SELF-DETERMINATION AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO INTRINSIC MOTIVATION IN NOVICE MIDDLE-SCHOOL TEACHERS

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Abstract

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore how novice middle-school teachers’ feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness affected their intrinsic motivation to remain teaching at the middle-school level. Although almost a third of all teachers leave the profession in their first 3 years, the few studies that have been conducted on middle schools have indicated that middle-school teachers, especially in urban schools, leave at a higher rate than elementary or high school teachers. Self-determination theory was used as a guide to answer the research question: How intrinsically motivated to stay at the middle-school level do novice teachers feel based on how well their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are being met? A small sample of 6 teachers in their first 5 years of teaching middle school was used, and analysis yielded 3 major findings: a) novice middle-school teachers felt a strong sense of individual autonomy but reduced feelings of professional and collegial autonomy; b) novice middle-school teachers felt competent in their knowledge of their subject matter but less competent about teaching and classroom management strategies for which they relied on a trial-and-error approach coupled with formal and informal mentor assistance; and c) novice middle-school teachers found relatedness to be essential to persevering at the middle school level.

Keywords: middle school, self-determination, autonomy, competence, relatedness, intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, novice teachers.
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore how novice middle-school teachers’ feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness affected their intrinsic motivation to remain teaching at the middle-school level. Most definitions of job satisfaction use language related to the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and research has shown that when these needs are met, teachers are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, satisfied in their work, and likely to remain in their chosen profession (Banerjee, Stearns, Moller, & Mickelson, 2017; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Gray & Taie, 2015; Heikonen, Pietarinen, Pyhältö, Toom, & Soini, 2017; Jayaratne, 1993; Koedel, Springer, & Tan, 2018; Locke, 1976; Marshik, Ashton, & Algina, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2006, 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009; Stockard & Lehman, 2004; Viel-Ruma, Houchins, Jolivette, & Benson, 2010; Vroom, 1982). In fact, regardless of profession, intrinsic motivational factors significantly relate to employees’ job satisfaction, with specific emphasis on feelings of autonomy and competence (Raza, Akhtar, Husnain, & Akhtar, 2015). Deci, Ryan, Leone, Usunov, and Kornazheva (2001) found that performative increases on evaluations correlated positively with increased work engagement and well-being on the job, suggesting that if administrators can increase intrinsic motivation of teachers, they can subsequently increase job satisfaction, teacher performance, and teacher retention.

However, autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs must be simultaneously supported in order to maximize intrinsic motivation, as they are interconnected. Supervisors’ support of their employees’ autonomy has been shown to lead to greater feelings of competence and relatedness, which in turn results in greater job satisfaction (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Gagné, Koestner, & Zuckerman, 2000; Ilardi, Leone, Kasser, & Ryan, 1993; Kasser,
Specifically, followers of transformational leaders are more likely to be autonomous and report feeling satisfied with and committed to their jobs. Significantly, when an occupation, such as teaching, is more complex and the climate supports autonomy, then a stronger connection has been shown between job performance and job satisfaction (Gagné & Deci, 2005). This has suggested that some teachers could be highly competent and receive excellent performance evaluations, but without the autonomy to perform their jobs in the way that they see fit, they would lack job satisfaction and might be inclined to leave the profession. In fact, employees with a high level of education have been shown to be generally less easily satisfied by their work (Eskildsen, Kristensen, & Westlund, 2004), suggesting that to retain highly educated, highly qualified teachers, educational leaders must reevaluate their controlled (i.e., extrinsic) motivation strategies and consider replacing them with autonomous (i.e., intrinsic) motivation strategies, giving strong teachers more autonomy to promote a positive response in job performance and satisfaction (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

In the era of No Child Left Behind, job satisfaction, specifically regarding feelings of autonomy, decreased among teachers (Wright, Shields, Black, Banerjee, & Waxman, 2018). Teachers in their first 10 years of teaching have reported feeling less school-level influence, curricular and pedagogical autonomy, and overall job satisfaction than those with more than 10 years’ experience (Wright et al., 2018). The knowledge generated in this study can inform educational leadership on how to retain middle-school teachers by increasing their intrinsic motivation.

**Statement of the Problem**

Although almost a third of all teachers leave the profession in their first 3 years, the few studies that have been conducted on middle schools indicated that middle-school teachers,
especially in urban schools, leave at a higher rate than elementary or high school teachers (Akos, 2002; Albright et al., 2017; Coehlo, Marchante, & Jimerson, 2017; Gootman, 2007; Marinelli, 2011; West & Schwerdt, 2012).

