacy. The purpose of this Interlude is to set the stage for re-examining the data in Chapter Six with a more critical lens, linking my participants’ experiences to audit profiles of the auditee. My hope is to provide an historical and political context for understanding burnout.
“The auditee is undoubtedly a complex being simultaneously devious and depressed; she is skilled at games of compliance but exhausted and cynical about them too; she is nervous about the empty certificates of comfort that get produced, but she colludes in amplifying audit mandates in local settings; she fears the mediocritv of the auditors at the same time as she regrets their powerlessness to discipline the “really bad guys”; she loathes the time wasted in rituals of inspection but accepts that this is probably what “we deserve”; she sees the excellent and competent suffer as they attempt to deal with the demands of quality assurance at the same time as the idle and incompetent escape its worst excesses; she hears the rhetoric of excellence in official documents but lives a reality of decline; she takes notes after meetings with colleagues “just in case” and has more filing cabinets now than she did a few years ago; she knows the past was far from being a golden age but despairs of the iron cage of auditing; she knows the public accountability and stakeholder dialogue are good things but wonders why, after all her years of training, she is not trusted as an expert anymore” (Powers, 2003, pp. 199–200).

The empirical definition of burnout posits the phenomenon as the end result of chronic exposure to workplace stress comprising three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Jennet et al., 2003; Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout is thought to be most prevalent in the caregiving and service occupations where the interpersonal context is the core of the profession; Maslach (1985) discovered that the “emotions, motives, and values between provider and recipient are the underlying interpersonal context for burnout (Chang, 2009). Most of the existing research around burnout attempts to cognitively explain this phenomenon, focusing on causes, effects, to what it is related, and prevention. The purpose of this vast body of research has been to apply theory and science to explain why humans experience burnout the way they do both within and across settings (Ferreira, Amorim, Makinen, & Moura, 2016).

20 Please see Maslach et al., 2001 and Chang, 2009 for thorough discussions of the burnout literature.
As noted in the previous chapter, there are notable similarities across my participants’ profiles: exhaustion resulted in a lower sense of personal accomplishment, which then increased emotional exhaustion; personal accomplishment mediated their sense of teacher self-efficacy; and their appraisals positioned them as more or less likely to experience burnout. There is some value in this work: if schools can leverage emotions, it may be possible to help stave off burnout, or at least its worst manifestations (Williams, 2006; Ashton & Gregoire, 2003; Frijda et al., 2000). But this perspective does not take into account structural reasons for burnout while placing the burden on the individual to remedy her situation over which she retains very little control, a political project with echoes to neo-liberal solutions of personal crises of self-management (Powers, 1994). I take up this discussion in the following chapter.

Moreover, the way that educational psychology research delineates burnout and its related constructs, restricts discussion and analysis to the dimensions of the constructs under study and the workplace variables associated with the different dimensions (Bianchi, Truchot, Laurent, Brisson, & Schonfeld, 2014). As work by Bianchi et al. (2014), demonstrates, this is an insular (their term is circular) way of conducting research: whereby focusing on the core tenets of the empirical model, the investigator acts as if the problem of establishing burnout’s scope has already been solved. Another area of concern is that in this model either a participant is burned out or not; there is no middle ground. This perspective focuses on one end of a vast spectrum, missing the fine details of daily life that may point to unanticipated insights.

From my personal experience as a high school teacher, burnout was a feeling that quietly hummed in the background, dormant until it loudly burst into the present moment, making itself known at various and unpredictable intervals. Why at those particular moments did it rupture

21 Even the use of the word “leverage” takes on particular meaning in finance. To leverage is to re-allocate resources from one area to increase output in another. This process invariably leaves a lack of resources in the arena from which they were drawn.
onto the scene, only to temporarily recede or fade away? Why did burnout eventually morph into something I could no longer ignore? My participants talk about burnout as a condition of teaching. If so, what are the historical roots of burnout and how have they managed to entwine themselves so thoroughly around the intellectual and emotional experiences of teachers? Are teachers being conditioned to be burned out? Or is burnout a reasonable response to social, political, and economic factors impacting our schools?

These are all theoretical questions that remain unanswered by examining burnout through the lens of educational psychology. Using these questions as a contemplative guide, I turn to cultural anthropologists’ work around audit practices that began to emerge as a result of the rise of neo-liberal policies in the 1980s and 90s as a possible remedy. (Powers, 2003, 1994; Strathern, 2000; Shore & Wright, 2000). Beginning in the field of finance, audit practices quickly migrated into other domains, including education (Taubman, 2009; Salvio & Boldt, 2009, 2004; Gill, 2009). Much of this work is a critique of the historical and political developments that created the current climate within which such practices are able to flourish (Hall & Lamonte, 2013; Strathern, 2005; Powers, 2003, 1994). The main premise is that the transplantation of financial accounting practices into fields such as education have redefined accountability and transparency, as well as undermined professional autonomy for teachers – all of which has produced unintended dysfunctional consequences (Shore & Wright, 2015; Gill, 2009; Taubman, 2009).

I reflect now upon the quotation that opened this brief Interlude. This is a description of an individual experiencing audit practices in the workplace. In this illustration, I am reminded of the profiles of my participants; in fact, the parallels are unsettling: exhaustion, cynicism, powerlessness, increased inspection and accountability. Therefore, it is my intention in the
following chapter to use profiles of the auditee in service of reinterpreting my data from a more critical perspective. By linking audit profiles to my participants’ experiences of burnout, it is my hope to historicize and politicize the construct of burnout.
CHAPTER SIX
BEYOND BURNOUT: HISTORICIZING AND POLITICIZING THE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Spend an evening with a teenager or a young 20-something, and it is obvious that checking up with others, monitoring what others are doing via social media, and communicating every aspect of daily life is part of what it means to be a rational individual in today’s society. But as frustrating as it is to have to wait for my dinner to be photographed and posted on three different social media sites before I can tuck into my food, it is helpful to remember that accountability is fundamental to human interaction and experience; it is part of everyday structures of reciprocity (Power, 1994). It is through the giving and monitoring of accounts that the fabric of social intercourse is maintained (Power, 1994). However, as Power (1994) notes, different communities have different practices of checking, depending upon what they are willing to trust and risk feeling vulnerable to.

The checking up on, or auditing of, accounts assumes concrete practices when society mistrusts or doubts a person’s or organization’s accounting of themselves (Power, 1994). Thus audit technologies are implemented to ensure the quality and accuracy of one’s accounts and transactions (Strathern, 2000). Although the discussion of audit practices brings to mind for many a stuffy office with a middle-aged man sitting behind a metal desk pouring over books, thus rendering the process of audit as a neutral, rational, and objective approach to the regulation of quality assurance, as Foucault points out, “seemingly dull, routine and bureaucratic practices
often have profound effects on social life (Shore & Wright, 2000, p. 57). Indeed, there is a large body of research that demonstrates that such practices are, in fact, new forms of governance and power (Taubman, 2009; Power, 2003, 1994; Strathern, 2000; Shore & Wright, 2000; Pels, 2000). One result of this new governmentality are new norms of conduct and professional behavior that render the individual as a self-regulating member of society, subject to on-going surveillance and audit (Shore & Wright, 2000; Pels, 2000).

This chapter takes up this body of research as a way to draw parallels between the experiences of my participants and the those of the audited teacher. As such, Part I of this chapter begins with a brief history of the rise of neo-liberal practices that created the conditions for the “explosion” of audit technologies, first in finance, and then across other professional fields (Power, 1994). Part of this discussion demonstrates how audit assumes new meanings and coercive functions when introduced into new arenas. I then specifically trace audit’s migration into the field of education and delineate its effects on both the teaching profession and teachers. Part II of this chapter looks more closely at descriptions of individuals experiencing audit. Working from psychological profiles of the auditee, I reinterpret my data to both historicize and politicize the experience of burnout.

**Historical Roots of Audit**

Audit practices have their roots in the field of financial management (Power, 2003, 1994; Shore & Wright, 2000). Shore and Wright (2000) proffer this dictionary definition of audit, which indicates the following:

1. Statement of account, balance sheet;
2. (From Late Medieval English) periodical settlement of accounts between landlord and tenants;
3. Official examination or verification;
4. Hearing, enquiry, judicial examination;
5. (Figurative) reckoning, settlement, especially Day of Judgment

As they note, these definitions stem from the Latin verb “audire” meaning “to hear,” and each definition includes a measure of scrutiny, examination, and judgment of one individual over another (p. 59). This is what Power (1994) refers to as “rituals of verification.” Additionally, what is implied within these definitions is a hierarchical relationship wherein one individual exerts power over the other (Shore & Wright, 2000).

Traditional usage of auditing practices was about checking financial accounts (Strathern, 2000). Located primarily within the realm of ‘old public management,’ it had what Power (2003) refers to as “low status” impact on the financial institutions being monitored (p. 186). In this articulation, bureaucratic hierarchies were responsible for the control of an organization, and audit practices were minor in scale, often no more than local bookkeeping exercises. Thus, auditing was technically necessary, but invisible and relatively neutral (Power, 2003).

Operationally, auditing had a relatively limited scope; it mostly constrained itself to account for the legal and managerial regularity of transactions (Power, 2003). To understand the transformation of the term audit to indicate contemporary practices of formalized, intensive accounting focused on efficiency, effectiveness, performance, and value (Power, 2003), I first discuss the neo-liberal economic policies that emerged during the 1980s.
Neo-liberal Influence

Neo-liberalism has as its roots Western laissez-faire economic policies of the mid-twentieth century when the theories of Milton Friedman promulgated the belief that unfettered markets offered the best hope for humankind (Taubman, 2009). During the Thatcher and Reagan administrations, the West witnessed a resurgent faith in the power of the markets to secure efficient outcomes (Hall & Lamont, 2012). The result was a “wide-ranging shift in prevalent ideas and social relationships privileging more intense market competition, less state intervention, and an entrepreneurial orientation to action” (Hall & Lamont, 2012, p. 8). This led to a declining confidence in the state to regulate and allocate resources efficiently, thus forcing governments to rethink how they deliver public services (Hall & Lamont, 2012).

Shore & Wright (2000) note that these organizing principles also impacted the conduct of other sectors of society and individuals through the inculcation of the norms and values of the free-market. First, neo-liberalism led to structural transformations, including corporatization and privatization, whereby organizations became connected to principles of business and the economy (Gill, 2009). This led to a decrease in the state’s fiduciary responsibility to its citizens (Harvey, 2007). Ironically, as states withdrew from former realms of responsibility (ie: education, housing, and healthcare), they often dictated standards and established external regulatory mechanisms by which these sectors would be evaluated (Rinehart, 2016; Shore & Wright, 2000).

Second, the tenor of work itself changed, including a new emphasis on competition and individual responsibility (Hall & Lamont, 2012). Economic performance described the worth of the organization and of the individual; hard work was no longer enough; now one had to be a worker with high productivity using skills validated by the market (Hall & Lamont, 2012).
People were encouraged to think of themselves as individuals in competition with other individuals all over the planet (Friedman, 2006, as cited in Taubman, 2009). This led to a feeling of insecurity, a constant need for updating and reskilling in order to maintain one’s worth, and the commitment to work long hours so as not to fall behind (Gill, 2009).

And finally, with the focus on individuality, new forms of self-discipline emerged, whereby people thought of themselves as governed less by others and more by themselves (Hall & Lamont, 2012). As a result, individuals internalized the need for self-improvement and responsibility (Strathern, 2005) through endless self-monitoring, planning, and prioritizing (Gill, 2009). Harvey (2007) summarizes:

Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse and has pervasive effects on ways of thought and political-economic practices to the point where it has become incorporated into the common sense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world (p. 23).

**The ‘Audit Explosion’**

Several scholars perceive the ‘explosion’ of the contemporary meaning of the term audit in the 1980s and 90s as a natural outgrowth of neo-liberal economic policies (Taubman, 2009; Shore, 2008; Apple, 2005). The term began to be used with more frequency within the context of finance as a response to scandals in the financial service industry (Power, 1994). It referred to a new display of accountability practices to reform fiscal management, which included neo-liberal preferences for exercising control through the enforced self-regulation regimes of accounting, budgetary control, auditing, and quality assurance (Power, 2003). Further, notions of performance became centered on cost-effectiveness and outcomes. As political demands clamored for greater accountability in other public service industries, the use and the
implementation of the term ‘audit,’ migrated to other domains of professional life\textsuperscript{22} (Shore & Wright, 2000).

