Meaningful Teaching:
An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of How
International School Teachers Experience Meaningful Work

A thesis by

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Abstract

Meaningful work has been studied extensively by organizational dynamics and psychology researchers, but rarely in an educational workplace setting, and never in the context of international schools. Meaningful work has been positively correlated with intrinsic motivation and engagement. A better understanding of how teachers experience meaning in their work may help to motivate and engage teachers and assist international school leaders in recruiting and retaining top teaching talent. This qualitative study of nine K-12 international school teachers examined how international educators experience meaningful work. All participants had significant experience teaching in international schools and self-identified as having “a rich sense of meaningful work”. An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology was employed to explore participants’ experiences and perceptions through semi-structured interviews. Five superordinate themes emerged from the data, revealing that participants experienced meaningful work through an alignment of personal and professional values, making a difference in the lives of students, the joys of creativity and growth through work, meaningful relationships, and a sense of empowerment from professional autonomy.

Key terms: meaningful work, meaning in work, international education, international educators, sensemaking, meaning-making
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celebration—with me.

I must also share my gratitude for the nine exceptional international educators who took part in this study. Thank you for sharing your experiences, aspirations, and passions with me. Your stories are what make this study matter.

Finally, to my parents, Dorothy and Michael Prakop: Your example of dedication and hard work is at the core of who I have become as an adult. You instilled in me a belief that determination would lead me anywhere I wanted. While my childhood dreams of becoming a major league baseball player failed to get much further than our backyard wiffleball field, I know you are proud that I have at least reached the major leagues of academia.
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Chapter I: Introduction

“Purpose and meaning are essential in helping a school become an effective learning community—a community of mind and heart” (Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 2).

Work is an essential component of an individual’s identity (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon, 2008). Maslow (1943) established work as a conduit through which people satisfy not only basic needs, but also higher order needs such as relationships, community, and a sense of purpose. In recent decades, a significant body of management, organizational dynamics, and psychology literature has confirmed that the satisfaction of higher order needs in the workplace supports intrinsic motivation, engagement, and productivity (e.g., Collins, 2001; Fullan, 2008; Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon, 2008). Moreover, talented people tend to seek out workplaces that offer more than financial ends, but also the opportunity to satisfy the human craving for meaningfulness (Chalofsky, 2010; Koloc, 2013). Corporations such as Google, Baird & Co., and Zappos have made use of these findings to create workplace environments that foster a sense of community, work-life balance, and personal growth (Great Places to Work, 2014).

Although the literature on meaningful work has enabled such companies to attract top talent and make their organizations more successful on a range of indicators, little is understood about meaningful work in an educational context, particularly in international schools. A better understanding of how international educators make sense of meaningful work might provide international school leaders with recommendations for attracting top talent and increase the intrinsic motivation and engagement of their faculty (see Significance of Research Problem, p. 14).

International schools offer a particularly relevant and consequential laboratory in which
to explore how teachers experience meaningful work. Unlike most national school systems where tenure and salary structure often keep teachers in the same school districts for decades, international school teachers change jobs regularly and often have several work experiences from which to compare (Bunnell, 2005). International schools also profile similarly in terms of salary, teaching staff and student population. Nevertheless, posts by international school teachers on the forum International Schools Review (ISR, 2014) reveal wide variations in the way they make sense of meaning derived from their work.

A teacher wrote of her experience as a teacher at one international school, “My experience has been extremely rewarding. . . . [The director] embraces the concept of a learning community . . . this is what makes teaching an engaging profession.” Another trumpeted, “The school's approach to service and community work is remarkable. . . . I do not think there is a school in the world that can compare with this” (ISR, 2014).

In contrast, others decry the lack of meaning in their work: “Staff morale is low and many are leaving or not planning to stay more than two years. The new appraisal system is a joke. . . . [Administration has] little integrity and will ‘suck up’ to parents and kids at any cost.” Another teacher offers this simple cost-benefit analysis of her work: “. . . [T]he exhaustion and effect on my health has been difficult to justify with dollar signs” (ISR, 2014). Such perspectives shed some light on how teachers perceive meaningful work—or conversely, perceive that their work is devoid of meaning.

Meaningful work means that individuals find personal significance in their work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). This study accepts the term meaningful work as synonymous with meaning in work. It means that an individual finds meaning in work as an expression of the global meaning and purpose that an individual finds in life (Chalofsky, 2010). It occurs when employees
perceive their work as important and purposeful (Steger & Dik, 2010; van Til Hayman, 2013). This definition has often been muddled in the literature as researchers discuss meaning at, from, and in work interchangeably (van Til Hayman, 2013). Consequently, a list of definitions distinguishing among various uses of the term has been included in Table 1 (p. 20) to provide clarity.

This study explores how experienced foreign-hire K-12 international schoolteachers experience meaningful work. The goal is to describe how this specific subset of educators, hired from abroad to work in international schools in countries around the world, experience meaningful work with the hope that findings will help international school teachers find more meaning in their work; enhance international school administrators’ capacity to support meaningful work among faculty; and help school leaders recruit and retain engaged, motivated, and committed teachers.

**Purpose Statement**

The literature provides an incomplete understanding of how teachers experience meaningful work. Employee meaning and fulfillment has been the subject of significant attention in the literature of psychology (e.g., Herzberg, 1974; Steger, Dik & Duffy, 2012; Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010), management (Chalofsky, 2010; Collins, 2001; Mautz, 2015), organizational dynamics (Turner & Lawrence, 1965; Oldham & Hackman, 2010), and organizational culture (Friedlander & Brown, 1974). Although the educational literature includes a significant number of studies on related topics such as teacher morale (Evans, 1992, 1998; Whitaker, Whitaker & Lumpa, 2000), engagement (Betoret, 2013; Skaalvik & Kaalvik, 2014) and motivation (Evans, 1998; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni & Steca, 2003), there is a dearth of research related specifically to the phenomenon of meaningful work as teachers.
experience it in an educational context. Research relevant to international schools is particularly scarce.

Whether teachers find meaning in their work has several important implications. Meaningful work has been linked to engagement (e.g., Geldenhuys, Laba & Venter, 2014) and intrinsic motivation in the workplace (e.g., Steger et al., 2012). Both engagement (Klassen, Yerdelen & Durksen, 2013) and motivation (Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, & Kaplan, 2007) among teachers have been linked to positive outcomes for students. A better understanding of how international school teachers experience meaningful work has the potential to inform leadership practices and policy decisions that facilitate or inhibit the development of engagement and intrinsic motivation among current faculty. Moreover, in an environment where the success of schools relies heavily on recruiting, it can also inform personnel decisions that can help, as Collins (2001) put it, “get the right people on the bus.”

Problem of practice. Three problems highlight the need to better understand how international school teachers experience meaningful work. First, an incomplete understanding exists about how to cultivate a sense of meaningful work among teachers, particularly in an international school context. This gap in the literature may offer international school leaders a limited capacity to harness benefits of meaningful work for teachers and students. Moreover, such an understanding could also offer recommendations for how international educators can enhance their capacity to experience meaning in their work. A second problem of practice is that international recruitment of international school teachers is a costly and competitive endeavor (Squire, 2001). Employees who find meaning in work are more likely to stay with an organization longer (Edmans, 2012), and thus schools may be able to reduce their costs of recruitment if more teachers are retained in their schools because they find their teachers find
meaning in their work. Furthermore, organizations that offer a sense of meaningful work are better equipped to attract talented employees (Kolok, 2013). Therefore, in the competitive environment of international school recruiting, this study could give international school leaders suggestions for making their schools more attractive to top teaching talent. A third problem of practice is the ethical imperative to provide workers with an opportunity to satisfy high-order needs through their work.

Untapped benefits for teachers and students. Meaningful work has been positively correlated with intrinsic motivation (Steger et al., 2012; Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010) and work engagement (Geldenhuys et al., 2014). Sergiovanni (2000) asserted that a sense of a meaningful work in educational environments supports commitment to the school, more connected relationships, increased effort, and heightened academic engagement for students. Still, the literature reveals little about how meaningful workplace perceptions are developed in the educational workplace, much less in the context of international schools. Both engagement (Klassen et al., 2013) and motivation (Roth et al., 2007) among teachers have been linked to positive outcomes for students. Sergiovanni (2000), Pasket (2007), Mueller and Hindin (2011), and others, have called for more research into how teachers make sense of their work.

Recruitment and retention of teachers. Another problem that is particularly relevant to international schools is the importance of hiring and retaining talented teachers. International schools face abnormally high turnover rates and expensive hiring costs. While exact turnover rates are difficult to quantify, one study of four US public school districts found that each teacher who leaves a school costs schools and districts nearly $10,000 (Barnes, Crowe & Shaefer, 2007). And these costs do not include costs of transportation, settling allowances, and housing incurred by many international schools. Moreover, the tenure of an international school teacher is 3.5
years (Bunnell, 2005). Indeed, one study showed that annual average of 80% of an international school’s total financial resources goes to staffing and new teachers account for a large chunk of these costs (Squire, 2001).

Along with the cost of hiring new teachers, international schools are also challenged to uphold high expectations for teaching and learning. The highly publicized struggles of the US public school system represent a cautionary tale for international school leaders. In 2010, less than a quarter of new American teachers had graduated in the top third of their college classes, compared to countries like South Korea and Finland where almost all teachers graduate near the top of their classes (Brill, 2011). In the relatively small and highly competitive pool of international schools, hiring the best teachers available is particularly important.

One solution to the challenges of hiring talented teachers and reducing turnover is cultivating a sense of meaningful work. The literature demonstrates that organizations that support meaningful work are better equipped to attract and keep talented employees (Edmans, 2012). There is significant evidence that a new generation of workers seeks different outcomes than its predecessors, and a meaningful workplace is emerging as a sought-after job outcome that talented recruits expect (Scroggins, 2008; Chalofsky, 2010). Nevertheless, most education reforms have focused on teacher pay and evaluation, two extrinsic motivators that can adversely affect performance, creativity, and ethical behavior in the workplace (Pink, 2009). Indeed, international school teachers report that “a happy working climate” and sense of “job challenge”—two characteristics of meaningful work—are more important factors to retention than financial incentives (Hardman, 2001). International school leaders need a better understanding of how teachers come to perceive their work as meaningful, if they are to recruit and retain top professionals in the midst of a shifting employment marketplace. Such an
understanding is particularly consequential for international school leaders who have significant autonomy over personnel decisions and are required to recruit new teachers with exceptional frequency, not to mention the particularly burdensome financial cost (e.g., recruitment, relocation costs) of hiring overseas teachers that they face (Squire, 2001).

**Ethical imperative of meaningful work.** There is an ethical element to this problem as well. Humanist theorists (e.g., Maslow, Stephens & Heil, 1998) have asserted that work, as an essential human enterprise, should include the capacity to fulfill the need for meaning. Dewey (2009) similarly complained, “How many of the employed are mere appendages to the machines which they operate!” (p. 29). Amabile (2008) articulates the problem in this way:

> People want to be a part of something meaningful. They want to feel pride in what they do and to be respected for it by their friends, family, and community. They want to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Most people have a yearning to somehow make the world better or do something to improve other people’s lives. Too many people are forced to leave these yearnings at home when they go to work. They see no meaning in their jobs and no real gratification when the day is done (p. 227).

The humanist perspective asserts that meaningful work is a human right (Yeoman, 2014). Sergiovanni (2000) uses Habermas’s distinction between *systemsworld* (i.e. the perspective of districts and governing bodies) and *lifeworld* (i.e., the perspective of individual stakeholders) to explain how the increasing institutionalization of education policy has made inroads into individual schools in such a way that divorces policy decisions from the interests of stakeholders, alienating teachers from their professional mission.

**Significance of Research Problem**

This problem is significant for two reasons that are particularly important for
international schools. First, there is evidence that students benefit when teachers demonstrate organizational outcomes influenced by meaningful work such as teacher engagement and intrinsic motivation (e.g., Roth et al., 2007). Second, the development of meaningful work among teachers can support the recruitment and retention of talented teaching professionals (e.g., Rosso et al., 2010).

“**Meaningful teaching**” and student success. The literature indicates that the cultivation of meaningful work among teachers may lead to significant benefits for students. Meaningful work research has primarily centered on the corporate arena. This research indicates that meaningful work tends to encourage productivity (Collins 2001; Fullan, 2008; Parker, 2008; Chalofsky, 2010). People who find meaning in their work tend to take ownership in the mission of the organization because it means something to them personally (Amabile & Kramer, 2012). Meaningful work predicts work engagement (Geldenhuys et al., 2014) and intrinsic motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Steger et al., 2012; Pinder, 2014). The education literature suggests that teachers who exhibit these qualities transfer them to their students (Roth et al., 2007; Klassen et al., 2013). As Sergiovanni (2002) summarized, “Meaningfulness leads to an elevated level of commitment to the school, greater effort, tighter connections for everyone, and more intensive academic engagement for students” (p. 4).

Following this view, a better understanding of how teachers make sense of their work has the potential to impact a wide array of student outcomes. “The benefits of teacher satisfaction for both teachers and pupils point to the importance of studying how teachers feel about work” (Bishay, 1996, p. 147). Nevertheless, how teachers make meaningful connections between their sense of self, sense of balance, and work life, has yet to be explored in depth, and this is why such a study is salient. Although the participants in this study will profile as international school
teachers, the study has the potential to generalize to the greater body of educational research by offering a narrative of how teachers experience meaningful work.

**Recruiting and retaining teaching talent in an “age of fulfillment.”** A second significance of this research involves recruitment and retention. This aspect of the study is particularly relevant for international school leaders who face particularly high staff turnover and hiring costs. International schools that cultivate meaningful work may be better prepared to recruit a new generation of young professionals who are increasingly intent on launching careers that are connected to their values and ideals as well as retain talented teachers for longer.

As we emerge from the industrial era—a time when managers concerned themselves with efficiency above creativity—organizations are looking to a new paradigm in order to attract and inspire top talent (Chalofsky, 2010). Krznaric (2013) calls this the “age of fulfillment.” The rapid spread of globalization and technological development have changed the dynamics between home life and work life, leading employees to seek value, support, and meaning on the job (van den Huevel, Demerouti, Schreurs, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2009). In short, talented professionals are increasingly seeking work that offers purpose and meaning (Koloc, 2013). Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon (2008) pointed out that there has been a surge in college students’ interest in careers that address “clear public needs” and a decline in those primarily offering extrinsic motivators such as pay (p. 253). As Koloc (2013) explained, people who have already achieved a degree of success and wealth look for work to give them a sense of purpose. This trend began in the 1980s when many employees, with basic needs met, began seeking more robust benefits packages including work-family programs and flextime, and employees—particularly those who have already found success in their careers—continue to ascend Maslow’s hierarchy of needs by seeking job opportunities that offer meaning and self-actualization.
Meaningful work has also been correlated positively with organizational commitment (Rosso et al., 2010; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2011; Steger et al., 2012).

International schools seem to be particularly impacted by this shift. Hardman’s (2001) study revealed that positive workplace climate and a sense of job challenge were among the top criteria for teachers deciding whether to remain at a school or accept a position at a new school. International school leaders who understand how teachers attach meaning to their work will be better equipped to attract and keep top teaching talent to their organization. An understanding of how international educators experience meaningful work has the potential to inform recruitment and retention of teaching talent despite a competitive recruiting environment.

**Research Question**

This study examines how K-12 foreign-hire international school teachers experience meaningful work. The purpose of phenomenology is to “grasp the very nature of the thing” (van Maanen, 2011, p. 163). In this case, the “thing” is meaningful work by foreign-hire teachers in an international school context. As previously noted, significant literature exists on the phenomenon of meaningful work (e.g., Chalofsky, 2010; Lips-Weirsma & Morris, 2011; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). However, the literature exposes an incomplete understanding of how individuals develop a sense of meaning in their work (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). Moreover, a robust understanding of how teachers experience meaningful work is missing from educational research, particularly in K-12 international school teachers. Therefore, the overarching line of inquiry guiding this study is: How do international school teachers experience meaningful work? In van Maanen’s (2011) terms, the goal is to grasp the nature of meaningful work in the life-world of international school teachers.
Positionality Statement

Before I continue, I must position myself in the context of this study. I taught social studies at an inner city parochial high school in New Jersey and a public middle school before pursuing a career overseas. My decision to teach abroad was largely the result of wanderlust, but an opportunity to work outside of the constraints and bureaucracy of the US public school system was also appealing. In this sense, I am somewhere between the maverick and the childless career professional that Hardman (2011) describes in his profile international school teachers (see Chapter 2).

I have been teaching internationally for the past eight years, first in the Netherlands, then in South Korea, and currently in the Philippines. These experiences have shaped a curiosity about the lifeworld of international school teachers and leadership practice that inspire engaged, purposeful teaching. For instance, I have noticed that teachers tend to be more engaged and feel better about their work when a clear and compelling mission is conveyed by leadership. In some schools the mission was mere lip service, whereas in other schools, I felt personally compelled by a mission focused on inquiry-based learning, community service, and pastoral care. Such anecdotal experiences have made me biased in favor of leadership practices that inspire a sense of meaningful work for teachers.

Moreover, as a prospective international school administrator, an understanding of the conditions that support meaningful work in an educational context will be extremely valuable. Sergiovanni (2000) asserted that the role of a school leader is to shape a school culture that connects its stakeholders with a meaningful purpose. My hope is that this research will build my capacity to shape school culture in a way that encourages meaningful work among existing faculty and attracts new teaching talent driven by the engagement and intrinsic motivation that
accompanies a sense of fulfillment in work.

It is also important to note that as an international educator, my personal feelings about my workplace and past workplaces will surely influence my interpretation of data. Nevertheless, researchers invariably bring preconceptions to their work. In the hermeneutic tradition, I must engage with these preconceptions with a “spirit of openness,” such that a transparent dialogue emerges between what I bring to the data and what the data bring to me (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). For an overview of the biases inherent in this study and my strategy for bracketing them from analysis, see the Threats to validity section in Chapter 3.

**Theoretical Framework**

Chalofsky’s (2003, 2010) model for meaningful work will provide a basis for understanding what conditions support meaningful workplaces. This framework provides a workable definition and provides structure to what is meant by meaningful work. As this study also involves sensemaking, the line of inquiry also requires an understanding of how meaningful work perceptions are formed, and therefore, a supplemental framework will be applied. Weick (1995, 2009) developed a theory of the organizational sensemaking process. While his model focuses on sensemaking as an organizational activity, it will be a useful tool for understanding how teachers develop a sense that their work is meaningful in the context of their organizational environment. These frameworks will provide the functional structure for this exploration by identifying what meaningful work is and how the participants make sense of their work.

**Meaningful work.** Chalofsky (2003, 2010) developed a model for understanding the dynamics of meaningful work (see Figure 1). His framework consists of three synergistic components—an employee’s sense of self, his or her sense of balance, and interaction with the work itself—that produce a state of “integrated wholeness,” a concept synonymous with
Maslow’s (1943) notion of self-actualization, and closely aligned with the higher order needs described by McClelland (1961) and Herzberg (1974). It is a state of personal fulfillment, self-esteem, rich relationships and alignment of purpose and values (Chalofsky, 2010).

Chalofsky’s model provides a framework that clarifies what we mean when we say, “meaningful work,” meaning in work and meaning at work (see Table 1). As much of the literature oscillates between various combinations of meaning and work, the model will provide a conceptual structure for exploring how international educators experience meaningful work. Understanding how perceptions of meaningful work take shape will also require a supplemental framework for thinking about the organizational sensemaking process.

**Supplementary theory: Weick’s organizational sensemaking model.** The process of interpersonal sensemaking significantly impacts how people make sense of their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Sensemaking is the “primary site where meanings materialize that inform and constrain identity and action” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). While much of the research on meaningful work has emphasized the outcomes of meaningful work attitudes, there has been “relatively less attention paid to the processes through which job attitudes and meanings are created in real time at work” (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003, p. 95). As this study is concerned with how teachers make sense of the experience meaningful work, an experience closely tied to identity—see Chalofsky’s (2010) description of sense of self—a framework for understanding the process of sensemaking is vital to this study. Such a theory also fits with the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology, which is founded in an understanding of humans as sense-making creatures (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), although the language in this study has been carefully crafted to clarify where an idiographic exploration of sensemaking inherent to IPA is situated in the context of an organizational sensemaking framework.
Weick (2005, 2009) developed a theory of social psychology of organizations that provides an understanding of how employees make sense of their work experiences. His theory rests on an understanding of organizations as impermanent, meaning that they consist of a “transient social order” (Weick, 2009, p. 3). The transient nature of organizational experience is easy to observe in international schools, which are impacted by changing policies, vocabularies, and social conditions. For Weick (2009), organizations are best viewed as a river of events and perceptions, rather than a static structure. Organizations become more stable and coherent as texts (e.g., mission statements, policies), conversations, and collaborative activity produce recurrent experience. Weick’s emphasis on impermanence framed the study of organization in terms of systems rather than structures, and organizing as opposed to organization (Czarniawska, 2006). This lens has particular relevance for international schools where turnover of staff, students, and administrators is high.

Weick (2009) established five themes and six regularities of organizational sensemaking. The themes of organizational experience are faith, evidence, action, guesses, and the unknowable. These themes establish a framework for understanding nonlinear, subjective experiences in human terms at the individual level of analysis, contextualized for the impact of interpersonal relationships inherent in a study of meaningful workplace perceptions. Along with the five themes of sensemaking, Weick (1995, 2009) highlights six “regularities” of the process of organizational sensemaking: redoing, labeling, discarding, enacting, believing, and substantiating. These regularities will add structure to an understanding of how beliefs turn into words and then turn into actions which reinforce beliefs.

Organizational members engage in sensemaking throughout their work-life to determine what meaning their work has for them (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Chalofsky’s (2010)
framework provides a guide to understanding what meaningful workplaces look like, and Weick’s (2009) model is essential to forming an understanding of how perceptions of meaningful workplaces develop. A more detailed review of both frameworks and related literature is provided in Chapter 2.

Table 1

**Definition of terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>Involves one of the following: (1) a sense of purpose or significance, (2) a person’s intentions, or (3) a clarifying or ordering of information</td>
<td>Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, pp. 215-216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningfulness</td>
<td>The product of an integration of a person’s identity with his or her role and/or sense of membership</td>
<td>Pratt &amp; Ashforth, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful work</td>
<td>Individuals perceive their work and/or work environment to be purposeful and personally significant.</td>
<td>Pratt &amp; Ashforth, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning <em>in</em> work</td>
<td>Synonymous with meaningful work; “an inclusive state of being. It is the way we express the meaning and purpose of our lives” through work.</td>
<td>Chalofsky, 2010, p. 11</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“People judge their work to matter and be meaningful.”</td>
<td>Steger et al., 2012, p. 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning <em>of</em> work</td>
<td>The “role of work in a person’s life” (i.e., the reason a person works)</td>
<td>De Klerk, 2005, p. 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning <em>at</em> work</td>
<td>State of personal fulfillment, self-esteem, rich relationships, alignment of purpose/values</td>
<td>Chalofsky, 2010, p. 153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful workplace</td>
<td>Values-based organizational cultures, including leadership and work-life issues; social responsibility and diversity; engagement and commitment, and the workplace as community.</td>
<td>Chalofsky, 2010, p. 90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning-making (in terms of life)</td>
<td>Sensemaking about the purpose of one's existence</td>
<td>Pratt &amp; Ashforth, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning-making (in terms of work)</td>
<td>The integration of work experiences into a personal framework of personal meaning through conscious reflection.</td>
<td>van den Heuvel et al., 2009</td>
</tr>
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**Structure of the Thesis**

This chapter has laid out the problem of practice, research question, justification, and theoretical framework for an examination of how international school teachers experience meaningful work. The next chapter will review the literature on international education, meaningful work, meaningful work and educational outcomes, teacher perceptions of their work, and recruitment and retention in an international school context. In Chapter 3, the IPA methodological approach will be reviewed, and a research design plan for the study will be articulated. Chapter 4 will review the findings of this study with a focus on the words of participants. Chapter 5 will present key findings, hold these findings up to the theoretical frameworks and literature, discuss limitations and implications for future research, and provide recommendations for international educators and administrators based on the themes that the data revealed.
Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter will review existing literature central to the phenomenon of study. First, an explanation of the international school teacher experience will help develop an understanding of the context and participants. Second, a review of the literature on meaningful work will serve to delineate what is known about the concept of meaningful work. This will include a review of needs theory as it applies to worker dispositions and subsequent research that ties meaningful work at the individual level of analysis with organizational outcomes such as intrinsic motivation and engagement. Third, the review will explore literature on meaningful work in an educational context with a subsection on literature relevant to an international school context.

The International Teacher Experience

A clarification of the participants and setting will help paint a picture the workplace context in which this study will be conducted. This section will clarify what “international school” means and offer a profile of the K-12 international school teacher.

International schools. International schools in the traditional sense are private, tuition-based K-12 schools providing academic programs to students from multinational, diplomatic and host-country families (International School Services, 2010). The first international schools were founded in the mid-nineteenth century in an effort to serve expatriate children and serve the ideals of international-mindedness (James & Sheppard, 2014). International schools take myriad forms including proprietary, parochial, secular, and partially government-sponsored schools, as well as those administered by the United Nations and its agencies (The International Educator, 2013). Simply defined, an international school is a school that offers a curriculum different than that of its host country (Hastings, 2006). There are 7,625 international schools worldwide enrolling nearly 4 million students (Keeling, 2015; International School Consultancy Group,
2014), but not all serve international students. Some “international schools” serve as de facto preparatory schools serving mostly host country families who have the financial means and desire to prepare their children for a Western postsecondary education. There has been a notable rise, for instance, in international schools serving Chinese nationals who aspire to attend North American or European universities (Keeling, 2015). Some offer only early-age programs or collegiate level courses, whereas others employ a faculty overwhelmingly represented by host-country nationals (Garton, 2000). Nagrath (2011) identified five types of international schools—American, British, Canadian, International Baccalaureate (IB), and international schools incorporating multiple traditions. With such variety, it can be difficult to pin down exactly what is meant by “international school.” For the sake of clarity, this study will focus on the experiences of teachers of K-12 international schools offering a North American, IB or British curriculum.

The international school teacher profile. Just as international schools take on many shapes and personalities, so do the teachers who staff them. The following paragraphs provide an overview of the international school teacher profile, including a breakdown of the various categories of international school teachers, in order to lend a better understanding of the participants of this study.

International schools employ nearly 400,000 teachers worldwide (Keeling, 2015). As instruction is generally delivered in English (or another language differing from the national language of the host country), many international school teachers are recruited from abroad. International school teachers fit three broad categories: overseas hires recruited abroad, local-hire expatriates hired within the host country, and host-country nationals (Garton, 2000). These categories often influence teachers’ motivation for taking a position in a school, their work
experience, and often their pay and benefits package as well. Some overseas hires move from school to school every three to four years, while some put down roots, raise families, and retire in their school’s host country. Local hires tend to be trailing spouses or expatriate professionals who have switched careers. Host country nationals are teachers who have been hired at an international school located within their home country (e.g., a Filipino hired to teach at an international school in the Philippines) (Garton, 2000).

Hardman (2001) further categorized the international school teacher into several personality types: the childless career professional, the maverick (free spirited traveler potentially seeking freedom from constraints in host country), the career professional with family, the senior Penelope (older, children left home), the senior professional, and the senior maverick. However, these characterizations primarily apply to the overseas hire profile (Hayden & Thompson, 2010).

International schools are growing at a rapid pace. From the first international schools founded in the 1860s sprouted over 1,000 by the mid-twentieth century (James & Sheppard, 2014). Now there are over 7,000 and the International School Consultancy Group (2014) expects the number to increase to 12,000 by 2024. This puts a premium on hiring quality international school teachers (Keeling, 2015). Indeed, ICS projects that the market will require another 100,000 teachers by 2020 (Keeling, 2015).

Meaningful Work

This subsection will review the literature related to meaningful work. The subsection will hone a workable definition of meaningful work, explore the origins of meaningful work found in needs theory, describe meaningful work as it has been examined in the field of organizational dynamics, and identify characteristics of meaningful work as described by
Defining meaningful work. As Table 1 illustrates, the concept of meaningful work has been muddled in the literature. This study explores meaningful work through a line of inquiry examining how international teachers experience meaning in work. However, the literature inconsistently applies various concepts to discuss meaningful work (van Til Hayman, 2013; Steger et al., 2012). The term has been used variously to describe meaning in work, meaning of work, and meaning at work (van Til Hayman, 2013).

Van Til Hayman’s (2013) dissertation made an attempt to distinguish between these various usages. An understanding of meaningful work starts with an understanding of meaning. For Csikzentmihalyi (1990), meaning can involve a sense of purpose, a person’s intentions (i.e., what someone “meant” by his or her words or actions), or a structure for making sense of information. Meaningful work as explored in this study relates primarily to the first sense of the word meaning in Csikzentmihalyi’s definition. A sense of meaningful work means that an individual views his or her work as purposeful and personally significant (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). It is an expression of “the meaning and purpose of our lives” through our work (Chalofsky, 2010, p. 11). It a sense of meaning in work.

Meaning in work. Although the terms have been used interchangeably, meaning in work is distinct from the meaning of work. Meaning in work is akin to the concept of meaning in life (van Til Hayman, 2013). To say persons find meaning in work is to say they judge their work to “matter and be meaningful” (Steger et al., p. 3). Seligman (2011) asserted that “meaningful life” involves “belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self” (p. 12). Meaningful work means that an individual holds those beliefs about his or her work. For Chalofsky (2010), meaningful work and meaning in work are synonymous expressions of an
integration of sense of self, the work itself, and a sense of balance. This model will be described in detail later in this chapter. Before moving on, it will be useful to distinguish meaning in work from other ways of looking at meaningful work.

**Meaning of work.** Meaning of work has generally been used to describe work’s role or significance in a person’s life (de Klerk, 2005). People define work in different ways. How they define work influences the meaning of work for them. Ruiz-Quintanilla and England’s (1994) cross-national, longitudinal study identified four major ways that individuals define work: burden, constraint, responsibility and social exchange, and contribution to society. Regardless of their country, people who viewed their work as a burden or constraint tend to view work in terms of costs to the worker (Ruiz-Quintanilla & England, 1994). Those defined their work in terms of responsibility and exchange viewed work in terms of the reciprocal benefits of the relationship between the individual employee and the organization and/or society at large. Workers who defined their work in terms of contribution to society emphasized the “social benefits of working” (Ruiz-Quintanilla & England, 1994, p. 2).

Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin and Schwartz (1997) asserted that individual employees see their work variously as job (i.e., a means to material ends), career (i.e., a means to professional advancement, power, and social stature), and calling (i.e., a source of personal fulfillment). Individuals who view their work as a calling find it meaningful. Work for such people is an end in itself and serves higher order needs beyond material ends and social stature (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

Of course work is not the only important aspect of life for most people. An individual’s disposition towards his or her work also depends on how central work is to his or her life (Cortez & Lynch, 2015). The centrality of work to individuals is based on their social entitlements and
obligations (i.e. societal norms) and a range of intrinsic and extrinsic personal goals related to their work (Harpaz, Honig, & Coetsier, 2002). Therefore, the degree to which work holds meaning depends on the centrality of work to his or her life writ large.

The distinction between meaning of and meaning in work is not a neat one. Rosso et al. (2010), for instance, examine “sources of meaning in work” to explore meaning of work (i.e., calling orientations) (p. 98), while Geldenhuys et al. (2014) and others use meaning of work in much the same way that others (e.g., Steger et al., 2013; Chalofsky, 2010) define meaning in work.