**Significance of the Research Questions**

The Metlife Survey of the American Teacher (MetLife, 2013) found that teacher satisfaction has fallen to a 25-year low, and Ingersoll and Strong (2011) noted that there are more novice teachers in the profession than ever before, with almost a third of teachers leaving the field in their first 3 years. At the beginning of the 2015–2016 school year, 42 states and the District of Columbia reported teacher shortages in math, with 40 states reporting teacher shortages in science (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). The U.S. teaching force has changed dramatically; in 1978–1988, the typical teacher had been teaching for 15 years, but by 2007–2008, the typical teacher was in his or her first year (Gilles, Carillo, Wang, Stegall, & Bumgarner, 2013). Recent estimates showed that between 19% and 30% of teachers leave the classroom within their first 5 years in the profession (Sutcher et al., 2016). This attrition rate is much higher than in other professions and has a negative influence on students, teachers, and the general climate of schools (Reiser, Murphy, & McCarthy, 2016). It will take a collective effort to change teachers’ perceptions about the profession and keep them teaching long term (Gilles et al., 2013). In many school districts, part of a novice teacher’s evaluation is based on student test scores, and students’ standardized test scores tend to significantly decline upon transitioning to middle school. Further, test scores tend to get progressively worse with each subsequent middle-school year. By contrast, freshman high-school students see a drop in standardized test scores but quickly rebound in their 3 remaining high-school years (West & Schwerdt, 2012). When novice middle-school teachers see the
declining test scores of their students, it could affect their feelings of competence and compound work-related stress.

Work stress has been strongly linked to psychological stress, which can lead to more absences, decreased teacher effectiveness, feelings of low self-esteem, and a lack of motivation (Mulholland, McKinlay, & Sproule, 2017). One third of teachers reported that they regularly felt stress at work (Mulholland et al., 2017). Social representation theorists posit that feelings of stress might be due to a perception that the job is stressful or a preconception that the job will be stressful, even if the work is not actually stress inducing (Mulholland et al., 2017). In the transactional model of stress, the experience of stress is seen as depending on an individual’s mental evaluation of the situation and his or her ability to cope; in other words, teachers’ perceptions that they cannot meet demands leads to feelings of stress regardless of their actual ability to do so (Ho, 2017; Reiser et al., 2016; Zhang, Wang, Lambert, Wu, & Wen, 2017). This suggests that middle-school teacher retention requires limiting negative perceptions or preconceptions of their capacity to handle their students and the work that goes into teaching them.

In addition, it must be acknowledged that the stressful factors contributing to teacher attrition are real. Educational researchers have noticed an upsurge in both work assignments and the pace at which teachers must complete them (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Teacher schedules often do not include time for rest or reflection, which contributes to emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction. Therefore, employers must alleviate the pressures imposed on teachers or face a teacher burnout crisis (Ho, 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Burnout results from very long periods of stress and is often accompanied by physical symptoms such as low energy and chronic fatigue. Fatigue can cause teachers to have negative opinions about themselves or
the value of their work and can lead to detachment from students and coworkers, thus increasing negative feelings and attitudes towards others (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). There are typically three stages of teacher burnout. The first stage involves a lack of balance between resources and demands. In the second stage, the teacher begins to experience outward signs of exhaustion, such as sleep disturbance, headaches, and forgetfulness. Finally, in the third stage, the teacher begins to change attitudes and behavior (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). In a study of teachers in Hong Kong, teachers’ exhaustion related to feelings of job dissatisfaction and predicted teachers’ intentions of leaving the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). These results clearly showed the needs for preventing teacher burnout long before it occurs. Because stresses on teachers have increased over time, teachers new to the profession will burn out much more quickly if school leaders do not find a way to mitigate the factors contributing to job satisfaction, of which stress is a primary indicator.

Through the Race to the Top initiative and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, legislators pushed states to reform their teacher evaluation systems and use students’ achievement as a major factor in teacher evaluations (Donaldson & Papay, 2014). Teacher attrition rates rose as a result, especially in urban districts, where teachers tended to leave for higher paying jobs after short stints in challenging schools. Teachers in these districts found it almost impossible to meet the demands of the teacher evaluation system due to the conditions and struggles of the communities surrounding the schools (Dunn, 2018). Education is a public resource that, ideally, enriches people’s abilities to be positive contributors to society. The public demanded a return on its investment in education and embraced the idea that a rigorous teacher evaluation system would ensure that their money was being well spent. However, districts were not able to retain teachers or recruit new ones with standards set so high, and the
respect teachers had once received was reduced dramatically, leaving the tenure system that had provided stability and job security for educators in jeopardy. Together, these factors further increased the stress of teaching jobs (Dunn, 2018).