As audit moved into other fields, the “fuzziness” of the notion of ‘checking up’ acquired new meanings and functions (Power, 2003), an example of what Strathern (1992) labeled the ‘domaining effect.’ As a result, the wholesale adoption of the language and norms of audit facilitated the new politics of government in which a “particular style of formalized accountability” has now become the “ruling principle” (Power, 1997, as cited in Shore & Wright, 2000, p. 60). Imported into other professional fields, audit is now associated with terms such as “public inspection, submission to scrutiny, rendering visible, measures of performance,” and standards (Shore & Wright, 2000, p. 59). Regardless of the fact that the precise meaning of each of these labels remains diverse and fluid, resulting in conceptual misunderstandings, this new language has created powerful new ways of thinking and acting.

Moreover, the term audit is not used descriptively to refer to precise practices, but normatively in the context of the demand for more accountability and control\textsuperscript{23} (Power, 1994). Auditing is always for something, and the discourse around it is aspirational (Power, 1994). Thus, the idea of audit shapes the public’s opinion of it as the practical solution to difficult problems, and its procedures present themselves as “rational, objective, and neutral, based on sound principles of management” (Shore & Wright, 2000). Nonetheless, the wide scale implementation of audit has had many unanticipated deleterious effects.

\textsuperscript{22} British anthropologists were among the first to critically notice the insidious creep of audit practices when the British government began the wide scale implementation of accountability strategies to solve perceived problems of the university (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Gill, 2009; Pels, 2000).

\textsuperscript{23} When I talk about the term “audit,” “audit technologies,” or “audit practices,” I am referring to both audit as the idea/concept that shapes the mission of practice as well as the concrete tasks and routines, which make up the world of the practitioner (Power, 1994).
First, it transformed organizations. In order to be audited, institutions had to become auditable (Power, 1994). This led to the expansion of external oversight bodies for inspection and monitoring, which established blueprints for “good” organizational processes based on performance objectives (Power, 2003). With this came the creation of management control systems incorporating both organizational self-observation and external control (Power, 2003). Now, instead of monitoring people, practices, and products, audit procedures were watching systems, what Power (2003) refers to as “the control of control,” a form of meta-regulation in which quality becomes subordinate to management system integrity (Power, 1999, p. 66). The problem with this is complex. Focusing on outcomes translates into pressure for continuous quality improvement (Shore & Wright, 2000). As Strathern (2005) notes:

[I]nformation an organization obtains about itself is information to be acted on – knowledge about its achievements becomes constitutive of its aims and objectives. When knowledge is pressed into the service of enhancement, the admonition to be explicit turns (self-) description into grounds for improvement (p. 465).

The consequence is that “the future is forecast as fragile”: unless organizations strive to improve, they will fail to meet their performance targets, targets by which they define themselves (Strathern, 2005).

Second these principles of audit are not, as they appear, politically innocent practices designed to promote transparency and efficiency, but are disciplinary, aimed at creating malleable, efficient, and docile employees (Shore, 2008).

The supposed ‘self-empowerment of this system rests upon a simultaneous imposition of external control from above and internalization of new norms so that individuals can continuously improve themselves. In short, external subjection and internal subjectification are combined so that individuals conduct themselves in terms of the norms through which they are governed. Audit thus becomes a political technology of the self; a means through which individuals actively and freely regulate their own conduct and thereby contribute to the government’s model of social order (Shore & Wright, 2000, pp. 61-62).
The effect of this has been to change the way that professionals conceptualize themselves and the work that they do: the auditee is a depersonalized economic resource whose productivity must be constantly monitored and improved (Shore & Wright, 2000). Under the guise of ‘empowerment’ and ‘autonomy’ individuals are enabled to ensure the quality of their performance by allowing for evaluation based on targets that they set for themselves (Shore & Wright, 2000). Thus, audit appears to be “open, participatory, and democratic” while obfuscating the hierarchical relationships and coercive practices it relies upon (Shore & Wright, 2000, p. 62).

And third is the creation of a new category of experts, consultants, and coaches who are charged with four different functions: the development of new frameworks for the measurement of individual and organizational performance; the establishment of institutional processes for implementing and assessing performance targets; the management and oversight of the data systems; and the training of employees in using data for self-improvement (Shore & Wright, 2000). The result of this was the consolidation of power from a distance. Yet this did little to alleviate the burden on individuals. Rather, while proclaiming to increase the autonomy of the individual, these processes simultaneously subjected her to surveillance from afar.

**Audit’s Impact on Teachers and Teaching**

As teachers’ work takes place within the public sphere, it is necessarily subject to the external political environment and all of its attendant discourses, attitudes, and understandings (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). This includes the importation of corporate models of management, which link the instrumentality of education to business and the economy (Gill, 2009). As such, in education, audit has become associated with a new cluster of terms: “performance, quality assurance, quality control, discipline, accreditation, accountability, transparency, efficiency,
effectiveness, value for money, responsibility, benchmarking, [best] practices, … stakeholder, and empowerment” (Shore & Wright, 2000, p. 59).

According to Taubman (2009), the impact of both neo-liberal policies and audit practices on teaching and teachers is best understood through the dual lenses of standards and accountability. As he traces in his book, *Teaching by Numbers: Deconstructing the Discourse of Standards and Accountability in Education*, standards and accountability rose to prominence as the solution to the public’s fear of the prevalence of various social problems: limited resources, racism, and classism. Instead of addressing these issues holistically, it became easier to hold teachers accountable for measuring up (or not) to specified standards, usually through the monitoring of their students’ standardized test scores (Taubman, 2014, 2009). Furthermore, the fears of some educators – of low status, dwindling resources, increased workload, lack of control, and imminent chaos” – also share some of the responsibility for shepherding in this wave of reform (Taubman, 2009, p. 107).

Standards operationalize neo-liberal and audit practices in the following ways:

- Standards remove central regulatory power from the immediate environment
- Standards are transportable and immutable; therefore, standards purport to be equitable in that everyone is held to the same standard
- Standards highlight particular problems and claim that they have the solutions
- Standards act as internal, self-regulatory mechanisms for teachers’ self-improvement

Because standards break down the work that teachers do into standardized and quantifiable parts, ‘best practices’ can thus be developed to define the skills that teachers need to have to achieve predetermined outcomes (Taubman, 2014, 2009). And, of course, standards change the

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workplace and its routines; for in order to determine how well people have achieved the standards, it is necessary to monitor and record individual performance to hold teachers accountable for student learning. This results in a host of new recordkeeping and surveillance techniques.

This process marginalizes the work of teachers to measurable outcomes (Acton & Glasgow, 2015), and is a type of “vulgar pragmatism” that results in a loss of professional authority (Salvio, 2004, p. 9). The inherent irony is that while promising to professionalize the work that teachers do, standards and accountability contribute to the loss of teachers’ former legitimacy as independent and academically trained experts (Pels, 2000). While held accountable, teachers are not included in the discussion about what is an educative experience (Salvio, 2004).

Further, the use of standards and accountability practices results in a “systemic culture of performativity,” leading to strategies of public surveillance, such as the publication of test scores, to enhance the performance of teachers through a politics of blame (Acton & Glasgow, 2015, p. 109). The result of this is three-fold. First, such experiences of being monitored and judged result in a high degree of professional uncertainty (Ball, 2003). According to Ball (2003), teachers can become “ontologically insecure: unsure whether [they] are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others” (p. 220). Second, teachers may experience an intensification of work due to either new regimes of paperwork as a result of the increased demand for more recordkeeping and transparency, or from a fear that they need to do more to keep up (Gill, 2009). Finally, standards and accountability result in a loss of professional autonomy as teachers are tacitly required to forego their sense of agency and professional
judgment in order to ‘teach to the test’; the expectation is that teachers whose students do not perform will be placed under more administrative scrutiny (Salvio, 2004).

What maintains this changing landscape of education is rationality itself. It is difficult to argue against the rhetoric of standards and accountability since its opposite would be to profess that one has no (or even worse – low) standards and remains unaccountable. Furthermore, this discourse rests on the belief that notions of good teaching can be identified and defined through “rational, enlightened thinking about how students learn, what best practices engage students so that learning is enjoyable and students are engaged in active inquiry and discovery on a daily basis” (Salvio, 2004, p. 19). However, this rationality “mediates the social relationships that constitute schooling, compromising people’s capacity to recognize and respond to the needs of others” (Acton & Glasgow, 2015, p. 108). The use of standards is to maintain the fiction of equality: if everything is standardized, then everyone has the same opportunities for achievement. Additionally, a teacher’s embrace of standards switches the focus from the social, political, and economic problems inherent in the larger society to the individual achievement of students based on performance indicators (Taubman, 2009). Both of these practices mask structural inequalities (Taubman, 2009).

As Acton and Glasgow (2015) suggest, neo-liberal ideology and the practices of audit are fundamentally at odds with the reasons many people choose to become teachers. Teachers teach because they are committed to the social purposes of schooling and are motivated by an ethical or moral desire to do good: to nurture children and “make a difference in their lives and help them achieve beyond what was previously possible – academically, socially, and emotionally” (Acton & Glasgow, 2015, p. 109). Salvio (2009) notes that the “lure” of “reform efforts” is “seductive” in that it “promises to recast the past” and to “make amends” (p. 3). This frequently
results in the experience of emotional tiredness caused by professional conflicts between teachers’ values and beliefs and those of their school community (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). Salvio (2009) explains it as “a sense of despair felt by many educators as they come to feel that the teaching life they once yearned for has been foreclosed upon” (p.3).

Perhaps the blame for this is best laid at the feet of neoliberal ideology within which the self-monitoring subject is rendered into a perpetual state of anxiety: anxiety about falling behind, missing something important, not measuring up, and letting one’s students down (Gill, 2009). It is important to note that such discourse is individualistic, a reflection of a privatized anxiety, and full of contempt for oneself, rather than focused on the systemic intrusion of marketplace values that force teachers to calculate their worth in quantifiable test scores (Gill, 2009). I close this section with the following quote:

Neoliberalism found fertile ground in [teachers] whose predispositions to work hard and do well meshed perfectly with its demands for autonomous, self-motivating, responsibilized subjects…The lack of resistance [to these practices]…is partly a result of these divisive, individualizing practices, of the silences around them, of the fact also that people are too exhausted to resist and furthermore do not know what to resist or how to do so (Gill, 2009, p. 241).

I now turn to the audit profiles.

The Experience of the Auditee

The Changing Nature of Work and the Workplace

“I am totally stressed at the moment, to be honest. Work is piling up and I’m just drowning. I don’t know when I’m going [to grade those papers]…I’m so late with it now, and I feel really bad that I’m letting [my students] down, but I literally never have a second…I mean, I had 115 emails yesterday and they all needed answering. I’m doing 16 hour days just trying to keep on top of it. I feel like I’m always late with everything, and my ‘to do’ list grows faster than I can cross things off it. It’s like one of those fungi in a horror movie that doubles in size every few hours! And I never ever have [the] chance to do any of my own work…Reading? What’s that? Thinking? No chance! I feel like I’m constantly stealing time from the kids, too – I’ll go off to check messages in the middle of a game of Monopoly or something. Sometimes
*I just feel like quitting. I’m sleeping really badly and it all feels completely out of control…*” (Gill, 2009, p. 465).

The above audit profile is excerpted from a transcript of a conversation that Gill (2009) had with a colleague. Although this occurred in the context of Gill’s work in a university setting, its parallels to the experiences of my participants is striking. For all three of them, teaching requires a lot, and they perceive their workload, and the exhaustion that accompanies it, as a natural part of the profession. As Sean says, “If you think that you’re done at 2:30 and you have summers off, you are in the wrong profession.” This feeling is echoed by the other two participants. For example, Jason is eloquent about “the incredible amount of time” he gave his job when he first started teaching, “often staying at work until 7, 8, 9, or sometimes 10 p.m. at night.” In addition, it was not unusual for him to work long hours at school over the weekends, frequently bringing his wife with him. This time was largely devoted only to Jason’s work as a classroom teacher. Therefore, he saw the time he spent on schoolwork as beneficial to him; it enabled him to hone his craft and create more engaging lessons for his students. He enjoyed this work, and he found it meaningful. The workload only became problematic after he had his first child, starting teaching a multiage class, and was subjected to numerous district initiatives. Suddenly, Jason was unable to devote large amounts of time right when he needed most. Jason points to these factors as the main contributors to his experiences of burnout.

Susan, too, talks extensively about the large amount of time she dedicates to lesson planning and grading. Prior to marriage, it was usual for her to spend an extra two-three hours at the end of the day and more time on the weekend working on her lessons. She describes it as being “sucked in” to teaching and teacher preparation. Despite feeling strongly that she’s only doing what a teacher is supposed to do, Susan finds it exhausting. In addition, the “sheer number of decisions” she makes on a daily basis wear her out. Notwithstanding the pervasive physical
and mental exhaustion that teaching elicits in Susan, she speaks about it in an accepting and
matter-of-fact way: it is part of the job and “it’s never going away.” The trick is to learn how to
“deal with it in all of its different forms.” Trying to balance what she perceives as the normal
demands of the job with her marriage is a complicating factor that has increased Susan’s stress
level.