**Meaning at work.** Meaning at work is a more distinct concept describing how an individual finds meaning in the context of the workplace. Chalofsky (2010) uses the term, meaningful workplace, to describe “a relationship between the person and the organization or the workplace, in terms of commitment, loyalty and dedication” (p. 18). Meaning at work connotes a sense of social belongingness and role significance, along with meaningfulness (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Chalofsky (2010) identified three elements of meaningful workplaces that are present when organizations satisfy the components of his framework. Meaningful workplaces are: (1) “values-based organizational cultures,” (2) socially responsible and diverse, and (3) comprised of “engaged and committed” employees who view their workplaces as a community (p. 90). Chalofsky (2010) emphasizes that “values-based cultures” consist of ethical leadership and respect for work-life balance. Amabile and Kramer (2012) offer the caveat that employees can also find personal meaning through the material benefits of a job by enhancing their lives and those of their families. A sense of meaning at work can be a component of what gives an individual a sense of meaning in work (vanTil Hayman, 2003). For instance, relationships with colleagues and an alignment of personal values with organizational values are both components
of meaningful work (Rosso et al., 2010). In short, the literature makes it clear that meaning *in* work is supported by meaning *at* work, in particular the relationship individuals have with each other within the workplace (Mautz, 2015).

**Meaningfulness.** *Meaningfulness* is the characteristic ascribed to the degree of meaning an individual finds in his or her work (Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, & Gatenby, 2010). Meaningfulness is a perception of how meaningful work is as a consequence of alignments between work and characteristics of the self (Rosso et al., 2010). For instance, an organization can cultivate the meaningfulness of its work through policies and practices (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Many studies use meaningfulness to describe how employees find meaning *in* their work (e.g., Alfes et al., 2010). Others, such as Yeoman (2014), use the term “meaningfulness in work” (p. 236). It applies both to the integration of an individual’s identity and his or her work, as well as a sense of membership. Meaningfulness is distinct from “meaning”—as it is used in terms of meaning-making—which focuses on how meaning is constructed (Rosso et al., 2010; Cortez & Lynch, 2015). While the line of inquiry driving this study is primarily concerned with meaning in the latter sense, meaningfulness is an outcome of such meaning construction. Individuals may feel meaningfulness in their work, for instance, as a result of a collective process of meaning-making in the context of an organization. Rosso et al.’s (2010) suggestion to clearly differentiate between meaning (a sensemaking process) and meaningfulness (the degree of perceived meaning) will guide semantics in this study.

This study is concerned with how international school teachers experience meaningful work. Meaningful work, in this case, means “meaning *in* work.” Simply put, meaningful work means that an individual sees his or her work as purposeful (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). However, as van Til Hayman’s (2013) attempt at clarifying the term demonstrates, what causes an
individual to find meaning *in* work, can depend on his or her perceptions of the meaning *of* work, meaning *at* work and the *meaningfulness* of work. Those beliefs are complicated because they are tied to identity. Chalofsky’s (2010) model of meaningful work provides a framework to give structure to an exploration of how teachers experience meaningful work (see Figure 1).

![Chalofsky's model of meaningful work](image)

*Figure 1. Chalofsky’s (2010) model of meaningful work*

**Chalofsky’s meaningful work model.** Chalofsky (2010) described *meaningful work* as a state of personal fulfillment, self-esteem, rich relationships and alignment between values, purpose and personal beliefs. Other theorists describe a similar phenomenon. Chalofsky’s description of meaningful work overlaps with what Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon (2008) call “good work,” which they posit results from a harmony between the mission of a person’s work, his or her personal identity, and high standards for professional achievement (p. 8).

Similarly, Krznaric (2012) ascribes the label “fulfilling work” to a job that is compatible with an individual’s qualities and affords the opportunity for purposeful activity. While subtle semantic differences exist between them, the adjectives “fulfilling,” “purposeful,” and “meaningful” are describing the same perception of work—work that supports an individual’s values and moves
an individual towards a sense of personal growth.

Chalofsky (2010) explicated that this state is characterized a feeling of “integrated wholeness” resulting from the alignment of an individual’s *sense of self* (i.e., perceived identity), *sense of balance*, and the *work itself*.

**Sense of self.** A primary component of meaningful work is that an employee’s sense of self can be expressed through the workplace (Chalofsky, 2010). *Sense of self* through work is a synergy between one’s belief system about purpose in life and beliefs about one’s work (Chalofsky, 2010). Meaning is a human need. Frankl (1992) isolated man’s search for meaning as the human need that motivates human behavior. Meaningful work implies the assentation of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs (Chalofsky, 2010; Yeoman, 2014). Individuals find purpose in their work when the values of the organization are in harmony with the employee's own values and self-conceived identity (Chalofsky, 2010). This condition supports meaningful learning and a sense that persons’ work fits with their sense of purpose in their life at large (Chalofsky, 2010).

Although they are distinct constructs, it is worth mentioning the significant body of literature connecting meaningful work with workplace spirituality (Holbreche & Springett, 2004; Chalofsky, 2003, 2010; Milliman, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2003). Often in the literature, spirituality cannot be separated from an examination of meaning (Rosso et al., 2010). “Spiritual beliefs and attitudes are there whether we acknowledge them or not” (Chalofsky, 2010, p. 26). Religious and non-religious people alike hold views about human nature, free will, and justice (Chalofsky, 2010). The connection between spirituality and meaning underscores the human need for fulfillment and purpose and the potential to climb Maslow’s hierarchy through work.

**Sense of balance.** Another component of Chalofsky’s model of meaningful work is the balance of life at work and life outside of work. “Work-life balance is . . . likely to influence
whether individuals perceive their work as meaningful” (Munn, 2013, p. 408). Work-life occupational health initiatives have been found to build meaning in the workplace (Holbeche & Springett, 2004). Munn (2013) defined work-life balance as the way individuals balance their various responsibilities to work, family, community, and self. Meaningful work implies a management of tensions between such responsibilities (Chalofsky, 2010).

At first glance, balance may not seem like an essential component of understanding meaningful work as it rests largely on factors external to work. However, Chalofsky’s inclusion of sense of balance as a component of meaningful work underscores that a sense of meaning is not developed in a vacuum, and so an understanding of meaningful work requires an understanding of the reciprocal nature of meaning in and out of the workplace. Work-life balance involves “a sense of balance anchored in purpose and meaning, while being flexible enough to bend with changing needs and conditions” (Chalofsky, 2010, p. 24). Thus, a sense of balance is the developed within the individual in the context of the organization. This is an example of meaning in work intersecting with meaning at work, as the individual and organization both impact the capacity for employees to develop a sense of balance.

Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2003) framed an understanding of balance through the lens of work roles and family roles. They identified three components of an individual’s work-family balance: (a) time balance is equity in time dedicated to work roles and family roles; (b) involvement balance is equity in the psychological investment allocated for work roles and family roles; (c) satisfaction balance is equity in gratification with work roles and family roles. Balance is crucial to the health of individuals as they try to align their work with the demands of their home lives (e.g., as parents, spouses, friends), physical health, and overall well-being (Chalofsky, 2010). Individuals who experience meaning in their lives outside of work
“experience greater wellbeing and have more energy to bring to work” as well as ask questions about “the responsibility of the organization towards their families, communities and environment” (Lips-Weirsma & Morris, 2011, p. 207). Chalofsky (2010) also asserted that employees who find a sense of balance are more engaged and effective. Conversely, work stress has been negatively correlated with both life meaning and meaning making at work (Allan, Douglass, Duffy, & McCarty, 2015).

The degree to which work roles and life roles intersect varies from individual to individual (Munn, 2013). Whether a sense of balance contributes to meaningful work relies on whether work and life domains are viewed as a dichotomy (i.e., in completion with each other) or as complementary, which has the potential to support personal growth (Chalofsky, 2010; Munn, 2013).

**The work itself.** Meaningful work requires work that is challenging, engaging, and requires creativity and continuous learning (Chalofsky, 2010). This is sometimes called “task significance” (see Raub & Blunshi, 2014). To describe this state, Chalofsky applies Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) description of “flow,” when a person’s “consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake” (p. 6). Examples include a stock broker who enjoys the challenge of predicting market trends, as opposed to making large sums of money, and a teacher who teaches because he or she innately enjoys interacting with children (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When employees find meaning in the work itself, they have the opportunity to carry out their own purpose through their work (Chalofsky, 2003). The result is a state of being in which the worker is engaged and derives pleasure from the activity itself.

Oldham and Hackman (1976) identified five “core job characteristics” of meaningful
work that focus on the work itself (see also Turner & Lawrence, 1965): (a) skill variety is the degree to which different skills are used to accomplish job-related tasks; (b) task identity relates to clear objectives and goals contributing to a sense of task completion; (c) task significance refers to the impact of work on other people, whether within the organization or in the outside world; (d) autonomy is characterized by an employee’s independence to determine when and how a task is completed; and (e) job-based feedback is clear and direct information given to an employee about his or her performance. Jobs that involve high levels of autonomy, skill variety, task identity and task significance, in particular, have been shown to cultivate perceptions of meaningful work, which, in turn, leads to higher levels of motivation, engagement and job satisfaction (Rosso et al., 2010).

Positive outcomes correlated to meaningful work. Contemporary popular leadership (e.g., Chalofsky, 2010; Fullan, 2006; Taylor & LaBarre, 2006; Mautz, 2015) and psychology literature (e.g., Csikzentmihalyi, 2008; Pink, 2009; Achor, 2010) emphasizes the benefits of meaningful work for individuals and organizations. This trend is grounded in literature identifying the correlation between meaningful work and various desirable workplace outcomes, especially job satisfaction (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003), engagement (Geldenhuys et al., 2014) and motivation (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004; Steger et al., 2012; Pinder, 2014).

Meaningful work and job satisfaction. Organizational research demonstrates the connection between meaningful work and job satisfaction (Michelson et al., 2013; Duffy, Autin, & Bott, 2014; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Golparver and Abedini (2014) asserted that meaning was among the variables most likely to improve job satisfaction. Wrzesniewski et al.’s (1997) distinction between job perceptions found that individuals who view their work as a calling—those who find fulfillment in their work—report significantly higher rates of job satisfaction.
Ashforth and Pratt (2003) drew the line connecting these findings with a study demonstrating the strong correlation between job satisfaction and job performance (Judge, Bono, Thorensen, & Patton, 2001) to argue that fulfilling work supports performance. The connection between meaningful work and job satisfaction seems to be founded on individuals’ perceptions of their work as meaningful. Duffy et al. (2014) demonstrated that stronger perceived meaning mediated job volition (i.e., the degree of choice an individual has over his or her career) and job satisfaction. Meaningful work has an affective impact on job satisfaction as well. Meaning produces feelings of joy, happiness and positivity that can enhance an individual’s sense of job satisfaction (Golparver & Abedini, 2014; Steger et al., 2012).

**Meaningful work and engagement.** Hoolebeche and Springett’s (2004) syntheses of Roffey Park Institute survey data demonstrated a clear link between employees who experienced as sense of meaning through work and “greater employee engagement and high performance” (p. 3). Several studies provide evidence that meaningful work predicts overall engagement in the workplace (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015; Geldenhuys et al., 2014; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). In fact, Alfes et al.’s (2010) comprehensive survey of UK employees found that the single most important factor influencing workplace engagement was whether employees claimed to find meaning in work. The correlation between meaningful work and engagement is cross-generational, although the impact is strongest for older employees (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015). Kahn (1990) found that people decide whether to engage or disengage from a work-related task by assessing how much personal meaning the act holds. Meaningfulness has also been shown to mediate the effects of job enrichment and job fit on engagement (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). As previously referenced, Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) landmark study of “flow” described a state of optimal experience achieved by total engagement—a state in which a person is so immersed
in an activity that nothing else matters. The relationship between work and flow should be viewed as circular: (a) individuals find deep satisfaction in work when they are in a state of flow; (b) people tend to become engaged when they find meaning and purpose in their work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

**Meaningful work and motivation.** Frankl’s (1992) assertion that the meaning is the most important motivator is supported by the literature. Maslow (1943) and McClelland (1961) connected the satisfaction of higher-order needs, such as meaning, to human motivation. Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman (1959) identified two distinct factors contributing to job satisfaction that tend to correspond to Maslow’s low-order/high-order breakdown of needs: motivators and hygiene. Herzberg (1974) suggested that motivation in the workplace is driven by meaningful content (e.g., achievement, recognition, increased responsibilities, interesting work), whereas external, or hygiene, factors (e.g., pay, company policies, supervision, interpersonal relationships) contribute to dissatisfaction. In essence, organizational members are driven by meaning derived from their work, but can be made unhappy at work by environmental factors, context, and the way they are treated (Herzberg, 1974; Pinder, 2014).

Studies on employee empowerment have focused on meaningful work as a facilitator of motivation in the workplace (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004; Steger et al., 2012). The Penna (2006) Report on Meaning at Work revealed that 55% of survey respondents believe they would be more motivated at work if their employer worked to create opportunities for meaningful work. In particular, meaningful work seems connected to intrinsic motivation in the workplace (Chalofsky, 2010). Steger et al. (2012) found that meaningful work had the highest correlation with intrinsic motivation among the various work-related and wellbeing variables they studied. This is unsurprising. Intrinsic motivation relies on individuals’ perception that their work is
meaningful—that it matters to someone (Hackman & Oldham 1976; Pinder, 2014). As Cholofsky (2010) asserted, when people find meaning in their work, “intrinsic motivation and development are built in” (p. 18).

The limits to meaning as a motivator. One important lesson of the research on workplace engagement is that meaning is not the only source of motivation. Engagement and motivation are the result of numerous factors, and whereas those reasons generally align with needs laid out by Maslow (1943) and McClelland (1961), meaning is only one human need. As Burke (2002) pointed out, one of the faults of early attempts to connect job fulfillment and employee performance was the neglect of periphery motivators. Still, the impact of extrinsic motivators is limited.

Pay and other extrinsic motivators motivate employees when it comes to mundane, rote tasks (Pink, 2009). The absence of hygiene factors can dissatisfy employees. It is only that their impact is less potent and enduring than satisfiers such as achievement, recognition, and interest (Herzberg, 1974). These satisfiers inspire intrinsic motivation, which is key to solving complex “right brained” tasks that require creativity (Chalofsky, 2010). Teaching involves many such tasks. When employees find meaning in their work, they exhibit more intrinsic motivation and a stronger sense of self-efficacy (Strong, 1998). While these attributes are essential to successful teaching (Holzberger, Phillipp & Kunter, 2013), this literature does not indicate that hygiene factors are unimportant when it comes to workplace motivation, but rather that they are central to the development of intrinsic motivation.

Meaningful work and recruitment and retention. Another aspect of the research relates to a key significance of this study: recruitment and retention. Meaningful work is a major driver of an employee’s decision to stay with or leave an organization (Wellins, Bernthal, &
Meaningful work has been correlated positively with organizational commitment (Rosso, et al., 2010; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2011; Steger et al., 2012). Meaningful work impacts engagement and engagement, in turn, impacts performance, levels of absenteeism and turnover (Alfes et al., 2010). Individuals tend to select themselves out of work environments where they do not feel a “job fit” that meshes with their self-construct as such jobs are void of meaning and purpose (Scroggins, 2008, p. 71). This is what Chalofsky (2010) means when he writes that meaningful work nourishes a sense of self. In particular, talented and accomplished professionals crave a sense of purpose through their work (Koloc, 2013).

Modern trends—in particular, the rapid spread of globalization and technological developments—have changed the dynamics between home life and work life, leading employees to seek value, support, and meaning on the job (van den Huevel et al., 2009). Krznaric (2013) calls this the “age of fulfillment.” In short, talent professionals are increasingly seeking work that offers purpose and meaning (Koloc, 2013). Gardner et al. (2008) pointed out that there has been a surge in college students’ interest in careers that address “clear public needs” and a decline in those primarily offering extrinsic motivators such as pay (p. 253). As Koloc (2013) explained, people who have already achieved a degree of success and wealth look for work to give them a sense of purpose. This trend began in the 1980s when many employees, with basic needs met, began seeking more robust benefits packages including work-family programs and flextime, and employees—particularly those who have already found success in their careers—continue to ascend Maslow’s hierarchy of needs by seeking job opportunities that offer meaning and self-actualization (Caudron, 2002). “People want to be a part of something bigger than themselves, something they can believe in” (Goffee & Jones, 2013, p. 104).
Sensemaking in Organizations

Finding meaning in work is a form of sensemaking (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). The term “meaning” is often used synonymously with “sense” in the literature (Mailtis & Christianson, 2014). However, “sense” and “meaning” denoting a form of understanding should not be confused with “meaningful”—a sense of purpose or significance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Mailtis & Christianson, 2014). Meaning-making, applying “meaning” in the latter sense, is a term often used to explain how an individual makes sense of meaningfulness (e.g., Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Lips-Weirsma, 2011; Yeoman, 2014; Holbreche & Springett, 2004).

Meaning-making in terms of work has been described as the ability to integrate work experiences into a personal framework of personal meaning through conscious reflection (van den Heuvel et al., 2009). “Employees engage in continuous sensemaking to discern what meaning their work holds for them” (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003, p. 99). However personal this process may be, the sensemaking process in an organizational setting is by nature interpersonal (Weick, 2009). In fact, Weick viewed sensemaking as a function of organizations and encouraged the study of events and structures over individuals (Czarniawska, 2006).

That may make this framework seem an odd pairing for an idiographic analysis of meaningful work. Nevertheless, an individual’s perceptions of meaningful work arise as the result of a sensemaking process that is both interpersonal and intrapersonal (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). “Sensemaking is, importantly, an issue of language” (Weick, 2009, p. 131). Language and social relationships are “two different sides of the same coin” (Winch, 1990, p. 121). Therefore, the sensemaking of individuals is necessarily nestled in the context of a social system. In other words, how an individual perceives meaning is strongly influenced by the meanings that are accepted in the social or cultural context (Rosso et al., 2010).
Indeed, there is “an almost infinite stream of events and inputs that surround any organizational actor” (Weick, Sutcliff, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 411). Sensemaking begins with an individual’s noticing and bracketing (i.e., interpretation) of stimuli (Weick et al., 2005), which is why it is relevant to an exploration of how teachers experience meaningful work, but sensemaking can only be understood in an organizational context.

**Weick’s six regularities.** People who come together to complete complex tasks do so, not in isolation, but “as complex personalities created by their location in relationships desirous of acting their way into a meaningful existence” (Weick, 2009, p. 170). Weick’s (2009) social psychology of organizations provides a useful sub-framework for understanding how international school teachers make sense of meaning in the context of their organizational environment. Sensemaking starts with noticing and bracketing (Weick, 2005). Sensemaking is about labeling, presumption, action, organizing through communication. Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) used Weick’s framework to show how individuals experience meaningful work in a social context. Similarly, this study explores meaning in work applying an organizational framework to oscillate between individual sensemaking (i.e., a sense of meaningful work) and organizational sensemaking to understand the dynamic between individual teachers making sense of their work in the context of a specific organizational environment.

Weick (2009) laid out five themes and six regularities of organizational sensemaking that occur individual and collectively as organizational members crystallize perceptions of each other, organizational events, and the organization as a whole. Organizational experience can be grouped into five themes: *faith, evidence, action, guesses*, and the *unknowable*. These themes offer a lens through which to analyze nonlinear, subjective and collective experiences in human terms. Individuals and groups filter actions and observations (i.e., evidence) through
assumptions, self-fulfilling prophecies, and beliefs. Organization becomes more lucid when people move from “saying to seeing to thinking” things about their work and their place within an organization (p. 27). It is a process of clarification that often occurs after events have taken place (Weick, 1995).

Weick (2009) also established six regularities of the organizational sensemaking process. These processes interact to produce a cohesive sense of reality that often differs significantly from what actually happened.

1. **Redoing** is the process of repeating what has been done in the past. Routines tend to unravel over time. Reoccurrence establishes order and codifies a sense of collective organization. In terms of organizational culture, redoing manifests itself in traditions, rituals, and shared beliefs. A sense of meaningful work develops in part because employees are committed to these patterns.

2. **Labeling** is a part of organizing whereby people organize events, roles, and processes by putting a name to them. This process is beneficial in the sense that labeling facilitates common understandings and facilitates “collective coping” (Weick, 2009, p. 28). However, it also limits understandings of changes and the nuances inherent in impermanence. As Weick (2009) explained, people explain and categorize events for social life in a way that results in people “know[ing] less and less about more and more” (p. 34). For instance, one can easily see the difference in perception that can result when a school fight is labeled *bullying* versus a *conflict between peers*. In either case, the description is likely to be an inaccurate simplification of what really happened. For better or worse, because organizations are social constructs, individuals in an organization make sense of complex events and individuals based on the simplified labels they have been assigned in order to communicate consensual meaning. The
language participants of this study use to describe meaningful work will have likely drifted from original experience. This understanding is essential to crafting interview questions and interpreting responses in an IPA study seeking to understand how teachers experience meaningful work.

3. **Discarding** is about adapting to changes (e.g., new technologies, methods). When change occurs it is often necessary to eschew past cultural norms or procedures to adjust to a new set of circumstances. These changes can include a leadership change, a shift in demographics, external political and bureaucratic pressures, and the introduction of new technological tools.

4. **Enacting** is the initiation of action based on both the structure provided by the organization and improvisation. The narratives and routines established by the organization push people to action. However, people do not act in a prescriptive, robotic fashion. The impermanent nature of organizations means that enacting also requires ad hoc decision-making and adaptation to novel circumstances. Though action can be initiated by a basic sense of organizational structure, eventually one-off actions turn into routines or habits that are more predicated on previous enacting than on the original structure (Weick, 2009). Beliefs, labels, and past experiences inform enacting, and the relationship is cyclical as actions reinforce beliefs. Understanding what influences some teachers to do their jobs with a sense of purpose, while others act as though it is a chore, is the essence of this study. Essentially enactment is an act of faith or a belief that what an individual does will in the end make sense.

5. **Believing** involves perceptions of where change is going. Organizations articulate a mission or a vision in order to communicate a shared sense of purpose. Belief also implies doubt. The beliefs organizational members share (or do not share) about the direction and
purpose of their work play a critical role in sensemaking. These beliefs must be malleable in uncertain times, as “Today’s truth may be partially false tomorrow” (Weick, 2009, p. 6). It is important to accept that the perceptions that a person holds about his or her work are beliefs. Individuals develop a sense of meaning based on an assertion about their relationship with their work that is based on beliefs about the organization, their role in it, the daily tasks they perform, and their sense of self.

6. **Substantiating** includes efforts to maintain a unified collective understanding of organizational actions despite the disruptions inherent in impermanent organization. Substantiating is, as Weick (2009) put it, “holding it together” (p. 39). In the context of this study, teachers make sense of experiencing meaningful work through what they **enact**, what they **believe**, how they **label** an event, and so on. This process is not linear. It is not the same feeling every day, and the perceptions people have about past events drift from what actually happened by the time they are asked to describe them. However, the purpose of this study is to understand how international school teachers come to an understanding that their work is meaningful. This understanding is **substantiated** when a common thread of perceived experience holds together a messy and nuanced reality.

Weick’s six regularities provide a framework to think about how people, nestled in the context of a changeable social construct (i.e., an organization) make sense of their environment, and therefore, how they develop an understanding (i.e., belief) that their work is meaningful. In other words, “meaningful work” is the “what” of this study and sensemaking is the “how.”

**Sensemaking, meaningful work and identity.** Work is one of the primary ways an individual makes sense of a personal identity (Chalofsky, 2010; Holbeche & Springett, 2004; Cortez & Lynch, 2015). Albert and Whetten (1985) isolated social interaction as the
environment in which individual identity formation takes place. When individuals find meaning in their work, personal identity is perceived to mesh with the both the work itself and organizational values allowing individuals to derive a sense of meaning from their work (Chalofsky, 2010; Rosso et al., 2010; Geldenhuys et al., 2014; Holbeche & Springett, 2004; Cortez & Lynch, 2015). There is a social element to this meaning-making. Organizations are important for building a sense of community and membership from which individuals draw a sense of identity, and sometimes, meaning (Rosso et al., 2010).

Just as work has an impact on identity, identity has an impact on organizational life. Identity is an important resource for sensemaking (Weick, 2009). Weick (2009) asserted that, as organizational actors develop beliefs about the congruence of their personal identity and the organization's identity, organizational commitment becomes strengthened. Within organizational life, there is a dynamic ongoing process of sensemaking about personal and organizational identity (Elliot, 2014).

**Sensemaking and organizational culture.** While this study is concerned with how individual teachers make sense of the experience of finding meaning in their work, meaningfulness involves sensemaking that is enhanced by feelings of organizational membership (Rosso et al., 2010). Organizations are essentially “socially constructed realities” that exist in the minds of their members (Morgan, 1997, p. 142). As Much (1995) asserted, cultures are essentially frameworks for meaning-making (as cited in Smith et al., 2009). Individuals continuously construct and interpret experiences, so that what happens in social life is interpreted by the self and given meaning (Elliot, 2014). Therefore, collective sensemaking influences individual sensemaking. The context of organizational culture, along with visions and collective identities, facilitates organizational membership, which is a source of meaning for individuals
Schein (1992) defined culture as a learned set of “assumptions” a group has adopted in order to solve internal and external problems. Insofar as those assumptions are effective in helping an organization adapt and achieve its goals, they are passed on to new organizational members in order to frame the way they “perceive, think and feel” about those problems (Schein, 1992, p. 12). This concept describes the landscape in which Weick’s sensemaking regularities manifest themselves. Schein’s cultural model (1992) isolates three levels of culture: artifacts (i.e., visible structures and processes), espoused values (e.g., mission statements, goals, strategies), and basic underlying assumptions (i.e., unconscious beliefs, perceptions and feelings). According to Weick (2009), these levels establish “reference points” and provide a foundation for how culture influences the construction of meaningful work perceptions. For example, in an educational context, Weick’s explanation of belief formation can be viewed as a cultural phenomenon arising from the interaction of a person with an organization’s culture as communicated through rituals such as meetings (artifacts), mission statements (espoused values), and dominant “best practices” for instruction (basic underlying assumptions). Still, cultural metaphors are relevant to this study insofar as they describe conditions during a specific moment in time. Weick’s (2009) framework posits that organizational culture is impermanent. It is not a fixed construct, but in a state of constant flux.

Applying the language of Weick’s (2009) framework, organizational culture has the capacity to rouse faith in an organization’s mission, help construct beliefs about the purpose of work, stimulate meaningful enacting, and prompt flexible labeling to create these understandings. In other words, “The organizational context provided by norms, culture and organizational logic shapes the substance of what is said, seen done, and thought” (Weick, 2009,
Structures, policies, goals, mission statements, job descriptions, and procedures are elements of organizational culture that serve as “reference points for the way people think about and make sense of the contexts in which they work” (Morgan, 1997, p. 144).

**Cultural models and meaningful work.** Fullan’s (2008) book, *The Six Secrets of Change*, emphasizes the importance connecting organizational members with a noble purpose with culture as a vehicle. Several organizational models attempt to achieve this goal using the relationship between organizational culture and employee dispositions as a starting point. Burke (2002) highlighted two such theories. Friedlander & Brown (1974) created a model with both task accomplishment and “human fulfillment” as outcomes. Similarly, the Burke-Litwin Causal Model focuses on the development of a positive organizational climate through the application of motivational theory (Burke, 2002). A consistent finding is the importance of alignment of an individual’s values and the organization’s culture. Literature demonstrates that the “relationship between job satisfaction and corporate culture is strengthened by synergy between individual motives and needs, and organizational culture” (Roos & Eeden, 2008, p. 57). An organization’s culture shapes an employee’s commitment, which in turn influences his or her level of intrinsic motivation (Mahal, 2009). This is what Chalofsky (2010) means when he writes about synergy between the work itself and individual’s sense of self. Although this study will examine the individual teacher’s experience, culture is important because work perceptions (e.g., meaningfulness) are embedded in culture (Rosso et al., 2010; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). In particular, culture asserts a set of beliefs that resonates with employees to varying degrees.

**Mission statements, culture and meaningful work.** The values of an organization often run deep with its employees to such an extent that work can be a source of purpose and deep meaning (Sergiovanni, 2000). An employee’s connection to what Shein (1992) calls the
“espoused values” of the organization is the link Chalofsky (2010) describes between sense of self and work itself. Forging this dynamic is a sensemaking process and is integral to Weick’s (2009) concepts of belief and labeling as sensemaking constructs. A critical component of the meaning-making process is how an organization’s mission and values are articulated.

Being human is enduring and needs to be taken seriously. Human beings know what is meaningful and for example, in the case of a mission statement, this knowledge needs to be accessed and articulated by the individual and be expressed through a mission statement than prescribed by a mission statement (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2011, p. 9).

The way an organization articulates mission has an impact on how well it is received by organizational actors. Darbi (2012) found that, although employees generally perceive that mission statements are in the administrative domain and have a limited relevance on their behaviors and attitudes, they impact attitudes and behavior if employees feel a sense of “ownership” over the mission. The literature indicates that it is not the mission but the way it is communicated through leadership and culture that has an impact on employee attitudes and behavior (Campbell & Yeung, 1991; Jacobson, 2011).

The mission and values of an organization, as articulated through mission statements, vision statements, and core values are important cultural artifacts that can shed light on how employees derive meaning from work. Campbell and Yeung (1991) found that employees develop a “sense of mission” through their work when their values and the values of the organization are aligned. Similar findings have been revealed in the public sector. Jacobson’s (2011) case study of two United States federal agencies demonstrated the importance of organizational mission to the development of an employee’s public service motivation (PSM). While the benefits of recruiting for PSM were not significant, the study found that organizations
develop PSM in employees by drawing connections between employee behavior and the mission of the organization (Jacobson, 2011). Mission statements serve the functions of communicate direction, assist in control, guide decision-making, and motivate employees (Bartkus, Glassman, & McAfee, 2004). The literature suggests that a clearly-articulated, compelling organizational culture often gives structure to organizational purpose, which in turn facilitates individual meaning-making (Goffee & Smith, 2013).

Making Sense of Meaningful Work in an Educational Workplace Context

While meaningful work has been written extensively in the psychology and organizational literature, the application of meaningful work research to the work-life of teachers is limited. This subsection will review the existing research related to meaningful work, as educators perceive it, in order to develop an understanding of the nature of meaningful work in an educational context. Three themes emerge from a review of the literature: (a) the meaningfulness inherent in the teaching profession, (b) meaningful work outcomes in an educational context, and (c) causal factors contributing to a sense of meaningful work among teachers.

Meaningfulness of the teaching profession. Meaning seems to be a profession with “built-in” meaningfulness—teachers have the opportunity to make a significant difference in the lives of others and have a significant degree of professional autonomy. They are also often cited as cultural heroes (Gerber, 1972). Indeed, “the majority of aspiring teachers wish to enter the profession out of a desire to engage in meaningful work” (Oberski & McNally, 2007, p. 941; see also Roness & Smith, 2010). International findings show that common reasons new teachers choose the teaching profession include a sense of personal fulfillment, making a difference, a sense of vocation and meaningful engagement in subject matter (Roness & Smith, 2010). When
asked what they loved most about teaching, 17% of teaching candidates isolated “doing meaningful work,” highlighting elements of the profession related to having a positive social impact, improving students’ lives, and serving as role models (Torrez & Krebs, 2012). Nevertheless, not all educators experience meaning in their work (Demirkasimoglu, 2015; Janik & Rothman, 2015; Talbert-Johnson, 2006). The literature reveals that perceptions of meaningful work have significant consequences.