If schools catered specifically to middle-school issues, perhaps fewer teachers would leave the profession or move to elementary- or upper-level secondary classrooms. Middle-school teacher education and induction programs commonly account for little of the foregoing, and very little of the literature referred to middle school at all. Middle-school teachers are deserving of more specific attention if quality teachers are going to be recruited and retained.

**Research Problem**

Middle-school teaching has proven challenging due to a variety of dynamics, and middle-school teachers often view their assignment to middle schools as a stepping stone to positions in either elementary or high schools. Further, administrators frequently assign middle-school teachers to subjects outside of their specialties (Marinell, 2011). These hurdles interfere with feelings of self-determination in the middle-school workplace. The purpose of this study was to explore how novice middle-school teachers’ feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness affected their intrinsic motivation to remain teaching at the middle-school level.

**Research Question**

How intrinsically motivated to stay at the middle-school level do novice teachers feel based on how well their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are being met?

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

The following terms will be used throughout this work.

- *Middle school.* A school that serves students in Grades 6 through 8, unlike junior high schools, which typically serve students in Grades 7 through 9
• **Autonomous motivation.** Intrinsic motivation

• **Controlled motivation.** Extrinsic motivation

• **Intrinsic motivation.** An incentive to do something that arises from factors within the individual, such as the need to feel useful or to seek self-actualization

• **Extrinsic motivation.** An incentive to do something that arises from factors outside the individual, such as rewards or penalties

• **Autonomy.** Regulation of the self, freedom from external control or influence, and the need to experience behavior as voluntary and reflectively self-endorsed

• **Competence.** The ability to do something successfully or efficiently, or the need to experience a behavior as effectively enacted

• **Relatedness.** The sense of belonging and connectedness with others

• **Self-determination.** The process by which people control their own life

• **Job satisfaction.** The feeling of pleasure and achievement that is experienced on the job when the work is perceived as worth doing, or the degree to which the work generates this feeling

• **Teacher efficacy.** When teachers believe in their own ability to guide students to success

• **Self-efficacy.** A personal belief in one’s capability to organize and execute a course of action required to attain designated types of performances

• **Collective efficacy.** The collective belief of teachers in their ability to positively affect students

• **Novice teacher.** A teacher in his or her first years of teaching, determined by tenure policy but typically referring to the first 3 to 5 years of employment
Theoretical Framework

Theorists using self-determination theory (SDT) have built on existing research about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of teachers by incorporating a greater social context (Positive Psychology, 2017). There are three components to SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2006). SDT was first developed by Edward L. Deci, a professor of clinical and social sciences, and Richard M. Ryan, a clinical psychologist (Center for Self-Determination Theory, n.d.). Their seminal book, *Self Determination Theory* (Ryan & Deci, 2017), was reprinted in 2017. SDT is actually comprised of six minitheories across a continuum: a) cognitive evaluation theory, b) organismic integration theory, c) causality orientations theory, d) basic psychological needs theory, e) goals content theory, and f) relationships motivation theory (Center for Self-Determination Theory, n.d.). Through each of these minitheories, researchers can explore a different aspect of motivation, but they must also allow for a focus on the value of intrinsic or extrinsic motivations (i.e., cognitive evaluation theory and organismic integration theory) and their relationship to an individual’s feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. According to SDT, individuals experience more intrinsic motivation when these three psychological needs are met, and intrinsic motivation is undermined when these needs are not met (Ryan & Deci, 2006). The need for autonomy does not refer to a need for independence, but rather, to individuals’ feelings of free will and the certainty that they can take actions in their own best interests. The need for competence is attached to feelings of mastery over one’s environment and control over outcomes. The need for relatedness deals with a desire to interact and connect with others and to belong to a community (Positive Psychology, 2017).
According to Ryan and Deci (2000), all three needs must be met and function together for a person to feel a sense of well-being. Even those who are self-efficacious might not feel a sense of well-being if their goals do not create feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Therefore, an excessively controlled work environment, challenges that are too difficult, and disconnection from the work itself can actively undermine feelings of self-determination, cause great stress, and impede rational thought (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Humans are born with intrinsic motivation, but this motivation requires reinforcement and enrichment and can also be disrupted by negative conditions. Deci and Ryan (1985) presented a subtheory to SDT called cognitive evaluation theory in which they suggested that although individuals can feel competent, they will not be fully intrinsically motivated without seeing their behavior as self-determined. However, research has shown that people will only be intrinsically motivated if they are interested in the activity; extrinsic motivation is required for uninteresting pursuits (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The goal is to integrate extrinsic motivation with a person’s internal value system or needs. This internalizes the motivation without making it intrinsic because the individual does not engage in the activity for personal enjoyment but rather to meet the expectations set by people they care for, value, or respect. This relatedness to others strengthens motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