Sean talks about the physicality of teaching; he compares the 2000 steps he makes in the
course of a normal summer’s day to the 2000 steps he takes by the end of second period during a
typical school day. He also notes the mental exhaustion that is the result of teaching and “being
on” all day. However, unlike Jason and Susan, Sean feels that he has learned to control his
teaching workload. He is thoughtful about the work he assigns and makes sure it is
“manageable” for him as well as beneficial for his students. It is everything else about teaching
that he cannot control. As he explains, over the years, “the amount of paperwork, the amount of
meetings, the amount of mandates, the amount of responsibilities, and the lack of authority
have…gotten worse.” Nevertheless, Sean believes that his “ability to deal with it has gotten
better.”

As Sean alludes to above, my three participants have each perceived that the nature and
volume of their work has undergone a radical transformation over the past several years.
Particularly telling is that they speak about their teaching careers in terms of past and present,
with the distinct sense that teaching “didn’t use to be this way” (Sean), the underlying
assumption is that things have become progressively more difficult. Within the context of this
discussion is their awareness that the various initiatives that their schools are undertaking is work
that is beyond the scope of teaching.
“I think I’m a bit too either addicted or compulsive about it or obsessive about it… I worry that I’m going to miss something that I ought to be attending to. I worry that if I leave it for a day, then I’m going to come back and then just have 60 or 70 emails at the end of the day… It is never ending. It’s like my To Do list” (Male professor cited in Gill, 2009, p. 472).

“A colleague asks me to examine his student’s PhD. I agonize for two days: I want to help out, it sounds like an interesting thesis, it feels important ethically and politically to do this stuff, and I know the student really wanted me as her examiner, but I am already examining two other PhDs that month. I’m behind on everything my mum’s ill, and I can feel I’m getting close to that place where I will collapse… Deep breath: I say ‘no, sorry, I can’t do it.’ I am immediately flooded with guilt. I feel a bit shabby, a little bit less than the human being I want to be; I try not to think about the student’s disappointment” (Gill, 2009, p. 474).

There is extensive research on both the intensification of teachers’ work and the transformation of the workplace in recent years (Taubman, 2009; Salvio, 2004; Gill, 2009; Apple, 2005). It is possible to connect this change back to the importation of neoliberal policies and audit practices (Gill, 2009; Taubman, 2009). As Gill (2009) notes, several key themes include individualization, insecurity, rapid technological transformation, and the constant need for reskilling, all of which are present in the profiles of the auditee and my participants. The above quotes highlight the transformation that has occurred in academia where work can feel like an endless to do list. My participants, too, have experienced the intensification of work in response to the relentless demands required by audit practices.

Jason noticed the change in the wake of No Child Left Behind (2001) legislation. In response to student test scores, his district adopted a series of new initiatives that increased his workload and performance expectations. In addition, Jason switched to teaching in a multiage classroom, which required a new pedagogical understanding about what it means to simultaneously teach two grades, but his district did not provide the time to develop new curriculum or to learn new instructional strategies. It was up to Jason to learn this on his own. Simultaneously, over the past ten years, Jason’s district has developed and implemented several new initiatives to try to raise student test scores, and more recently, to respond to the NH
Department of Education’s push toward competency-based education as a way to hold teachers and students accountable for learning. The tacit message to all teachers is that they are expected to be implementing them. In Jason’s words:

[The result is] all these [initiatives] that we’ve set out as a district, these programs that we’re trying to implement, things that we’re supposed to be doing…It’s so daunting and so overwhelming…and my school district acted like we were all doing [them]. I’m not doing them all…Yet no one cares, no one is paying attention, but if they really ask me if I’m doing my job, that answer is “no,” according to what I’ve been told to do. Then I feel like a fraud…

So [I tried to] find that happy medium, to remind myself what [I was] doing well and to recognize that not everybody is probably doing that…To find part that [I could] be proud of, I guess, is the best way to survive it, but when you’re in the thick of feeling like a failure, all you can see, all I could see was what I wasn’t doing…

Suddenly, Jason felt his workload increase dramatically. The immediate impact has been to increase Jason’s level of exhaustion as he struggles to learn new instructional and recordkeeping strategies.

Both Susan and Sean also speak to the intensification of their workloads in response to school-based initiatives. Susan talks about “all these other roles” that are expected of her in addition to teaching. For example, she describes in detail being required to be an advisor to her students, but helping her students figure out their next steps in high school absorbs a tremendous amount of “time and effort.” Sean, in particular, is very articulate about the escalation of record-keeping and accountability that “didn’t exist 18 years ago.” Sean explains how he feels that “over the years there are more and more big asks to do and [he] find[s] himself sometimes frustrated with the fact that [he] feel[s] less of a teacher and more of a paperwork pusher person.” Specifically, he mentions losing his common plan time to parent meetings and new district-wide special education requirements that have teachers taking on the work of special educators. Sean understands this in terms of the district trying to extract more labor from teachers in order to save
money. This is frustrating for Sean because it leaves little time for the work he feels is important. As in the case of Jason, these new requirements leave Susan and Sean more prone to physical and emotional exhaustion. Sean also entertains cynical beliefs towards his administration.

Susan and Sean also talk about the changing context of teaching, particularly the impact new technologies have on instruction and classroom management. Susan describes this change in terms of her students. As she notes:

Things I could get through with students 10-15 years ago, I just can’t seem to get through it. I don’t know what the difference is, but I can’t get through the same amount of material that I could get through with students before…And to some extent, I’m like, “Nope, this group, they’re just not going to get through this unit…

The kids I have now, they’re not biologically the same as 15 years ago…They have no handle of being bored. They don’t have downtime. They don’t have the creativity…And so I’m trying to find a classroom management plan that fits into an entertainment mind frame…because what worked 15 years ago may work, but it’s probably not as effective as other things now…And I’m going to have to keep reinventing it because the kids I’m getting in 15 years are going to be different than the kids I have now…That’s just exhausting.

Susan clearly sees this as a deficit in her students, and seems to unconsciously blame them for increasing her workload. As the audit literature notes, audit practices mediate social relationships to the point where teachers are so focused on student outcomes they are unable to recognize and respond to students’ needs (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). Because her students are “apathetic” and unresponsive to her attempts to improve their outcomes, Susan experiences increased stress and disengages from them.

Sean, too, notes that due to technology student interest has changed over the years. For example, “the poster stuff is pretty much out. Nobody does a poster anymore. But the kids will create videos for YouTube channels, or they’ll send…a link to their own website.” Although Sean spends a significant amount of time online searching for new instructional strategies that will engage his students, he does not view this negatively. Instead, he believes his workload is
something he has control over, and he is very deliberate in how he spends his time. Further, this represents the “art of teaching,” which is what Sean loves most about his job. As a result of these two perspectives about his work, Sean feels significantly less impacted by stress from the changing teaching context at the micro (classroom) level than Susan. However, at the macro level, Sean experiences the intensification of reform initiatives and his struggle to resist them as a depletion of his emotional energy.

The De/professionalization of Teachers

“She knows the public accountability and stakeholder dialogue are good things but wonders why after all her years of training, she is not trusted as an expert anymore” (Power, 2003, p. 200).

“The underpinning logic of policies that focus on narrow understandings of accountability, market competition within and between schools and the use of league tables is one that assumes that individual teachers and students are to blame for poor performance” (Acton & Glasgow, 2015, p. 109).

Embedded into this transformation are new indicators for teacher performativity and accountability (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Hall & Lamont, 2012; Ball, 2003). Hard work is no longer acceptable on its own (Hall & Lamont, 2012); now teachers are expected to be productive in the sense that they can positively impact student learning (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). But due to the erasure of trust (Shore & Wright, 2000), and the public’s anxiety about the economic futures of their children, teachers must be held publically accountable (Taubman, 2009). Thus, teachers’ performances are relegated to measurable outputs (Acton & Glasgow, 2015), and their effectiveness is evaluated based on student performance on standardized, high-stakes exams (Taubman, 2014). Further, rituals of verification become embedded in the logics of daily life: online gradebooks, data walls, common assessments, daily learning targets, exit tickets, etc.
short, best practices that promise to professionalize the teaching force by defining skills teachers need to be successful.

New accountability measures over the past years, have impacted all three participants. Since Susan is a foreign language teacher and Sean teaches social studies, neither have students who take standardized tests in their subject area. Susan does talk about the frustration of losing class time to the frequent testing her students undergo and how these interruptions make it “hard [for her] to stay consistent.” Furthermore, Sean notes that although “testing is doing in the job of education” because it “drains the life out of it,” he feels grateful that it does not directly impact him. However, Sean does feel an increased accountability that “did not exist eighteen years ago.”

First, district requirements regarding common assessments make him accountable directly to the school board. In addition, because of the online gradebook, his hyper-vigilant parents hold him accountable for student grades. Finally, a “top heavy” administration leaves him feeling as though people are “looking over [his] shoulder all of the time.” The result is an increased feeling that he is “on all the time” as his performance is monitored by the school board, parents, and administrators on a regular basis. Although Sean did not use the word ‘surveilled,’ his profile leaves little doubt that this is his experience.

Jason is the only one of the three who directly feels the impact of standardized testing. Because he teaches all subjects to his students, and for many years he taught the same students for two years in a row, his principal linked student outcomes to Jason’s performance. Jason recalls walking into faculty meetings immediately following the release of test scores; he would be greeted with either “Hey, you’re awesome,” or “You need to get your act together” depending upon how his students scored. The result, for Jason, was a feeling that he lived and died “by the sword.” He would be excited if the scores were strong or depressed when they were bad, but
underneath this, Jason believes that they did not “have a whole lot to do with [his] teaching from one year to the next.” This culture of performativity, in which teachers are expected to display continuous improvement based on student test scores was palpably felt by Jason. Although he colludes with these practices, he experiences tremendous anxiety and uncertainty as he knows student outcomes have little to do with him. At the same time, he lacks the language to resist: he has been told that these practices will improve his students’ learning, which aligns with his desire to be a good teacher.

Clearly accountability measures and their impact on performativity intensify stress and frustration, especially for Sean and Jason.

“She requires little management, but can be accorded the ‘autonomy’ to manage herself” (Gill, 2009, p. 469).

“[Teachers] strain against their loss of autonomy and bemoan the constant surveillance and emphasis on test scores and number crunching” (Taubman, 2014, p. 14).

Explicit in discussions about accountability is the use of data by teachers to bring their work in-line with performance standards established by others, and the implicit acceptance by teachers of this reality (Taubman, 2009). Through the measuring and self-monitoring of their own performance against standards set elsewhere, teachers become dependent upon a distant authority (Salvio, 2004) and contribute to the loss of their own autonomy (Gill, 2009). The irony is obvious: the very measures that promise to increase a teacher’s professional status contribute to her deprofessionalization for she is no longer positioned to render independent and meaningful decisions. Furthermore, Taubman (2009) points out that the roll-out of initiatives surrounding the implementation of standards and accountability measures often results in a “blizzard of directives that seem disconnected” (p. 94). Thus, the work of teachers is often ambiguous and confusing.
There is the pervasive sense that what a teacher does matters little; yet the language surrounding this work is highly fraught (Power, 2003). The result for many teachers are feelings of powerlessness and confusion around what is expected of them (Taubman, 2009). Thus, in the context of audit practices, the notion of teacher autonomy refers to the ability of a teacher to do her job as defined and monitored by others with limited help or direction, except what she can muster herself (Taubman, 2009). These themes are prevalent throughout my participants’ profiles.

Both Jason and Susan express some frustration with decisions made without their input. For example, Jason mentions “top down initiatives” in his district that have teachers “jumping through hoops.” However, he recognizes that some initiatives, like competencies, are state mandated, so the district “can’t not make that initiative, an initiative.” However, because school administrators did not provide clear and consistent information regarding these initiatives, Jason felt what Lortie (1975) terms “endemic uncertainty” about where he should focus his attention; Jason talks about this in terms of needing “survival skills” to figure out what is expected of him.

Susan also alludes to decisions that directly impact her teaching in which she has no direct say: schoolwide assemblies, special grade level programs, or extra recess. She experiences this as a negative conflict with her colleagues. Susan is a unique case in her school: as a foreign language teacher her students are held to high school expectations, earn high school credit, and are graded using high school competencies. Yet, Susan teaches in a middle school with different academic expectations and a different grading system. However, she is accountable to the French Department at the high school for her students’ achievement. Moreover, Susan is frustrated because her students are routinely pulled out of class for programs. Not only does Susan disagree with their purpose, she also rues the loss of class time since she needs to prepare her students for
French II at the high school. In addition, she describes feeling undermined by colleagues who do not seem to value or who question her concerns.