**Positive meaningful work outcomes in an educational context.** In an organizational setting, meaningful work tends encourage productivity (e.g., Parker, 2008; Chalofsky, 2010), ownership of the mission of the organization (Amabile & Kramer, 2012), organizational commitment (e.g., Steger et al., 2012), work engagement (e.g., Geldenhuys et al., 2014), self-efficacy beliefs (e.g., Dik et al., 2014), and intrinsic motivation (e.g., Steger et al., 2012; Pinder, 2014). While there is a dearth of research relating directly to the impact of meaningful work on job-related outcomes for teachers, there is reason to believe that the organizational literature is transferable to an educational context. Betoret (2013) has drawn the connection between the satisfaction of psychological needs, such as meaning, with various dimensions of teacher engagement, such as vigor and dedication to work. Importantly, meaningful work perceptions have been correlated with self-efficacy beliefs (Chalofsky, 2010; Strong, 1998; Dik et al., 2014). Teacher beliefs about self-efficacy contribute significantly to attitudes about work (Caprara et al., 2003; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). Teacher self-efficacy beliefs have been correlated to quality of classroom instruction, especially in the areas of classroom management, student support, and cognition activation (Holzberger, Phillipp & Kunter, 2013). In particular, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) found a negative correlation between teacher self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion and perceived depersonalization, which they suggest can be expected to lead to lower
performance in the classroom. Some studies have indicated that teachers who exhibit qualities such as engagement and intrinsic motivation may transfer them to their students (Roth et al., 2007; Klassen et al., 2013).

**Meaningful work and benefits for students.** Sergiovanni (2002) called for schools to cultivate more meaningful work environments for both teachers and students. As evidenced by the broader organizational research above, schools that do so experience greater commitment, more connected stakeholders, and in the end, an increase in student achievement.

Meaningfulness leads to an elevated level of commitment to the school, greater effort, tighter connections for everyone, and more intensive academic engagement for students—all of which are virtues in themselves but which have the added value of resulting in heightened levels of student development and increased academic performance (Sergiovanni, 2002, p. 3).

Indeed, the literature indicates that whether teachers find meaning in their work may have important implications for students. As previously reviewed, meaningful work has been correlated with higher levels of engagement (e.g., Geldenhuys et al., 2014) and intrinsic motivation in the workplace (e.g., Steger et al., 2012). Both engagement (Klassen et al., 2013) and autonomous motivation (Roth et al., 2007) of teachers has been linked to positive outcomes for students. Klassen et al. (2013) found that overall teacher engagement influenced student-teacher engagement in the classroom. Student-teacher engagement has been shown to play a key role in fostering student engagement in the classroom and positive student outcomes (Klassen et al., 2014; Long & Hoy, 2006). Roth et al. (2007) similarly showed that teachers who reported autonomous motivation for teaching promoted the same attribute in their students. This effect was enhanced by a stronger student support among teachers who reported autonomous
motivation (Roth et al., 2007). Intrinsic motivation has also been correlated with the adoption of
effective teaching practice and positive academic outcomes for students (Bishay, 1996; Evans,
1998). Still, the evidence that teacher perceptions of meaningful work directly impacts student
outcomes is incomplete.

**Threats to meaningful work in an educational context.** There has been significant
analysis of the effects of government accountability measures attached to standardized test scores
on the way teachers view their work (Evans, 1992; Mackenzie, 2007; Protheroe, 2006; Oberski
Sweden to a diminished sense of meaningful work among teachers. Talbert-Johnson (2006)
argued that educational reforms (e.g., No Child Left Behind) must incorporate, not only
curricular and instructional capacity building for teachers, but also dispositional development.
Similarly, Hess and Darling-Hammond (2011) asserted that current trends aimed at standardizing
education, which mandate prescriptive teaching practices, leave teachers stripped of “the
initiative and energy that characterize effective schools” (p. A29). Demirkasimoglu (2015)
found that, while teachers who felt their jobs had lost meaning identified low salary and lack of
educational resources, they also cited unpredictable working environments and authoritative
leadership as primary reasons. This may result in higher levels of attrition (Demirkasimoglu,
2015). Janik & Rothman’s (2015) study of Namibian educators found that low psychological
meaningfulness had a direct impact on teachers’ intention to leave their jobs. Likewise, Nias (as
cited in Evans, 2002) identified the lack of a “sense of purpose” as a source of frustration for
primary schoolteachers, and an oft-given reason for resignation (p. 125). Work-life balance is
also a threat to meaningful work of teachers. Societal expectations, organizational policies and
government initiatives shape teacher perceptions and add pressures that threaten perceived
balance between work and leisure (Demirkasimoglu, 2015; Janik & Rothman, 2015).

**Causal factors of meaningful work in an educational context.** Pasket (2007) conducted a heuristic study of adult educators that uncovered four catalysts for increased meaning: contribution to students, interaction with colleagues, continual learning, and autonomy of choice. The literature sheds light similar factors—in particular emotions and dispositions, job crafting, and social interactions—that help explain how K-12 teachers experience meaningful work.

**Emotions, dispositions and meaningful work in an educational context.** How a teacher makes sense of meaningful work is significantly influenced by his or her emotional landscape. Working in a highly social environment—interacting with a steady stream of students, colleagues, administrators and parents—means that “emotions are integral to teaching” (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 1075). Sensemaking often occurs “under intense emotional experience,” often linked to values (Weick, 2009, p. 146). As such, emotional energy is one of the main drivers of meaningful work (Chalofsky, 2010). Several studies have shown that teachers identify social-emotional rewards, such as expressions of validation from administrators and gratitude from students, as lending meaning to their work (Hargreaves, 2001; Kokka, 2016). Hargreaves (2001) argued for more research to uncover “why teachers’ emotions are configured in particular ways in the changing and varying organizational life of schools” (p. 1075).

Some research on how teachers make sense of their work has centered on the role of dispositions. John Dewey and others have asserted that dispositions have an impact on student achievement (Mueller & Hindin, 2011). The National Council for Teacher Education’s definition of teacher disposition includes an explanation that dispositions rely on “beliefs, perceptions and attitudes related to values” (Mueller & Hindin, 2011, p. 18). In the 1990s, the
New Teacher’s Assessment and Support Consortium outlined 10 dispositions that teachers should exhibit. Among them are “love of learning,” “self-reflection,” and “collaborating for student advocacy” (Hartlep & McCubbins, 2013)—dispositions connected to a sense of meaningful work (see Chalofsky, 2010). Moreover, Chan (2011) found that dispositional gratitude and a “meaningful-life orientation to happiness” could insulate teachers from burnout. Accordingly, Talbert-Johnson (2006) and others (see also Sergiovanni, 2002; Hess & Darling-Hammond, 2011) have argued for dispositional development as a critical component of effective school reforms. Despite the significance of emotions and dispositions to the sensemaking process, the literature contains an incomplete explanation of how they are developed in the individual and organizational life of teachers.

**Teachers, job crafting, and meaning.** Berg, Dutton and Wrzesniewski (2013) draw on two examples from an educational context to illustrate how job crafting can produce more experienced meaning through work. One example explains that a history teacher could access his love of performing music, collaborate with a music teacher, and incorporate music into his history lessons. “By crafting his job in these ways the teacher is able to incorporate musical performance and the experience of being a musician—which are valued parts of his identity—into his life at work, thus bringing new meaningfulness to his work” (Berg et al., 2013, pp. 3-4). In another example, Berg et al. (2013) explain how a principal could prioritize getting to know the individual preferences and interests of teachers, thus reframing the principal-teacher relationship in ways that produce an increased sense of meaning that both the principal and teachers gain from their workplace relationships.

**Service through teaching as meaningful.** One of the most popular explanations teachers give for joining the profession is the capacity to make a difference in the lives of others (Roness
Kokka’s (2016) study of K-12 educators teaching in an urban environment revealed that some teachers crafted their jobs in such a way as to derive a sense of social purpose in teaching economically disadvantaged urban students in an under-resourced school. The sense of meaning derived from this perception improved the satisfaction and longevity of teachers working in such conditions (Kokka, 2016). Teachers may also be able to craft this desire to make a difference into their job through service learning (i.e., learning experiences involving community service). K-12 educators who initiate service learning activities often describe their experiences as purposeful and gratifying (Krebs, 2008). Pre-service teachers who experienced meaningful service learning work during their preparation showed pride in collective achievements, greater self-confidence and self-efficacy (Kashak & Letwinsky, 2015). Krebs (2008) found that K-12 teachers who lead or participate in service-learning projects also derive a sense of personal meaning from the social relationships with students, colleagues, and parents that are enhanced during such projects.

**Meaning through the social interactions inherent in the teaching profession.** Another consistent theme in the literature related to causal factors of meaningful work is the role of social interactions in developing a sense of meaning. Several studies highlight how teachers find meaning in the social interaction and a sense of belonging associated with the work of teaching (Demirkasimoglu, 2015; Torrez & Krebs, 2012; Masuda, 2010). This evidence supports the transfer of May’s (2004) claim that co-worker relationships are a significant source of work meaningfulness in an educational context. Camburn and Han’s (2015) study on teacher reflection found that designing “professional learning experiences that engage teachers in meaningful work with peers” could result in increased classroom application of professional development learning (p. 528). Similarly, teachers who were connected in study groups engaged
in more meaningful work and felt validated as professionals (Masuda, 2010; Nieto, 2003).
Moreover, teachers find meaning in working with students on a daily basis. Aspects of teaching
that involve interacting with students are a source of meaning in the work of many teachers
(Demirkasimoglu, 2015; Torrez & Krebs, 2012; Kokka, 2016; Roness & Smith, 2010).

**Factors shaping work in international schools.** The literature does not offer much
insight into the perceptions of meaningful work, or related phenomena such as engagement,
motivation and job satisfaction, as they take shape in an international school context. Whereas
the research described above provides a foundation for understanding how meaningful work
conditions take shape in the larger scope of K-12 education, international schools are a unique
context. International school teachers take on a different profile from the typical public school
teacher (Garton, 2000; Hastings, 2006). Despite the lack of research related to meaningful work
in international schools, there are some understandings that can be gleaned from the literature on
international school teacher perceptions, turnover and retention trends in international schools,
and the impact of international school leadership on perceptions of work.

**International school teachers and meaningful work.** The limited existing research on
meaningful work in an international context confirms some of the findings in the organizational,
psychology and education research. McReynolds (2010) found that international school
teachers’ perceived ability to make meaningful contributions to the school’s mission mediated
burnout and engagement. In particular, contributions to the lives of students and colleagues were
seen as particularly meaningful contributions inspiring engagement and commitment to the
school (McReynolds, 2010). These findings are supported by psychological (Seligman, 2011),
organizational (Chalofsky, 2010) and education (Demirkasimoglu, 2015; Torrez & Krebs, 2012;
Masuda, 2010) literature asserting positive workplace relationships as a source of meaning in
work. Young international school teachers, in particular, value meaningful work when making career decisions (Cox, 2013). Hardman (2001) found that international school teachers list “job challenge” and “happy work climate” as primary reasons for deciding to leave or stay at a school. Fong (2015) recommended “making teachers feel their job is meaningful” as a way to increase job satisfaction, positive views of nature of work, and retention in international schools (p. 96).

**Teacher retention and turnover at international schools and connections with meaningful work.** A teacher’s decision to leave a school is influenced by perceptions of meaningful work (Demirkasimoglu, 2015; Janik & Rothman, 2015). Teacher turnover in international schools is particularly high (Mancuso, Roberts, & White, 2010). According to the Association for the Advancement of International Education, the average tenure of an international school teacher is 3.5 years (Bunnell, 2005). However, positive perceptions of nature of work—a sense of purpose, enjoyment and pride derived from a job—have predicted contract renewal among international school teachers in Asia (Fong, 2015). Moreover, international school teachers often cite organizational conditions as reasons for teacher movement (Mancuso et al., 2010). Turnover also has an impact on organizational sensemaking. Hardman (2001) found that international school teachers view sustained retention of teachers as a critical component of quality instruction. Along with pay and benefits, a “happy working climate” and “powerful sense of job challenge” were identified as conditions that support teacher retention (Hardman, 2001, p. 134). This research suggests that meaningful work may have a positive impact on retention, as workplace climate and sense of challenge have both been associated with the meaningful work literature (Chalofsky, 2010).

**The impact of leadership perceptions of work in international schools.** As independent
international schools typically operate outside of the influence of centralized district school boards and public policy legislation, leadership may have a particularly impact on teacher retention in international schools. Mancuso et al. (2010) also showed a correlation between the perceived effectiveness of international school heads and teacher retention in international schools. Betts (2001) stressed that because international school teaching contracts, especially for overseas hires, often cover housing, medical care, transportation and vacation costs, international school teachers are vulnerable to dissatisfaction that results from mismanagement of such benefits. The impact of leadership seems to be influential here. Harper & Hayden (2008) studied the influence of leadership styles on international schools and found that leaders who apply distributed, transformational, and reflective leadership practices are most effective in instilling a sense of mission in their staffs. These findings are supported by the broader body of educational research, which indicates that leadership has a central impact on a teacher’s work-life experience (see Evans, 1998; Brown & Wyn, 2009).

**Summary of the Literature**

The line of inquiry guiding this research is informed by the literature surrounding international school teachers, the phenomenon of meaningful work, the process of organizational sensemaking, and applications for that research on the lived work-life experiences of educators, and specifically K-12 international school teachers. First, the international school teacher profile demonstrates a variety of work settings and perspectives shaped by how teachers were hired (Garton, 2000). Moreover, among overseas hires, a stratification emerged distinguishing international school teachers by their personal motivations for teaching overseas (Hardman, 2001). These distinctions form an understanding of the profile, perspectives, and shared experiences of the participants required for a purposively sampled study (see Chapter 3). Next,
Chalofsky’s (2010) meaningful work theory was reviewed, including its roots in needs theory (see Maslow, 1943; Herzberg, 1974) and its relevance to job satisfaction, motivation, and engagement (e.g., Lips-Weirsma & Morris, 2011; Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2012). This was followed by a review of the literature on organizational sensemaking examining the connection between the organization and individual identity (e.g., Gioia, 1998; Hatch et al., 2000). In particular, Weick’s (2009) explanation of organizational sensemaking was discussed as a supplemental framework useful for discussing how individuals make sense of their work in the context of a social workplace environment. The impact of organizational culture on the sensemaking process was also explored, with an emphasis on the impact of values and mission of an organization on employee perceptions and behavior; this supports an exploration of the second sub-question of this proposal. Finally, applications of the organizational and psychological research on meaningful work to an educational setting were reviewed. This section included a review of the literature related to fulfillment among teachers (e.g., Sergiovanni, 2002), teacher dispositions (e.g., Mueller & Hindin, 2011), teacher morale (e.g., Evans, 1992), self-efficacy beliefs, and job satisfaction in order to develop a holistic picture of what is known about factors that contribute to and follow from meaningful work for teachers. A subsection covering existing research specifically related to meaningful teaching in an international school context was also included, which revealed the relevance of meaningful work to international school teacher recruitment and retention.
Chapter III: Methodology

This section provides an overview of the methodology and data collection approach that were used for this study. A review of the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach will explain the justification for this approach, citing key researchers who have contributed to the research tradition, and lay out the plan that was used for data collection and analysis.

Research Question

The line of inquiry guiding this study is: How do international school teachers experience meaningful work? The purpose is to describe and analyze how foreign-hire K-12 international educators make sense of experiencing meaning in their work.

Research Approach and Justification

The research approach to this study is founded in an interpretive philosophy that applies a qualitative research approach in the IPA tradition. Interpretive researchers aim to look at the reality that individuals create in the context of their situation (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Understanding how individuals experience reality is integral to the phenomena of both meaningful work and sensemaking. Interpretive sociology understands this reality as a network of shared meanings (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). This fits with a qualitative, IPA approach concerned with fleshing out how participants label experiences, develop beliefs, and ultimately make sense of the experience of meaningful work.

Qualitative tradition. Qualitative research is appropriate when an issue requires a complex, detailed understanding (Creswell, 2012). Meaningful work has been studied both quantitatively (Steger et al., 2012; van den Heuvel et al., 2009) and qualitatively (May, Gilson & Harter, 2004) in the past. Several survey studies have identified attributes of organizations that
have successfully developed meaningful work environments (Chalofsky, 2010). However, this study aims to present international school teacher experiences in their own words in order to better understand the phenomenon of meaningful work in an international school context. Qualitative research involves the exploration of a multifaceted phenomenon from the perspectives of individual participants (Creswell, 2008). Most studies on meaningful work have focused on managing meaning as opposed to the subjective experience of meaningful work (Lips-Weirsma & Morris, 2011). The qualitative approach offers the opportunity for teachers to describe the meaning-making process in their own words, offering in-depth data for exploring how perceptions of their work-life are formed and what variables contribute to a sense of meaningful work experienced at the individual level of analysis.

**IPA Approach.** Meaningful work is a highly contextualized phenomenon. Consequently, an examination of meaningful work perceptions requires a methodological approach that takes into account the complex and nuanced nature of subjective human experience. To that end, this study will apply the IPA methodology framed by Smith et al. (2012) in their text, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Theory, Method and Research.* IPA is “a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (Smith et al., 2009). There are three key dimensions to this approach: phenomenological, heuristic and idiographic.

**Phenomenological underpinnings of IPA.** IPA is phenomenological in the sense that it explores experience as a valid subject for research (Smith et al., 2009). This perspective is elemental to this study as perceptions of meaningful work are derived through a meaning-making process, and the phenomenon of meaning-making is at the essence of phenomenological inquiry.
driven by a curiosity about the human experience, particularly when it comes to things that hold meaning for us and make up our lifeworld (Smith et al., 2009). The philosophical phenomenology of Husserl (1931, 2012) attempted to set aside the limitations of natural sciences and theoretical constructs in order to distill “purified phenomena” for observation (p. 3). Husserl’s ambition was to find the essence of experience itself; in contrast, the ambition of IPA researchers is to encapsulate the unique experiences of specific people (Smith et al., 2009). Although his movement was a rebuttal to the predominant psychological trend towards empiricism and naturalism of the nineteenth century, Husserl’s phenomenology laid the groundwork for future manifestations of phenomenology within modern social sciences. Moustakas (1994), for instance, explained the application of phenomenology to psychology thusly: “The empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a structural analysis that portrays the essence of experience” (p. 13). This description of phenomenology fits neatly with one purpose of this investigation: to describe how teachers experience meaningful work. Through the phenomenological lens, participant interviews can paint a picture of how individual teachers have experienced meaning in their work and make sense of that experience. Still, the phenomenological approaches of Moustakas and other empirical, psychological and transcendental phenomenologists (e.g., Giorgi) focus less on the meanings extracted by the researcher and more on describing the experiences of the participants in a pure way, free of bias and interpretations (Creswell, 2008).

**Hermeneutics and IPA.** Another foundational theory contributing to IPA is hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, originally developed for biblical analysis, is essentially a framework for interpreting texts (Smith et al., 2009). Creswell (2008) defined interpretation in
qualitative research as an abstraction beyond the themes to consider the larger meaning of findings.

IPA’s interpretive nature differs from the phenomenology of Moustakas and Giorgi in that it offers an heuristic commentary on the findings rather than a strictly descriptive report of the participants’ accounts (Smith et al., 2009). This interpretive nature of the IPA approach offers a contextualized phenomenological analysis that is appropriate for the application of a strong conceptual framework and leaves room for the researcher to assess how workplace conditions contribute to a teacher’s sense of meaningful work. Just as Paul’s letters can only be understood in the context of his Jewish heritage, the Greco-Roman world, and his audiences, a teacher’s sense of meaningful work is the product, not only of an individual's relationship with an organization, but also an individual's sense of identity, values, beliefs, past experiences, home life, and various other external influences. Following this analogy, Paul was in some ways less able to make sense of what he was writing than is a third party analyzing his letters at a later date, in the same way that teachers might not be able to put their finger on exactly how they derived meaning from a workplace environment.

IPA research is hermeneutic on two nested levels: the participant’s sensemaking of his/her own experiences as well as the researcher’s attempt at making sense of the experiences that are described (Smith et al., 2009). IPA offers a more dynamic framework for understanding how teachers experience meaningful work than a strictly phenomenological approach, because it offers the opportunity not only to convey what the participants report about their experience, but also what sense can be made from that sensemaking.

The hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle is a method of linguistic analysis concerned with the relationship between the part and the whole. Gadamer (1975) emphasized
that experience must be viewed in the context of history. Conversely, parts contribute to the meaning of the whole. Interpretation of text, from this position, is influenced by researchers’ background-knowledge; that background is influenced by the new text (Smith et al., 2009). As with most qualitative approaches, IPA analysis tends to be conveyed in a linear, step-by-step process. However, in practice, IPA analysis moves through various ways of thinking about data, in an iterative fashion, rather than completing one step after another (Smith et al., 2009).

**Idiography and IPA.** The third characteristic on the IPA approach is idiographic. Idiographic research starts at the individual level of analysis. It is concerned with the study of particular individuals, rather than “nomothetic” research, which is concerned with making, claims about groups or populations (Smith et al., 2009). An idiographic study might ask how a widow deals with the death of a spouse in order to better understand the phenomenon of grief as she experienced it, while a nomothetic study asks how widows *tend* to deal with the death of a spouse in order to identify interventions that can help widows deal with grief.

The idiographic paradigm is similar to that of an anthropologist who studies a specific culture with no claim to generalizable findings that can be applied to *all* cultures, but with the hope that future studies will reveal trends that are larger in scope (Smith & Osborne, 2007, italics in original). Similarly, an IPA study of how international school teachers experience offers an in-depth understanding of specific sensemaking by individuals; this has the potential to move the body of literature closer to a more holistic view of meaningful work in an educational setting.

**Summary of IPA methodology.** IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences. This examination consists of three key philosophical perspectives: phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic. From the phenomenological view IPA seeks what Smith et al. (2012) describe as a
process of discovery, bringing to light an individual’s unique construction of meaning, shaped from perceptions and understanding of his or her environment. The “currency” for an IPA study is the meanings that participants derive from experiences, events, and conditions (Smith & Osborne, 2007). This currency of meanings is extracted at the individual level of analysis (idiographic) and is interpreted (hermeneutic) using a theoretical framework, connections with the body of literature, and further questioning.

The primary goal of IPA is a detailed exploration of “how participants are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith & Osborne, 2007, p. 53). This made it an ideal methodology for uncovering how international school teachers experience meaningful work.

**Recruitment, Participants and Sampling Strategy**

Interviews were conducted via Google Hangouts, Skype or in person with nine participants from accredited international schools who self-identified as having experienced “a rich sense of meaningful work” as an international educator. Participants were currently employed at a K-12 international school offering a North American, IB or British curriculum.

**Recruitment and access.** Participants were self-selected or referred. A recruitment flyer was posted on The International Educator (TIE) Online, various professional Facebook pages, and international school teacher blogs laying out the purpose of the study, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and time commitment required of participants (see Appendix B). Self-selected or referred participants received a clear overview of the study and its purposes, along with the responsibilities of the researcher and participants and a brief overview of the purposive sampling criteria for this study (see Appendix D). Based on questionnaire results, nine participants who best fit the sampling criteria were recruited to participate in the study.

Selected participants were then sent a signed consent form (Appendix C). A subsequent
e-mail sought input to develop timetable for interviews and outline an unobtrusive strategy for conducting online interviews. Correspondence with participants determined convenient times for 45-minute online interviews as well as technical instructions for connecting for the online interviews.

**Participants.** Traditionally, IPA studies generally involve between three and six, with the intention of deeply exploring the experience of each individual (Smith et al., 2009). More recently, a larger group of participants has been recommended (T. Sanders, personal communication, June 3, 2015). Keeping in mind that some interviews may not be rich in data, the researcher sought to identify eight to 10 teachers presently employed by a K-12 international school offering a North American, IB or British curriculum who have experienced meaningful work. Participants were be purposefully sampled based on specific criteria. In the end, 10 participants were recruited. One participant’s interview data was disqualified due to technical difficulties that made it impossible to transcribe. In the end, nine participants were included in the study.

**Purposive sampling.** This study employed purposive sampling. Typically, participants in an IPA study are identified through the referral of “gatekeepers,” the researcher’s contacts, and snowballing, whereby participants identify and refer other potential participants (Smith et al., 2009). Although administrators and faculty were be asked for referrals, potential participants also had the chance to self-select as having experienced meaningful work by responding to a request on international school forums such as The International Educator (TIE) Online, professional Facebook pages, and international school teacher blogs. Given the context of this study, there were two key considerations when it comes to sampling: (a) identifying participants who have “a rich sense of meaningful work.” and (b) identifying, among this sampling,
participants with diverse experiences with the phenomenon of meaningful work. The former facilitated a homogeneous participant group comprised of teachers who have experienced a robust sense of meaning in their work. The latter offered the opportunity to examine commonalities and disparities among international teacher experiences to develop a deep understanding of the sense making process (see Smith et al., 2009).

As mentioned, IPA research is concerned with offering a detailed account of individual human experience (Smith et al., 2009). Research is conducted at the individual level of analysis (i.e., idiographic), with a small and precise purposive sample (Smith et al., 2009). This results in a relatively homogeneous group of participants for whom the research question has particular relevance (Smith & Osborne, 2007, p. 67). International schools offer a wide range of teaching experiences among a relatively homogeneous pool of potential participants. In short, purposive sampling offers greater confidence that conclusions will reveal a detailed picture of the phenomenon in different contexts by including individuals whose experiences offer divergent perspectives that may not be caught by random sampling (Maxwell, 2005, p. 89).

**Purposive sampling criteria.** The following set of criteria was used to identify potential participants who have processed a common experience (see Creswell, 2008).

- Full-time international school teachers at accredited K-12 North American, IB or British international schools.
- Diverse teaching experiences including at least one international school (including current school of employment).
- Self-identified as having “a rich sense of meaningful work” in a meaningful work setting and/or referred by colleagues or administrators (see Chalofsky, 2010).

These sampling criteria ensured that the participants had experienced the phenomenon of
meaningful work and fit the profile of a K-12 international school teacher. Smith et al. (2009) leave some room for expanding inclusion criteria to ensure rich data. In the case of this study, the original study design called for participants with work experience in at least two international schools. However, when it was revealed that one participant had only one international school experience (he was in the process of moving on to his second school at the time of the interview) it was determined that one international school experience along with other teaching experiences would serve to illuminate the experience of meaningful work in an international school context. In fact, this participant’s responses netted some of the most revealing data collected in the study.

**Data Collection Overview**

Smith et al. (2012) recommend the use of semi-structured interview guided by a flexible interview schedule that allows for the direction of the conversation to be led by the participant. Then transcripts are coded for themes and analyzed through a process that becomes increasingly systematic and analytic in the qualitative tradition. The result is a narrative account with the analysis of a researcher who interprets key excerpts from the interviews (Smith et al., 2012).

**Semi-structured interview.** As mentioned, Smith et al. (2012) suggest “semi-structured one-to-one interviews” as the primary data collection method for IPA research. Interviews should be constructed in such a way that participants are free to describe their experiences and reflect on them without time constraints. It is critical that IPA research be driven by the experiences of participants, not the interviewer’s understanding of the phenomenon of study (Smith et al., 2012).

To that end, establishing a positive rapport with the participants is essential. The ordering of questions should not be viewed as static; the interviewer is free to probe interesting areas that arise and follow the respondent’s interests or concerns (Smith et al., 2009). To that
Smith and Osborne (2007) recommend developing a schedule of interview questions, keeping in mind that the interview process is iterative, rather than linear, and that the schedule should guide rather than dictate the interview. Questions should be funneled from broad to more specific to avoid guiding participants towards a particular theory or hypothesis (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Ideally, interview schedules consist of six to 10 questions with possible prompts to cover a conversation spanning 45 to 90 minutes (Smith et al., 2009).

Keeping these suggestions in mind, an interview schedule was created covering the salient aspects of meaningful work contextualized for the experiences of an international school teacher (see Appendix E). Participants were consulted on when and where the interviews would take place. For some participants a face-to-face interview was possible, while for others, it was more practical to conduct interviews via Skype or Google Hangouts. Ahead of the interviews the purpose of the study and structure of the interview were reviewed. It was important, during this phase, to explicitly sanction narrative storytelling and remind the participant that the discussion was to be driven by their experiences, not the interview schedule. It was also important to direct the focus of the discussion to participants’ own experiences rather than the second-hand accounts of others (see Smith et al., 2009). Interviews were recorded on a password protected iPhone Voice Memo Application and backed up using QuickTime voice recorder on a password protected laptop. These recordings were stored in secure password-protected files and transcribed by Rev.com, a professional transcription service provider. Hand-written memos were also taken in order to make note of body language and other observations that may not have been picked up by the audio recording. Handwritten original notes will be shredded upon final approval of the study.

**Follow-up interview.** After the primary interview, participants were told that they may
be asked to schedule a 15-minute follow-up interview to explore emergent themes across the interviews and pose questions that arise during the reading and notating of first-interview transcripts. The follow-up interview was not necessary for any participants due to the sufficiently rich data collected during initial interviews.

**Additional data.** Although semi-structured interviews were be the primary data-collection method, other sources were explored to contextualize the data (see Smith et al., 2009). Participants were asked to submit their most current resume to provide a history of their educational careers. Also, background research on their past workplaces was explored to lend meaning to their narratives. Finally, post-interview notes were taken to capture immediate reflections on the interview that were used during the data analysis phase.

**Data storage and management.** Transcripts and recordings were stored in password-protected computers and, when hard copies of documents were used (e.g., participant resumes), in a locked file cabinet. Pseudonyms were be used to protect the confidentiality of participants. Transcriptions and recordings will be saved indefinitely and potentially used in future research. This was disclosed to participants during the sampling and contracting processes.

**Data Analysis**

Although general steps for IPA data analysis are delineated below, it is a key tenet of IPA that this process is iterative—researchers may move back and forth through a range of different ways of thinking about the data, rather than completing each step, one after the other (Smith et al., 2009). Although there is not a prescribed method for working with IPA data, Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) suggest that analysis be carried out in two stages. During the initial stage, the researcher formulates a clear third-person description of what the participant has experienced. This description should be as close to the participant’s perspective as possible. Next, the
researcher engages in a “more overtly interpretive analysis” that positions the data in the context of culture, external variables, and theory. It is during this phase that researcher provides a commentary of the participant’s “sensemaking activities” (p. 104, italics in original; see also Smith & Osborn, 2003). In this way, the process moves the analysis from idiographic and inductive to interpretive and theoretical.

**Steps of data analysis.** Smith et al. (2012) suggest four steps towards conducting IPA data analysis that were applied to data analysis for this study:

1. **Reading and rereading:** Immerse oneself in the text; read closely line-by-line and taking notes; listen to the audio-text

2. **Initial noting:** Develop a “comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data,” leaving descriptive (normal text), linguistic (italicized, and conceptual comments (underlined); engage in “free textual analysis;” bracket one’s own thoughts and opinions

3. **Developing emergent themes:** Map interrelationships, connections and patterns in initial notes; look for relationships between parts and the whole (i.e., hermeneutic circle); apply theory to conceptualize emergent themes; strive for a synergy between description and interpretation

4. **Searching for connections across emergent themes:** Draw together emergent themes to produce a structure highlighting significant aspects of the data; establish “superordinate” themes and group related themes; establish groupings based on themes of polarization, context, frequency and function; develop a visual representation of themes representing an emergent “gestalt”

**Coding.** IPA analysis process is iterative. Coding moves back and forth between
emergent and superordinate themes, sometimes “reshuffling the deck” throughout the analysis process as new understandings shed light on initial understandings. Smith and Osborne (2007) summarized that in IPA research, “the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (p. 53). This is not generally a tidy process, and as with data analysis in general, the researcher may move back and forth between data clusters in an inductive cycle. The analytic attention remains with the participants’ attempts to make sense of their world as general themes emerge.