It is Sean, however, who directly talks about his loss of autonomy. In his words, “the whole data movement is really taking autonomy away from teachers. …[N]ow everyone has to do the same thing at the same time.” Whereas when he first started teaching, “teaching was an art, and teachers were told ‘Play to your strengths,’ …now [he] feel[s] like teaching has become a science.” He further mentions a district-wide committee he recently served on whose goal was to create a checklist of traits that made a good teacher. This list was to be used for formal observations of teachers, which has the potential to constrain how individual teachers teach. Sean strongly believes that this promotes conformity and impacts the work that he does in the classroom. Further, he discusses record-keeping that was never part of his job before and his district’s expectations for teachers to have “80% of...students get an 80% or higher on the common assessment to show that [they are] good teacher[s].” To Sean, this seems “arbitrary” and is “not what...teaching should be.” He is strongly antithetical to the “data movement,” and it causes him a great deal of frustration, which leads him to question whether or not he can do this for another ten years.

The difference between Jason and Susan’s experiences of constraints on their autonomy versus Sean’s is best explained by looking at how their experiences of teacher autonomy play out across meso (classroom) and macro (school) leveled contexts. Although Jason and Susan feel a loss of autonomy at the school level, ie: they are left out of decisions impacting the school as a whole, they both talk about being able to close their classroom doors and teach as they want. In contrast, Sean experiences district and school-based decisions as having a direct impact on his
work in the classroom. Because these initiatives are in direct conflict with Sean’s beliefs about teaching, he experiences them as a loss of autonomy.

“…Exhaustion, stress, overload, insomnia, anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt, guilt and out-of-placeness, fraudulence and fear of exposure…These feelings, these affective embodied experiences, occupy a strange position in relation to questions of secrecy and silence. They are at once ordinary and everyday yet at the same time remain largely secret and silenced in the public spaces of the academy. They are spoken in a different, less privileged register; they are the stuff of the chat in the corridor, coffee break conversations and intimate exchanges between friends, but not, it would seem, department meetings” (Gill, 2009, p. 465).

“The individualizing discourse devours us like a flesh-eating bacterium, producing its own toxic waste – shame: I am a fraud, I’m useless, I’m nothing…This affective response in turn is profoundly silencing and isolating – and how could it be otherwise; we don’t want to show our ugly failure and more than it might already be evident” (Gill, 2009, p. 478).

As the quotes indicate, for many teachers, the transformations in teaching have been isolating ones (Gill, 2009). As scholars note, the neoliberal ideology frames work in terms of the individual and competition; this creates a culture in which people are meant to be self-reliant, both judge and remedy to an imperfect world (Hall & Lamont, 2012). As a result, negative feelings are not made public, but suffered in silence as a naturalized condition of teaching. Perhaps, as Gill suggest, out of the shame of not being good enough, teachers remain silent.

Jason used the word “island” to describe both his school in relation to others in his district, and his position in relation to other teachers in his building. Jason felt as though the school itself did not have the resources to meet students’ needs, nor did he have grade-level colleagues on whom he could lean for support. As a result, Jason felt alone in his struggles, which emotionally impacted him. Soon Jason stopped “want[ing] to go to [his] classroom. It [wasn’t] a place that [he was] proud of, or feeling great about,” so [he] no longer wanted to be there. In the midst of these experiences, Jason found it difficult to advocate for himself because
“you feel you’re coming across as a whiner or something.” It is simply not culturally acceptable to be open and honest about one’s emotional experiences in the context of teaching, which contributed to his sense of isolation.

However, at the time of this study, Jason had a new principal, who he describes as “super supportive” and a “strong educational leader.” Jason credits the principal for empowering the faculty to implement initiatives in a meaningful and practical way. This is a change from his previous administrator, who was often unpredictable and lacked oversight. As Jason explains, under the new principal, faculty, student, and community morale has improved within the last year; he believes that they are all working toward a common goal. The frustration the community once felt has lifted, at least temporarily.

Excluded from grade-level meetings and decisions, Susan, too, feels isolated in her building. She explains:

I would appreciate more support from my colleagues. But my circumstances don’t put me into any particular team or group...[And] I don’t have any friends at my current building. So I miss that support because it does help when you have a couple people at the school [to talk to] because they just understand the circumstances so well.

Susan feels that she is “the weird one” in comparison to everyone else and finds her school “hostile.” As a result, Susan chooses to isolate herself as a way to emotionally protect herself from the uncaring attitude of others. Thus, for Susan, her “room is a refuge” where she can just “stay away from everybody.” Therefore, when Susan perceives that her instruction and classroom management are working well and her students are engaged, she feels relatively low levels of burnout; “the stress can happen, and [she] just kind of bounces back from it.” However, when those aspects of her teaching are not going well, the sanctity of Susan’s room is threatened and her burnout increases significantly.
Susan’s isolation is exacerbated by her administration; she finds her administrators to be on the whole unpredictable because “You don’t know what mood you’re going to get.” She also finds that the mood determines “much more so than any policy” what is going to happen in the building. As a result, she avoids her administrators, preferring to send emails, which she believes is “a safer way to go.” The difficulty for Susan is that she is trying to learn and use competencies as required by the high school. However, her administrators do not know how to help and support her, which she feels acutely. Even more problematic is her perceived lack of support from her colleagues. She is not an integral part of a team, so she feels isolated and friendless. In addition, she does not believe that anyone cares about her professional accomplishments. As a result, Susan has gone “into survival mode,” remaining as much as possible in her classroom to avoid interacting with them. Throughout her profile, it is evident that Susan palpably misses collegial support.

When Sean first began teaching, he, too, experienced his struggle to meet the demands of teaching as emotionally isolating. He felt very much alone and unsupported, which contributed to his decision to leave the profession for a few years. Now, however, he has a supportive group of colleagues, which helps mitigate his stress. Moreover, Sean also perceives of his room as a refuge from the ceaseless demands and negativity of his administrators. He explains, “I like going in my room and shutting the door and doing my thing.” Unfortunately, “once [he] step[s] outside that door, Lord knows what’s going to happen.” This feeling of inconsistency between teaching and administrative demands escalates Sean’s sense of emotional burnout. Although Sean recognizes that administrators are accountable to the district for implementing reforms aimed at improving student learning, he is vocal in regards to what he perceives as poor leadership. He describes in detail a top-down leadership team, which believes that teachers ought
to do as they are told. Because his administrators do not get along with each other, Sean finds them inconsistent, which makes it “emotionally hard” and “draining” to work with them. Teachers never know what to expect “because they can turn on a dime”; therefore, the faculty is “walking on eggshells.” For example, when an administrator walks into his room, Sean “immediately put[s] up [his] guard,” and asks whether or not he needs his union rep. The result, as Sean perceives it, is “a school in turmoil.” Fortunately for Sean, his colleagues are very supportive. What “keeps [him] going are the interpersonal relationships [he has] developed among [his] colleagues.” Sean believes that in “order to survive teaching, you really need the help of other teachers.”

Throughout my participants’ profiles is the pervasive sense that the intensification of their work has contributed to increasing the emotional burnout that each feels. In the following section, I discuss how the practices of audit contribute to my participants’ acceptance of the increased work routines and demands.

Audit and the Re-production of the Hardworking Teacher

“[Teachers] have been held responsible for racial problems in the U.S., for the increasing incarceration rates of minorities and the poor, for the purported failures of our students and workers in the past, for the assumed failures in the present, and for those projected in the future. We have been accused of incompetence, stupidity, and political indoctrination. We have been chastised for “dumbing down” the curriculum, for goldbricking on tenure, for teaching “Mickey Mouse” courses, for doing a disservice to poor and minority children, and for spewing out elitist folderol. If test scores are low, we haven't taught; if they are high, we are guilty of grade inflation. We are too theoretical or not theoretical enough. The language we use is too arcane and esoteric or simply the nonsense of “edu-speak.” Overall, we inadequately prepare our students and fail to educate our teachers” (Taubman, 2009, p. 138).

This quote demonstrates a prevailing belief in American society that teachers are lazy, incompetent “buffoons” (Taubman, 2009, p. 139). Yet the image of the good teacher is equally pervasive. As Grayson and Alvarez (2008) note, the norms of the teaching profession are clear:
to be selfless, to work long hours, and to give whatever it takes to make a difference in students’ lives. This is conveyed in popular culture through books, movies, and other forms of media.

From the classic 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle* to the more recent *Freedom Writers* (2007), the American cultural landscape is full of heroic teachers who engage in “sacrificial self-abnegation” (Hansen, 2011, p. 12), even to the detriment of their marriage, career, or health, all the while maintaining a tangible sense of hope. And indeed, the language of the selfless, dedicated teacher who “gives, gives, gives” runs throughout these teacher profiles. In Jason’s words:

One of the best things they do [at professional development meetings] is…to have another colleague show how he or she does it in their classroom. And you’re like, “Ah, wow. This person is amazing. I need to do that in my classroom.” But they’re doing that with language arts, and this other person is doing this in math. This person is doing this with social studies. And you’re saying, “I need to take what she does and what he does and put it all into my room.” …You start thinking you’re supposed to be the “every person” that you’re supposed to be the best of everything that there is. You just keep hearing that all the time as a teacher. You’re supposed to want to duplicate the best of everything you’ve ever seen. And that’s a big expectation to live up to.

As Taubman (2009) demonstrates, this dual image of the teacher, cast simultaneously as heroic and self-sacrificing while also portrayed as grossly negligent and in need of constant monitoring is ubiquitous from education policy discourse, to academia and journalistic portrayals of teachers. And it does far more insidious harm than merely produce hardworking teachers.

First, teachers teach for a reason. Thus, according to Pines (2000), teachers enter the profession with “very high hopes and expectations, high ego involvement, and passion” (p. 634), ready to find meaning and significance in the work that they do (Frankel, 1976). As previously noted in this chapter:

“Teachers value their work holistically. In becoming educators, they are likely to be committed to the social purposes of schooling. Often teachers’ reasons for entering the profession are based on nurturing children and…to make a difference in their lives and help them achieve beyond what was previously possible – academically, socially, and emotionally” (Acton & Glasgow, 2015, p. 109).
This is matched by fictionalized accounts of real teachers who overcame the odds to change students’ lives. Throughout the profiles of all three participants, it is possible to hear echoes of their attempts to find a sense of significance from their work (Pines, 2000). Perhaps as a way to describe how they envision themselves in relation to their work as teachers, all three participants use metaphors to frame their teaching practice in such a way as to ascribe meaning to their work. Jason is a ballplayer who wants to “hit home runs,” Susan a “super hero,” and Sean a “storyteller.” In the context of their profiles, they use these terms to describe the times when they do good work.

Second, there is a palpable sense that good teaching is not only more important than ever before, but a moral imperative (Taubman, 2014). For example:

More than ever before, it is imperative to have high-quality teachers. In today’s information economy, education has become the engine driving the future of the country and of our children. To obtain a decent job and support a family…[t]o compete in a global marketplace and sustain a democratic society, the United States requires the most educated population in history. For these reasons, the future is in the hands of the nation’s teachers. The quality of tomorrow will be no better than the quality of our teacher force (Levine, 2006, as cited in Taubman, 2009, p. 141).

This quote presents an “unrealistic and grandiose” view of teachers’ responsibilities (Taubman, 2009). Yet, it captures them in such a way as to make the work of teachers highly fraught: teachers are cast as the key to not just their students’ economic futures, but the country’s as a whole.

The result of this is the production of teachers who believe it is their duty to care enough and work hard enough to provide a great education to their students (Taubman, 2009). It also presents a partial justification as to why teachers take up the calling of ‘Best Practices,’ standards, and accountability (Taubman, 2009). Simply put, teachers concede their professional autonomy based on the fear that they will not succeed.
This may be described as a “trap of conscientiousness,” where audit practices socialize teachers into a “sense of obligation to meet all work demands to the best of their ability” (Campbell and Neill 1994, p. 223). All three participants express that they became teachers to be the best they could be. As Sean explains, being a good teacher means that he “can’t let go for even a second…[he has] to be on all the time.” It is this sense that he is constantly in a state of alert, ready for whatever comes his way, which leaves him physically and emotionally exhausted. For Jason, he acknowledges that he “didn’t sign-up to be mediocre,” and therefore feels like a “failure” when he is unable to measure up to district expectations. In addition, Susan went into teaching because she wanted “to do it well.” For her, this is an all-encompassing endeavor, because as Susan explains, she “can’t imagine how to do good teaching without putting in the time.” What these profiles reveal is that these teachers have internalized the image of the ideal teacher: dedicated and hardworking.