Research data was coded and analyzed using NVivo 11.1 software with Smith et al.’s (2009) recommendations as a guide: (a) thoroughly reading and re-reading of the data, (b) making annotation, (c) developing emergent themes, (d) looking for connections across cases and (e) the identification of super-ordinate themes. An analysis of interview data yielded five superordinate themes: “Harmony through alignment of personal and professional values,” “fulfillment through making a difference,” “joy through creativity and growth,” “vitality and support through meaningful relationships,” and “empowerment through autonomy” supported by several nested themes (see Table 2).

The coding software program, NVivo, helped manage and organize the grouping of data. Although coding software presents challenges in the later stages of research, it is useful for grouping qualitative data and coding directly from the text of interview transcripts (Smith et al., 2009). NVivo was chosen because of its compatibility with Mac OS X operating system and its convenient noting features, flexible coding capabilities, and appealing visual representation of themes.

For studies of larger participant groups, reoccurrence of themes across studies informs which emergent themes apply to the entire corpus of participants (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et
al. (2009) leave the decision of how to define “reoccurrence” (e.g., occurrence in one-third, half or all of cases) to the researcher, but suggest that establishing parameters for identifying superordinate themes can facilitate more meaningful analysis and enhance the validity of a study. In the case of this study, superordinate themes were prevalent in at least half of cases to be included in analysis (see Table 2).

Table 2

Reoccurrence of superordinate themes across cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Karen</th>
<th>Diana</th>
<th>Molly</th>
<th>Mary</th>
<th>Rachel</th>
<th>Lloyd</th>
<th>Brent</th>
<th>Amanda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harmony through alignment of personal and professional values</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfillment through making a difference</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy through creativity and growth</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitality and support through meaningful relationships</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment through autonomy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Trustworthiness

Validity. Assessing the validity of a study requires an assessment of the quality of the research conducted, as well as the relevance and trustworthiness of the findings (Yardley, 2007). This is a challenging task for all researchers, but especially for qualitative researchers (Yardley, 2007). For instance, while quantitative research seeks to eliminate subjective perspectives, qualitative research accepts that the perspective of both the participants and the researcher(s) will influence the interpretation of data. Instead of mitigating all risk of bias and error, qualitative
researchers often closely engage participants to understand subjective experiences and seek to interpret hidden meanings in the data. The primary value of IPA research is offering careful analysis of individual life stories that does justice to the complexity of human experience (Smith, et al., 2012). In this way one strength of qualitative research data is their “richness and holism” that provide contextualized, vivid descriptions that have the potential to reveal complexity of lived experience (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10).

The purpose of this study is to explore, not measure, how teachers experience meaningful work. It is meant to glean meanings and patterns that describe the sensemaking process of participants. Whereas IPA research does not make claims to generalization, the rich data focused on the particular experiences of purposely sampled individuals can lead to a better understanding of how a complex construct, such as meaningful work, is developed in individual international school teachers.

Despite the value in such a study, precautions to protect the validity of the study were necessary. Smith et al. (2012) discourage a prescriptive, step-by-step approach to assessing validity, which can detract from the benefits of nuanced interpretation of data which is a strength of IPA research. They instead rely heavily on Yardley’s (2000) more “pluralistic” criteria for judging validity, which focus on sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

**Sensitivity to context.** All qualitative research requires sensitivity to context. IPA’s emphasis on the particular experiences of purposefully sampled participants heightens the importance of sensitivity to sociocultural dynamics, existing literature, experiences of participants, and especially the analysis process (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2012) recommend several ways to ensure sensitivity of context, including building rapport with both
participants and gatekeepers, using ample direct quotes from participant interviews in order to allow the reader to check the veracity of interpretations, and an engaging in a discussion with the existing literature to help orient findings.

**Commitment and rigor.** IPA research requires a commitment to uncovering the perspective of the participant during both the data collection process and analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Interviews require a commitment to building set of essential skills, such as listening, empathy and diligence. Many of these skills overlap with the various aspects of Yardley’s criteria (Smith et al., 2009).

Rigor refers to the thoroughness of the research process, especially in terms of sampling, quality of interview, and completeness of analysis. Rigor applies both to the portrayal of the idiographic and theoretical analysis inherent in IPA research (Smith et al., 2009).

**Transparency and coherence.** IPA studies should be transparent about the research process, describing how participants were sampled, why a particular interview schedule was developed, and how the data were analyzed (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2012) suggest using tables to provide an overview of these three components of IPA research: sampling process, interview schedule, and analysis.

Coherence refers to the scope and sequence of a study. Smith et al. (2012) suggest rigorous re-reading to check for contradictions, the alignment of themes, strength of analytic interpretations, and clarity of the researcher’s line of thinking.

**Impact and importance.** The final piece of Yardley’s (2000) criteria for testing the validity of qualitative research is its impact and importance. In other words, does the research tell the readers something useful, something that has implications for the field (Smith et al., 2009)? This is the most crucial aspect of IPA research, indeed all academic research: It should
contribute to the existing research and reveal important understandings of the phenomenon of study

**Threats and Limitations**

There were several threats to the validity of this study, namely, bias and reactivity. Moreover, IPA research has limitations that should be acknowledged in order to effectively frame the study’s outcomes.

**Bias threats.** Maxwell (2005) identified “researcher bias” and the influence of the researcher on the participant (i.e., reactivity) as threats to validity in qualitative research. In IPA research, in particular, it is necessary for the researcher to position him or herself in the study and report on such biases openly (see Chapter 1, Positionality Statement) (Creswell, 2012; Maxwell, 2005). There are two major sources of potential bias and reactivity in this study: The researcher is an international educator and the data analysis employed the use of theoretical frameworks.

Researcher bias is a threat to validity in all forms of qualitative research. Bias can be particularly difficult to avoid when the researcher is also a practitioner. Still, researcher-practitioners also possess contextualized insights into the phenomenon of study that can also be viewed as an asset if that experience is positioned effectively. Evans (1998) reflects on the importance of reflection to her experience as a researcher-cum-teacher:

> I am aware of the methodological problems associated with roles of this nature, arising out of the potential for bias. Recognizing these limitations, I am nevertheless convinced that such roles enable data to be gathered which reflect, with as much faithfulness as it is perhaps possible to achieve, individuals’ attitudes to their work and responses to situations and events which occur (p. 48).
To gain a rich understanding of how teachers experience meaningful work, each particular case of meaningful work was uncovered and analyzed in the setting that it was experienced. The founding principle of the phenomenological approach is that experience is best understood in the context that it occurred (Smith et al., 2009).

**Reactivity threats.** There is also a threat of reactivity inherent in applying theoretical frameworks to qualitative research. Creswell (2012) stressed that “not all evidence will fit with the pattern of a code or theme.” Therefore, in order to avoid spurious conclusions during data analysis, it was critical to report an objective account of the participant’s experience, even if it did not fit neatly with the theoretical framework. The application of theoretical frameworks also has the potential to artificially shape interview questions and data analysis in favor of the researcher’s knowledge and interests. It is essential that IPA researchers “Bracket off” personal assumptions when developing an interview schedule to avoid leading the participant in a direction (Smith et al., 2009).

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) pointed out that “reflexivity,” or the fact that the researcher is always a part of the world that he or she studies, is unavoidable (as cited in Maxwell, 2005). It is the obligation of the researcher to be explicit and reflective about biases, values, and experiences throughout a research study (Creswell, 2012).

Although studying a phenomenon in the context of the researcher’s profession posed some threats to reliability and validity, it also offered the potential for robust, contextualized findings and increased the capacity for generalization by ensuring deep analysis of the phenomenon of meaningful work, how it was experienced, and under what conditions.

**Limitations of IPA research.** As a methodology, IPA is focused on an understanding of experience. But experience is elusive, and the pure experience of another person is never truly
accessible (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, an idiographic approach, focused on the individual level of analysis, IPA findings are not in themselves immediately generalizable (Smith et al., 2009). Rather, IPA research is an attempt to add to the body of knowledge in a discipline that can be replicated in order to identify trends and understandings. In this way, IPA findings are theoretically transferable to similar contexts (Smith et al., 2009). So, while this study can help international school leaders understand how teachers experience meaningful work, findings must be applied to novel contexts that compare to the situations described by participants.

As with all forms of phenomenological research, bracketing the biases and opinions of the researcher can be a challenge that affects the trustworthiness of data. Sampling presents another significant challenge for phenomenological researchers. As a discipline concerned with an understanding of experience, choosing participants who have interacted with the phenomenon is an imperfect science (Creswell, 2012). Findings were positioned in the context of this understanding.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The primary data-collection method employed by this study was semi-structured face-to-face interviews with teachers. As such, there are some ethical considerations that were considered.

Interviews with teachers had to be phrased in an unbiased, unpersuasive way so as not to encourage specific interviewee responses. Likewise, careful wording of the participant invitation took into consideration the potential for persuasion and the necessity of eliciting untainted perceptions. In line with the Belmont Report (1979), this study respected interviewed teachers as autonomous agents. Participants were fully informed of the purpose, implications and desired results of the study. The professional reflection benefits of the study for participants were
maximized, and sacrifices incurred, particularly time commitments of interviewed teachers, were minimized whenever possible. Furthermore, the interruption of teaching and learning were avoided altogether. The confidentiality of participants has been protected by pseudonym. Interview transcripts are stored in a password protected computer, as well as a locked file cabinet. Interviews saved on Google Drive and hard drives are retained with full privacy settings.

Informed consent was ensured through the initial invitation to participants, an informed consent document, and a pre-interview group meeting. The informed consent document outlined the following for participants:

- General purpose of the study and its potential contribution to scholarly research
- Time commitment that will be endured by participants
- Potential benefits that the study may provide the individual and the field
- A clear disclaimer that participants will not be financially compensated
- Researcher’s contact information
- Terms of participation and procedure for withdrawal from study

Lastly, time was allotted before the interviews began to address questions and concerns of participants.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

Introduction

This study explored how international school teachers experience meaningful work. Nine K-12 international school educators who self-identified as having a “rich sense of meaningful work” were interviewed—six females and three males. Interview times ranged from 45 to 50 minutes. This chapter includes profiles of participants and a review of superordinate and subthemes that emerged from the data. These themes lend structure to a narrative revealing how the international educators in this study experience meaning in their work.

Participant Profiles

Participants’ demographic data, along with an overview of how they explain work and life experiences that have shaped perceptions of their work as an international educator, give context for understanding their responses. All participants were teaching at an accredited international school at the time of the interview, and all but one had more than one international school experience. All participants were self-identified as having “a rich sense of meaningful work” on a pre-interview questionnaire (see Appendix D). Although there was significant congruence in the themes that emerged between cases, each participant framed their sense of meaning in their work differently based on their experiences and perspectives. What follows is a narrative profile of each participant intended to situate individual cases in the context of the superordinate themes revealed by the data viewed as a whole.

Mark Beren. Mark, an American, is married with no children and in his mid-thirties. He has taught in a US public school and at two international schools in Latin America. His background is in secondary English. He currently leads and teaches in an alternative high school program, called the Innovation Academy, that he co-founded within a medium-sized international
school. He coaches basketball as well. He pursued an opportunity to teach internationally when a friend started researching international teaching. His motivation to go abroad was based partially on the constraints of the US public school system. He was enjoying his job teaching gifted and talented students, but felt like his class sizes were too large and like he was “always treading water.”

When he arrived at his first international school in Central America, he felt a sense of empowerment from his newfound autonomy. He explained the difference this way: “In terms of creativity, I felt far more creative. I felt far more relaxed. I wasn’t worried about being sued all the time for not following the scope and sequence.” The desire for autonomy was a common theme during the interview. As his career progressed, he described moving to a new school in South America where he began teaching IB English and Literature. “I immediately started to feel like I was back in [the US]. With the IB diploma . . . every I you have to dot, every T you have to cross just to make sure you’re covering all the content, all the internal assessments and it just . . . felt constraining again.” At that point he approached his principal about doing something different or perhaps moving schools. That is when he was offered the opportunity to start the Innovation Academy, which he said reinvigorated his career.

At various points in the interview, Mark expressed a desire for autonomy and the room to be creative with his work. He explained that, “If you feel like you’ve always got to keep up with the prescribed scope and sequence or curriculum, then I think it kills some of that innovation and creativity.”

Karen Schmidt. Karen is an Australian national in her 40s. She is married with a young child. She currently teaches middle school drama and dance at a large international school in Southeast Asia, but has primarily taught high school performing arts and English. She has also
taught in an Australian and UK public schools and a small British international school in China. She explained that she has wanted to be a drama teacher since Grade 9. “I think I was just bossy,” she said jokingly. “I’ve always liked helping kids, people, caring about them.” Indeed, many of her interview responses emphasized aspects of her work that gave her the opportunity to care for others.

She shared her earliest teaching experiences during her practicum with economically disadvantaged students on the Australian outback. “I had to step up and be there for them, and that’s when I realized I like to be needed. As a teacher, I like to be needed.” She went on to explain that, “the need changes depending on what school you’re at.” In her previous school, for instance, many of her students were English language learners, while at her current school, while most students are fluent or native English speakers and strong academically, they “need to be aware of how lucky they are and what comes with being a privileged person within the international school context.” Her interview responses revealed that a significant source of meaning in her current job was the service-learning project she initiated. “That’s why Drama for a Cause gives me a lot of meaning, and fulfillment. It’s allowing me to apply the curriculum learning, but more importantly, help the kids apply that subject learning to a different context, and also engage with underprivileged kids.”

She drew a stark contrast in her experience in an international school with an IB curriculum—where the performing arts were given the same meeting time as other subjects—and her current school, which has more of an American curriculum and differentiates between core classes, such as English and science, and “encore” classes, such as the arts. She felt less valued her current work situation as a result. “The language shows the difference” in how much the subjects are valued.
**Diana Carlson.** Diana is a single mother of two in her mid-thirties. She teaches middle school art at a large international school in Southeast Asia. At the time of her interview, she was finishing her seventeenth year teaching. She has taught four schools in Asia and Latin America as well as an interlude in an alternative school in the United States. An American citizen, her parents worked as teachers and administrators in various international schools in the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Latin America. Consequently, she grew up attending international schools and identifies as a Third Culture Kid (TCK).

She never expected to become a teacher. “I always had said, ‘I’ll never be an international teacher. I’ll never be a teacher. I’ll never be a teacher.’” However, when she graduated from college, she was not sure what she wanted to do, so she took an internship at a school in South America. “From the very first day that I walked in, I felt at home and I felt challenged. I was excited to go to school every day after that. There’s never been one day that I haven’t been happy to go to work.” After her internship, she taught at two other schools in Latin America, before taking a job at an alternative school in the US. While she described those three years as a “pretty neat experience,” she also confessed that it was “the most foreign place for me.” Subsequently, she took a job at her current school in Southeast Asia, where she has worked for the past seven years teaching middle school art. She identifies strongly with an ethos of international school education that she describes thusly:

Know other cultures and to know other languages. To know other religions, to know other beliefs and family home life of other people… High standards from home, from teachers, from students themselves, the adventure of it and different experiences other than you might get living in one place your whole life. Mobility, flexibility. Growth mindset…
She shared that one of her most personally meaningful roles is that of student-advocate, and that her experience as an international school student helps her in that role. “I think the pressures are different for international school students sometimes. . . . It’s different pressure. Academic pressure. Pressure to be perfect.” Throughout her interview she revealed that she often was able to draw on her own experiences to support students who were struggling with the same pressures she faced. She also cited the values of her school as lending meaning to her work, particularly in regards to an emphasis on service-learning, social-emotional support for students, and work-life balance.

**Molly Burgess.** Molly is white, single and in her late 40s. She is originally from the United States, but moved frequently within the US until her family relocated to Southeast Asia when she was 13 years old. She identifies as a TCK. She currently teaches middle school English and Language Arts (ELA) at a large American international school in Southeast Asia. She has taught internationally for seventeen years in both Europe and Asia. Her experience as a TCK had a strong influence on her desire to take on a career in international education. Her father was an oil executive and she lived all over the US and eventually ended up attending an international school in Southeast Asia from eighth grade through graduation. When she got to college she gravitated to other international school students. “My closest friends to begin with were other third culture kids.”

During her first teaching job at a US public school in a very diverse district, she felt drawn to the TCKs she was teaching. “I wanted to reach out to the kids I most understood and those were other third culture kids.” After three years in that district, she reached out to a counselor from the international school she attended in high school who helped her find a job at a small international school. She described feeling an instant sense of belonging at her new
school. As she put it, “I belong in an international school. I understand these kids.”

Molly has been involved in pushing school-wide initiatives such as Readers Writers Workshop, curriculum development, a scheduling committee, and research and development. She revealed that she feels called to be a “role model for the people around me, whether it’s my students or my fellow colleagues.” She summarized her teaching philosophy like this: “I just like to learn and I like to do what’s right.” Another interesting detail about Molly: Every seven years she takes a year off from teaching. She described this as her “self-imposed sabbatical for my own sanity.” During her years off—she’s taken two in her career—she explores personal interests such as skiing, taking classes, and writing (she’s drafted a novel). “I teach seven years and it’s exhausting, but meaningful work. But in order for me to be a better teacher, I need to step away from the job and be reflective for a while and do something else entirely and come back to it.”

Mary Nichols. Mary, an American mother of two, currently teaches middle school science in a medium-sized British curriculum international school in Southeast Asia. She has taught at one other small international school in East Asia and as an English language teacher. She also had a career as a victim’s advocate in the Canadian legal system. Mary took an unusual track to education. She studied neuropsychology as an undergraduate in the US and then moved to Canada for graduate school to study psychology, where she met her husband.

During her time in Canada, she worked for a few years as a “victim advocate” for the local prosecutor’s office—a role akin to social work. She relocated to the US and served as a social worker for a time. When asked how this experience impacted her perceptions of her work as a teacher, she explained, that the experience strengthened her interest in how to train people and “how the brain works.” She also gained valuable insights “what actually works and what
doesn’t and how to look for what people need, and I think that really helps with teaching.”
When someone was screaming at her in court, she was trained that “they just need someone to
scream at for a while, so just stand and smile, helps a lot when your teaching because I can reel
myself in and not take it personally and just be like, ‘Okay, this kid just really needs to freak out
for a bit.’”

When her husband, who is Canadian, encountered visa troubles in the US, they decided
to try teaching English in East Asia. Shortly after that, the organization she was working for
tapped her for a leadership position with a focus on writing curriculum. “I just had so much fun
teaching and looking for big-picture curriculum as far as aligning everything . . . and then ended
up doing my Masters in Education there.”

Her husband eventually landed a job at the nearby American international school. She
had her first child during that time and began working for the government writing “subject-
specific curriculum in the English language.” After that, she joined her husband at the American
school as an elementary science teacher. The school had an IB framework. She learned the
Primary Years Program (PYP), i.e., the IB’s elementary school curriculum framework, and
“really, really, I drank the [PYP] Kool-Aid.”

When they decided to move on, they attended an international school job fair, where they
drew lots of interest from schools around the world. They settled on their current school, which
is a British international school with an IB curriculum. A deciding factor was that the school
agreed to hire her part-time for her first year. Their youngest child was only one year old at the
time and “there’s no way I would ever be ready to leave her even if it was the best job in the
world.” She explained that, “My kids are first. I’m not going to do anything unless it has some
sort of positive outcome for my kids.” She also explained that teaching with her husband gives
her work a sense of balance and meaning. “I work with my husband and I work with him closely, and I think that we get really meaningful work done together.” Mary also revealed a sense of meaning in her passion for teaching science and sharing her personal interests with her students.

**Rachel Simpson.** Rachel is a single British woman in her mid 30s. She currently teaches elementary school at a large international school in Southeast Asia that is part of a network of service and sustainability oriented schools around the world. She coordinates sustainability and environmental activities for her elementary school. She previously taught in a British international school, and new, progressive international school, both in Asia, as well as a state school in the UK.

She was originally drawn to international education not for the teaching, but for the opportunities to travel. “I guess initially it was the travel, exploring other places and people and cultures, and all of that, so it wasn’t really the teaching that attracted me.” But she grew to enjoy the feel of international schools and noted the contrast between the UK state school, where she had started her career, at the three international schools in which she had worked. “I like the internationalism. . . . International schools have a kind of opportunity for being quite progressive in trying different things, and I think the state system back in the UK is fairly slow moving, really politically driven and I find that frustrating.”

She revealed sustainability education as a source of meaning in her work. She completed a master’s degree in sustainability education and serves as her school’s Environmental Stewardship Coordinator. She also explained how the organization of the schools she has worked at has impacted her experiences. She worked at a very progressive school focused on environmental and peace education. It was a new school at the time and struggled with aspects
of living its mission. “They said that they’d be everything to everybody, so there was a lot of discontent . . . about what was delivered.” She also felt isolated at that school because she was the only British teacher on the faculty at the time. “I think [my colleagues] thought I was like some kind of Victorian school mistress who’ll have the children sitting in rows, being really strict and watching the children, so that was a weird thing to come into.”

Her work at her current school feels more meaningful to her. As she put it, “It knows what it wants to be, whereas [her previous school] didn’t.” She describes finding a sense of meaning in sustainability education and her work with an NGO group that provides resources and runs workshops on teaching sustainability. “If you teach kids about sustainability, you’re actually teaching them yet a better way to learn. It is going to help most understand the world way, way better.”

**Lloyd Winthrop.** Lloyd is a single father from Canada of African descent. He is in his mid-40s and lives with his two children, his girlfriend and two of her children. He is currently teaches elementary school technology at a small “dual stream” German-English international school in Southeast Asia. He also serves as deputy principal of the elementary school. He has led robotics and technology integration initiatives in his school. He has also taught in international schools in the Middle East and East Asia.

After graduation from college, he worked for a few years in Canada before travelling to East Asia to take a job teaching English to adults. From there he took a job at a small private “emersion” school for local students, although the curriculum was mostly local, “we were actually using English as a medium.” From there he started looking for a more “more typical international school teaching.” He taught in the Middle East for a semester, then got a job at an international school in Southeast Asia. He moved to another international school in the same
country and has been there for the past 11 school years. He admitted that, “I’ve probably been at my current school a couple years longer than I should, and there’s a certain measure of not wanting to be there right now.” One reason for staying is that his children are still in school for another four years. At that point he mentioned, he could see himself moving on to another school and/or country.

He finds meaning in his work, particularly through leading small projects, supporting students through behavioral problems in his role as elementary deputy principal (some students refer to him jokingly, Mr. Evil, because he is viewed as the primary disciplinary figure at his school), and observing his students’ personal and professional growth. Still, he shared that teaching primarily students from affluent families left a sense that something was missing from his work.

I’m always cognizant that I have a pretty easy job in the sense that I’m teaching, by and large, upper-middle-income kids with money, with lots of opportunities for support at home. It’s not teaching in a downtown urban area with poverty and that kind of stuff, so in some ways it’s not as meaningful as if I was teaching in those other environments.

He has a deep concern for social and economic inequality in education, and said of himself: “I’m as much of a practitioner as I am a critic of the overall system.” His master’s work focused on post-secondary education with a focus on “equalizing outcomes in post-secondary education. How do you actually plan to get minorities and women and people with disabilities, immigrants, low-income, into and through . . . and graduating from post-secondary institutions.” His rationale for staying in his current work situation has a lot to do with his children. When asked if his situation raises a conflict for him in terms of work versus the social values he would like to advance, he replied, “It’s not a conflict. I’ve made peace to a certain degree. I’m not
going to drag my kids someplace. They need to finish off their education.”

He went on to explain that he looks forward to contributing more to the cause of educational equality when his children graduate, and at the moment, he finds ways to offer open access to education through a robotics-education website, open weekend workshops on technology for local teachers, and regular contributions to Wikipedia. “I think it’s important to support that open-access, free source of information which I think is important to a lot of people.”

**Brent Peterson.** Brent Peterson is in his late 20s, was recently married and has no children. He grew up in the Midwest United States. He was teaching high school math and serving as department chair at a medium-sized international school in Latin America at the time of the study. However, he had already signed a contract with an international school in Eastern Europe set to begin at the beginning of the following school year.

He previously taught at a STEM magnet high school in the United States before moving overseas. He comes from a family of educators, but found irony in the fact that his grandmother, a teacher herself, tried to steer him away from the profession. “She was like, you know, with your math skills you could be an engineer, you could make all this money.” But he was not driven by money. “I kind of realized early on that as long as I’m happy and I have enough money to eat and provide for my family, I don’t really care.” He taught at a magnet school affiliated with a large tech-corporation and state university that emphasized constructivist learning. That had a big impact on his teaching philosophy. As he put it, “All kids can do this, let’s remove the time barrier, what’s the difference if the kid can do it in 30 weeks or 36 or 40? Who really cares if they can do it at the end?” He carried that into his current job at an international school in Peru. At first he found his new school a bit outdated. “I have to admit at
first, I kind of thought that international schools would be a big step up from the US schools, and I guess if I was coming from a typical public school it probably would have been. I kind of found that some of the techniques . . . were just a few years behind.”

He explained that he eventually became department chair of math at his current school and has worked to update the curriculum and methods of his team. When asked what gives him a sense of self of meaning in his work as an international educator, his first response was his teaching discipline, mathematics. “I’ve always kind of identified with the subject . . . I like spreading it. I think there’s a lot of worthiness in studying tough subjects, wrestling with some of the concepts and . . . going through the same process . . . that some of the smartest people in history . . . .” In particular, he finds a sense of meaning in guiding students through the construction of learning and seeing their progress. “That gives me the sense of fulfillment because at the end, the kids, they start to see how it’s put together, and then and the end of the day, when the kids can start to understand where the different connections are . . . that makes me excited then.”

He also explained that he finds meaning in building relationships with students, particularly through school trips and the school’s social-emotional learning program. “Anytime I can step out of the teacher role, and just be real with the kids, I find that I really enjoy that.”

**Amanda Sharp.** Amanda is an Australian citizen in her 40s. She is married with two children. She currently teaches high school English at a medium-sized international school in Southeast Asia. Previously she taught for nine years at a Catholic international school in East Asia and before that she taught in the Middle East.

Her path to international education was not linear. She studied English literature and ancient history during as an undergraduate and aspired to become an archaeologist. When she
graduated, having not found a job immediately, she travelled through Europe and then began to study social work. When she started working as a social worker, she soon found that it was not an ideal fit for her at that time in her life. “I was too young. Everything was too black and white.” Then, she decided to study law. By the time she finished half of her law degree, she realized she did not fit in with the “Old School Tie” culture based on “private school connections” she observed among her peers. That’s when she got a job teaching English to adults and children in Japan. “I loved it,” she said. “I had fun, and enjoyed teaching people, and enlightening them on some of the English terms that they were unfamiliar with, or misused.” After that, she went back to Australia and dedicated herself to becoming a teacher.

One aspect of teaching that is meaningful to her is opening the minds of her students. “Just letting people know that there’s more out there than what they actually did know. They have the ability to actually research and find out more, rather than just in their little home.” She also finds meaning in holding students to high expectations and pushing them to their academic potential. One time, she shared, some students wanted to switch into her class mid-semester. “They said, ‘You’re tough, but if we get an A in your class, we’ve earned it.’ I was somewhat honored about that. I thought, ‘I’ve got a reputation as being tough, but fair, I guess.’” She expressed difficulties transitioning from her last school, where she and her husband worked for 10 years, to her new school. She expressed difficulty leaving meaningful relationships with “life-long-term friends” and “moving to a school where “you’ve got to try and make those connections again, it can be quite difficult.” She also framed the difference between her current school and previous school in cultural terms. “This school, it’s a different kind of educational cultural attitude. It’s not necessarily worse; it’s just different. There’s not so much of an emphasis placed on academic excellence, so to speak, which is a bit of a shift for me.”
Gestures of gratitude and appreciation, particularly from students and parents, give her work a sense of meaning. She mentioned the tradition of Teacher Appreciation Day at her last school, when she would receive notes and small gifts from her students. “It would be when you got a thank you note from the students that you actually never expected to get a thank you note. You never knew that you had any impact on their life. . . . That’s when I would actually think, ‘Oh wow, maybe I am in the right profession’ sometimes.” She also expressed some frustration with leadership that detracted from the meaning she derived from her work throughout her career as an international educator. “There are similar elements of frustration [at the school’s she’s worked in]. . . . There’s a disconnect between what the administration is doing and what the teachers are doing, and there’s not a lot of understanding.” She felt that this is “exacerbated” in international schools, “because it’s a closed environment.” Amanda is a self-described “literature nerd” and shared that on the day of the interview she had been analyzing literature. I’ve just been doing that . . . sitting there, analyzing, going, ‘Yeah! I love this stuff.’”