The problem with conscientiousness is that it cultivates a passive temperament (Nias, 1999). In the face of pressure to be a ‘high-quality’ teacher, to make a difference in students’ lives, and to avoid the shame of failure, teachers willingly acquiesce to the demands that they work hard to be “every person” (Taubman, 2009). Only in this way are teachers able to measure their self-worth (Pels, 2000). The two tasks of speaking out and finding one’s own moral center become secondary. This helps to partially explain why Jason and Susan passively accepted the increased workload that resulted from their district’s new initiatives. Even though Jason felt as though what his district was asking him to do was excessive, and at times divorced from his idea of good teaching, Jason felt as though he couldn’t be a whiner. Instead he buckled down and tried to work hard to be successful. Susan, too, felt the pressure to work hard under the new technologies of audit. Despite knowing that competencies were not helping her students’
learning, she worked tirelessly to implement them successfully. And when the going got tough, she hid in her room. Sean, however, has a different story. He did speak up about his administration’s abuse of power, the inadequacies of data-driven initiatives, and the instructional demands that teachers conform to one model of teaching. This work rendered him exhausted, but it was exhaustion with a purpose, which I elaborate on in the next section.

The result of all my participants’ dedication to their students and hard work is an ever-present exhaustion for all three participants. For Susan and Sean, they view burnout as a natural part of teaching. As Susan explains:

One of the biggest things about teaching – learning how to cope with burnout and how to cope with it in its different forms because it’s never going away. You’re always going to have kids who don’t want to be in your room, and parents who think you’re an idiot, and administrators who don’t know what you’re doing, and colleagues who are more burned out than you who are cynical about you trying. So you must have to find ways to get over it.

This rings true for Sean, too. He believes:

As a teacher, I think you view everything through the lens of burnout. If it goes unchecked, you view everything you do through that lens. Then you start to think this isn’t the right profession for me. [And] everything you do reinforces that belief. That this isn’t the right career for me…

For both Susan and Sean, burnout is a way of being, a natural entailment of being a teacher, and it is either something with which a teacher learns to cope, or it will drive him or her out of the profession.  

“I am haunted by questions that make me feel unreasonable. I can’t help but feel that despite the apparently reasonable assumptions underlying these initiatives, something is amiss. As I drive home in the evenings, I wonder what makes me feel so uneasy. What makes me feel as if a dangerous hour is upon us, that in fact, ramp up training is one manifestation of what Marx has described as ‘alienation in action,’ a painful and incoherent process through which a person experiences a profound sense of estrangement during the activity of production” (Salvio, 2004, p. 15).

25 Sean has developed strong coping strategies, which I address in the following section.
In order for work to be fulfilling, it must hold personal meaning. In this quote Salvio is reflecting upon the mandated Ramp up to Literacy program implemented in New York City public schools. One of the main critiques is that Ramp Up, like many of audit’s practices, assigns meaning to the curriculum from a distance. This renders teachers estranged from the rationality behind their work. For my participants, it was this sense that they were working hard, but pulling in the wrong direction that made them more prone to burnout.

For example, Jason describes eight years working in a multiage room, trying to implement a host of new initiatives, but not being able to “hit the ball out of the park.” The work that he was trying to accomplish was not personally fulfilling or meaningful for him. Jason did not agree with the way multiage classes were structured and felt that they were not addressing the needs of all of his students. Moreover, the myriad of new initiatives left him confused as to where to dedicate his energy and time. The result was a slow burning out, one of the main reasons he took a sabbatical. Susan believes that, like a superhero, she is capable of being an “amazing” teacher. However, she is struggling in her current teaching context; especially, with the use of competency-based assessment, which saps up much of her time. Additionally, once her students feel as though they cannot measure up to the standards, they stop working, leaving Susan “snappier” and “emotionally more up and down.” Furthermore, Sean describes being a storyteller as his strength as a teacher. Unfortunately, he finds that this is at odds with the curricular demands of his district, which dictate conformity, and which he fights “really hard.”

As I mentioned earlier, this work was exhausting, but it was purposeful. Sean believes that it is his moral obligation to hold the line and to protect those with less seniority from the many initiatives that would have teachers sign over their autonomy. This gives Sean a sense of fulfillment.
All of my participants had idealized the work that they wanted to do as teachers. When these images rubbed up against the realities of their job, the teachers experienced a loss of meaning in their work. Maslach et. al., (2001) suggest that the gap between individuals’ idealism and reality renders people more prone to burnout. When my participants no longer believed that their work was meaningful, they felt emotionally vulnerable.

Salvio (2009) discusses the loss of meaning as despair, or a devastating sense that the teaching life one had imagined was foreclosed upon. The result are feelings of loss and sadness. Despair is evident in my participants’ use of the terms “survive” and “survival” to describe working with burnout. At different moments in their careers, teaching was no longer about working with students, but surviving burnout caused by work intensification and a loss of meaning in their work. Second, the rhetorical questions the participants asked of themselves throughout the profiles indicate that they were aware of their loss of the idealism with which they had entered the profession. For Jason, when he was experiencing the depths of burnout, he wondered, “Am I that teacher who is just collecting a paycheck?” He felt like a “fraud,” and questioned, “What am I doing? Why am I on this path?” Susan, when she did not see her the results of her labor reflected in her students’ work, wondered, “I don’t even know why I’m trying…Why? Why am I trying so hard to get kids to learn?” And Sean asked, “Can I do this for another 10 years?” This demonstrates the negative, emotional impact that audit practices has on teachers and the meaning they find in their work.

Susan’s story is especially poignant as she views teaching as a “calling,” one in which she “lives for her students.” She relates this back to “teacher movies”; when she first started teaching, she wanted to be like the heroes/heroines she saw on the big screen. But over the years Susan has ontologically struggled with this. On the one hand she wants to be as selfless and
talented as the teachers portrayed in the movies, but on the other she realizes that this requires a surrendering of herself to the profession, and she’s not willing to do that. However, her profile clearly indicates that she struggles daily trying to find the balance between not overcommitting herself to the profession while still doing enough to consider herself a good teacher. This exacts an emotional toll on her well-being. As Woods (1999) noted, “teachers at most risk of stress are those with strong feelings of vocation” (p. 125). For them, personal identity is inextricably bound up with the teacher role. This is certainly true for Susan: teaching is such an essential part of her identity that she does not “know how to be anything but a teacher.” In addition, the more she tries to pull back from teaching, the emptier she feels because she does not have a personal identity. As she explains, “there really wasn’t anything there…I have to find more of myself to fill.” Perhaps this is the despair, manifested as grief, from a lost self-image as a teacher (Salvio, 2004). Certainly despair can increase feelings of emotional distress, and it is most evident when Susan talks about not liking herself much as a teacher because she is not being the best teacher she can be.

Although Susan’s case is the most extreme, all three participants experience the teaching as a trap of conscientiousness, which operates here in two mutually reinforcing ways. First, conscientiousness taps into teachers’ desires to work hard and produce good results. This magnifies the pressure on teachers to fulfill personal and professional expectations. For Susan and Jason, this came at the cost of their own well-being. Second, public portrayals of both the desperate need for high-quality teachers and the teaching profession as incompetent and lazy, increases emotional stress within teachers when they perceive that they are unable to meet those expectations. For my participants, this manifests as feelings of guilt, failure, and frustration.
Small Acts of Resistance

“In Mr. Rae’s and Ms. Meryl’s 9th grade classroom, students began one independent reading lesson with a brief demonstration presented by Ms. Meryl on attending to the images that are generated during reading – a process referred to as ‘visualization.’ This lesson was brief and included a discussion led by Ms. Meryl of the images that came to her as she read Living up the Street by Gary Soto. In this brief demonstration, however, Ms. Meryl departs in subtle ways from the ramp-up protocol. She is meant to ask students what they visualize when they read a particular passage, and she is meant to model this for them. Instead, she picks a set of passages that she finds difficult to visualize, a series of images that she can barely hold in her imagination given their horror” (Salvio, 2004, p. 23).

Despite the fact that most of my analysis thus far has focused on the negative aspects of audit, it is important to remember that audit is not the determining factor of society, but a symptom (Shore & Wright, 2015). Further, audit practices are not, per se, experienced as a monolithic system across institutions (Pels, 2000). There will be differences between the ways in which individuals experience, interpret, use, and remain faithful to audit technologies (Shore & Wright, 2015). This seems to suggest the possibility for resistance. Hall and Lamont (2012) conceptualize resistance as ‘social resilience’ and argue that it entails significant modification to individual behavior. Further, they believe that creating resilience is work that requires the social resources of a group to establish alternative repertoires for evaluating oneself not based on dominant discourse. Similarly, the above quote is part of Salvio’s (2004) description of two teachers simultaneously implementing and resisting the Ramp Up To Literacy program mandated by the New York City School Department. As Salvio (2004) explains: “[Teachers] simultaneously incorporate the loss or lack of professional integrity in their bodies and dis-incorporate the authority of the central administration” (p. 2). Her work with these teachers and their colleagues witnessed how they continually reframed the ramp-up program through establishing a community dedicated to maintaining their intellectual lives and commitments (Salvio, 2004).
Likewise, it is possible to see attempts at small acts of resistance running throughout my participants’ stories. The best place to examine this is in the context of how my participants establish and maintain boundaries between work and their personal lives. Boundary theory conjectures that individuals erect boundaries between life roles in order to manage their world (Nippert-Eng, 1996). How flexible or rigid these boundaries are will vary from person to person; it is how the individual’s perception of these boundaries, and whether or not they are in conflict with one’s personal and professional goals, that determine to what extent they contribute to or mitigate stress (Ezzedeen & Zikic, 2017; Westaby, Phillips, & Fowler, 2016). To connect the theory of boundary work to acts of resistance, I present Sean, Susan, and Jason as a clear case, a counter case, and a borderline case, respectively, to illustrate this point.26

As discussed earlier, all of my participants experienced the transformation of their work environments due to new technology (laptops, cell phones, iPads, etc.) and practices (online gradebooks, email, lesson planning using online technologies, etc.), which demand that teachers be “on all the time.” Sean, however, actively resists this push. For example, Sean claims he is the “master at compartmentalizing home and school.” Although Sean uses the word ‘compartmentalizing,’ it is clear that he is discussing boundary work. For example, during a 45-minute commute home, he might rant and rave about different stressors, but the minute he steps through his doorway, he “lock[s] it in a box” and keeps it there until he returns to work. Neither does he bring home to school; with a critically ill wife, he finds it emotionally easier to separate each space from the other. He explains, “each situation has its own stresses, and I just don’t want to have to deal with all of it at the same time. …And I think that has really helped with…burnout.” Furthermore, Sean believes that by shutting his classroom door, he can shut out

26 The notion of using cases to clarify characteristics of a theory is particular to conceptual analysis. A clear case is a model of the theory; a counter case is an example of what the case is not; and a borderline case contains traits from both the clear case and the counter case.
administrative requirements that attempt to regulate how he teaches. Although he complies with certain demands (ie: common assessments and online gradebooks), he refuses the idea that all of the social studies teachers ought to teach alike. Instead he “plays to his strengths” as a teacher in the classroom. He tells stories and controls the amount of work and types of assignments he gives to his students to make sure his workload is manageable. Although the literal act of shutting a door could be interpreted as a move to isolation rather than resistance, I don’t believe this is the case here. The work Sean does in his classroom is done in communal solidarity with his colleagues: discussed and validated by their opinions. As he notes:

“[W]hat kind of keeps me going are the interpersonal relationships that I have developed among my colleagues…the group of people I work with keeps me grounded…The fact that I have great colleagues is what helps get me over the cynicism, that gets me out of my own head to what I was thinking, into what I am doing.”

Sean clearly has a strong concept of self-agency. This is also evident when he talks about his experiences with burnout. Although he recognizes that burnout is something that teachers feel throughout their careers, he believes that it is just a matter of learning how to deal with it. For example, when Sean begins to feel burned out, he assumes he can control the situation to make it work for him without letting burnout “become the focus of [his] thinking.” Any factors he cannot control are not his responsibility. This boundary work is a coping skill, which allows Sean to use the concept of professional boundaries to rationalize his detachment from workplace stress variables. As a result, Sean’s subjective perception that he has agency over the stress in his life (and can detach from stress he cannot control) helps mitigate his emotional exhaustion. Sean’s case, then, is an example of both ‘social resilience’ (Hall & Lamont, 2012) and the re/incorporation of norms that Salvio (2004) points out as one type of resistance.

It is useful to compare Sean’s experiences with Susan’s, who, it could be argued, is boundaryless. Although she intellectually separates work and home, the emotional strain of each
spills over into the other with the effect that any boundaries between the two are blurred. This is due, in large part, to her inability to balance the two domains despite recognizing that she experiences less burnout and is happier when she does. Furthermore, it is evident throughout her profile that Susan would like to segment the demands of her school life from her home life, but she remains ambivalent about doing so. In her words, “either I am going to dislike myself as a teacher [because] I’m not doing enough as a teacher, or I’m going to dislike myself as a wife because I’m not doing enough as a wife.” Although Susan says she wants to prioritize her role as a wife over her role as a teacher, she also claims that she does not know who she is when she is not a teacher. She perceives herself primarily as a teacher (“That’s what I am.”), so her attempt to be both teacher and wife are unsuccessful. It is clear that Susan has incorporated the myth of audit that teachers must be self-sacrificing to the point where her work is prioritized over her personal life, despite the fact that it causes tension between her and her husband. In this sense, teaching and the practices of audit are a totalizing experience for her. It renders her subject to the demands of her school with no sense of agency to engage in alternative acts. Even when Susan talks about her room as a refuge, it is impossible to view it as a site for resistance. Susan shuts her door to hide in her room to get away from others; the experience is profoundly isolating. Nor does Susan have any colleagues on whom she can rely for support. In addition, this isolation reinforces existing practices rather than creates space for alternative ones. As a result, her emotional burnout is an all-encompassing experience.

Finally I turn to Jason who has a more integrated approach to home and school. Throughout his professional career, Jason’s boundary management was integrated, and he transitioned easily between work and home. For example, earlier in his career, Jason regularly brought his wife to school and talked to her extensively about his students. Furthermore, Jason
resides within the community where he teaches, and frequently mentions attending his students’ soccer games and running into parents around town. The porous nature of his boundary work was not a negative factor for Jason because it matched how he viewed his work as a successful teacher and involved community member. It was only when the strain of both school and home intensified that Jason felt the conflict between the demands of work and home. Because he was no longer able to successfully manage his work, Jason began to talk less about it at home, which in turn led to a loss of communication with his wife. In addition, the stress of having kids put pressure on him to spend less time at work.

Jason struggled for many years trying to balance the demands of each. This struggle led to an attempted act of resistance. After eight years of treading through the mire of school initiatives aimed at improving his students’ achievement and never feeling like he had the work under control, Jason took a sabbatical. This year off was an attempt to rediscover his intellectual life and restore balance between work and home demands. Unfortunately, the work he undertook during this year reinforced current best practices in his school district; thus when he returned, he found himself reimmersed in the same discourses and problems. The death of his sister-in-law tipped the scale and forced wholesale change.

Throughout his profile, Jason mentions how isolating his experiences were; he felt guilty he was a “failure,” and felt as though he had no one to talk to about these experiences. It was the death of his sister-in-law that gave him a “socially acceptable reason to seek help; at this time Jason experienced the support of his colleagues. Once he started talking openly about burnout and depression, he was amazed by how many others had similar experiences. This support can be understood as a type of social resilience in that his colleagues garnered administrative support to reorganize the structure of the school, which allowed Jason to resume teaching a single grade.
rather than a multiage class. However, I am cautious about labeling this as resistance for a couple of reasons. First, this support came after Jason publically experienced a deep depression; it was not proactive like Sean’s experience of collegial support. Second, this support has not addressed the audit-based school initiatives that led to Jason’s burnout, rather its drumbeat continues to roll along. It makes me wonder about the ‘fragile future’ ahead.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this chapter was to draw parallels between the experiences of my participants and those of the audited teacher as a way to historicize and politicize their profiles. By first tracing audit’s rise from neo-liberal economic policies, I was able to demonstrate how education has been influenced by the importation of accountability practices based on the rationality of the free market (Shore & Wright, 2000). The experience of this has been the creation of new forms of regulation and surveillance, which render teachers more uncertain, anxious, and exhausted (Apple, 2005). I then discussed my participants’ experiences in terms of audit practices by investigating four themes that are prevalent throughout their profiles: The Changing Nature of Work and the Workplace, The De/professionalization of Teachers, Audit and the Re-production of the Hardworking Teacher, and Small Acts of Resistance. This analysis enabled me to reconceptualize burnout as a response to audit practices, which make them vulnerable to burnout.
CHAPTER SEVEN:
REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

In Review

This study is the result of my awareness of the negative impact burnout continues to have on teachers and the teaching profession. Despite the seemingly exhaustive treatment burnout has received in the educational psychology literature, teacher burnout remains a relevant topic for several reasons. Foremost, high levels of burnout characterize the teaching profession, with teachers reporting more burnout than workers in other occupations (Chang, 2009; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Maslach et al., 2001). Second, burnout has been linked to perceived ill health (Milfont, Ameratunga, Robinson, & Merry, 2008; Hakanen et al., 2006; Bauer, Stamm, Virnich, Wissing, Muller, Wirsching, & Schaarschmidt, 2006), excessive absenteeism (Friedman, 1991), and poor job performance (Chang, 2009), all of which negatively impact the learning environment (Whitaker et al., 2015; Zhang & Sapp, 2009; Stoel & Thant, 2002).

This study is also a product of my own experience. I had entered the teaching profession as a young, idealistic individual with stereotypical high hopes of making a difference in the lives of my students. But over time the creep of administrative demands slowly enveloped most of the work I was doing until I was exhausted and cynical about my job. It took about ten years to realize what was happening, but the day I did, I made plans to leave the profession.
As I detailed in Chapter One, I had come to see burnout as the result of too many demands placed upon the body of the teacher. The result is an emotional response – the all-encompassing feeling of being emotionally depleted, which leads to a loss of motivation and commitment to teaching. The early body of research seemed to support my view. As Maslach (1982) first noticed, burnout frequently occurs in the caring professions, when individuals, full of energy, excited, and dedicated, give and give until there is nothing left. The internal flame literally dies out, leaving an erosion of engagement and even cynical feelings about one’s job (Maslach et al., 2001). However, subsequent research problematizes this simplistic view, suggesting that there is a myriad of variables that contribute to a teacher’s experience of burnout including coping skills (Carmona et al., 2006; Leiter, 1991), self-efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010), resiliency (Howard & Johnson, 2004), emotions (Carson, 2006), teacher appraisals (Chang, 2009), and motivation (Fernet et al., 2012). This study specifically aimed to explore the relationship between burnout and teacher self-efficacy.

A qualitative approach allowed me to examine the experiences of burnout for three NH middle school teachers. As the educational psychology literature notes, since the mid-1970s most research around teacher self-efficacy and burnout has been quantitative and based on correlational and cross-sectional data derived from self-report surveys (Blasé, 1986; Schonfeld & Santiago, 1994). What is missing from this body of literature are the personal experiences, thoughts, and reactions of research participants (Mazzola et al., 2011). In addition, researchers note that the exact nature of the relationship between burnout and teacher self-efficacy is often masked in quantitative studies (Klassen & Durksen, 2014). Therefore, it is important to investigate these constructs qualitatively to try to capture the full experience of stress, burnout, and teacher self-efficacy beliefs.
Indeed, in-depth interviews further enabled me to explore the relationship between the three dimensions of burnout and teacher self-efficacy. As discussed in Chapter Five, my participants’ responses indicate that there is a strong, cyclical relationship between emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment: exhaustion can result in a lower sense of personal accomplishment, which then increases emotional exhaustion. Moreover, personal accomplishment is experienced as a separate construct from teacher self-efficacy; in fact, for my participants, personal accomplishment mediates their sense of teacher self-efficacy. And finally, underlying all of my participants’ experiences are their perceptions and appraisals, which position them as more or less likely to experience burnout.

Throughout all of my participants’ profiles was the palpable sense that the very nature of teaching has changed. It is this change that led to the intensification of their work and the transformation of their teaching environment. Even though the burnout literature is responsive to workplace variables that contribute to burnout, it nonetheless ignores the historical and political dimensions of the experience. Although my participants could describe the intensification of administrative incursions into their classroom space, what is missing from this analysis are the structural reasons that many teachers experience burnout. Questions remain such as: Why do people become burned out when they do? Is burnout a response to particular changes in the workplace? Are teachers being conditioned to be burned out? Or is burnout a reasonable response to social, political, and economic factors impacting our schools? Instead, the focus of much of the current research on burnout emphasizes the individual nature of the burnout experience, which places the burden on the individual to remedy her situation, over which she may have very little control. This is where I turned to the theory of audit to reframe and contextualize the experiences of my participants.
In the remainder of this chapter, I revisit my findings from Chapter Five. My intent is to re-examine the dimensions of burnout and its relationship to teacher self-efficacy using the language and theoretical lens of audit. The goal is to make explicit the intersection between these two bodies of research in order to demonstrate how our understanding of each assumes a richer texture when considered together. I then explore the limitations of my findings and suggest directions for future inquiry.

*Emotional Exhaustion*

I began Chapter Five by first discussing the emotional burnout that my participants experienced. As detailed throughout all three profiles, emotional exhaustion was an integral part of their teaching lives. Although there is acceptance on their part that teaching is supposed to entail hard work, it was when they had to spend time and effort pursuing work that was meaningless or unfulfilling that they experienced increased levels of stress. This work can be directly tied to audit practices adopted by their districts, which led to the transformation and intensification of their working environments. The result were feelings of uncertainty, anger, worry, fear, and sadness as all three tried to emotionally cope with these changes. In addition, all three participants discussed how failure and the subsequent feelings of guilt affected them and led to more emotional exhaustion. It was when they did not measure up to preconceived notions of what their performance ought to look like (based on student outcomes), that my participants felt guilty because they had failed to perform.

However, for Susan and Jason, not only were their experiences isolating ones with limited emotional support, but they also felt that they could not display their emotions. Jensen (2011) reminds us, “Neoliberalism entrains us to experience certain emotions over others,

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27 Sean experienced this pattern for three years when he first began teaching. Currently this is not his experience.
suggests rules for their expression, and even tries to define what one is ‘allowed’ to feel for.”

Although I originally explained this in terms of ‘display rules,’ I believe it is important to reconceptualize display rules to take into account the emotional demands of audit practices. Because audit establishes the possibilities for teachers’ experiences in the classroom, it only makes sense that emotions are likewise circumscribed. Ehrenreich (as cited in Jensen, 2011) maintains that neoliberalism cultivates an “affective labor of cheerfulness.” As a result, there is no place in schools for the worry, sadness, uncertainty, fear, and anger of my participants. To control these emotions is exhausting, especially for Jason and Susan. Therefore, I ask, what would it mean for teachers to recognize the emotional disorientation in their lives? Would it enable teachers to turn away from the forced cheerfulness and acknowledge the emotional labor in their work? Could teachers regain a sense of emotional equilibrium by understanding that their emotions are the result of external expectations rather than rising from a lack within themselves? And finally, can emotions work against the grain of neoliberal policies and audit practices to undo the discourse of rationality that naturalizes and cements their place within the classroom?

**Personal Accomplishment and Teacher Self-Efficacy**

This study finds that personal accomplishment, as expressed by my participants’ perceptions of “failure” or “success,” is negatively or positively related to emotional exhaustion. For Jason and Susan, it was the disconnect between their desire to be successful and the reality of their perceived failure that produced extreme emotional exhaustion. Jason described it as “a constant onslaught of disappointments” and feelings of guilt. Susan experienced failure when she was unable to motivate her students to meet the expectations as outlined by the competencies; she explained the result as a physical wearing out and as “losing [her] emotional strength.”
contrast, Sean rates his sense of personal accomplishment high, despite finding teaching exhausting. He strongly believes that he is a good teacher as evidenced by his students’ enjoyment of his class and parent and colleague support. Therefore, Sean feels that his efforts are rewarded.

Moreover, an interesting finding of this study is that teacher self-efficacy beliefs seem to be linked to personal accomplishment, as conceptualized by the participants’ perceived failure or success in the classroom, more than the other two dimensions of burnout. In fact, it appears that personal accomplishment mediates teacher self-efficacy beliefs for all three participants. They each describe having a high sense of teacher self-efficacy when they first began teaching, and in general, they do believe that they have, or should have, the capability to teach well. For example, the metaphors that my participants use to describe themselves when they are teaching well (ballplayer, superhero, storyteller) indicate they have a strong expectation to impact student learning in positive ways. However, Jason had eight years of cumulating experiences of failure, or reduced personal accomplishment, which lowered his sense of teacher self-efficacy to the point where he could not conceive of being able to teach all of his students what they needed to be successful. Susan discusses the renewal that she experiences over each summer, so she returns to school every fall, fresh and ready to start again. But over the course of each school year, successive failure lowers her sense of teacher self-efficacy until she no longer believes what she does will impact student learning. In contrast, Sean explains that he knows he will continue to be able to teach all of his students because of the successes he has experienced in the past. His teacher self-efficacy beliefs, mediated through a strong sense of personal accomplishment, remain high.
This begs an obvious question, why do Jason and Susan experience failure while Sean does not? Clearly all three participants are dedicated, hardworking, and knowledgeable in their respective subject areas, so why don’t all three experience a high sense of personal accomplishment? Perhaps the answer rests in both the nature of their work and how they each define success. As Chapter Six detailed, all three participants experienced the intensification of their work, which transformed their teaching environments. This is attributable to the incursion of audit practices into their schools. For Jason, his teaching is clearly circumscribed by the many different district initiatives, which all teachers are expected to implement. These initiatives are often vaguely delineated, and are so numerous that Jason doesn’t know where to prioritize his time. What Jason does understand is that these initiatives absorb a tremendous amount of his energy with very little personal reward, thus rendering him exhausted. Furthermore, success for Jason is defined by his students’ achievements on standardized test scores, the fluctuation of which, Jason believes is unrelated to his teaching. Thus, Jason has difficulty finding a purpose and meaning in doing this type of work.