**Thematic Analysis**

Through an iterative review of the data, the researcher uncovered themes in participant responses that shed light on how they experience meaning in their work. The analysis includes five superordinate themes with two to three subordinate themes for each superordinate theme. Those themes are presented with examples in Table 3:
### Table 3

*Description of themes with sample quotes.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sample Quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Harmony through alignment of personal and professional values</strong>&lt;br&gt;1.1 Harmony of organizational values with personal values&lt;br&gt;1.2 Academic disciplines as personal values&lt;br&gt;1.3 Espousing international school values</td>
<td>A sense of meaning in the opportunity to enact personal values through work as an international educator&lt;br&gt;Personal values are aligned with the values of the organization&lt;br&gt;Opportunities to spread a love for academic disciplines (i.e., subject), which are expressed as personal values&lt;br&gt;An alignment of personal values and ethos of international school education</td>
<td>“I think that holistic [education]… actually being a good person and doing the right thing is pretty important.” (Rachel)&lt;br&gt;“The fact that our mission says, ‘Happiness,’ it’s pretty amazing to me… the happiness, the balance. Integrity, I think that was important and service. We’re really working on that and improving that a lot.” (Diana)&lt;br&gt;“I like to try and get my kids to think that way, not that they're all going to be mathematicians, I think the vast majority of them are not going to be mathematicians, but if they can think mathematically, if they can hear things logically from what they know, if they can bring that file of thinking to their area of passion, I think it's only going to benefit. That's what I try and instill.” (Brent)&lt;br&gt;“[International education means] to know other cultures and to know other languages. To know other religions, to know other beliefs and family home life of other people.” (Diana)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Superordinate themes in bold</td>
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<td>2.1 A sense of purpose in supporting students’ growth</td>
<td>Having a positive impact on the lives of students.</td>
<td>“We were doing a dance performance, and in her first dance performance, she got onto the stage for a minute and half, and then she left. She just freaked out. Then I worked with her outside of class every Friday for, I think it was eight weeks, just in visualizations, and then transferring what I was doing there into when I was working with her in class. She did her final performance of four-and-a-half minutes, and stayed on stage, and then did the finale… Seeing her have success was great.” (Karen)</td>
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<td>2.2 Fulfillment through societal impact of work</td>
<td>Having a positive impact on society in work as international educator.</td>
<td>“I feel like these are the kids in this room on a daily basis who will be the movers and shakers. They’re the ones who will change things.” (Molly)</td>
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<td>3. Joy through creativity and growth</td>
<td>A sense of meaning in the work of teaching</td>
<td>“That was a powerful sense of meaning or sense of worth that I could bring the things that I loved, and the kids that I worked with, and these kids, and that they could mix them all together.” (Karen)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.1 The joys of daily classroom teaching</td>
<td>Meaning in the daily work of classroom teaching</td>
<td>“What I love about my job is being in the classroom, and being with kids and having fun being goofy, and all of that, so I think I wouldn't want to take myself away from that a little bit.” (Rachel)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.2 Excitement of creating authentic learning experiences</td>
<td>Meaning in creating and facilitating authentic learning experiences</td>
<td>“Right now we're doing a task on measurement and electricity and modeling where students have to build a doll house and then they have to wire it for electricity and they have working lights going there. Of course that's clear scientific application, but I came to him saying, &quot;I want to make this better. I want to make this deeper. We need more Math in it. We need to actually look at these 3D shapes. We need to look at the blueprints. We need to figure out the surface area. I want them to work on a budget. How much wire do they actually need to build those circuits and measure the voltage requirement of having nine LED lights?&quot; all of that, and so then he's unpacking all of that and it's really questioning how accessible all of this is to all students.” (Mary)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
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<td><strong>4. Vitality and support through meaningful relationships</strong></td>
<td>A sense of meaning in workplace relationships.</td>
<td>“For me. That's what makes meaning for me is my relationship with the kids, and that's why I'm a people person to a degree. That's what makes the most meaning.” (Karen)</td>
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<td>4.1 Fulfilment through relationships with students</td>
<td>A sense of meaning in the relationships formed with students.</td>
<td>“It's something I look forward to and when I'm sitting there planning on a Saturday or Sunday or giving feedback the deeper I know the students and the better the relationships I have with them the more engaged and purposeful my work becomes too.” (Mark)</td>
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<td>4.2 Vitality through relationships with colleagues</td>
<td>A sense of meaning in relationships formed with colleagues and collaboration inherent in the work of teaching.</td>
<td>“I wish I had written it down but I didn’t even know it was coming. But it was really sweet. I think that inspirational was one of them. It was like you just don’t know what people are thinking like I thought people came to the task force and irritated that they had to be there because it was like another meeting on their plate. But for them to actually stop and start with saying nice things about me, it was like I actually burst into tears when they were doing it.” (Molly)</td>
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<td>4.3 Feeling supported and inspired by relationships with administrators</td>
<td>The impact of relationships with administrators on sense of meaningful work.</td>
<td>“We believed in him and we knew it was coming from a good place and his intentions were good. It wasn't about finance. It wasn't about whatever. He was real and genuine.” (Mark)</td>
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<td><strong>5. Empowerment through autonomy</strong></td>
<td>A sense of meaning in a sense of autonomy and empowerment over work</td>
<td>“They gave me the opportunity to start the Innovation Academy and it's a program that combines English media and business into the projects we do. I have a group of students for large chunks of time and tons of autonomy and creativity and we do real authentic work and it's been interesting to go through those different waves.” (Mark)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.1 Sense of autonomy through creative license</td>
<td>A sense of professional autonomy</td>
<td>“I found that, yeah, it's usually the feeling of can I be autonomous to a certain extent, a reasonable extent, and do I have that professional freedom to be creative from the admin. That's huge.” (Brent)</td>
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</table>
5.2 Empowered to lead passion projects
A sense of meaning in opportunities to lead project connected with personal and intellectual passions

“That's been really interesting for me to see how we were able to restructure the school to create a division that includes the Ad Tech coaches, which we finally got… continuing the work of integrating technology across the curriculum, and in fact, the ICT lessons in the primary… and I can kind of look and say, ‘Okay, well, we've made a big step over the years.’” (Lloyd)

Superordinate theme 1: Harmony through alignment of personal and professional values. All of the participants described a sense of harmony in the alignment of their personal values with the professional values enacted through their work. In several cases, participants described work as an opportunity to exercise their personal values. Although all participants experienced the synergy between work and personal values as a source of meaningful work, they expressed it differently. Some emphasized an alignment with the mission and values of the schools where they’ve worked; others emphasized the perceived value of their discipline in a particular school; and others expressed an alignment between their personal values the values they associated with international education, such as inclusiveness and internationalism.

Subordinate theme 1.1: Harmony of organizational values with personal values.
Several participants framed their sense of meaning in their work around a feel of harmony between their personal values and the organizational values of a school. In several cases, participants cited their belief in the written mission and values of the school as a source of meaning, while in others, the mission and values were seen as more implicit aspects of work-life. Finally, several participants drew contrasts between organizational settings showing how the values of different international schools detracted from a sense of harmony between
organizational and personal values.

Rachel described how one school’s emphasis on environmental stewardship and sustainability meshed with her personal values. The mission emphasized “educating for peace and a sustainable future . . . I’m passionate about that,” she explained. The alignment facilitated a synergy between her personal values and her work. “I think that holistic [education] . . . actually being a good person and doing the right thing is pretty important.” This impacted the role she played as a teacher in the school and framed her relationships with students around “that ability to get kids to stop and make decisions about what kind of person they want to be. It’s really fulfilling to see, to talk with them about them and help them with those decisions.” The compelling mission of her school framed Rachel’s daily work experience. Diana, too, highlighted the language of her school’s mission statement when discussing how her personal values align with the values of her school. Words such as happiness, balance, integrity and service gave her a sense that her work a sense of heightened importance. She spoke passionately when she shared, “The fact that our mission says, ‘Happiness,’ it’s pretty amazing to me . . . the happiness, the balance. Integrity, I think that was important and service. We’re really working on that and improving that a lot.” Diana actively cited the mission statement as a tool she used to gain direction and purpose in her work-life. She explained how she decided to focus on “improving work-life balance,” when she was choosing her annual professional goal: “The fact that it's in the mission statement, allows me to have that as something that guides me in my decisions.” For Diana, “Just the fact that we’re talking about balance at our school, and just the fact that it’s in our mission statement . . . that in itself is pretty phenomenal, I think.”

Although some participants mentioned work-life balance as an aspect of meaningful work, most did not cite language in the mission when explaining the importance of balance.
Rachel, however, described how her school’s emphasis on work-life balance also resonated with her personal priorities. In fact, she cited her school’s support for school-life balance as an important reason why she chose to accept an offer to teach there:

The school that we're at now . . . I told them about a not-so-detailed version, a rundown of my predicament and they said that they would hire me part-time or hire me as a permanent cover teacher or whatever I was comfortable with, and then the next year I could work full-time. I was just blown away by that support, and so we signed on right there.

That her school honored her personal commitment to her family signaled that they valued her as a person, not just as a worker. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the working mothers in this study framed work-life balance as an important value more than any other subgroup.

Molly framed the importance of values alignment around her identity as a life-long learner. She revealed an important aspect of her personal identity, when she asserted bluntly: “I’m a learner.” Although she did not cite the written or implicit mission statement of her school, she derived a sense of meaning in the value placed on continuous learning. She felt her current school supported her desire for personal growth and professional learning through its approach to capacity building. At her previous school, “I never really felt like I was growing as a professional there. I felt like I was stagnating.” When she arrived at her current school, she found the “complete polar opposite experience”. She explained:

. . . there are so many opportunities here that it’s easy to make meaning in your work whether it’s with students or with colleagues, but to find out what matters, this school will support you. I mean, for example, I’m enrolled in a doctorate program right now. What other international school does that where they develop a partnership with a major
research university in the United States and fly the professors in because they believe in our education as much as we would like to pursue it? They believe in us, and they believe in our potential.

Her school invested in her professional development in various other ways including a research and development trip with a cohort of colleagues to the United States to observe a world-renowned middle school program and a summer course at an Ivy League university to study literacy teaching methods. Not only did Molly feel supported by her school’s financial commitment to her professional development, but also that her school shared her value in lifelong learning. At times she described her school as if it was a vehicle to personal and professional growth, which gave her an enhanced sense that her work was meaningful.

Although the theme of service learning was more prevalent when viewed through the lens of the super-ordinate theme, “making a difference,” service learning projects were mentioned by several participants as a way that they are able to “live their values” through work. Mark described a few projects he has been involved at in his current school:

…the idea is you go in and the homes are prefabricated and over the course of a weekend you can build the home. You can level the ground, build the home. At one point there were two hundred kids in the club and on a few builds we had teachers, students, administrators, board members all go on the build to build the home. That was really cool.

Although he did not explicitly describe a sense of meaning derived from his service learning work (perhaps the result of a desire to be modest), he clearly found a sense of fulfillment in his capacity to engage the school community in a project that was making a difference in people’s lives. He also described a project he is currently engaged in that pairs his
international school students with the children of the school’s cleaning staff, gardeners and other contractual staff for Saturday English tutoring sessions. Karen also discussed her drama outreach project, Drama for a Cause, as an opportunity to enact values, such as breaking down social barriers and helping children living in poverty, through her work. Diana explained why service learning is important to her: “Empathy, that’s why. Because empathy is critical to save the world. It sounds cheesy, but it sympathy that is going to save us and empathy starts very young.”

Several participants specifically pointed out alignment between the written mission and the lived mission had an impact on the sense of meaning they experienced in their work. For Mark the degree to which his school “lives the mission” is a matter of personal and organizational integrity:

Our school right now, this is tough to say, but we have a beautiful mission statement, as a whole I don't think we follow it and that's tough. Because one of the aspects of the mission statement is to lead lives of integrity, and if we're not fully following our own mission statement then immediately that's a lack of integrity.

Although he found meaning in other aspects of his work, Mark felt like this misalignment detracted from a sense of meaningful work. He described a more meaningful connection with the lived mission of a previous school that was framed not by a written mission, but by the example of an inspiring leader:

I couldn't even tell you what the mission statement in XXX was, but it didn't matter because our leader was such a great leader. That's all words on a paper because whatever he would tell us we needed to work on or do we trusted him, we believed in him and we
knew it was coming from a good place and his intentions were good. It wasn't about finance. It wasn't about whatever. He was real and genuine.

At this school, Mark felt a strong alignment with the mission and vision of the school because he trusted the intentions of his leader. This was more significant to Mark than “words on a paper.” Others felt that written mission was less important than how the organization enacted its values. As Brent explained it, “The stated mission doesn’t bother me at all; what bothers me is what they actually do.” Amanda felt that her work was more meaningful at a school that incorporated its mission into its everyday language. She described a school she had worked at where the mission was clearly defined:

They very firmly stood by [their] seven goals. . . . They pretty much firmly stood by that, their own goals for the school were developed around those. It was fairly clear, fairly obvious. Consistency, this is what it is. We knew what was going on. You could point directly to “I’m doing this in the curriculum.” I even remember teaching it, “This goes with Goal 7” or something like that. You could clearly link it to the goals of the school. The vision and mission . . . it's a little like communism. It’s an ideal that looks good on paper, but not necessarily in practice. [At my current school] it’s there. You can see it, but you can't always say, “Okay, what I'm doing in class now is linked to one of the goals.”

The expectation that planning and decision-making was centered on the mission and values of the school added a degree of consistency and accountability that kept everyone focused on those ideals. This may be colored by her experience in a for-profit international school. For Amanda, accountability was an important theme.
It's a bit depressing to see all the funds and school fees going to people's pockets and not necessarily back into the education of the students. You just go, “That's the way it is.” You have to deal with it, and I put on a stiff upper lip about it all, and just deal with it, but it can get a little bit frustrating. You know, if the air conditioners don’t work and stuff like that, it can take ages to fix it because some money is somewhere else.

She went on to explain a collective sense among faculty at the schools that individuals were profiting at the school at the expense of the quality of education offered to students. She felt like a misalignment between her personal values and the school’s priorities sucked the meaning from her work. Diana had a similar experience teaching in a school where there was misalignment between her values and the values of the organization. She explained, “It was challenging to work where empathy, kindness, open-mindedness worth wasn’t as important as other things.”

Some participants discussed the alignment of their values and work, not in terms of written mission, but in the nature of their work. Karen, for instance, revealed how she enacts the value of caring, which she identified as most important value to her personally, through her work when she said, “Becoming better people is not necessarily academic grades. A good person isn't necessarily someone who gets [perfect grades]. The kids know what I value, because I tell them what I value. They know I care.” Similarly, Diana discussed how her job gives her the opportunity to “spread kindness” through interactions with students and colleagues, and Mary described her work as a vehicle to live out her value in lifelong learning.

**Subordinate theme 1.2: Academic disciplines as values and the value of academic disciplines.** Some participants described their academic subject or discipline as a personal value. Brent, for instance, elaborated on his passion for mathematical thinking: “I teach math, and I've
kind of always identified with the subject, just for its challenge. So like, give me a sense or purpose or something like that? I like spreading it.” His passion for mathematics could be described as evangelical. Although he admitted that his students will not all grow up to be mathematicians, he explained, “if they can think mathematically, if they can hear things logically from what they know, if they can bring that [line] of thinking to their area of passion, I think it’s only going to benefit [them]. That’s what I try to instill.” The fact that he is interested in “instilling” and “spreading” an appreciation of mathematics illustrates how he views math as a value, in the same way other participants described sustainability or life-long learning.

Karen, who teaches drama, described her value in the expressiveness and self-awareness cultivated through arts education in a similar way. During her master’s work, she researched the impact of arts education on learning. Her findings instilled in her a strong belief in the value of the arts in education. “Those students that are exposed to the arts and have arts integrated into their curriculum have higher achievement levels in the traditional subjects.” She felt a lack of value is placed on her subject at her current school and explained that this contradicts her conviction that the arts are crucial to holistic education. “After 25 years teaching, and all the research and the data that I've read . . . I still find it mind-boggling that there is a differentiation between the perception of core and encore [e.g., arts, music, electives]. I never would have expected it to be in an international school.” She described her current school’s attitude on the arts as “archaic,” saying it in such a way as to communicate her deep frustration with the lack of value placed on her discipline.

While other participants did not discuss their subject explicitly as a personal value, both Amanda and Mary described how their passion for their teaching subjects is integral to their identity, something that makes their work more meaningful. Amanda described herself as a
“literature nerd” and discussed how her work allowed her to pass on her love for literature to her students. Mary explained how she is able to share her passion for science through her work.

**Subordinate theme 1.3: Espousing international school values.** There were participants who mentioned an alignment between their personal values and the wider scope of “international school values” writ large. For these participants, values they saw as espoused by international schools—e.g., open-mindedness, acceptance, and global thinking—meshed with their personal values. For Molly, her work as an international educator aligns with her political world view, particularly at a time of heightened hostility and divisive rhetoric in the United States.

I really believe like as I see what’s happening in politics now, it feels like the world is quickly spiraling in a very negative direction and there’s a lot of anti-Islamic sentiment in the US. There’s just a lot of hostility brewing. It feels like it’s just coming from hidden places. I didn’t even know it was there. When I think about who’s going to lead us in the future, it’s going to be the kids we teach in international schools because they’re the ones who get it. They’re the ones who have a more global perspective.

She feared that, if she were teaching in parts of the United States (she cited the southern state she was born in), she would be suffocated by the political climate. “I’d be droning almost in negativity and almost feeling a sense of hopelessness.” Rachel also elaborated on the forward-thinking pedagogical philosophy of international education. She distinguished between teaching in state schools and teaching in international schools by highlighting the progressive ethos of international education. “It's quite a different feel. I think international schools have a kind of opportunity for being quite progressive in trying different things, and I think the state system back at the UK is fairly slow moving, really politically driven, and I find that frustrating.” Both Brent and Rachel cited an emphasis on sustainability, which they perceived as more prevalent in
international schools, as aligning with their personal values. Diana listed knowledge of other cultures and belief systems, a sense of adventure, flexibility and growth mindset to describe what international school education meant to her. “I feel like it’s taught so early and it’s engrained at a really young age to encourage students to have a growth mindset. Even teachers, to have a growth mindset . . . I’ve seen that because I was an international kid myself.” Indeed, the two TCKs in this study—Molly and Diana—identified most strongly with the “values” they saw as cultivated by an international education.

**Superordinate theme 2: Fulfillment through making a difference.** All participants developed a sense of meaning in “making a difference” through their work as international educators. The difference-making applied to both micro and macro levels of impact. Some participants emphasized making a difference in the lives of individual students. Others saw their work as an opportunity to make a larger societal impact through service learning and their role in shaping future leaders.

**Subordinate themes 2.1: A sense of purpose in supporting students’ growth.** Many participants described experiencing a strong sense of meaning in the impact they have had on individual students. Participants shared examples of their experiences supporting student growth on both an intellectual/academic level and in terms of personal development.

**Intellectual growth and academic progress.** Many participants discussed observing students’ academic progress and intellectual growth as a source of meaning in their work. Some participants were explicit about the evidence of academic growth that they observed while teaching. Lloyd described the fulfilment he derives from observing student progress in his IT classes. “When I'm in with the kids and I'm actually working with them on projects or having them see the big picture of how the Internet works or something of that nature, that's much more
interesting. I think that's definitely where I see the benefits because I see them growing.” Brent explained that he finds meaning in bringing students to a better understanding of complex concepts:

I try to construct math with them, it's not like I'm telling them what we do, and I think that gives me the sense of fulfillment because at the end the kids, they start to see how it's constructed, how it's put together, and then at the end of the day, when the kids can start to understand where the different connections are, maybe how that works, that really makes me excited then.

He went on to explain how seeing his students grasp math concepts is one of the best feelings he experiences in his work as a teacher. “One of my favorite things is to hear kids say ‘Oh I used to not be good at math’ or ‘I used to not like math and now I do’ . . . or parents that say that, that for me is the best thing. If I'm in a situation where . . . I’m hearing kids say stuff like that, that's pretty sweet.”

Brent derived a fulfilling sense of validation from hearing these indications of progress. Rachel described how seeing growth in her elementary school students’ ability to solve authentic, real world problems lends a sense of meaning to her work. “Yeah, because it's meaningful and it gives kids a sense of purpose. I think that's really important. I think it's very easy with primary school kids to be told they’re too young, and they wouldn't understand or they can't learn like that, but actually in some ways, it's where the best learning happens.” She expressed a sense of personal pride when her students surpass the expectations of others.

Other participants spoke less directly about learning, but about supporting students personally in order to help them succeed academically. Karen expressed a sense of fulfillment in
building her students’ confidence in their public speaking skills. As a drama teacher, she explained, she is able to see some students surpass their own expectations:

Sometimes it's the small things that you see. Often I have students whose English is second language, and they come in to drama and they don't like speaking. They don't like presenting themselves in front of an audience. Then, at the end of semester when they see themselves up on the performance, and their voices are loud, and they can be heard. There's also that sense of achievement within themselves which makes me happy, and makes me feel good.

Karen’s explanation demonstrates how many participants saw an intersection of personal growth and academic progress. You can hear her intermingling the two in her description of a recent production, of which she was particularly proud: “Just the development that I saw in them, the way that their self-confidence grew, their skills in the subject area that I was teaching. That's probably where I find a lot of meaning with it.” From her viewpoint, when she instills confidence in her students they excel in terms of academic tasks. Personal growth and academic development are not mutually exclusive from this perspective. Consequently, it is difficult (perhaps unnecessary) to tease out examples of meaning found in supporting academic progress as distinct from examples of meaning found in supporting students’ personal growth. Many participants saw the latter as a vehicle to the former. Diana, too, shared a story of an art student who she helped gain confidence, which resulted in academic progress. In her class, she had students create their own syllabus including a goal related to course content.

One student in her syllabus that she created has started a daily habit of drawing.

Yesterday, she shared that with the class. She pitched her idea of this daily drawing idea in her sketchbook. We saw that. We saw her confidence in pitching it, then we saw her
work. That moment right there, yesterday was really meaningful to me. She created her goal. She has worked on for seven days and then she was able to share it with her peers, so she was feeling good. I was feeling very inspired and then all of the students, after she pitched that, the whole environment changes because they're inspired by her effort, her passion and her personal connection. That was something insightful.

Diana supported this student, who she described as shy, to share her work. She was able to instill confidence, which led to academic growth in terms of her presentation skills and motivation to develop her craft. That she described being “inspired” by this experience and that it changed the environment in her class shows that this intersection of personal guidance and academic development was deeply meaningful for Diana.

Amanda discussed, along with the academic growth directly linked to her curriculum, her capacity to “open minds” as a teacher in an international context. This is how she described the meaning she experienced during her first overseas job teaching English in Japan: “Yeah. Just letting people know that there's more out there than what they actually did know. They have the ability to actually research and find out more, rather than just in their little home.” Her ability to broaden her students’ horizons gave her a fulfilling sense that she was opening doors for them and supporting the development of an expanded worldview.

Mary framed intellectual growth in terms of ownership over learning. “Our goal as an educator is to create a lifelong learner, right? If you don't have ownership over it, you're never going to take that on for life.” In her view, it is a duty of her role to cultivate a love of learning. She described an annual experiential learning project, called Week Without Walls, that she helped organize, centered on a camping trip to a rural area of her school’s host country. The trip included an exposure visit to an indigenous village. Feedback from the previous year, she
explained, suggested the project lacked authentic connections to the curriculum and included superficial service-learning that failed to benefit the local community. She engaged her eighth graders in redesigning the project. After introducing a sustainability framework and giving them some tools to work with, she stepped aside and acted as a facilitator. “They said that they wanted to have a continued positive impact in both places. They said that it's not going to be sustainable unless the impact of each trip continues on, which I thought was brilliant.” Along with creating a model for sustainable oversight of the project, her students ended up eliminating a cultural dance performed by village children that they described as awkward and replaced the village exposure with an invitation for members of the village to visit their school ahead of the trip to give them lessons on survival skills they would need on the camping and hiking aspects of their trip. She continued:

Then they said that if they’re looking at the economy side, then they could also be paying these people or doing something else, doing some sort of financial gift or planting gift or something, because we were pretty sure that they got paid for the dance, the performance that they did. They like having an ambassador come on to their boat or come to an island with them and actually teaching them a skill instead of everything just being for show.

Mary was very engaged when she was telling this story relating a deep sense of fulfillment. It was clear that she was proud of her role, but even more proud of what her students had accomplished. She was proud of the sophistication of the redesign her students were able to implement and the intellectual growth and learning that occurred during the process. Participants who conveyed a sense of meaning in the development of students’ academic and intellectual growth often described a sense of accomplishment. Karen summarized the feeling in this way: “A couple of the kids said to me that ‘That was really cool! I really learned a lot.’ The fact that
they acknowledged to me that they had made some significant learning is important.” Although there was overlap in descriptions of personal development and intellectual-academic growth, some participants made sense of meaningful work in their capacity to support students in purely non-academic, personal ways in their role as teacher.

**Supporting students’ personal growth.** Every participant spoke about the personal fulfillment they derive from supporting their students’ personal growth. Often, participants did so without mentioning academics at all. Many participants cited a specific student’s story of personal growth that made him or her feel that his or her work had been meaningful. Karen described her work with a drama student who suffered from performance anxiety.

> We were doing a dance performance, and in her first dance performance, she got onto the stage for a minute and half, and then she left. She just freaked out. Then I worked with her outside of class every Friday for, I think it was eight weeks, just in visualizations, and then transferring what I was doing there into when I was working with her in class. She did her final performance of four-and-a-half minutes, and stayed on stage, and then did the finale . . . . Seeing her have success was great. Then, her mother . . . sent me a really nice email.

Participants offered various forms of evidence of their impact on students’ personal growth that reinforced the importance of their contributions. As a drama teacher, Karen’s evidence was obvious, as her discipline involves performances that clearly displayed personal growth. But the parent email added a little “sugar on top” validating her contribution. Amanda also described feeling validated by student and parent feedback on their work. She recalled the Teacher Appreciation Day at one of her previous schools that involved students writing letters of thanks to their teachers. She explained:
It would be when you got a thank you note from the students that you actually never expected to get a thank you note. You never knew that you had any impact upon their life. It would be that you would get something from them, and a small present, or even at the end of the school year when you'd get the notes from a student, sometimes even a parent, who said "Thank you for all you did for my child. You made such a difference." I wasn't aware of any of the difference that I made to them whatsoever. That's when I actually think, "Oh wow, maybe I am in the right profession" sometimes.

This sense of validation sometimes took place long after the teacher had made their impact. Lloyd reported receiving emails from former elementary students, now adults, who contacted him to thank him for his contributions. It meant more, according to Lloyd, because he had taught them as elementary school students and still remembered him. Similarly, Diana recounted receiving an email from a previous school:

She is now a professional artist in New York after having . . . struggled in high school with her self-esteem, depression, making friends. She had move a lot and she had felt sort of out of place a little bit. She found a home in the art room and she then found such a comfort in that place that she really changed her whole demeanor over the course of a semester. From that point, to then get an email from her . . . and to hear about her journey that made a big impact on me. To see, to hear, and read her success. Her success, meaning, not financially. She is professionally stable and doing well financially, but she's in such a good place personally and she's fulfilled and happy.

Diana emphasized that the meaningful aspect of the correspondence was realizing, not that the student was successful in terms of career or financial security, but in terms of overcoming personal challenges and attaining a sense of happiness and personal fulfillment.
In many cases, particularly when it came to elementary and middle school teachers, the impact a participant’s work made on a student’s personal growth did not resonate until years later. Karen hit on this theme when she emphasized her preference for teaching students over the course of several years, so she can see the scope of their progress.

For me, a lot has to do with the kids and watching how the students develop, and grow, and change. That's why I like teaching . . . students over a series of year levels, because then you can track the development and adapt things to what they need, or their growth. That's how I find a lot of fulfillment.

Because most of her classes were electives, Karen often had the same students in her classes in consecutive years. Consequently, she had a greater awareness of their personal development and growth. She had seen it over the course of years, rather than months.

Several teachers mentioned specific students they were able to guide through their struggles fitting into an international school environment. Brent emphasized the importance of a mentorship program, called Personal Growth Connection (PGC), as a space for him to focus on the social-emotional challenges students were facing. During PGC sessions older students mentor younger students and teachers play the role of student-advocate. This program gave Brent the opportunity to support students through personal issues with which they were grappling.

I had a couple kids that had a rough time, something was going on with their parents, he sought me out, one of the kids, and he just talked to me. He just wanted to be heard. He wanted to reach out to an adult kind of outside of his family and his culture, and I just kind of get a viewpoint. I think his family was Korean, and he was definitely Korean [culturally], but being in the American school. I think he identifies with various parts of
the three cultures, and just needed another point of view. I really felt like man, these kids are really listening to what we say. They're seeking us out; they want our advice. It's kind of one of those moments that's like, this is real.

His role as student-advocate and mentor added a sense of fulfillment to his work, as he indicated with his revelation: “This is real.” He saw that his purpose as a teacher, particularly in an international school context, went beyond teaching skills and context.

Lloyd, too related a story of helping a student who was struggling to fit into an international school environment.

I have a student now who is. . . . He’s having a hard time. There's not many people from his country. He feels that some kids are picking on him. His name's a bit unusual in the Anglo-Saxon or Germanic community, so trying to work with him on his behavior and showing that I'm interested in him and not just on the fact that he does bad things and that I'm responding really quite quickly at times when he feels picked on, although every single time there's always been more of the story than just him being a victim.

Lloyd identified as being a disciplinarian at his school. He also shared stories about how the bus supervisors would reach out to him to address discipline problems. However, he described his disciplinarian role as an opportunity to support students who needed direction or felt like outsiders. Indeed, some teachers described their role as international school teachers as similar to the role of parents. As Amanda put it, “You've got to be almost a surrogate parent to some of the kids, especially some of the international school students.” She went on to describe some of unique challenges international school students face.

Some of these kids don't, their parents are working full time. . . . Sometimes they need a bit more of a guiding hand in some regards. Not necessarily telling them what to do, but
just guiding them in the right direction to get the information that they do need. Or, if you have bad behavior in class, just going, “No, that’s not right. That's not what you should be doing. That's not how you treat other people.” Just pulling them up on things that they might not necessarily be pulled up on at home. I also encourage them. Some kids I know whether they get enough encouragement at home. Like a second parent, sometimes.

Most participants expressed a sense of meaning in their role as “surrogate parent” or student-advocate. When participants spoke about this role, there was a heightened depth and engagement in the stories they told. These responses convey a sense of fulfillment in their role in supporting students’ personal growth—a role that seems amplified by the challenges faced by many expatriate children.

This section illustrates how the international educators in this study experienced meaningful work through the sense of purpose that came from sensing they had made a difference in their students’ lives. At times this perceived impact was framed in terms of supporting students’ academic or intellectual growth. More frequently, it was the perceived impact participants had on the personal growth of students that sparked this sense of meaning in work.

**Subordinate theme 2.2: Fulfilment through societal impact of work.** While most participants framed “making a difference” around having an impact on the personal and intellectual growth of students, several participants revealed a sense of meaning in their capacity to make a difference in the wider world through their work.

Molly, for instance, found meaning in her view that international school students are uniquely positioned to become future leaders. Their parents often hold important positions in
government, business and development. She described a sense of meaning in having a vicarious impact on the world through her students. “I feel like these are the kids in this room on a daily basis who will be the movers and shakers. They’re the ones who will change things,” she explained. She expressed deriving a sense of meaning in equipping her students with the skills and dispositions to be effective leaders. As she put it:

As far as meaning making goes, this to me like it’s important not only to do meaningful things for my students, but to do meaningful things that will move the entire school forward so that we’re doing what’s best for our kids because if they’re going to be the leaders in the 21st century and . . . They’re not going to lead anybody if we’re not guiding them in ways that are preparing them for the unknown.

She emphasized that the current political context made this mission more important than ever. Although she described herself as traditionally conservative politically, she described leaning more to the left in recent years as a result of her distaste for what she viewed as the Republican Party’s “increasingly intolerant and regressive agenda.” Having worked in US public schools in districts where the population tended to align with values contradictory to those espoused by international schools (e.g., international-mindedness, open-mindedness, tolerance), she discussed the potential of her students to become leaders dedicated to fostering a more tolerant and inclusive world. Her capacity to help mold her students into leaders with internationalist values was a source of meaning in her work as an international educator.

I really believe like as I see what’s happening in politics now, it feels like the world is quickly spiraling in a very negative direction and there’s a lot of anti-Islamic sentiment in the US. There’s just a lot of hostility brewing. It feels like it’s just coming from hidden places I didn’t even know it was there. When I think about who’s going to lead us in the
future, it’s going to be the kids we teach in international schools because they’re the ones who get it. They’re the ones who have a more global perspective. Obama himself is a third culture kid.

Molly viewed her students as future leaders with the potential to augment the “hostility” and intolerance currently fomenting in the US political landscape. This gave her a sense of meaning in her work, because through her work, she was able to cultivate internationalist values in her students, thus having impact on the future world of which they would become leaders.

Diana, too, identified with a sense of meaning in shaping a better world through her impact on her students. In her case, she made a difference in developing empathy in her students through service learning. Similarly, Rachel described meaning in “educating for peace and a sustainable future.” Her work as an educator allowed her to develop these values in her students who would in turn shape the future world for the better. Molly, Diana, and Rachel saw their students as future leaders, through whom they could make a difference in the world via their role in cultivating values.

Lloyd, on the other hand, described the limitations on “making a difference” inherent in teaching students of affluence. He lamented that his family and financial situation had made it necessary to teach students who already had a socio-economic advantage.

Well, this goes back to my first initial caveat where I talked about teaching kids who come from more disadvantaged neighborhoods or circumstances, and that was an interest of mine because I'm very interested in the more sociological aspect of education in terms of who gets in, who does well, who doesn't do well, how governments structure education to maintain the power structure as it is and to limit social mobility. I'm as much a practitioner as I am a critic of the overall system.
For Lloyd, his work as an international educator limited his ability to make a difference, because he was teaching students who were already at the top of the social hierarchy. Meaning for him was defined by helping the disadvantaged gain social mobility. He revealed a sense that in some ways his work contributed to the problems of social reproduction through education. As he explained:

That was very much the kind of approach that I took when I decided to become a teacher, much to the chagrin of many people who figured I would either go into law or politics, both of which were, I suppose, possible, but decided that if I had the view that education can and should be a way to improve life chances that the best way for me to do that was to actually get in the classroom and help make that happen which is true on a small scale but not true on a big scale. Of course now, where I am, obviously not all that important.

Lloyd described a disappointment in not being able to directly impact the lives of disadvantaged students. Nevertheless, he found ways to make a difference through his extra-curricular work supporting local schools with technology and in his free time by contributing to Wikipedia in order to provide a free source of knowledge. He described looking forward to a time when his situation allowed him to pursue more meaningful work making a difference for disadvantaged children.

Participants revealed a sense of meaning in “making a difference” in the lives of their students, both intellectually and in terms of personal development, and in the world at large. Participants felt able to enact deep-seated societal values, such as empathy, self-reliance and global-mindedness, through their contribution to students’ academic and personal growth. A sense that they had made a difference in the lives of students was often codified by validation or feedback by students, parents and colleagues. Values played a part too. Participants often
viewed their capacity as teachers to shape the values and dispositions of their students as a source of meaning, as they were able to impact their personal development, and vicariously, the future world of which they would become leaders.

**Superordinate theme 3: Joy through creativity and growth.** The third superordinate theme centered on participants’ finding meaning in the work of teaching. There were aspects of interview data that revealed a joy in the creativity and growth inherent in the day-to-day work of teaching. This included discussion of the joy of classroom teaching, planning authentic learning experiences, and opportunities for personal growth through the work of teaching.

**Subordinate theme 3.1: The joys of daily classroom teaching.** Many participants described experiencing a sense of joy in working closely children on a daily basis. When asked if she would ever consider leaving the classroom for a leadership role, Rachel responded that she would never want to leave classroom teaching entirely. “What I love about my job is being in the classroom, and being with kids and having fun being goofy, and all of that, so I think I wouldn't want to take myself away from that a little bit.” She explained, “I think it would take the joy out of my job if I wasn’t working with kids.” This sense of joy related to working with children was clearly linked to Rachel’s experience of meaningful work.

Some participants explained that the learning implicit in the teaching profession made their work meaningful. Molly explained how her work complemented her identity as a life-long learner. She spoke with passion about her professional learning experiences and modeling new techniques for her colleagues. Amanda, similarly, described deriving a sense of satisfaction from her work as a teacher, because it required her to engage in continuous learning. “I love that people can never stop learning. Regardless. I like to try and make sure my students understand that, as well.” She explained how her work entailed the study of literature and how she hoped
students would find the same passion through her example.

Like Amanda, several participants cited the opportunity to engage with their intellectual passions through work as a source of meaning in their work. Mary described her love for teaching science like this: “I think in Science, kids are always engaged no matter what. I think it's pretty hard for a Science teacher not to engage kids. We're lighting things on fire and building things.” She described several class projects with remarkable detail and engagement that demonstrated her love for guiding students through the scientific process. Brent, too, spoke at length for his love of math and the meaning he derived from “constructing” solutions to problems with his students. He described the playfulness with which he approaches teaching math:

Mathematicians always talk about being playful, and playing around with numbers, playing around with problems . . . but you don’t see it that often in the classroom. I try to bring that playfulness, not like joking around having a good time, but like let's see what happens if we do this, let's see what happens if we do that, and then I think the kids kind of stumble into mathematics more, and it brings a greater awareness. I think the more you know about math, the more you appreciate it.

For participants, who emphasized their passion for their discipline, the meaning seemed to come in two forms. In some ways, the opportunity to spread an appreciation for math, science, or literature gave them a sense of purpose in their work (i.e., Superordinate Theme 1). In other instances, the data reveals a sense of meaning in work that allows them to engage in their area of interest on a daily basis. Diana said of her love for teaching art, “One of my art colleagues says that it's so obvious that I love what I do, that it almost overpowering to others.” Participant responses revealed that many of the daily tasks involved in the work of teaching were
a source of meaning.

**Subordinate theme 3.2: The excitement of creating authentic learning experiences.**

The planning process was another such “task of teaching” that participants described as meaningful. Mary, for instance, described reworking a cross-curricular project involving math and science along with her husband, a math teacher. The task involved learning about measurement and electricity by building a dollhouse and wiring it for electricity.

Of course that's clear scientific application, but I came to him saying, “I want to make this better. I want to make this deeper. We need more Math in it. We need to actually look at these 3D shapes. We need to look at the blueprints. We need to figure out the surface area. I want them to work on a budget. How much wire do they actually need to build those circuits and measure the voltage requirement of having nine LED lights?” all of that, and so then he's unpacking all of that and it's really questioning how accessible all of this is to all students. We've redone our entire task-specific as far as rubrics. It's accessible in everybody and help is accessible to everybody. . . . I’m really happy with that, and that’s just been the past three weeks we've been working in it.

Mary derived a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in the planning process, in designing an authentic learning experience, and in making it accessible to all of the students in her class. In a sense, Mary’s description also revealed several important personal values inherent in the planning process, e.g., collaborative problem solving, access to the curriculum for all students, interdisciplinary learning. Mary’s vignette was reminiscent of Molly’s description of her Week Without Walls redesign, when she described in detail the process she guided students through in applying their learning to real world problems.

Indeed, in many cases, participants emphasized the authenticity of learning tasks they
planned. Mark described several projects he, along with his team, designed for Innovation Academy students. One was a documentary film project integrating economics, research and English skills, and another involved starting their own businesses. “Students also start businesses in twelfth grade that are legitimate businesses. They deal with real money and impact real people.” Mark conveyed a sense of accomplishment in planning an activity that engaged students in complex projects and then required them to apply learning to a real-world context. Along with a sense of accomplishment, Mark underscored the creativity in planning an authentic learning experience. He stressed that the planning process is only meaningful if teachers have been given the autonomy to design tasks using their knowledge of their students, discipline, and context. “Ultimately, every situation, class, day, week is different and you need to design around that. If you feel like you’ve always got to keep up with the prescribed scope and sequence or curriculum then I think it kills some of that innovation and creativity.”

Rachel also explained the meaning in guiding students through authentic, real-world learning experiences that allow them to increase their depth of understanding and analysis. “I think it’s been a real skin-tingler,” she said of seeing students develop insightful questions and demonstrate they have gained a deeper learning that is transferable to the outside world. She cited an excursion project she helped lead to an NGO in a rural province of a neighboring country.

In the first year, I went to go and see one of the tribes, and they showed us how to use a blowpipe, and how to light a fire with no matches, and that kind of thing. We talked about community, this was last year before we went, and what makes community feasible. Before they went, they had a think about, “Well, what would you need to know about being in the rain-forest?” Between those two, you get a different way of thinking,
but the kind of level of. . . . The first questions were about. . . . In the first few, it was about how far can you get a dart to go? Is your dart tipped with poison to kill me? And then, the second time we went, it was, what's your leader? Who decides on your leader: How do you earn money to keep everybody. . . . What if somebody gets sick? I think we went into. . . . The questioning showed a lot about that community in much more depth.

Rachel emphasized that she played a facilitator role in this process. She guided them through the process, but resisted overtly prompting them. That she described this process as a “skin-tingler” demonstrates the excitement and meaning she found in letting go and observing what students are capable of when adults get out of the way. In this way she experienced meaning in leading the process of inquiry-based learning.

Likewise, Mary described a sense of purpose in guiding students through systems thinking. She emphasized the learning process. She emphasized that the process she teaches in science class is the same process she wants students to engage in with any problem they encounter in life.

Yeah. That's what we want. As a learner, that's what we want to be doing all the time. That's how I interpret it. That's what I'm trying to support and curate with students, that we're really looking at our process. We're looking at our learning process, we're looking at our troubleshooting process with whatever we're doing, but if we're not trying to figure out what's going on and how it's connected, then we're probably not going to get a good picture or come to a successful conclusion, or at least a working conclusion that we can build from.

Teaching, she expressed, gives her the opportunity to teach a process that students can apply beyond the walls of the classroom. She described this process of questioning and
continuous learning a way of life that she has the opportunity to “curate” on a daily basis.

**Subordinate theme 3.3: Enriched by opportunities for growth through work.**

Participants also related feeling that their work as a teacher gave them opportunities for personal and professional growth. Lloyd described how he developed an expertise in technology through his role as a teacher. “Probably that was where I would get my biggest interest. It was an area that I wanted to get into. I didn't have a high level of expertise in it, but I did have a lot of interest and developed that expertise as I went along.” Through his work, he was able to build on an interest and develop it into an area of expertise. Mary described how she first came to develop an interest in curriculum through her work. “I really enjoyed writing curriculum. I just had so much fun teaching and looking for big-picture curriculum as far as aligning everything and et cetera, and then ended up doing my Master’s in Education.”

Karen explained that her work gives her the opportunity to constantly evolve and adapt her teaching methods. “I like to experiment. I hate doing the same thing. Even with my Grade 5 classes, I know the curriculum’s there but I always try to make something different for me so that I can enjoy teaching them that links to the skills that they're developing. I like to change it up and adapt.” Diana described being excited by the challenge of integrating tactile and tech-based art in her classroom. “That was a challenge last year and I was really finding difficulty. This year, I'm finding it really exciting because I'm finding a way to bring them together much more.”

Molly pointed out that such opportunities are not the same in every context. She explained how, whereas her previous job lacked a sense of challenge, her current job offers her the opportunity for constant growth. She emphasized how her school supports exploration and pursuit of personal passions. “There are so many opportunities here that it’s to make meaning in
your work whether it’s with students or with colleagues but to find what matters, this school will support you.” Indeed, Brent explained that a significant rationale for changing schools was that he lacked opportunities for growth at his current workplace.

This theme focused on how participants experienced meaning through the joy of experiencing creativity and growth in their daily work. While this is a broad theme—indeed, every theme involves an aspect of the work of teaching—it focused on how participants derived a sense of meaningful work through the daily tasks involved in their work as teachers in an international school context. They made sense of meaning in the work of teaching in different ways, however. Some, such as Rachel and Diana, discussed the joy they found in the daily experience of classroom teaching. Others, such as Brent and Amanda, emphasized the opportunity to exercise their intellectual passions on a daily basis. Others, such as Mark and Mary, found meaning in designing and facilitating authentic learning experiences for their students. While Molly, Karen, and Lloyd, on the other hand, described their work as a vehicle for personal and professional growth. Despite these points of emphasis, many participants singled out multiple aspects of the work of teaching that gave them a sense of meaning.

Superordinate theme 4: Vitality and support through meaningful relationships. The fourth superordinate theme that emerged from the data was meaningful relationships. Participants described various workplace relationships that gave them a sense of vitality in their work. Participants also described their relationships, particularly with administrators, as a source of support and inspiration. Discussion of meaningful relationships tended to revolve around relationships with students, colleagues and administration.

Subordinate theme 4.1: Fulfilment through relationships with students. Participants described experiencing a fulfillment in the relationships they developed with their students. For
some, it was the most meaningful aspect of their work as international educators. As Karen summarized, “For me. That's what makes meaning for me is my relationship with the kids, and that's why I'm a people person to a degree. That's what makes the most meaning.”

Mark explained that he is able to overcome the more mundane aspects of his job, such as assessment, by focusing on the impact his work has on students. He describes his relationships with students as a source of motivation, engagement and purpose.

The relationships that year in, year out, I have with students . . . that drives me, that motivates me. . . . It's something I look forward to and when I'm sitting there planning on a Saturday or Sunday or giving feedback. The deeper I know the students and the better the relationships I have with them, the more engaged and purposeful my work becomes too.

When his job begins to lack meaning or enjoyment, Mark is able to reach for meaning in the relationships he has developed with students. Brent described the meaningful relationships with his students through his school’s PGC advisory program. He said he gets a sense of meaning from . . . working closely with kids, like over time. There’s a group that we run at school, it’s called Peer Group Connection, or PGC, and it’s similar to an advisory program, except for the PGC, the eleventh and twelfth graders will run a program similar to advisory, with the ninth graders. They help them transition. Any time I’ve run a troop, or a group like this, where we meet for two or three hours a week, you really get to know the kids, you get to learn more about them as the semester goes on. You get to see them meeting and struggling and kind of help them through, and it’s a pretty cool process. Anytime I can step out of that teacher role, and just be real with the kids, I find that I really enjoy that.
He described mentoring students through difficulties through the PGC program. He describes a realization he had: “These kids are really listening to what we say. They’re seeking us out, they want our advice.”

Rachel also described her role as a mentor as something that gives her work a sense of meaning. “That’s, I guess, what most of teaching is, those relationships you build with young minds.” She described a sense of fulfillment in helping students make choices, develop values, and broaden the scope of their perspectives. “It’s really fulfilling to see, to talk to them about them and help them with those decisions, and help them to see that there are options in the way they approach things and how to think.”

Karen said that it was easier to develop meaningful relationships with students at her previous school because it was smaller and she had the same students in her classes over several years. This helped her build trust with her students allowing her to support them through personal struggles.

I’d seen them from grade 5 to 6, grade 7. I knew their family background, I knew their story. The amount of kids that come to. . . . They didn’t have a counselor system. They did have a counselor, but it wasn’t the same. The amount of kids that come to you with problems to talk things over. . . . I’ve had so many boys who don’t know whether they’re gay or not, come and talk. Maybe it’s the arts, maybe.

Indeed, many participants discussed finding meaning in mentoring students and serving as a student advocate.

Mark explained that his role in the Innovation Academy entails a lot of contact time with students, which adds a pastoral dimension to his relationships with students. “Because I spend so much time with the students, it becomes more of a mentor and almost a counseling role too.”
Rachel described her relationships with students as the most fulfilling aspect of her work, particularly since she works with younger students. “I think because as a primary school teacher, as well, you’re with the students day in and day out, so the most fulfilling part of that is really the relationships you have with them.” Molly, similarly, emphasized importance of being a teacher students know that can turn to for support. “I try to give guidance whether it’s something on their writing or whether they just burst into tears in the hallways or whatever it might be. They can come to me. I have kids coming back to me all the time.” The fact that students return to her for support even after they have moved on to high school validated the importance of her relationships with students. Lloyd, Karen, and Diana also discussed maintaining meaningful relationships with students long after they left their classes.

Some participants revealed a particularly strong connection with international school students. Two participants, Diana and Molly, grew up attending international schools, which seemed to impact how they made sense of the student-teacher relationships in the context of international schools. Molly described her special bond with international school students as part of her rationale for pursuing an international teaching job after several years teaching in a public school district in the US.

For me, in search of meaning for myself, I started my teaching career in XXX County, which is a very diverse school district. In the middle school where I taught, there were more than 50 nationalities in the school. I taught ESL, learning support kids. I was in the gifted program as well and I also taught the normal class. It was like trial by fire but what I realized in those three years just within the very first year even was that the kids I really wanted to reach out to or the kids I most understood and those are the third culture kids.
Even when she was teaching in the United States she gravitated towards students who had a shared experience in growing up in a foreign land. She described feeling uniquely equipped to support students given her background and this is something that lent her work a sense of meaning. Diana also felt that she has a better understanding of her international school students as a result of her background as a TCK. “Getting each other, too. People who've grown up who speak three or four languages and moved a lot, we get each other. A lot of students, I get what they're going through a little bit, maybe.” Diana went on to explain that international school students lean heavily on the student-teacher relationships, since they often have parents with demanding jobs and high expectations. The significance of international school teachers’ role as, in Amanda’s words, “surrogate-parents” was echoed by several participants, including Lloyd and Brent.

Subordinate theme 4.2: Vitality through relationships with colleagues. Participants also discussed their relationships with colleagues as source of vitality that made work meaningful. Some participants focused on the collaboration process that their work entails. Rachel described finding meaning in “a kind of thirst for finding out what everybody else is doing . . . seeing the different ways of educating and getting to the end goal of a certain type of learning . . . and learning from others.” Mary expounded on her relationship with her husband, who teaches math at her school, as a source of meaningful collaboration. Molly described a meaningful relationship with a member of her department with whom she shared ideas, participated in professional development and worked on curriculum. When they returned from a summer workshop, they worked to integrate their learning into their lessons. “We would meet every week,” she explained. “I would go over to his house on Wednesday evenings. He and I would just hammer out what all of our mini lessons would look like for the coming week and
where we wanted to go.” This collegial friendship lent a sense of meaning to her planning sessions.

Mark cited his relationship with two specific teachers in the Innovation Academy as a source of meaning.

I work very closely and this is probably something that brings a great deal of meaning to the job too is now I work very closely with two other teachers. I lead the twelfth grade section of the Innovation Academy. Joe, my friend and colleague, teaches the tenth grade and leads the tenth grade and Bill Cotter leads the eleventh grade. So, Joe [Smith] and Bill Cotter and we have an incredibly close relationship through our work and just working here together and I get feedback from them. We collaborate constantly. We're very open about our weaknesses and things we need to improve on. That's huge.

Mark’s relationship with his teaching partners shows how collegial relationships can merge into meaningful friendships. He emphasized that these relationships were founded on trust. He felt comfortable giving and receiving feedback. Mary also emphasized the importance of honest feedback when discussing what makes her workplace relationships meaningful: “I think it’s hard to find people who are willing to give you criticism. I found some people who I don't have to beg anymore and they'll just tear some work apart and you can get some reflection done and build from there. Those are always really meaningful partners.” Molly and Brent, on the other hand, did not feel challenged by his colleagues at previous schools and cited this as a reason for seeking a new job at various points in their careers.

Some participants expressed feeling valued by colleagues as a source of meaning. Karen explained that at a previous school, which was smaller than her current school, she was valued for her expertise in drama and the IB curriculum. “I would say that more people knew who I was
as a teacher, and respected what I did, and saw value in what I did. She lamented that in a larger school, she feels “lost in the system” and that it’s “harder to communicate with people.” Molly shared a story that illustrates the importance of feeling valued by coworkers. She had organized a task force committee of teachers and administrators, and the group decided to take time out of the beginning of their first meeting to express their gratitude to her.

They wanted to thank me for running it. I was like, but we’ve hardly even begun. Isn’t it a little early for a thank you? But they’re just said they wanted to take three minutes of the start of the meeting, and they all went around and they said one word that they thought described me. I wish I had written it down but I didn’t even know it was coming. But it was really sweet. I think that inspirational was one of them. It was like you just don’t know what people are thinking. . . . I thought people came to the task force and irritated that they had to be there because it was like another meeting on their plate. But for them to actually stop and start with saying nice things about me, it was like I actually burst into tears when they were doing it.

That she burst into tears demonstrates how meaningful this experience was for Molly. She expected members of the task force to be annoyed at having to meet, and in return, her peers showered her with praise.

Various participants reported that their relationships with colleagues were a source of meaning in their work. Meaningful collegial relationships took on different forms for different participants. Some described the meaning derived from purposeful collaboration with colleagues; some emphasized their relationships with trusted colleagues who give honest, meaningful feedback and challenge them to become better at their craft; and others discussed the importance of feeling valued and respected by their colleagues.
Subordinate theme 4.3: Feeling supported and inspired by relationships with administrators. A third relationship that influenced perceptions of meaningful work for participants was their relationships with school administrators. Some reported deriving a sense of inspiration from their workplace relationships with administrators who “walk the talk.” Mark remembered a previous principal who developed a strong sense of trust with faculty. “Whatever we needed to work on or do, we trusted him. We believed in him and we knew it was coming from a good place. . . . He was real and genuine.” Molly also said that her relationship with administration was critical to her work experience. “If my bosses aren’t inspiring me to be my best and showing me in incredible ways . . . like where I could be headed and where the school can be headed, then I don’t really want to stick around. I feel like I need to be someplace where I can find that.” The role of administration, in her view, is to communicate a vision and model it for teachers. She remembered feeling inspired by an administrator who modeled a literacy strategy she learned during a summer course. She invited teachers to observe the lesson and offer feedback.

That is the first time in 20 years of teaching that I’ve ever had an administrator actually go someplace, get trained in something and come back and make herself vulnerable in front of all of us and open to critique and trying to do our job. . . . She’s walking the walk because she’s actually doing it. That to me is inspirational and that’s to kind of leadership I thrive under. That’s why . . . this is my 10th year [at this school].

In her example, Molly stresses the importance of administration that leads by example. Indeed, this is her definition of “inspirational” leadership. She also cites her administration as a reason she has stayed at her current school for nearly a decade.

While Diana, Mark, Molly, and Brent described meaningful relationships with
administrators, Amanda painted a picture of a situation where administrators had lost the trust of teachers. She described “a disconnect between what the administration is doing and what the teachers are doing, and there's not a lot of understanding.” She went on to recount the frustration she felt at a previous school “with, again, with administration not communicating what was going on, and not actually asking teachers for feedback, and things like that.” Even worse to Amanda was when teachers asked for feedback and didn’t use it. She remembered leadership “asking teachers for feedback, and you putting in a lot of effort into communicating that feedback, and going ‘Well, it doesn't matter anyway, because we've already made up our minds.’” She viewed this seeking of token feedback as something that eroded the teacher-administrator relationship.

Participants described various aspects of their administrators as meaningful. In some cases, administrators who led with integrity inspired in participants an enhanced commitment to their work (e.g., Molly’s principal who lead the model lesson, Mark’s principal who lived the mission). Participants also described a trust that administrators have in teachers to take risks and do what is best for students. This segues to the final superordinate themes: autonomy and empowerment.

Superordinate theme 5: empowerment through autonomy. Several participants underscored the importance of autonomy and empowerment as a source of meaning in their work. For some, it was a source of professional validation connected closely with their relationships with administrators. Others emphasized the meaning in having creative license over special projects of interest.

Subordinate theme 5.1: Sense of autonomy through creative license. Some participants emphasized the importance of being entrusted to teach in ways that diverged from the prescribed
curricular scope and sequence. Mark explained that when he arrived at one school, he felt deflated by the unit plans he encountered. “It laid out week one, teach these prefixes. Week two teach these roots. I was like this can't be. This is not what I studied in college. It was so *prescribed* [sic].” When he approached his principal, he was allowed to make changes to the course. “[He] entrusted me with a great deal of freedom” and allowed him to veer off the rigid plan to create a course with more robust content and methodology. Brent also described autonomy as crucial to his sense of meaningful work. He described what it feels like: “It's usually the feeling of can I be autonomous to a certain extent, a reasonable extent, and do I have that professional freedom to be creative from the admin.” Karen, too, relished opportunities to change and evolve her lessons based on the needs of her students. She described experimentation as a source of meaning in her work. Rachel explained that this autonomy is something that keeps her in international education. International schools, freed of the restrictions of public schools, allow an “opportunity for being quite progressive in trying different things.”

Here there is some overlap with subordinate theme 4.3: feeling supported by relationships with administrators. While participants described a sense of meaning in their relationships with administrators, many framed meaning in terms of being entrusted with creative license and professional autonomy. Several participants, for instance, described feeling trusted and empowered by administrators who supported risk-taking. Brent asserted that his relationship administrators had a crucial impact on workplace environment. He emphasized the importance of administrators trusting teachers, supporting risk-taking and listening to new ideas:

> . . . even if they ultimately reject them, entertaining thoughts, kind of helping you think through ideas and what might work, what might not, for me that really sets the tone for
the environment. [A principal who] says "I trust you’re the professional, if you want to experiment, I trust you to do it, and if it doesn’t go perfectly, that’s cool I understand this is an experiment and you’re approaching this in a thoughtful way."

For Brent, feeling as thought administrators trust him as a professional is crucial to his relationship with leadership. He went on to describe a new project-based math course he wanted to initiate. He said of this experience, “I felt like the whole time like my administration really believed in me and what I was doing.” Several teachers framed the relationship with administrators around a source of validation. This validation comes from the faith and trust administrators have in teachers to take risks. As Diana summarized:

Yes, and trust me so that the risk can happen, right? To trust me that I know what I'm talking about. That they trust me and I trust them and then we can take risk together, I guess. They know what I'm going to ask for is going to end up successful hopefully. Maybe not always but. . . . Then they’re able to say, “They're able to support a crazy idea.”

Diana illustrated the importance of support for risk-taking with an example of an upcoming “maker’s fair” that another teacher organized. The fact that administrators got behind this project, invite parents and engage the community, even if it was possible that it could fail, was evidenced in the degree to which they trusted their teachers. Lloyd described the trust of administrators in more tangible terms. He felt validated and supported when his school decided to invest significant funds into supplying a robotics program he initiated.

Participants revealed a sense of autonomy, or professional freedom, when they were entrusted to apply their creative instincts and mobilize their individual talents to job-related tasks. Feelings of excitement, validation and creative inspiration characterized the experience of
taking on such challenges. This experience was influenced by leadership. Several participants spoke at length about supportive leaders who encouraged risk-taking, as feeling trusted seems integral to experienced meaning through professional autonomy and creativity.

Subordinate theme 5.2: Empowered to lead “passion projects.”” Several participants described specific projects they were empowered to lead. Leading these projects gave participants a sense of empowerment. Mark described going to his administrator when he felt his work was becoming mundane.

I told him I wanted to go somewhere else that was more progressive and I had more autonomy as a teacher he said, “Why don't you try something here. See what you can do with fifteen students.” Going back to the whole creativity and independence piece, that was huge. It’s all come from that initial meeting with him.

He was allowed to start an alternative school within his school that focused on inquiry-based learning, innovation and interdisciplinary units of study called the Innovation Academy. He ended up staying at his school for several more years and cites this opportunity as the main reason.

Lloyd, too, explained the meaning he finds in developing new programs within schools. He has been involved in revamping technology education and starting a robotics program at his current school. “Again, it’s one of those things that I can kind of look on and say, ‘Okay, that was an interesting area to develop at the school.” Lloyd derives a sense of accomplishment from watching his projects come to fruition.

It’s been really interesting for me to see how we were able to restructure the school to create a division that includes the Ad Tech coaches, which we finally got . . . continuing the work of integrating technology across the curriculum, and in fact, the ICT lessons in
the primary school . . . and I can kind of look and say, “Okay, well, we’ve made a big step over the years.”

Molly also discussed leadership roles she has taken on through several school-wide initiatives connected to her passions. She led a task-force on scheduling, was a member of a research and development trip, initiated several professional reflective practices in her school, and brought Reader’s and Writer’s Workshop (a structure for developing literacy skills) to her middle school English and Language Arts department. She viewed these special projects as part of her personal mission to improve her school, which in turn, she hoped would benefit students. She relished playing a central role in these initiatives, all of which supported her passion for preparing future leaders.

As far as meaning making goes, this to me like it’s important not only to do meaningful things for my students, but to do meaningful things that will move the entire school forward so that we’re doing what’s best for our kids because if they’re going to be the leaders in the 21st century and we’re not giving them. . . . They’re not going to lead anybody if we’re not guiding them in ways that are preparing them for the unknown.

Molly’s connection between her work pushing the school forward with the potential in her work to “make a difference” shows the synergy that can exist between superordinate themes two and five. Teachers find meaning in being empowered to lead, because gives them the license to make impactful changes that make a difference in the lives of students, their school, and thus, sometimes enact vicarious change through their students.

For some participants, the scope of their passion project was more local. Instead of affecting school-wide change, they discussed the opportunity to redesign units, start new classes or lead special projects within their departments. Brent spoke about pushing his department
forward and starting a new project-based math class. Diana described a new class, called Artisan, at her school that was particularly meaningful to her. “The students create their own curriculum based on what they want to learn in the field of art.” While Diana appreciated the benefits this class had for students, it was also the creative freedom to design the course that made the process meaningful.

Rachel discussed a unit on peace and conflict she initiated for her team through which she got students to see connections between geopolitics and playground dynamics. She did not think the unit was successful at first. Student questions centered around guns and bombs. But eventually she began to see evidence of authentic learning. “They came up with a list of amazingness . . . all the things that you could do to build peace.” When she looked at her students’ list, it was very closely aligned with the UN Sustainability Goals. “Basically, they got to that complexity through looking at their own sphere of reference and their own understanding.” Indeed, there was an element of social impact conveyed by Rachel’s description of the project, in that she was able to teach students about the dynamics of peace and sustainability. However, it was her pride in having designed a project that successfully walked students through a complex learning experience that gave her a sense of accomplishment. This is an important distinction related to the division of themes. Because teaching is a profession geared towards supporting student growth, inevitably, participants described their passion projects in terms of “making a difference in the lives of students” and . . . Nevertheless, in terms of experienced meaning, it was often the sense of accomplishment they felt in taking ownership over a project and watching it achieve intended outcomes that characterized participant descriptions of meaningful work derived from leading passion projects.
Karen also described a sense of accomplishment when describing a realization that a service-learning project she initiated, called Drama for a Cause, had made an impact on her students. She described how she and a group of students worked with a home for abandoned boys who had been living on the street to build confidence and communication skills through drama games. Another desired outcome of the project is to build relationships between cultures and economic classes. She described the impact of the project on her students: “to walk through the slum areas and watch those kids’ eyes go ‘Oh my god, really? This is what it's like.’ Made me feel good.” She went on to explain that the project allowed her to connect people from different backgrounds through her passion for drama and performance.

The games are designed to get people to touch, communicate, non-threatening, mix it up so you're not with your friends, and interact with each other. Once you break down those barriers down, then you can do other stuff with them. What we did was, we used the book *The Wild Ones*, and we read them the story. . . . Everyone was put into different groups, and we created masks. They made monster masks, and they had to come up with a dance that was their monster dance . . . the [children from the orphanage] were like “Wow! Look at how different it was,” and it was just material. Then, they performed it, and they were just like, “This is so much fun! It was so good!” That was a powerful sense of meaning or sense of worth that I could bring the things that I loved, and the kids that I worked with, and these kids, and that they could mix them all together.

Although the significance of the social impact of the project was clearly articulated by Karen, there is another lens through which to view her story. Her sense of meaning had to do, not only with the bridging of people from different backgrounds and the lasting impact it had on her students, but also the fact that she created it. That is the common thread woven through
portrayals of empowerment through passion projects—the sense of ownership and accomplishment derived from overcoming challenges to create something important. She explained that the project was initially difficult to get off the ground. She had a hard time finding a suitable partner in the local community and struggled to build the prerequisite skills in her students to lead the drama games. That she was able to overcome these challenges and see results made the experience more meaningful. Perhaps it was her ownership of the project that allowed her to preserver through her difficulties and gave her a heightened sense of meaning.

Participants revealed several ways that they found meaning in their work through a sense of autonomy and empowerment. Many participants highlighted specific projects over which they were given domain. These “passion projects” gave them the opportunity to mobilize their interests and passions to create something important through work.

**Summary of Research Findings**

Participants revealed several themes that shed light on how international school teachers experience meaningful work. The nine international school teachers interviewed for this study all reported a rich sense of meaningful in work; however, their experiences, worldviews, beliefs about education, and workplace relationships shaped how they experienced meaning in work. An analysis of the data revealed five super-ordinate themes: (a) harmony through an alignment of personal and professional values; (b) fulfillment through the capacity to “make a difference” in the lives of others through work; (c) joy through the creativity and growth opportunities that come with the daily work of teaching; (d) a sense of vitality and support through meaningful work-related relationships; and (e) empowerment through autonomy over important roles and “passion projects.”

Participants described a harmony through alignment of personal and professional values
as a sense that participants were living their values through work. In some cases, participants cited specific language in the school’s mission statement, but more often, they experienced meaning through the implicit values communicated by perceived organizational priorities. Some participants described feeling that their subject-matter was more or less valued by school administration and this impacted how they experienced meaning in their work. Some participants even described their academic disciplines as if they represented deep-seated values in their own right (e.g., mathematical thinking, the arts as integral to the human experience). Several participants also experienced meaning in their alignment with a set of “international school values” characterized by open-mindedness, global citizenship, and tolerance.