Likewise, Susan’s teaching is constrained by audit practices. Her district requires the use of competency-based instruction and assessment for classes receiving high school credit, and Susan values high achievement based on these competencies. She talks about success in terms of students passing or failing, and she bemoans the fact that teachers in the high school will be judging her based on her students’ achievement. Therefore, students’ grades are the primary instructional target for Susan. She spends an exorbitant amount of time trying to raise them, and when they are low, she feels like she has failed. In addition, Susan has the sense that for many of students, school is a low priority due to the difficult lives they lead outside, which makes her task of teaching them seem impossible at times. Moreover, there is a vague understanding in her
school of what competencies are and how they should be used, and Susan does not feel validated or supported by her administration or colleagues. All of these factors contribute to her emotional burnout.

It is clear that audit practices have subsumed Jason’s and Susan’s teaching lives. Not only is their autonomy constrained by their compliance to school initiatives, but they also measure their worth as teachers by a narrow range of predetermined targets based on student outcomes. Where is their intellectual engagement? How can this work be fulfilling in a sustainable way?

Once again, in contrast, Sean has a different experience. Although it is evident that his district has adopted several policies which can be labeled ‘audit practices,’ Sean has managed to protect his teaching from being completely overrun by them. He shuts his door and teaches how he wants; he establishes explicit boundaries between the demands of audit and his personal life; and despite having to administer mandated assessments, Sean describes his success as a teacher in terms of his students’ “enjoyment.” Teaching remains a creative and fulfilling endeavor in Sean’s life.

**Teacher Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Appraisals**

My participants’ profiles demonstrate that teachers’ perceptions of the various contexts in which they live and work act as an interpretive framework through which they ascribe meaning to their experiences, and they entail an evaluative component (Gu & Day, 2006). Appraisals, which include affective and cognitive dimensions, evoke emotional responses (Roseman, 2001). Moreover, teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs affect their appraisals of the teaching context (Bandura, 1997). Teachers with higher self-efficacy are more confident and are more likely to persevere in the face of difficult challenges (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Guskey & Passaro 1994). Therefore,
there is much interest in positively impacting teacher self-efficacy beliefs through professional development opportunities (Palmer, 2011; Klassen et al., 2011; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009; Ross & Bruce, 2007; Gabriele & Joram, 2007).

If we were to focus only on the educational psychology constructs, it is certainly plausible to believe that we could ameliorate burnout by impacting teachers’ appraisals of the teaching context through mastery experiences. The logic looks like this: the more opportunities for success that an individual teacher has, the greater her feelings of personal accomplishment. In appraising her teaching as successful, we should expect to see a subsequent increase in her teacher self-efficacy beliefs, an increase in positive emotions, and a decrease in emotional exhaustion. If only the answer were this simple, then it ought to be easy enough to fashion professional development opportunities to engage teachers in mastery experiences, the success of which would entail a drop in teacher burnout. However, we know that half a million teachers leave the profession every year, more than in any other occupation, with many teachers citing work overload, loss of autonomy, teaching to the test, lack of administrative support, and a loss of meaning in their work as primary reasons for leaving (Fisher, 2011). Clearly something else is amiss here.

Digression

I want to digress for a moment and think about the two very different traditions of literature that this dissertation calls upon, that of education psychology and audit. Both bodies of work speak eloquently about the emotional impact on teachers due to their appraisals of the

Bandura (1997) posits that four types of experiences are associated with increasing self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological arousal. Because personal accomplishment and teacher self-efficacy were closely linked for my participants, I believe it is arguable that these four types of experiences will also increase an individual’s personal accomplishment.
constraints on their intellectual capabilities, which affects how they perceive themselves in relation to their work. However, they do so using very different language. Whereas educational psychology discusses this in terms of teacher self-efficacy, critics of audit talk about a loss of autonomy (Taubman, 2014). Here I use the term teacher self-efficacy to refer to a teacher’s “belief or conviction” that he or she has the capability to “influence how well students learn, even those who may be difficult or unmotivated” (Guskey & Passaro, 1994, 628). Whereas autonomy indicates the professional independence of teachers in school, especially the degree to which they can make decisions about what they teach to students and how they teach it.

The Greek roots of the word ‘autonomy’ are autos (the self) and nomos (pertaining to the law governing the self) (Parker, 2015). Foucault (1983) suggests that the autos is constructed by the nomos, which indicates that autonomy is not a private matter, but involves identifying challenges to social existence as “essential to the development and reconstruction of autonomy” (Parker, 2015, p. 20). Thus one’s interaction with society and its rules can restrain or enhance autonomy. Raaen (2011) believes that autonomy is best thought of as the authentic expression of one’s personal identity in contrast to a reflection of one’s social surroundings. This background is important because it positions autonomy as existing on a continuum between self-dependence and complete interdependence (Parker, 2015).

As many critics of audit argue, teacher autonomy is a crucial concept given today’s educational context (Taubman, 2009; Gill, 2009; Shore & Wright, 2000), in which teachers often feel their autonomy usurped by audit practices (Taubman, 2014). The difficulty is in finding a precise definition, but I begin with Hoyle and John (1995):

29 I owe much of this section to the work of Parker (2015), who presents a detailed definition of teacher autonomy through a solid review of the literature and consideration of its usage in current contexts.
a positive form of autonomy represents a teacher’s freedom to construct a personal pedagogy which entails a balance between personality, training, experience, and the requirements of the specific educational context (as cited in Parker, 2015, p. 21).

Another way to conceptualize this is the ability of the teacher to retain control over her work-related activities and theoretical knowledge (Power, 2015). But there is also the acknowledgment of autonomy existing “within a complex relation to the influence and authority of individuals, ideas, and ideals we reject or claim as our own” (Pitt, 2010, as cited in Parker, 2015, p. 21). It is also important to note that there is no concrete way to measure autonomy; instead it is based on teacher perceptions (Parker, 2015).

So why this digression? To begin, I think it’s worth highlighting a couple of similarities between teacher self-efficacy and autonomy. First, they are both predicated on teacher perceptions, so the extent to which teachers have teacher self-efficacy or autonomy is experienced by the individual teacher in an individual context. Both bodies of literature take up the work of creating conditions in which the teacher can perceive herself as a self-efficacious or autonomous individual. Second, they are both related to capacity beliefs.

**Teacher self-efficacy**: To what extent does a teacher believe she has the capacity to teach all students? (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

**Autonomy**: To what extent does a teacher believe she has the capacity and power to act in a certain way? (Garland, 1997).

And finally, teacher self-efficacy beliefs are related to emotional exhaustion, and a loss of autonomy has been linked to emotional tiredness (Acton & Glasgow, 2015).

As similar as these definitions are, there are a couple of important differences. On the one hand, teacher self-efficacy beliefs stand in relationship to a task; they are task specific. Although the work environment can complicate the task, either a teacher believes she can teach students or not, regardless of the students’ background or motivation. Within the literature of educational
psychology is the understanding that teacher self-efficacy beliefs are there to be taken, rather than created, by the teacher. By comparison, autonomy beliefs exist in a relationship to the social context and imply the act of finding the perfect equilibrium between society’s demands and one’s freedom and ability to act (Parker, 2015). This endows the teacher with the potential for agency. Moreover, teacher self-efficacy beliefs are something that can be externally manipulated and improved, independent of the social context. In contrast, improving autonomy beliefs is an active process of redefining oneself in relationship to society’s demands. And finally, teacher self-efficacy beliefs are focused on student outcomes whereas autonomy is focused on a teacher’s actions. In this sense, teacher self-efficacy beliefs can be understood as passive whereas autonomy is active. These are important distinctions because even if we impact teacher self-efficacy by providing mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, or physiological arousal, the reality of the teaching context has not substantially changed. Additionally, teacher self-efficacy beliefs, with their focus on student outcomes and teacher improvement, take up the practices of audit, whether intentional or not.

Even though teachers can be complicit in the stripping of their autonomy (Gill, 2009; Salvio, 2004), autonomy is a much more participatory orientation. As Ollin (2005) notes, the interplay between external factors and individual agency implies a space for individual action (Parker, 2015). Drawing upon Foucault’s (1980) theory of power, which he conceptualizes as a “fluid omnipresent network without restrictions” and “operational within everyday relations,” the potential power to act exists within every individual (Parker, 2015). As a corollary to this, in order for power to exist, there must be the possibility of resistance. This is not to understate the difficulties of resistance. Audit practices are disciplinary with the intent of producing docile, malleable, and efficient employees (Shore, 2008). Therefore, I close here by asking, Is it possible...
to reconceptualize teacher self-efficacy as teacher autonomy? What would be gained by making this distinction? How would focusing on autonomy rather than teacher self-efficacy impact a teacher’s appraisals? Can autonomy impact a teacher’s experience of burnout? If so, can autonomy be cultivated? What other conditions are needed to effectively resist audit practices?

**Future Directions and Limitations**

If we accept as a possibility that burnout is a reasonable response to neoliberal policies and audit practices, then it naturally follows that resisting audit practices may ameliorate burnout. As Gill (2009) notes, audit practices are both individualizing and totalizing, which makes concerted efforts to mitigate against audit’s incursion into our curricular space difficult. Although it is outside of the scope of this project to delineate paths of resistance, given the topic of this dissertation, there are a few suggestions worth noting.

First, Jensen’s (2011) call to action is for new ways of seeing, sensing, and thinking strategically that could lead toward creative, effective acts of resistance. As a way to counter neoliberalism’s all-encompassing rationality, which naturalizes and cements into place existing audit practices, Jensen locates this work in affective orientations. His purpose in doing so is to reorient us away from destructive acts of accountability and back towards “our connections to the places and people who sustain us.” Although conceptually compelling, Jensen leaves it up to his reader to imagine how to turn this theory into practice. With such a wide-open canvas upon which to do this work, I am wary of the possibility that this could be taken up by and incorporated into audit technologies as a disciplinary norm to regulate teachers’ emotions under the banner of student learning. Thus, I ask how can this work be done?
One possible solution is to focus on burnout’s conceptual opposite, well-being (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Hall & Lamont, 2012). Well-being is defined as the physical and psychological health, material sustenance, and sense of dignity and belonging needed to balance life challenges and people’s capacities for coping (Hall & Lamont, 2012). Acton and Glasgow (2015) note that neoliberal policies shape the work that teachers do by privileging competition, individualism, performance, and accountability—all of which threaten a teacher’s emotional well-being and may lead to burnout. They argue that in order to maintain well-being it is necessary to focus on the affective domain in teaching by foregrounding emotions, relationships, and personal accomplishments.

Hall & Lamont (2012) proffer an approach to cultivate well-being: through the creation of social resilience networks in schools. They define social resilience as members of a group coming together to sustain their well-being in the face of challenges to it. This work requires two actions: people must first understand the institutional and cultural scaffolding around them with an eye to the opportunities it offers and forecloses, and they must actively respond by crafting new images of themselves as a group, which may entail new ways of acting. It is important that this work is undertaken collaboratively and in communal solidarity with each other; as they note, strong collective identities bolsters self-concepts and reduces the psychological impact of adverse social experiences. Thus, social resilience is the result of active processes of securing information, logistical, and emotional support as a means to resist neoliberalism.

Taubman’s (2009) notion of professional study\textsuperscript{30} may be the perfect vehicle for this work. In contrast to professional development, professional study enables teachers to:

Promote the conditions and opportunities that will enable us to consider what teaching

\textsuperscript{30} Professional study is different than professional development. Whereas professional development focuses on continuous improvement based on teacher outcomes, professional study emphasizes the sustainability of a teaching life.
means, to examine our disciplines and other disciplines, to reflect on ourselves and our relationships with students, and to contemplate the kind of life we wish to live and into which we wish to usher our students.