Making a difference in the lives of others through work gave participants a sense of fulfillment. All participants reported feeling that their work allowed them to have a positive impact on the lives of their students. Participants conveyed a sense of purpose in supporting students’ intellectual growth and personal growth. The experience of guiding students through challenging tasks and seeing them make academic progress was described as rewarding and purposeful. Many participants experienced purpose through supporting students personally. Some participants even likened their role as international school teachers to “surrogate parents” to their primarily expatriate students, who face daunting academic standards and require support with the unique challenges of living away from their homes. Many also felt a sense of fulfillment in the vicarious societal impact that they were able to make through their impact on international school students positioned to become future leaders.

Participants also described experiencing meaning through the joys of everyday aspects of their work as international educators. In particular, they found joy in their daily interactions with students and the act of teaching. Job-related challenges such as planning authentic learning
experiences were described as exciting and “skin-tingling.” Furthermore, participants felt enriched by opportunities for personal and professional growth inherent in their work as educators.

Relationships also were a critical aspect of the meaningful work experience. Participants described meaningful relationships with students, colleagues and leaders as a source of vitality, validation, inspiration, and support.

Finally, participants revealed a sense of empowerment through autonomy. Participants described feeling trusted and valued when they were given autonomy to use their creative license through work. The most resonant experience described by many international educators in this study was the opportunity to lead passion projects that mobilized their talents, values and interests. Participants described experiencing meaning in being empowered to lead projects such as service-learning projects, new course offerings, and the creation of an alternative school.
Chapter V: Discussion of the Research Findings

Introduction

This study explored how nine foreign-hire international school teachers experience meaningful work. Interview data painted a compressive picture of the life-world of participants revealing five themes that illustrate how international school teachers experience meaningful work. Whereas Chapter 4 provided an overview and analysis of participant voices, the following chapter will engage in a dialogue between how participants made sense of meaningful work as an international educator and the extant literature to uncover what each has to say about the other (see Smith et al., 2009). It will include a review of the methodology and participant profiles, a discussion of emergent themes as they apply to the literature and theoretical frameworks, and implications for research and practice.

Key Findings

This study began with a simple question: How do international school teachers experience meaningful work? While five superordinate themes emerged from the data, there are three key findings that stand out as particularly salient to this line of inquiry. International school teachers experience meaningful work through:

1. An alignment of personal values with work that is heavily influenced by the example of leadership.
2. Meaningful relationships with students.
3. Being empowered to lead projects connected to their passions and talents.

Alignment of personal values with work. The international educators in this study revealed how they experienced meaningful work through an alignment of personal values and values associated with their work. Examples of participants experiencing meaning by living
personal values through work appear frequently in the interview data. In some cases, this was the result of an alignment of personal values with the values of their organization. Some participants described a connection with the explicit literature in the mission statement of their school or a set of core values articulated by leadership. Other participants spoke of this alignment in terms of implicit values—particularly those modeled by administrators.

One of the key aspects of this finding is the role that administrators play in the sensemaking process. The actions of leadership—in particular the degree to which those actions showed integrity to the mission of the school—played a significant role in the way participants experienced meaningful work. Participants’ perceptions of the integrity of their administrators contributed or detracted from their capacity to draw meaning from their work. Molly asserted the importance of administration to inspire her: “I want to be in a place where I’m inspired. If my bosses aren’t inspiring me to be my best and showing me in incredible ways like where I could be headed and where the school can be headed, then I don’t really want to stick around. I feel like I need to be someplace where I can find that.” For many participants, leadership’s ability to make sense of the relevance of work to their personal values was a key component of their meaningful work experience. Mark’s distinction between his faith in the mission of his current school and a past school illuminated this point:

Our school right now, this is tough to say, but we have a beautiful mission statement, as a whole I don't think we follow it and that’s tough. Because one of the aspects of the mission statement is to lead lives of integrity, and if we’re not fully following our own mission statement then immediately that's a lack of integrity. . . . I couldn’t even tell you what the mission statement in XXX was, but it didn't matter because our leader was such a great leader. That's all words on a paper, because whatever he would tell us we needed
to work on or do we trusted him, we believed in him and we knew it was coming from a good place and his intentions were good.

Mark’s described mission as “words on a paper” illustrated just how much faith in a school’s mission relies on leadership communicating espoused values through action. All participants described a sense of meaningful work in living their personal values through their work. The degree to which participants’ values aligned with the espoused values of the organization often depended on the authenticity of leadership to articulate and model them.

Participants found various ways to live their values. If they did not have faith in the espoused values of the organization or the example of leadership, they found ways to live their values by spreading a love for their discipline (e.g., Karen, Brent, Amanda), or a personal advocacy, such as environmental stewardship (e.g., Rachel) or a love for learning (e.g., Molly). Moreover, for many participants, a strong connection between personal values and an international school ethos—defined by open-mindedness, multiculturalism, and global citizenship—contributed to their identity as international school teachers and was integral to their experience of meaningful work.

**Meaningful relationships with students.** Participants spoke at length about relationships at work. In particular, their close connections to students featured heavily in their descriptions of meaningful work experiences. Teaching is a highly social occupation. Teachers derived joy from the everyday interactions with students inherent in their work as teachers—silly anecdotes of adolescent awkwardness and the moments they surprised them with their brilliance. But teaching is also a pastoral occupation, and many participants highlighted the larger impact of their relationships with students as a source of meaning in their work.

Participants offered a multitude of vignettes describing the meaning they derived from
supporting students through life’s challenges. Karen spoke about her support of a student who had performance anxiety to overcome her fears and perform at a high level. Diana spoke about helping a student figure out her identity during a turbulent time and the fulfillment she felt when that student, many years later, reached out to her to thank her for her contribution. Lloyd described supporting a little boy who felt culturally out of place in a foreign environment to become confident and happy. In many cases, these vignettes highlight the unique role of international school teachers to serve as, in Amanda’s words, “surrogate parents” to their students.

Participants revealed that their relationships with students were meaningful because of the simple pleasure of getting to know and interacting with young people as part of their everyday work-life. They also experienced the meaning from their pastoral role in the relationship and their capacity to make a positive impact on a student’s personal development.

**Empowered to lead passion projects.** Every participant cited experiencing a sense of empowerment that came from being trusted to lead special projects aligned with their passions and talents. Of the hundred-plus pages of interview transcripts, some of the most resonant experiences captured participants’ experiences leading projects of personal importance to them. Mark’s experience leading the Innovation Academy breathed new life into his job. Karen crafted meaning into her work through her service-learning project, *Drama for a Cause*. Molly’s committee on scheduling and Reader’s Writer’s Workshop initiative were vehicles for her to explore her passion for school improvement and exercise her conviction that all educational decision making should be centered on what’s best for students.

Here too, the role of leadership was significant. Many participants expressed meaning in terms of feelings of support and trust. This support manifested itself in teachers feeling
supported to explore new ideas and take risks. Specifically, Diana, Lloyd, Mark, and Brent cited specific examples of leadership supporting their ideas and those of their colleagues that illustrated how the feeling of support was integral to their experience of meaningful work.

Participants often experienced meaning in work that allowed them to exercise their unique subset of passions and talents. Passion projects reflected a kind of self-expression through work for many participants. Leadership, again, was key in validating and supporting these projects.

**Relationship of the Findings to the Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed by Chalofsky’s (2010) model of meaningful work and supplemented by Weick’s (2009) organizational sensemaking framework. The findings in relationship to these two theories is provided below.

**Meaningful work.** Meaningful work theory is based on needs theory. Maslow (1943) asserted that meaning is a human need. In the tradition of Maslow (1943) and Herzberg (1974), literature has explored meaningful work as a human need (Yeoman, 2014). Meaningful work is meant to mean meaning in work. Van Til Haymen (2013) described meaning in work as analogous to meaning in life. When individuals find meaning in their work, they judge their work to be a vehicle for meaning-making and to serve a significant purpose (Steger et al., 2012). Chalosky’s (2010) framework delineates three aspects of meaningful work—sense of self, the work itself, and sense of balance—that result in a sense of “integrated wholeness.”

**Sense of self.** These findings support Chalofsky’s (2010) framework, which asserts that a fundamental element of meaningful work is a sense of self. Sense of self in work is a synergy between one’s belief system about purpose in life and beliefs about one’s work (Chalofsky, 2010). It means that an individual is able to enact personal values and beliefs through work
resulting in a sense of purpose and fulfillment in work (Chalofsky, 2010). There is a dynamic relationship between meaning in work and personal identity (Cortez & Lynch, 2015). In this way, work can be an expression of self. This was demonstrated by participant responses illuminating the experience of harmony between work and personal values and dispositions, such as sustainability education (Rachel), expression through the arts (Karen), mathematical thinking (Brent), and innovation (Mark, Lloyd).

Chalofsky (2010) described meaningful workplaces as “values-based cultures”. Indeed, many participants described an alignment between their personal values and the mission and values of the organization as a source of meaning. A common element of meaningful workplaces is the presence of supportive relationships among employees and between employees and managers (Chalofsky, 2010). In particular, the relationship with managers seemed most salient to participants’ experiencing a sense of self at work. Several participants described experiences working for administrators who instilled a sense of faith in the school’s mission and values through their example.

**The work itself.** Participants also made sense of meaningful work by describing how they experienced joy through various aspects of the act of teaching. This aligned closely with Chalofsky’s (2009) description of meaning in the work itself, or work that is challenging, engaging, requires creativity, and involves continuous learning. The work itself implies a deep engagement in the activities of work. The concept is closely aligned with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) description of meaning through engagement called “flow.” Participants described the joy of teaching as a source of meaning in work. As Rachel put it, “What I love about teaching is being in the classroom, and being with kids and having fun.” Participants described being engaged in work that allowed them to express their identity and engage in tasks they enjoyed.
Indeed, literature suggests that individuals experience high levels of engagement or “flow” when they engage in tasks that they see as worthwhile in and of themselves (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). How international teachers experience flow was expressed variously by participants. Some, such as Molly and Amanda, found flow in engaging in continuous learning. Others, such as Jake and Karen, found meaning in their subject content and the opportunity to work with their subject matter on a daily basis and spread a love of, say, math or drama, to their students. Some participants found deep engagement in specific tasks related to teaching, such as curriculum development or developing authentic learning experiences. Rachel for instance, described guiding students to develop deep thinking questions as “a real skin-tingler.” Participants found a sense of meaning in the work of teaching via different avenues based on their individual passions and interests. This supports Chalofsky’s (2009) assertion that people find meaning in the work itself when they have opportunities to carry out personal purpose through their work. This was also evident when participants described passion projects, such as Mark’s Innovation Academy and Karen’s Drama for a Cause Project. Tasks involved in these projects were closely aligned with personal values. They were also opportunities to for continuous learning and creativity. As Mark explained, “Ultimately, every situation, class, day, week is different and you need to design around that.” Responses illustrate how international school teachers experience meaning through the work itself, i.e., the daily work-related tasks of teaching.

Moreover, several participants expressed the importance of autonomy in their work and a sense of empowerment in leading projects aligned with their passions. Chalofsky (2010) asserted that part of a sense of meaning in the work itself is “having autonomy, empowerment, and a sense of control over one’s environment” (p. 20). Participants cited the importance of
autonomy and empowerment when describing their experiences of meaningful work. Often, feelings of autonomy and empowerment were linked to perceptions of administrators. Two components of admin relationships stood out among participant responses: authenticity and trust. This illustrates Chalofsky’s (2010) assertion that effective leaders are authentic, have clear purpose and values, and support their employees. In this sense, authenticity and trust go hand in hand. A meaningful relationship with administration requires that leaders model values. One of these values is trust in the people with whom they work. “When leaders truly value their employees, they are fulfilling a moral imperative to believe in human potential” (Chalofsky, 2010, p. 101).

Finding meaning in the work itself also involves seeking learning, challenge and continuous growth (Chalofsky, 2010). The joy through creativity and growth inherent in the teaching profession experienced by participants aligns with Chalofsky’s (2009) description of meaning in the work itself. These experiences, in many cases, were facilitated by a perception that they were trusted and valued by administrators.

**Sense of balance.** The third component of Chalofsky’s framework is a *sense of balance*. For work to be meaningful, the demands of work-life and home life must both be valued and an individual must be supported to find meaning in other aspects of life outside of work (Chalofsky, 2010). This component of Chalofsky’s framework was not highly prevalent in the data. In fact, several participants laughed at the idea of balance as an unattainable ideal in the world of international schools with their rigorous academic standards and expectations for extracurricular involvement. Several participants, such as Molly, emphasized that teaching was so integral to her identity that she had a hard time distinguishing between work and life. However, the working mothers in the study, especially Diana and Mary, emphasized the importance of being
supported to strike a balance between work and life outside of school, particularly family life. One participant, Mary, accepted her current position among other more lucrative offers because it offered her the flexibility to work part-time while her first child was still young. While most participants did not emphasize sense of balance as a significant aspect of experiencing of meaning in their work, it was of heightened value for some, particularly mothers working as international school teachers.

Participants revealed how the experienced meaningful in their work as international educators. Chalofsky’s (2009) meaningful work framework guided an analysis of the implications of participant data. In particular, the relationship between personal identity and work—Chalofsky’s (2009) sense of self and the work itself—was experienced by participants in ways specific to their work as international educators.

**Organizational sensemaking.** Finding meaning in work is an act of sensemaking (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). As such, a supplemental framework for understanding organizational sensemaking based on Weick’s (2009) model supported this research. This framework was applied to better understand how people make sense of the experience of meaningful work in an organizational setting.

Weick (2009) explained that individuals act, not in isolation, but as a result of their situation in organizational relationships, and fueled by a desire to act their way to “a meaningful existence” (p. 170). Although Weick emphasized sensemaking as an act of organizations rather than individuals (Czarniawska, 2006), meaningful work perceptions arise from interpersonal and intrapersonal sensemaking situated in a social context (Werzesniewski et al., 2003; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Perceived meaning is often shaped by the social or cultural context (Rosso et al., 2010). Weick (2005, 2009) focused on sensemaking as an activity of language. It begins
when individuals interpret experiences (Weick et al., 2005). Weick (2009) explained how
sensemaking occurs as individuals move from dialogue to observation to forming beliefs,
identifying six regularities of sensemaking: redoing (i.e., organizational routines and traditions);
labeling events, roles and processes; discarding old routines and ideas for new ones; enacting
(i.e., actions are influenced by and reinforce beliefs); believing; and substantiation of an
organization’s identity and individuals’ place within it.

Several of the superordinate themes that emerged from the data reveal elements of
Weick’s framework as participants experienced them. For instance, participants described a
tight-loose dynamic in their experience of autonomy through empowerment. They were able to
make sense of meaning in their work when there was a clear set of organizational values,
whether communicated by an inspiring leader, organizational culture, or explicitly in a written
mission statement. However, after a clearly articulated vision had been communicated by
leadership, they craved autonomy and empowerment to contribute to that vision in ways that
aligned with their own passions, values, and talents. Both Amanda and Rachel described
situations where the pendulum swung too far in either direction. At one previous international
school, Rachel explained, she felt like the school lacked an identity. The lack of a cohesive
mission detracted from a sense of meaningful work. Amanda explained how a change in
administration resulted in a shift from a suffocating environment to a loose, directionless one.
While participants expressed a desire for direction, particularly around the articulation of a noble
mission and set of espoused values, they also explained that some of the most meaningful aspects
of their work come from feeling trusted with professional autonomy, especially on special
projects of interest. This supports Weick’s (2009) assertion that organizations that achieve
shared meanings and sustained coherency are “tight around a handful of key values but loose
around everything else” (Weick, 2009, p. 35). Such organizational designs, according to Weick (2009), experience less attrition, greater innovation, and more consistent performance.

Furthermore, many participants described an alignment between their personal values and the mission and values of the organization—what Shein (1992) called “espoused values”—as a source of meaning. Weick (2009) asserted that organizations articulate a mission or vision to communicate a sense of purpose in work. Organizational values are founded on faith (Weick, 2009). Indeed, the degree to which employees had faith in their school’s mission—and the integrity with which it was carried out by leadership—had an impact on how they made sense of meaning in their work. While some participants, such as Amanda and Diana, made specific references to their written mission statements, a more prevalent theme that emerged from the data was the authenticity with which espoused values were enacted. Faith in a school’s mission seemed to be reinforced by action, particularly on the part of leadership. Several participants, including Amanda, Molly, and Brent, emphasized the importance of leaders “walking the walk” and modeling espoused values. When viewed through Weick’s (2009) organizational sensemaking lens, participant responses revealed how international school leaders can substantiate a shared sense of purpose by instilling belief through their own actions (i.e., modeling the mission). Weick (2009) asserted that beliefs move from words to action, which can inspire reaffirmed beliefs. Put simply, action inspires belief (Weick, 2009). Participants frequently invoked examples of administrators’ actions, rather than their words, when describing the experience of meaningful work (or its absence). Actions of leadership had a consequential impact on perceptions of not only their leaders, themselves, but their work writ large. Administrators who were perceived to be authentic, lead with integrity, and trusting international context.
While Chalofsky’s meaningful work model and Weick’s organizational sensemaking framework helped lend structure to an analysis of superordinate themes as they reveal a micro-macro dynamic to meaning-making. On the one hand, individuals are making sense of their experience on an individual level. On the other hand, that sensemaking is manifested in social relationships within an organizational context (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2.** International school teachers make sense of the experience of meaning in their work through the synergy of individual and organizational sensemaking.

**Relationship of the Findings to the Literature**

The following section provides a discussion of how the research findings relate to the research. The analysis has been organized into subsections by superordinate theme examining what the findings contribute to the literature.

**Harmony through alignment of personal and professional values.** Participants emphasized the importance of an alignment of work and values. For instance, the data illustrate how international school teachers make sense of, experience, and derive meaning from the mission and values of a school. Interview data support research suggesting that the written
mission is less significant than the way it is communicated through leadership and organizational culture in terms of impact on employee attitudes and behavior (Campbell and Yeung, 1991; Jacobson, 2011). Mark, for instance, spoke at length about his experience working for a leader who modeled the school’s values in a way that made the written mission irrelevant. Literature suggests that the way a mission is communicated, through the example of leadership and organizational culture, has more of an impact on the attitudes and behaviors of employees than the content of mission statements (see Campbell and Yeung, 1991; Jacobson, 2011).

There were other ways that participants sought to live their values through work. Molly, Amanda, and Mary emphasized the importance of working in a school culture that values life-long learning. Molly, for instance, spoke at length about her school’s generous investment in professional development as a way her school supports her desire to keep learning and improving as a professional educator. Some participants spoke extensively about the meaning they find in leading service-learning projects. Karen, Mark, Diana, Mary, and Rachel described various ways they were able to live their values through their work on service-learning projects. Other participants, such as Lloyd, lamented at not having more service learning opportunities through school and discussed ways he pursued making a social impact outside of work through contributing to Wikipedia and offering technology training for teachers in local public schools. While there is limited literature on the impact of service-learning on how teachers make sense of their work, some studies suggest that involvement in service-learning may contribute to a stronger sense of meaning in work (e.g., Krebs, 2008; Kashak & Letwinsky, 2015). This study’s findings suggest that involvement of service-learning may provide opportunities for international school teachers to enact their values, thus developing a stronger sense of meaning in their work.
Several participants also described experiencing meaningful work through their alignment with international school values. Whereas experiencing meaningful work is often expressed in spiritual terms in the literature (Rosso et al., 2010), participants in this study spoke more about values such as open-mindedness, empathy, and life-long learning that seem to be contained in a general ethos prevalent in international school community. Rachel, Diana, and Molly, for instance, emphasized that international school students and teachers tend to be more progressive and open-minded, which appealed to their disdain for the current political climate in their countries of birth. Diana explained that she found meaning in working in an environment that encourages empathy, resilience, and multiculturalism. This indicates that international educators may find meaning in global, secular values rather than a sense of spirituality in the traditional sense.

In summary, participant responses supported meaningful work literature emphasizing the importance of an alignment of personal values and work. The international educators described a sense of meaning in the opportunity to “live their values” through work. Participants often described finding a sense of meaning in their alignment with a set of “international school values,” including open-mindedness, intercultural understanding, and empathy, rather than a sense of spirituality in the traditional sense. Some participants found a synergy in the written mission and values of the school, particularly in cases where school leadership integrated espoused values into professional dialogue. However, when describing their alignment with school missions and values, participants tended to emphasize the degree of authenticity of leaders (i.e., walking the walk) over the wording of mission statements. Several participants also described a sense of meaning in enacting personal values through service-learning projects.
**Fulfillment through making a difference.** Another superordinate theme that emerged from the data was the capacity to make a difference through work as an international educator. The capacity to make a difference in the lives of others is a well-documented motivation cited by teachers for pursuing a career in education (see Roness & Smith, 2010; Demirkasimoglu, 2015). Participants confirmed that making a difference on both a micro (i.e., in the lives of students) and macro (i.e., contributions to society at large) were sources of meaning in their work.

Interview data revealed how participants made sense of their work as international educators as a calling. Individuals who view their work as a calling derive a sense of meaning and fulfillment by serving others, society at large, or a higher power (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Duffy et al., 2012). Participants tended to frame their work as a calling by describing their positive impact on individual students. Many described playing the role of, in Amanda’s words, “surrogate parent” to international school students, emphasizing the challenges that TCKs face. This calling orientation was a source of meaning for several participants. Brent described helping a Korean student come to terms with his cultural identity in the context of an international school environment through his work as a student advisor. Lloyd described his support of a student who felt alienated from the predominant culture of his school because of his ethnicity. In both cases, participants were able to explain how their work had a positive impact on a student through the unique pastoral role of a teacher in international schools catering to students in an intercultural environment.

Nearly all participants were able to cite specific examples of students whose lives they impacted. Karen recounted working outside of class time every Friday for two months to lead a dance student through visualizations that helped her overcome her performance anxiety in time for a concert. “She did her final performance of for-and-a-half minutes, and stayed on stage, and
then did the finale,” Karen said with pride in her voice. She added, “Seeing her have success was great. Then, her mother . . . sent me a really nice email.” Indeed, positive feedback from parents, administrators and students codified participants’ sense of that they had a meaningful impact on the lives of students. Several participants recounted feeling validated by expressions of gratitude by students or parents. Diana told the story of an art student who had been struggling with depression as a student in her class. The student emailed her years later to share her successes and thank her for her support. “That made a big impact on me,” Diana said, “to see, to hear, to read her success . . . she’s in such a good place personally and she’s fulfilled and happy.” This experience provided tangible evidence of the impact she had had in her work, particularly in her pastoral role. These perspectives support literature suggesting that teachers derive a sense of meaning in social-emotional rewards, such as positive feedback from administrators and students (see Hargreaves, 2001; Kokka, 2016), and show how teachers make sense of “making a difference” in a student’s life.

In many cases participants went above and beyond their official job description to support students. In this way they crafted meaning into their jobs. Berg et al.’s (2013) study on “job crafting” revealed the capacity of individuals to make changes to their work-related tasks and workplace relationships in order to make their work more personally meaningful. Indeed, several participants engaged in “job crafting” in ways that helped them make sense of meaning in their work. Service learning is another way that participants crafted meaning into their work. There is limited research on the impact of service learning on teacher perceptions of work. However, some research has shown that teachers who engage in service projects through their work take pride in their social impact and develop more meaningful relationships with students (see Krebs, 2008; Kashak & Letwinsky, 2015). Participants described service learning projects
they sought out as experiences that lent their work meaning. Mark described his work with students to build houses in slum areas and teach literacy to the students of the low-income staff at his school. Karen developed a club that integrated a desire to serve underprivileged children in the community and teach communication and leadership skills through her service learning project, Drama for a Cause. Mary and Rachel described the social impact they found through engaging students in redesigning experiential projects to improve sustainability and impact on host communities.

Participants described making sense of meaning in their work through their experiences of making a difference in the lives of others, particularly students, as well as through the social impact of their work. Making a difference was integral to the perception that work as international educators was a noble calling, supporting Wrzesniewski et al.’s (1997) description of a calling and shedding light on how international school teachers experience meaningful work. Several participants described taking on the role of “surrogate parents” to describe the heightened importance of shepherding students from transient families struggling with identity issues. Other data revealed how participants crafted meaning in to their work through service learning projects.

**Joy through creativity and growth.** Rosso et al. (2010) found that jobs involving high levels of autonomy, skill variety, task identity, and task significance have been shown to cultivate perceptions of meaningful work. Participants illustrated several ways that their work as international educators offered opportunities for autonomy, skill variety, task identity, and task significance.

Participants revealed a heightened sense of meaning and engagement in aspects of their work that gave them opportunities for personal and professional growth. Several participants
cited learning new areas of expertise through their work. Mary developed a love for curriculum when faced with the challenge of developing curriculum for her host country government. Lloyd developed an expertise in IT education and robotics through his work. Diana described the new challenges of integrating tactile and digital arts she was confronting with her students. Molly seemed to be developing new interests and capacities on a weekly basis, from literacy techniques, to scheduling to reflective practices. Participant descriptions indicated a sense of engagement in learning new skills and developing new interests. There was a sense conveyed that, not only were they growing better in their work, but also that they were becoming more whole as human beings as a result of the opportunities they found in their work.

Participants described experiencing meaning in their work by sharing various aspects of their work that were deeply engaging, such as curriculum development, interacting with students and developing authentic learning experiences, shedding light on the myriad ways international teachers find meaning in the work itself. Participants also described how continuous learning, integral to the work of teaching, was a source of deep engagement and meaning.

**Vitality and support through meaningful relationships.** Mautz (2015) emphasized that meaning in work is supported by the relationships individuals have with each other in the work place. The international educators in this study expressed experiencing meaning in terms of a vitality derived from their relationships with students, colleagues and administration.

*Students.* A litany of participant responses demonstrated the importance of student relationships as a source of meaning in their work as international educators. Karen asserted, “What makes meaning for me is my relationship with the kids.” Mark reached for student relationships to find motivation on days when he did not feel excited about his work: “The relationships that year in, year out, I have with students . . . that drives me, that motivates me. . . .
The deeper I know the students and the better the relationships I have with them, the more engaged and purposeful my work becomes too.” These assertions demonstrate how teachers make sense of their relationships with students in international school workplace environment.

In terms of student relationships, participants expressed finding meaning in supporting students on a personal level more than academic support. For instance, Brent stressed the meaning he found in mentoring through his school’s PGC program. Rachel discussed helping students uncover their convictions and figure out what kind of people they want to be. The advocacy role, or as Amanda put it, “surrogate parent” role was highlighted by every participant as a source of meaning in their work. These responses support literature showing that the act of working with students is a source of meaning in the work of teachers (e.g., Demirkasimoglu, 2015; Torrez & Krebs, 2012; Kokka, 2016; Roness & Smith, 2010). Participants in this study all described assuming the role of mentor, and cited this as a source of meaning in their work. This may be because international school students have a unique array of needs as a result of the need to adapt to new contexts and systems. Pollock and Van Reken (2009) recommended mentorship as a buffer against the challenges of identity formation for TCK students. Indeed, participants in this study illustrated how the mentor relationship can be mutually beneficial by providing a source of meaningful work.

**Colleagues.** Several participants underscored their relationships with colleagues as a source of meaning in their work. Some discussed specific colleagues with whom they worked on teams or special projects. Others cited a general sense of meaning that came from working in an atmosphere where people learn from each other. This is unsurprising. Several studies highlight how teachers find meaning in the social interaction and a sense of belonging associated with the work of teaching (Demirkasimoglu, 2015; Torrez & Krebs, 2012; Masuda, 2010). In particular,
several studies have shown that coworker relationships are an important component of meaningful work as they influence interpersonal sensemaking and identity (Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

Several participants in this study expressed a belief that workplace relationships helped them become better teachers and challenged them to improve. These relationships reinforced their identity as life-long learners. Mark, for instance, described his close partnership with two colleagues at the Innovation Academy: “We have an incredibly close relationship through our work and just working here together and I get feedback from them. We collaborate constantly. We're very open about our weaknesses and things we need to improve on. That's huge.” Rachel described “a kind of thirst for finding out what everybody else is doing . . . seeing the different ways of educating and getting to the end goal of a certain type of learning . . . and learning from others.” Mary emphasized the importance of her working relationship with her husband: “I work with my husband and I work with him closely, and I think that we get really meaningful work done together. . . . I’ve given him every unit and every task and everything I’ve done and he's coming at it from a different perspective. He’s questioning absolutely everything that I’ve ever done.” These examples highlight the role of collegial relationships in reinforcing an identity centered on the learning aspects of the teaching profession. These findings may also lend support to the formation of professional learning groups within schools. Other studies suggest that participants in teacher study groups (or “professional learning communities”) felt more meaning in their work and validated as professionals (Masuda, 2010; Nieto, 2003).

Individuals take cues about what is meaningful from others in their social network (Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Participants often expressed these cues in terms of validation, or lack thereof, highlighting experiences when they felt appreciated by their peers.
Molly expounded on a time when the members of a committee she organized took time at the beginning of a meeting to go around the room and express their gratitude for her work one by one. This was an overt example of coworker validation, but participants also cited subtler cues from colleagues that influenced their perceptions of how they were valued. Diana mentioned a passing comment by a colleague who marveled at her love for her work as an art teacher. Mary explained that getting constructive feedback showed that her colleagues were comfortable and trusted her. Karen explained how her role in her previous school was more meaningful because her colleagues appreciated her as an expert in your field. She lamented that in her current school, which is about twice the size, she feels “lost in the system.” She described an experience leading a workshop on communications skills for her colleagues during a professional development session to illustrate how she feels less valued in her current work situation.

 Okay, so I’ve done workshops. I’ve done workshops outside of school. I did workshops in my small community. I’ve done workshops in the state community. What shocked me last year is when I was asked to run a workshop. I’m standing up in front of my peers, and my peers are rolling their eyes at me, or making comments, or not wanting to be involved. What’s that? What’s that? They obviously feel that whatever knowledge I’m imparting is not [important].

Karen’s example illustrates how people are constantly interpreting cues from their social environment to determine whether they are valued by colleagues. Weick (2009) asserted that sensemaking is ultimately an issue of language. For Karen, the nonverbal body language of her colleagues spoke loudly about the degree to which she was valued as a professional. Feeling valued or feeling undervalued by colleagues played heavily into how participants made sense of meaning in their work. Participants took cues in the form of words and actions from colleagues.
which reinforced their beliefs about the value of their work to others.

**Administration.** The literature has demonstrated the significance of leadership on international school teachers’ perceptions of their work (Betts, 2001; Mancuso et al., 2010; Harper & Hayden, 2008). In particular, transformational and reflective leaders tend to be more effective than other leadership styles in communicating a sense of mission (Harper & Hayden, 2008).

These factors may also have an impact on international school teachers’ decisions to renew their contract. Perceived effectiveness of leaders has also been associated with higher rates of international school retention (Mancuso et al., 2010). However, participants did not emphasize effectiveness explicitly, but rather, they pointed to authenticity and trust as reasons for staying on at schools. Molly illustrated her decision to stay on at her school by recounting how her principal studied a new technique over the summer and came back to model it in front of teachers. Molly viewed this as an act of courage: “She’s walking the walk because she’s actually doing it. That to me is inspirational and that’s to kind of leadership I thrive under. That’s why I’ve been at XXX, this is my 10th year.” Mark also remembered how when he was ready to leave his current school and expressed his frustrations to his principal at the time. His principal responded by offering him the opportunity to lead the Innovation Academy. “Going back to the whole creativity and independence piece, that was huge,” he explained. “It's all come from that initial meeting with him.” His principal’s willingness to trust his talent and capacity for innovation resulted in a renewed commitment to his school.