The goal of professional study is to cultivate intellectual curiosity and companionship as a way to open access to possibilities for teachers to reclaim their authority (Taubman, 2014), and perhaps their autonomy. This is work that is worthy of future study to investigate its possibility as a form of social resilience.

One limitation to this work is the fact that if we eliminated audit practices, burnout would still exist. Therefore, I suggest that professional study needs to include conversations around reasonable expectations for teachers and the work that they do. Possible topics ought to encompass reducing teacher workloads, managing boundaries between personal and professional lives, and putting the locus of control on external factors: in short, topics that would help dedicated teachers to maintain both a sense of equilibrium and fulfillment in their work.

Additionally, these conversations need to include the emotional work of teachers. This would entail foregrounding the “inherent impossibility of education – that we can never know or predict what someone knows or thinks” (Taubman, 2014, p. 16). I imagine it would involve an emphasis on learning from failure, coping with complexity, and adjusting to adversity while asking questions such as “How did you feel during this situation? What were your emotions telling you when…? Or what did you do about these feelings? The juxtaposition of these questions and a pragmatic orientation to teaching links the realistic work of teachers and their subsequent emotions. By making this work visible, I believe we can cultivate the well-being of teachers.

Moreover, as Hall and Lamond (2012) and Taubman (2014) note, doing this work with others creates a more empathic community that can help keep educators grounded in the face of
burnout. This in itself is an act of resistance and is a project I imagine taking up in the future as a district administrator.

**In Closing**

As an educator and a future district administrator, preventing teacher burnout is a project that will remain close to my heart. Particularly in an era when assaults on public schools stem directly from the White House and the Secretary of Education, it is vital that we insulate our teachers from its effects. Beginning with *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the United States has obsessed over why other countries are seemingly outperforming us. The one piece of data they do not scrutinize is teacher workload. According to the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2014), the average secondary school teacher in the United States works 1,051 instructional hours per year. (Instructional hours are defined as the time spent in front of students; they do not include time spent planning, grading, or collaborating with other teachers.) In England it's 695 instructional hours; in Korea, 609 hours; in Finland, 553 hours; and in Japan, 510 hours.

Consider also the following statistics from Rankin at *Psychology Today* (2017):

- When surveyed, 73% of teachers reported they are "often" under stress (American Federation of Teachers, 2015)
- In a Met Life survey (2013), only 39% of teachers were satisfied with their job.
- And according to the National Union of Teachers (2013), 55% of teachers self-reported that they had a low or very low morale at work.

Clearly the antecedents that can result in burnout are a big part of the experiences of many public school teachers.
The value of this dissertation is in its historicizing and politicizing of the psychological constructs of burnout and teacher self-efficacy. As noted earlier, the purpose of educational psychology is to apply theory and science to explain why humans experience burnout the way they do both within and across settings (Ferreira, Amorim, Makinen, & Moura, 2016). But all too often, the way that this research talks about burnout and its related constructs limits the discussion to the constructs themselves (Bianchi, Truchot, Laurent, Brisson, & Schonfeld, 2014). Additionally, this perspective does not take into account structural reasons for burnout while placing the burden on the individual teacher to remedy her situation over which she retains very little control, a political project similar to neo-liberal solutions (Powers, 1994).

In fact, the similarities between my three cases and with psychological profiles of individuals experiencing audit makes it possible to link the experiences of my participants to those of the auditee. Therefore, the case can be made that burnout is exacerbated by current neoliberal policies and audit practices. In fact, it appears that such practices are conditioning teachers to be burned out.

Yet, the stories of these individual actors are not monolithic. The empirical life often contradicts the theoretical, and different individuals do respond in personal and unique ways depending upon a myriad of factors. Therein lies the power of the case study. By investing these constructs through qualitative interviews, it is possible to see individual acts of resistance. I look forward to many conversations about resisting audit practices in the future.

I end with a quote from Sean:

I think it’s perspective. That this too shall pass, you know? I think it was worse at the beginning when I first started teaching because I always assumed it was me…And now I realize that most of the things that go wrong I have very little control over...So I think that perspective, that comes with time and experience is really what gets me through…I think I’ve become more seasoned. You think of what that word means. A seasoned teacher. You think of wood that’s seasoned. It stands up to the elements and I just think
that I don’t let those little thing bother me anymore because now I know that nothing is permanent, nothing lasts forever. …Teachers are like farmers. We always think next year will be better…You get the summer vacation, and you go back, you try again, and you try harder. You learn a lot, and you do better and you just keep doing that until it’s okay.
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview One: Focused Life History

A. Introduce the Project
   1. Brief description of the project/time frames
   2. Consent Form and confidentiality

B. Interview Questions
   1. Impetus to Teach
      a. Please tell me a little about your career as a teacher. When did you begin teaching and where? At what schools have you taught, what subjects and kinds of students have you taught, and what are the highlights of your career? Tell me about your stress level at each school? What made/did not make these jobs stressful?
      b. At what point did you know that you wanted to be a teacher? How did it happen?
      c. Can you reconstruct for me how you viewed yourself as a student? What is your favorite memory? Your least favorite?
      d. Would you consider k-12 experiences to be formative for being a teacher? How so?
      e. Did you experience any teachers, in particular, that stand out for you? Good teachers? Bad teachers? What makes them stand out?
      f. How do you compare the way you teach to the ways that you were taught?
      g. Can you describe for me your teacher preparation program? How well did it prepare you to be a teacher?
      h. Tell me about yourself when you first began teaching. Can you reconstruct your first year of teaching? Your next couple of years? Can you describe your level of engagement with your work?
      i. Can you describe your involvement with your students when you first started teaching? Can you describe your involvement with your students over the course of your career?

   2. Teaching Philosophy
      a. What is your teaching philosophy when you first started teaching? What informed these beliefs? What is your teaching philosophy now? What informed these beliefs? If a change in philosophy: How do you explain this change?
      b. Can you give me a story of your teaching philosophy in action?
c. Describe for me how you view your role in regards to the needs of your student population. Needs relative to particular disability. Emotional needs. Cognitive needs. Are you comfortable and confident responding to these needs? Why/why not?

3. **Expectations for students**
   a. Describe your expectations for your students? Can you give me a story of your expectations in action?
   b. Can you tell me what informs your expectations? Prior experiences? Conversations with other teachers? Prior readings?
   c. How do you communicate your expectations to your students regarding classroom behavior? Academic performance? Life goals? Realizing potential?
   d. Can you describe your role in guiding your students toward realizing their potential or meeting goals? How much of the responsibility to you bear in this regard? Where does this belief come from?

4. **Expectations for Parents**
   a. Can you reconstruct your relationships with parents?
   b. How involved do you expect them to be with students’ academics?
   c. What informs your expectations? Prior experiences? Conversations with other teachers? Prior readings?
   d. How do you develop relationships with parents? What do relationships with a parent look like?

5. **Expectations for Peers**
   a. Can you reconstruct your relationships with your colleagues? What are your expectations for them?
   b. How would you describe faculty morale at school XXX?

6. **Expectations for Administration**
   a. Describe your relationship with your administration? How often do you meet with him/her? What is a typical conversation like?
   b. How would you describe the interactions faculty have with the administration?
   c. Tell me about the school culture? What role does the administration play in creating school culture?

7. **General Probing Questions**
   a. Can you tell me more about ____________?
   b. You said _____________. How did this impact your teaching?
   c. You mentioned _____________. Tell me what that was like for you.
   d. Can you describe ____________ in more detail for me?
   e. What was going on in your mind when ____________?

C. **Conclude**
   1. Any additional thoughts that you want to share?
   2. Confirm time and place of next interview.
   3. Thank participant.
Interview Two: Contemporary Experience

A. Introduction
   1. Any additional thoughts you want to add from the last interview?
   2. Introduce today’s topic

B. Interview Questions
   1. General Thoughts About Teaching
      a. What is it like for you to be a teacher?
      b. How does it compare to the expectations you had prior to teaching? Have you changed from the beginning of your career? Do you experience yourself differently as a teacher than you did at the beginning of your career?
      c. Describe for me a typical day/week that is most representative of your teaching experience. Describe the day/week in general. More specifically, what were the biggest demands or challenges that you experienced? How did you feel during this day/week?
      d. What is a good day of teaching? What happens on a day when you leave and say to yourself, “That was a good one…”? Bad day?

   2. Relationships
      a. Can you describe your relationship with your students? What is typical of a good relationship? A bad relationship? How important are these relationships to your work as a teacher?
      b. Your fellow teachers? What is typical of a good relationship? A bad relationship? How important are these relationships to your work as a teacher?
      c. Administrators? What is typical of a good relationship? A bad relationship? How important are these relationships to your work as a teacher?
      d. Parents and the broader community? What is typical of a good relationship? A bad relationship? How important are these relationships to your work as a teacher?

   3. Strain/Stress
      a. Describe your experience of the challenges or demands of teaching. Can you reconstruct a typical challenge or demand?
      b. What are your physical and emotional responses to these challenges and demands?
      c. Describe your feelings about the school culture? Describe its affect on you and your work?
      d. How would you describe your overall workload? Including time doing paperwork, extracurricular clubs, committees, etc? Can you reconstruct a busy day? Week?
      e. What kinds of supports are available to you? What supports have you found helpful? What kinds of supports do you feel that you need that are currently unavailable?
4. **Exhaustion**
a. Tell me about the physical demands of teaching. Does teaching physically and emotionally impact you? If yes, how? If no, why don’t you believe it does?
b. Does exhaustion influence or affect your working life, personal life? If yes, how? If no, why don’t you believe it does? Does exhaustion impact how you feel about yourself as a teacher? If yes, how? If no, why don’t you believe it does?
c. What causes exhaustion?
d. Can you think of a prolonged or entrenched experience of exhaustion? Can you reconstruct that experience?

5. **Depersonalization**
a. How would you describe your level of engagement with your work? Has this changed over time? If yes, how? If no, why not?
b. How would you describe your level of engagement with your students? How has this changed over time? If yes, how? If no, why not?
c. Think of a recent experience where you had negative feelings toward your students, colleagues, or administrators at work. Can you reconstruct that experience?

6. **Personal Accomplishment**
a. Do you think you can make a difference in a child’s life? In what way? Why do you think this is/is not so?
b. What are the principal things you are trying to accomplish as a teacher? How do you know if you are successful?
c. Can you describe a successful teacher? An unsuccessful teacher?
d. Think of a recent experience where you did not experience success at work. Can you reconstruct that experience?
e. Do you feel that other teachers around you and how they feel about teaching, affects your own feelings about teaching? How? Can you reconstruct of a specific example?
f. Does the administration impact how you view your work as a teacher? If yes, how? If no, why not?

7. **Results of Stress**
e. Has your life outside school influenced and been influenced by your work as a teacher? If yes, how? If no, why not?
f. In looking back at your career as a teacher, have you changed since your earliest years in the classroom? If yes, how? If no, why not?
a. Reconstruct what do you do at home to decompress and relax? How does this help you as a teacher?
b. Have you ever thought about leaving the profession? If so, what factors contributed to these thoughts? What factors convince you to stay in the profession?
c. How do you feel about yourself as a teacher?

8. **General Probing Questions**
a. Can you tell me more about _____________?
b. You said __________. How did this impact your teaching?

c. You mentioned ____. Tell me what that was like for you.

d. Can you describe _______ in more detail for me?

e. What was going on in your mind when ____________?

C. Conclude

1. Any additional thoughts that you want to share?
2. Confirm time and place of next interview.
3. Thank participant.

Interview 3: Reflection and Meaning Making

A. Introduction

1. Any additional thoughts you want to add from the last interview?
2. Introduce today’s topic, reviewing the notion of burnout to re-focus the participant on that particular aspect of her teaching experience.

B. Interview Questions: Reflection and Sense-making

1. The research defines burnout as consisting of three different aspects: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Can you describe your experience with each of these three aspects?

2. Given what you have reconstructed about your early life and current teaching experiences, how would you describe the role of burnout in your life?

3. Do you think that your professional education and experience impact your experience of burnout at work? If so, in what way?

4. How do you envision the next several years of your teaching career?

C. Conclude

1. Any additional thought that you want to share?
2. Confirm contact information and estimated time for sending transcripts.
3. Thank participant.
02-Nov-2016

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**IRB #:** 6552
**Study:** Middle School Teachers' Experiences of Burnout in NH Public Schools: A Case Study of Three Teachers
**Approval Date:** 31-Oct-2016

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Exempt as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 101(b). Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the document, *Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects*. This document is available at [http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources](http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources). Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

Upon completion of your study, please complete the enclosed Exempt Study Final Report form and return it to this office along with a report of your findings.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

[Signature]

Julie F. Simpson
Director

cc: File
Salvio, Paula
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