Meaningful workplace relationships were described by participants as a source of meaning in their work. Meaningful relationships with students were characterized by the role of mentorship and validated by actions such as former students’ visiting or writing to express
Meaningful collegial relationships were a source of professional growth, community membership, and validation. Participants also described how meaningful relationships with administrators had the capacity to inspire a sense of meaning in their work by demonstrating that the mission and values of the organization had integrity. Meaningful relationships with administrators also were a source of empowerment for several participants, as leaders entrusted them to take on special projects and lead passion projects. This connects to the fifth superordinate theme, which centered around a sense of autonomy and empowerment.

**Empowerment through autonomy.** In several cases, autonomy facilitated participants’ crafting meaning into their work. Mark’s Innovation Academy, Diana’s Artisan class, and Lloyd’s robotics initiative show the power of job crafting to give employees ownership over the meaning-making process. As Berg et al. (2013) explained, “Freedom to take initiative opens up opportunities for employees to create meaningful experiences for themselves through job crafting” (p. 4). Karen explained that her service learning project, Drama for a Cause, held so much meaning for her because she was able to integrate her love for drama with her work as a teacher. “That was a powerful sense of meaning or sense of worth that I could bring the things that I loved, and the kids that I worked with, and these kids [from the orphanage], and that they could mix them all together.” Mark also expressed experiencing a sense of meaning in his work creating the Innovation Academy. “They gave me the opportunity to start the Innovation Academy and it's a program that combines English media and business into the projects we do. I have a group of students for large chunks of time and tons of autonomy and creativity and we do real authentic work. . . .” Mark cited this opportunity as a reason he has remained at his current school. The depth of detail and engagement conveyed in his responses illustrated how meaningful this sense of autonomy was for Mark. A sense of ownership seems crucial to this
construction of meaning. This shows how the organizational research on the connection between autonomy and meaningful work manifests itself in an international school environment. The literature suggests that individuals have a need for self-determination over their activities and environments, and that a sense of control is meaningful because it reassures them of their significance and contribution (Oldham & Hackman, 1976; Rosso et al., 2010). Participants often described a sense of meaning in leading “passion projects” centered on personal values or interests. These projects seemed to isolate them from the aspects of their work that detracted from meaning. For instance, the Innovation Academy kept Mark from feeling suffocated by his school’s IB curriculum, and Drama for a Cause helped Karen find meaning despite feeling that her teaching discipline was undervalued at her school.

Administration had a significant impact on participants’ ability and willingness to take on passion projects. This supports literature indicating that international school leaders who apply distributed leadership practices are more effective than leaders who employ more centralized leadership styles in instilling a sense of mission in teachers (Harper & Hayden, 2008). As Brent explained, “I think the administrator has my back, then I'm more likely to try things, try different style of classes, different projects.” He went on to describe a project-based math course he started. All participants expressed a sense of meaning in being entrusted by administration to take on passion projects of one kind of another. Lloyd’s robotics program, Rachel’s environmental stewardship position, and Molly’s professional learning committee are a few examples of leadership trusting teachers with autonomy over special projects that were cited by participants. Clearly, the theme of autonomy and empowerment overlaps with meaningful relationships, as the latter facilitates the former.

Participants affirmed the importance of feeling entrusted to lead projects of personal
importance within the framework of a clear set of values. In many cases they were able to craft meaning into their work through such projects that they were empowered to oversee.

**Summary of connections to the literature.** Participants in this study revealed how the experience of meaningful work takes shape in an international school context. While perceptions of meaningful work have been linked to positive organizational outcomes in the literature, few studies have explored meaningful work in an educational context and none have focused specifically on K-12 international educators. This study provides a better understanding of how meaningful work literature (e.g., on identity and meaningful work, meaningful work outcomes) applies to teachers working in an international school context. Positive outcomes of meaningful work—productivity (Parker, 2008; Chalofsky, 2010), ownership of the mission of the organization (Amabile & Kramer, 2012), organizational commitment (Steger et al., 2012), work engagement (Geldenhuys et al., 2014), self-efficacy beliefs (Dik et al., 2014), and intrinsic motivation (Steger et al., 2012; Pinder, 2014)—took shape for participants in ways unique to their professional context. Furthermore, meaningful work perceptions have been correlated to self-efficacy beliefs (Chalofsky, 2010; Strong, 1998; Dik et al., 2014). Participants in this study described the importance of feeling empowered with autonomy over tasks related to their interests and personal passions. Such “passion projects” may facilitate meaningful work by codifying self-efficacy beliefs.

**Implications for Practice**

This study is significant for several reasons. It has implications for theory—in particular, how meaningful work and sensemaking literature applies to K-12 educators working in an international school workplace environment. Indeed, the capacity to apply broad theory to personal experience is one of the benefits of the idiographic focus of IPA research (Smith et al.,
2010). This study also has practical implications for international school leaders who want to better understand how to create opportunities for meaningful work among staff members and teachers who want to find more meaning in their work. The findings of this study have several implications for practice that apply to both international school leaders and teachers (see Table 4).

Table 4

**Recommendations**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations for international school leaders</th>
<th>Recommendations for international school teachers</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lead authentically.</td>
<td>Craft meaning into your work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To recruit and retain teachers, stay true to a meaningful set of organizational values.</td>
<td>Cultivate meaningful workplace relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empower teachers with autonomy over “passion projects.”</td>
<td>Prioritize an alignment of personal and organizational values when choosing a workplace.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offer abundant opportunities for meaningful work experiences.</td>
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<td>Value teachers for their contributions.</td>
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**Implications for international school leaders.** International school leaders wishing to recruit talented teaching talent and create workplace conditions conducive meaningful work and its correlated outcomes, such as intrinsic motivation and engagement, can benefit from the following suggestions.

**Lead authentically.** Participants frequently cited examples of past and present leaders either modeling their school’s mission and values, or contradicting it. This is supported by Weick’s (2009) assertion that leaders have the power to make sense of meaning or legitimate doubt through their words and actions. Leadership, for many, had the potential to inspire a sense of meaning in work, by substantiating a belief in the espoused values of the school through the way they modeled those values. When authentic leadership was lacking, participants expressed
doubt in the integrity of the school mission. Chalofsky (2010) emphasized that authentic leadership has the power to inspire a sense of meaningful work in employees. “Authentic leaders demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practice their values consistently, and lead with their hearts as well as their heads” (George, Sims, McLean & Mayer, 2007). This description fit the description of principals and superintendents described by participants as igniting a sense of meaning in their work.

To recruit and retain teachers, stay true to a meaningful set of organizational values.

This study underscores the importance of an alignment between personal and organizational values as a contributing factor in international teacher recruitment and retention. Understanding international school teacher motives and values should inform recruitment practices (Savva, 2015). Articulating and living a meaningful mission that is aligned with the values of teachers was essential to the experience of meaningful work among participants. In some cases, participants cited this as a reason for signing on a specific school. Even more resonant in participant responses, the integrity of organizational mission and values, as modeled by administration and faculty, was crucial to the meaning-making process. Action was crucial to participants’ faith in their school’s mission. When values were not supported by action, participants lost faith in their school’s mission. When values were supported by action, participants made sense of meaning in their work via a belief that their personal values aligned with organizational values. For several participants, decisions to stay at a school or move on hinged on this factor.

Several subgroups emerged among participants. The two former TCKs in the study expressed a strong alignment between their personal values and the ethos of international education. Leaders wishing to attract and retain former international school students as teachers
are encouraged to emphasized elements of their school’s mission and values that align with values of open-mindedness, multiculturalism, and global citizenship. The working mothers in the cohort also emphasize balance as a value of particular importance, which indicates that international school leaders may want to develop and promote policies that promote a sense of balance, particularly when recruiting female international educators with children.

*Empower teachers with autonomy over “passion projects.”* There is great value in empowering teachers with autonomy over projects of personal significance to them. Leaders should look for opportunities to connect teachers with passion projects that align with their personal values and interests. Participants revealed that such projects were an important source of meaning in their work and in some cases dissuaded them from leaving their jobs. Passion projects also allowed participants to craft meaning into their work and endure other aspects of their job they found mundane. This fits with Chalofsky’s (2010) suggestion that leaders act as “enablers” who empower employees to “grow and perform at their highest capacity, with work that is meaningful and fulfilling” in a supportive and caring environment (p. 101).

*Offer abundant opportunities for meaningful work experiences.* International school leaders are encouraged to provide opportunities for meaningful work experiences, such as authentic service learning projects, pastoral care programs, co-curricular opportunities, and informal opportunities to connect with students on a personal level. Service learning was one way that participants made sense of their work as meaningful. This may be a result of the level of economic poverty in many international school host countries. Several participants cited service learning as an opportunity to live their values through their work and craft meaning into their work. Experiences with social-emotional learning (SEL) programs and co-curricular activities were also cited by some participants as elements of their job that supported a sense of
meaningful work. Such experiences were described as opportunities to forge meaningful relationships with students outside of a traditional classroom. While, advisory, mentorship and pastoral programs were cited by some participants as an opportunity to connect with students on a personal level, there were abundant examples of less formal opportunities that arose in the context of daily teaching—during before or after class—and outside of school. Educational leaders are encouraged to support these activities and an atmosphere of student support and advocacy as a conduit for the development of meaningful teacher-student relationships.

*Value teachers for their contributions.* Participants in this study highlighted experiences of being recognized for their contributions as some of the most vivid examples of meaningful work. These experiences validated that their work had meaning for the organization at large and made a difference in the lives of others. Validation by colleagues, students and parents was also integral to the experience of meaningful work for participants. Opportunities for students and parents to praise the specific contributions of teachers to the school community can result in an amplified sense of meaning in work. Allocating meeting time for teachers to acknowledge each other’s efforts may contribute to a feeling of worth and validation that contribute to a sense that their work is meaningful to others. Several participants also developed perceptions that their academic disciplined was more or less valued by their school. It is important to keep in mind that teachers may internalize implicit valuations of various subjects and roles.

*Implications for international school teachers.* International school teachers wishing to develop a richer sense of meaning in their work can benefit from the following suggestions.

*Craft meaning into your work.* Participants in this study were able to craft meaning into their jobs in various ways. Some initiated service learning initiatives. Others approached administration about taking on leadership roles or forming committees on issues of importance.
Job crafting can bring an expanded meaningfulness to work (Bert et al., 2013). Because they are less beholden to government and district mandates, international schools offer various opportunities to initiate new courses, lead service and experiential learning initiatives, and take on passion projects related to advocacies that are personally meaningful to teachers. Interview data indicates that international school teachers have unique opportunities to craft meaning into their work.

**Cultivate meaningful workplace relationships.** All participants cited meaningful relationships with students and colleagues as a source of meaning in their work. In terms of meaningful student relationships, participants tended to emphasize experiences supporting students’ personal growth. Such experiences tended to take place outside of class time. Some of these meaningful relationships were forged through formal aspects of their schools’ academic program, such as advisory programs, co-curricular activities, or school trips. Others were informal parts of the school-day. Participants described relationships that were strengthened through conversations before and after class or in the context of behavioral concerns.

International school teachers are encouraged to seek out both structured and unstructured opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with students. Meaningful relationships with colleagues was another superordinate theme that emerged in the data. Participants discussed the importance of their relationships with coworkers as a source of meaning in their work. Colleagues have the potential to collaborate on meaningful projects, validate a sense of self-assurance, and fulfill teachers’ need for social interaction. Moreover, social interaction is a conduit for sense making, as individuals make sense of experiences through the lens of conversations with and observations of those in their social network (Weick, 2009). Participants often developed a sense of meaning in their work in the context of social relationships.
International school teachers are encouraged to seek out professional learning communities, committee work, collaborative initiatives, and informal relationships with colleagues in order to enhance a sense of meaning in work.

Prioritize an alignment of personal and organizational values when choosing a workplace. All participants described a sense of meaningful work when the organizational values of their school aligned with a sense of self. A sense of self in work is an essential component of meaningful work (Chalofsky, 2009). While hygiene factors, such as salary, contribute to job satisfaction (Herzberg, 1974), participants did not mention pay and benefits as factors contributing to a sense of meaningful work. Rather, all participants described a belief (or disbelief) in the integrity of their school’s mission and values as consequential to whether they made sense of meaning in their work. Importantly, participants emphasized that the explicit mission and values of schools where they had worked, as articulated by school documents and promotional literature, were not always lived in practice or modeled by administrators.

International school teachers are encouraged to reflect on the intersection of personal and organizational values when making career decisions, and seek out the perspectives of teachers working at schools they are considering. The degree to which personal values align with the organizational values of an international school workplace may have a significant impact on whether a teacher is able to develop an optimal sense of meaningful work.

Implications for international school students. There is reason to believe that supporting meaningful work for international school teachers may have implications for student outcomes. Betoret (2013) has described a link between the satisfaction of psychological needs, such as meaning, with various dimensions of teacher engagement. Moreover, meaningful work perceptions have been correlated to self-efficacy beliefs (Chalofsky, 2010; Strong, 1998; Dik et
al., 2014). Self-efficacy beliefs contribute significantly to teacher attitudes about work (Caprara et al., 2003; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014), and self-efficacy beliefs have been correlated to quality of classroom instruction, especially in the areas of classroom management, student support, and cognition activation (Holzberger, Phillipp & Kunter, 2013). In addition, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) found a negative correlation between teacher self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion and personalization, which they suggest can be expected to lead to lower performance among students. Some studies have indicated that qualities such as engagement and intrinsic motivation may be transferred from teachers to their students (Roth, et al., 2007; Klassen et al., 2013). The international school teachers in this study revealed that experiencing meaning in their work involved feelings of engagement, heightened engagement, and empowerment. Although more evidence is needed, this study supports literature suggesting that an enhanced sense of meaningful work for international school teachers can support workplace attributes that lead to positive outcomes for students.

Limitations of the Study

As with all forms of qualitative research, bracketing the biases and opinions of the researcher can be a challenge that affects the trustworthiness of data. In the small world of international education, the researcher was bound to have pre-conceived perceptions of international schools cited by participants as well as first, second, or third degree professional connections. Two participants were, in fact, colleagues, while others were referred by administrators who were sought out by the researcher. Moreover, the researcher holds beliefs about the importance of meaningful work that may have influenced questioning and the interpretation and analysis of data. Inevitably, such preconceived notions based on personal background and beliefs pose a threat to objectivity (see Positionality Statement in Chapter 1).
Smith et al. (2009) recommend bracketing assumptions, advocacies and concerns to focus on the participants’ language. While best efforts were made to achieve this ideal, and a focus on the particular ensured some assurance of objectivity, it is impossible to know exactly how biases may have impacted this study.

Sampling presents another significant challenge for phenomenological researchers. As a discipline concerned with an understanding of experience, choosing participants who have interacted with the phenomenon is an imperfect science (Creswell, 2012). Findings must be understood in the context of this understanding. Sampling involved self-reporting “a rich sense of meaningful work as an international educator.” The goal was to identify a cohort of teachers who experience a rich sense of meaning in their work. However, there is no guarantee that the participant group reflected exemplars. Indeed, several participants, (e.g., Amanda, Brent) spent significant time discussing factors and experiences that detracted from their sense of meaningful work, while Lloyd was reticent to describe his work as meaningful, preferring to describe aspects of his work as “interesting.” Does this mean that some participants failed to meet the sampling criteria? Perhaps, although, making sense of meaningful work is a highly personal phenomenon. As such quantifying degrees of meaning and individual finds in his or her work may be a futile undertaking. Findings must be interpreted in the context of these muddy waters.

Moreover, the goal of an IPA study is to analyze the particular (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2007). As such, while rich data was collected on the nine international school teachers who participated in this study, their experiences may not be generalizable to all international school teachers. Rather, IPA research is an attempt to add to the body of knowledge in a discipline that can be replicated in order to identify trends and understandings (Smith et al., 2009). In this way, IPA findings are theoretically transferable to similar contexts
(Smith et al., 2009). So, while this study can help international school leaders understand how teachers that profile similarly to participants (e.g., former TCK teachers such as Diana and Molly, performing arts teachers such as Karen) make sense of their experience of meaningful work, the results are not necessarily generalizable to all international school teachers.

This is not only a limitation of IPA research, but also on research focused on meaningful work. Van Til Hayman (2013) honed an understanding of “meaning in work” by correlating it with the concept of “meaning in life.” Although theorists (e.g., Wolf, 2007; Yeoman, 2013) have asserted that meaning in life is both subjective and objective in nature, meaning-making is a highly personal experience. As there is no universally accepted understanding of meaning in life, how meaning in work is experienced varies from individual to individual. (Michelson et al., 2013). While this subjectivity is what makes this research question appropriate for IPA methodology, how an individual makes sense of meaningful work is tied to how that individual finds meaning in life, which is the result of a sensemaking process that can often be nebulous, variable, and unclear to participants themselves. For this reason, it could be called into question whether participants found a topic interesting or important, rather than meaningful. For instance, does Lloyd find personal meaning in robotics? What does he mean when he says, “That’s an interesting area to develop in a school”? Does that make it meaningful or just interesting? While reflexivity and the intentional wording of research questions can assuage concerns, this type of question came up regularly during analysis. This limitation of meaningful work research can be limited by remembering Smith et al.’s (2009) reminder to oscillate between the individual in the hermeneutic tradition, so as to make sense of the participant making sense of their experiences. While pure objectivity is an aspirational ideal, the IPA emphasis on iterative reflection navigating the tension between the individual and the whole (i.e., the hermeneutic
circle) played a critical role in mitigating bias.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

One of the most important contributions of IPA research is identifying important topics for future research (Smith et al., 2009). This section reviews several recommendations that this study has produced.

While some superordinate themes support understandings that have already been identified in the literature, other themes emerged that indicate loose ends. For instance, a significant portion of the literature of meaningful work has focused on meaning as a spiritual construct (Holbreche & Springett, 2004; Chalofsky, 2003, 2010; Milliman, Czaplewski & Ferguson, 2003). However, participants in this study revealed a kind of “international school ethos” consisting of shared secular values such as open-mindedness, intercultural understanding, and empathy. Future research should explore how international school teachers and students identify with such values.

The data also revealed a sense of meaning participants found in leading “passion projects.” Future research should explore how teachers find meaning in projects that resonate with their values, interests and passions with a focus on the impact of teacher autonomy and “passion projects” on engagement, motivation and organizational commitment. It would also be useful to know how these projects look in different contexts so that meaning can be worked into job design and opportunities for job crafting can be intentionally facilitated. Service learning emerged as an opportunity for job crafting and passion projects. Additional research is recommended to explore the impact of service learning on teachers’ attitudes about work.

Next, IPA was a useful methodology for understanding how teachers in a particular context make sense of their work. IPA studies on other subgroups of educators could be
employed to better understand how teachers experience work in, for instance, urban public schools, community colleges or parochial schools. Understanding the lived experiences of teachers can help both educators and administrators enhance working conditions.

Moreover, as they share similar challenges related to moving from country to country, Savva (2015) recommended exploring parallels between TCKs and international school teachers. The two participants in this study who identified as TCKs revealed unique perspectives about international school students and the role of international schools in the global community. An IPA study focusing on the lived experiences of former-TCK international school teachers may reveal new understandings about the impact of international education and an expatriate childhood on international school students.

Next, a better understanding of how teacher dispositions towards their work impact student outcomes would lend clarity to the discussion of meaningful work in an educational context. This study, the literature, and common sense imply that students may benefit from contact with more engaged, intrinsically motivated, and self-efficacious teachers. However, this implication is based largely on correlation. Additional research into the benefits that meaningful work for teachers may have on student learning and growth would strengthen the rationale for supporting meaningful work in an educational context.

Finally, this study explored meaningful work in the context of international schools. It would be interesting to investigate whether this context shaped the findings. For instance, do teachers in US public schools have autonomy to pursue passion projects? What are the personal values that resonate with missions of different types of schools (e.g., urban public schools, German state schools, parochial schools)? Are teachers who pursue a career in international education uniquely suited to experience meaningful work? An inquiry into these questions
would help uncover the broader implications of this study.

The findings of this study are significant because they add to the body of knowledge about how teachers find meaning in their work. The findings have particular salience because they describe K-12 international school teachers, a unique subgroup of educators who have not been studied extensively. Moreover, how individuals experience meaningful work, while examined in a general workplace context, has not been applied to the experience of international educators. This has implications for international school leaders, teachers and students, as meaningful work has been shown to result in positive outcomes such as enhanced intrinsic motivation and engagement. Meaningful work can also be a powerful recruiting tool for international school leaders seeking top talent in a competitive market.

Conclusion and Reflection

This study has shed light on how international educators experience meaningful work. While some of these findings confirm understandings already articulated in the literature, the study uncovered key aspects of the meaningful work experience that are unique to the specific context of international schools.

First, an alignment between personal values and work is central to the meaningful work experience. When describing meaningful work, participants emphasized a feeling a harmony between their personal values and the daily tasks associated with their work, along with the mission and values of their organizations. Participants emphasized the implicit, or espoused values (see Shein, 1992), communicated by leadership by their actions. Opportunities to align personal values with work roles took on a unique flavor for the international educators in this study. Participants listed various roles such as “environmental stewardship coordinator,” founder of an “innovation academy,” and pioneer of a robotics program that aligned with their
personal values. These opportunities allowed them to make sense of work as an opportunity to live their values and transfer them to students. Participants also described crafting such roles into their work through service learning initiatives, co-curricular involvement, and the opportunity to create new elective courses. Moreover, much of the meaningful work literature has focused on spirituality as a major component of meaningful work (e.g., Holbreche & Springett, 2004; Chalofsky, 2003, 2010; Milliman, Czaplewski & Ferguson, 2003). Participants in this study revealed a sense of meaning in the values of internationalism and an international school ethos, rather than an alignment with personal spiritual or religious beliefs. International school leaders are encouraged to clearly articulate a vision, mission and set of core values and stay true to them. Teachers are encouraged to seek out jobs and work experiences that align with their personal values.

Meaningful relationships of students were also central to participant data. All participants were able to highlight experiences of positively impacting a student on a personal level. The role likened to that of a “surrogate parent” is unique to an international school context where students are removed from traditional community support systems, encounter high expectations for academic success, and often struggle with identity issues. The teachers in this study emphasized the fulfillment they experienced through opportunities to make a difference in a student’s life and felt validated when former students and parents expressed appreciation for their contributions. School leaders are encouraged to emphasize the role of the teacher as student-advocate, and promote positive social interactions through social-emotional learning programs. Teachers should seek out opportunities for meaningful relationships with students through co-curricular involvement as well as informal interactions.

Participants also emphasized the key role of empowerment and autonomy as a source of
meaning. While this is not unique in the literature, the “passion projects” participants described take on a unique shape in an international school context. Opportunities such as creating service learning projects, new courses and taking on leadership over advocacies such as sustainability are unique to the international teacher work-life. This often hinged on how confident teachers were that leadership trusted them to take risks. International school administrators are encouraged facilitate ways for teachers to craft meaning into their work and support them to take risks in the process. Teachers are encouraged to look for ways to craft meaning into their work through leadership opportunities, service learning projects, and other projects connected to their personal and professional passions.

These findings paint a picture of how international school teachers experience meaning in their work. Such a picture offers educational leaders insight into how to create conditions supportive of meaningful work for their faculty. The picture can also inform international school leaders’ recruitment practices, as they strive to offer more than lucrative compensation packages and attract top teaching talent with the opportunity to find meaning in their work. Finally, the findings of this study offer international school teachers a better understanding of how they can develop a rich sense of meaning in their work. As the literature suggests, such a sense of meaning can result in higher levels of engagement and intrinsic motivation, which can benefit their students as well. This study began with words from Sergiovanni (1990), who asserted that meaning and purpose are essential components of an effective learning community. The nine international school teachers whose perspectives were offered in this study, shed light on how such a learning community can be forged in an international school context.
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doi:10.1348/096317904322915892


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Appendix A
Letter to Potential Participants Requesting Participation

Dear Potential Participant,

I am conducting a research study as a part of my Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at Northeastern University. I am writing to invite you to participate in the study. My phenomenon of inquiry is “meaningful work”. In particular, I am looking at how international teachers experience meaningful work.

If you volunteer to participate, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire. If fit the sampling criteria, you will be asked to meet online via Google Hangouts or Skype for semi-structured interviews at time of convenience for you. The initial interview will take from 45 to 60 minutes to conduct. A follow-up interview will take about 15 minutes to complete. Semi-structured interviews are led loosely by an interview schedule of eight to 10 questions about how you’ve found meaning through your work as an international school teacher. The interview questions will be broad in nature, with the emphasis on you sharing your experiences, rather than me, the interviewer, leading the discussion. You will not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer.

The sessions will be conducted with video and audio recorded and then transcribed into written form. Recordings, transcripts and video footage of interviews will be saved in a password-protected computer program; any printed transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet. In such recordings and transcriptions, your identity will be protected by pseudonym. The study may be published and/or presented publicly, by your identity will remain confidential. If you volunteer to participate, you may quit at any time during the interview process.

If you have any questions, you may contact me at +63 917.560.9491 or via email at willey.c@husky.neu.edu.

Sincerely,

Cory Willey
Appendix B

Recruitment Flyer

International Educators Needed

Do you have a rich sense of meaningful work?

If you are an international educator who derives a strong sense of personal fulfillment from your work, you are needed for an important research study. Does this describe you?

- Employed as full-time international school teacher at accredited K-12 North American, IB or British school.
- Diverse teaching experiences including at least two international schools.
- A rich sense of meaningful work as an international educator.

If you fit these criteria, contact Cory Willey, doctoral student at Northeastern University (see contact info below). Participation involves a brief questionnaire and two semi-structured online interviews totaling less than 60 minutes.

To volunteer, email or call:
willey.c@husky.neu.edu • +63 917.560.9491
Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, Department
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Atira Charles, Cory R Willey
Title of Project: Meaningful Teaching: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of How International School Teachers Make Sense of Meaningful Work

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are a K-12 foreign-hire international school teacher.

Why is this research study being done?
This purpose of this research is to develop a better understanding of how international educators make sense of meaningful work. Meaningful work has been connected to higher levels of intrinsic motivation and engagement in the workplace. It is hoped that the study will contribute to a better understanding of how international school leaders can cultivate meaningful work for teachers and how teachers can themselves find more meaning in their work.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to:
- Complete a brief questionnaire to confirm that you fit with the desired participant profile.
- Participate in a 45-minute interview via Google Hangouts.
- Participate in a 15-minute follow-up interview via Google Hangouts.

The initial questionnaire will consist of 10 questions to determine whether or not you align with the participant profile for this study. If you are identified as an appropriate candidate, you will be notified via email and a convenient time for a 45-minute Google Hangouts interview will be arranged. Google Hangouts is similar to Skype with some added capabilities for such an interview. The only requirement to use Google Hangouts is a Gmail account. If you do not have a Gmail account, Skype or another format may be used to conduct interviews.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You can be interviewed via Google Hangouts at any time and place with Internet connectivity. The exact time will be established with the researcher and initial interviews will take no longer than 45 minutes. A brief follow-up interview will be scheduled to ask follow-up questions and validate responses. This interview will take no longer than 15-minutes.
**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There is limited risk associated with this research. There is an obvious time commitment for completing the questionnaire and participating in the two interview sessions. Your identity and that of your current and past places of employment will be protected with a pseudonym.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

While financial compensation is not offered for this study, the process does offer potential benefits for professional growth. The interview process will offer an opportunity for personal and professional reflection. The information you offer as an international school teacher may also lead to a better understanding of how meaningful work is experienced in an international school context. This may have benefits for international schools, teachers, and students.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project. Your identity and the identity of current and past employers will be protected through the use of pseudonyms.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

There is little or no risk of physical or mental harm from this research. As such, no special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time.
Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Cory Willey, Tel: +63 917.560.9491, Email: wiley.c@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Atira Charles, the Principal Investigator, email: a.charles@neu.edu

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will not be financially compensated for participation in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
You will not incur any cost to participate in this study.

Is there anything else I need to know?
In order to participate in this study, you must fit the following criteria:

- Full-time, foreign-hire international school teachers at accredited K-12 North American, IB or British international schools.
- Diverse teaching experiences including at least three schools (including current school of employment), two of which were international schools.
- Self-identified as having a rich sense of meaningful work as an international school teacher.
- These sampling criteria will ensure that the participants have interacted with the phenomenon of meaningful work and fit the profile of a K-12 international school teacher.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________   ____ ____________________  
Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part   Date

____________________________________________   ____ ____________________  
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________   ____ ____________________  
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent   Date

____________________________________________   ____ ____________________  
Printed name of person above
Appendix D

Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Questionnaire - Meaningful Teaching Study

In order to determine if you fit the profile as a participant in this study, please complete the questionnaire below. Note that your name and any current or past employers you mention in your responses will be kept confidential. You will be notified whether you have been selected as a participant within two weeks of completion. If selected, you will receive an Informed Consent document laying out the roles and responsibilities of participants. This questionnaire requires no commitment, and if selected for participation, you may withdraw at any time.

Are you currently employed as a fulltime teacher at an accredited K-12 international school?
- Yes
- No

If so, please list the schools at which you have been employed in order of employment date.

Please indicate how you feel about the following statement: I have a rich sense of meaning through my work as an international school teacher.

1 2 3 4

Strongly agree ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Strongly disagree

Preferred email address

Submit

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSesserWGjOjFRMka0YKDjZ2ZnEkZ2Z5Q7/BQQA7kxSdLAcZ2Zw/viewform
Appendix E

Interview Schedule

The following questions represent a schedule of questions funneling from broad to specific in scope. They represent a loose plan informed by the recommendations of Smith, et al. (2012) and Smith and Osborne (2007). It is possible that not all questions will be asked in order to allow the interview flexibility to explore emergent themes revealed by the participant. The questions have been adapted from Smith, et al. (2012, Box 4.3).

1. How do you find a sense of self or personal fulfillment (believing) in your work as an educator?

2. Tell me about a time when you felt that your work had a deep meaning or purpose. Possible prompts: What happened? How did you feel about it? What about the work itself do you think you felt a sense of meaning or purpose?

3. Can you tell me a little bit about why you decided to become a teacher (believing, labeling, enacting)? Possible prompts: When did this happen? What was your relationship with school and/or education at the time? Why did you decide to teach in international schools?

4. Have your perceptions changed about life as a teacher? Possible prompts: What are your ideas about why they have/have not changed? What experiences have influenced your perceptions of the teaching profession. How does a sense of balance (or lack thereof) impact your perceptions of work?

5. How would you describe (i.e. label) yourself as a teacher (sense of self)? Possible prompt: What experiences have influenced the way you feel about yourself as a teacher (substantiating)?

6. How do you think your students see you (i.e., believing, substantiating)? How about your colleagues? Administration? Possible prompts: Is this consistent with your past workplace experiences? Has your image as a teacher (i.e., the way others see you) changed over the years?

7. What workplace conditions (redoing) have influenced your work experience. Possible prompts: Tell about a time when you felt your workplace conditions had a significant impact on your work experience. Describe your sense of work-life balance. How does that influence your work experience?

8. How much does the mission and values (believing, substantiating) of a school impact your work experience (sense of self, the work itself)? Possible prompts: Have you ever felt really good about the mission or values a school you worked for? Explain what it was like to work there. How did you enact these values through your work as a teacher.

9. How do you see yourself as an educator in the future (believing, labeling, possibly discarding)?

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1 Note: Questions have been linked to Chalofsky’s (2010) meaningful work model—sense of self, the work itself, and sense of balance—and Weick’s six regularities of organizational sense-making: redoing, labeling, discarding, enacting, believing, and substantiating.