SDT has wide applications and has been used in a variety of fields including: education, entertainment and media, health care, exercise science, virtual reality, psychology, and psychotherapy. SDT has been connected to the field of positive psychology, in which theorists focus on what makes people happy and functional rather than what makes them sad and dysfunctional. Although Ryan and Deci (2017) have been the predominant researchers in this field, others have explored the theory further. Christopher Niemiec is a researcher who has extended SDT theory into the study of parenting and cultures in Jordan, Pakistan, South Africa,
Taiwan, and Turkey (University of Rochester, n.d.). In addition, Johnmarshall Reeve, a professor in the education department at Korea University in Seoul, South Korea, has performed extensive research on teachers’ motivating styles and students’ motivation and engagement during learning activities (Johnmarshall Reeve, n.d.). Reeve coauthored a recent study on teachers who were given a year-long intervention that built up the teachers’ efficacy and intrinsic instructional goals to help them increase autonomy and better support their students (Cheon, Reeve, Lee, & Lee, 2018). Cheon et al. (2018) found that students showed more engagement and interest in learning when they experienced greater feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Furthermore, teachers who saw the effectiveness of this intervention increased their own self-efficacy, which resulted in greater needs satisfaction for themselves. In recent studies, researchers have also developed minitheories around mindfulness and its relationship to self-determination theory (Center for Self-Determination Theory, n.d.).

**Critics of Self-Determination Theory**

Self-determination theory was developed in contrast to behaviorist theories, most notably those of B. F. Skinner, in which he posited that autonomy or free will is an illusion and that external reinforcements determine behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Skinner attempted to contradict psychoanalysts such as Freud, who investigated the deep internal lives of patients. Skinner believed that the idea of the mind could not be empirically measured and that a person’s environment, which could be manipulated and controlled, was the real determinant of behavior (Harvard University Psychology, n.d.). Therefore, in Skinner’s view, only extrinsic motivation matters. Self-determination theorists have stated that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are both factors in behavior and that, in contrast to behavioral theory, extrinsic motivation can sometimes undermine intrinsic motivation and reduce autonomy by making
people act against their needs, beliefs, and general well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2006). In their research, Lepper and Green (1975) asked children to participate in an activity they enjoyed while also offering them a reward for completing it. The reward lessened the children’s interest in participating in the activity due to what Lepper and Green (1975) called the overjustification hypothesis. To put it simply, when adults try to provide too much justification for the child’s participation, the reward ceases to be intrinsic. Eisenberger and Cameron (as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2000) contended that tangible rewards do not undermine intrinsic motivation, but a meta-analysis conducted by Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2000) claimed the opposite is true.

Social-cognitivists like Albert Bandura have argued that true autonomy is not possible because external influences affect it too much; self-efficacy is the only factor that matters (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Wegner contended that there is no autonomy but individuals’ belief that they have it can profoundly affect their behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Schwartz further stated that too much choice can be negative, and that choice does not necessarily mean freedom of will. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice (as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2006) also showed that the more choices someone must make, the more exhausted they become and the less energy they have to make additional choices. Ryan and Deci (2006) responded to such criticisms by suggesting that it is not the number of choices available that matters but rather the feeling that a choice exists. In general, Ryan and Deci (2006) accepted the criticism of their theory but did not find it to be discounting.

**Rationale**

All three tenets of self-determination theory are highly relevant to the research question: How intrinsically motivated to stay at the middle-school level do novice teachers feel
based on how well their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are being met? Research has shown that low job satisfaction is the primary reason that teachers leave the profession in general, and when job satisfaction is broken down into its components, the breakdown most commonly reveals the need for feelings of autonomy, confidence, self-efficacy, and inclusion in a community of colleagues or peers (Banerjee et al., 2017; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Gray & Taie, 2015; Heikonen et al., 2017; Jayaratne, 1993; Koedel et al., 2018; Locke, 1976; Marshik et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2006, 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009; Stockard & Lehman, 2004; Viel-Ruma et al., 2010; Vroom, 1982). Job satisfaction is especially poor in middle schools. In New York City, middle-school teachers account for 22% of teachers who have left the school system since 1999, even though they make up only 17% of the overall teaching population. Further, a 2011 assessment of New York City’s 13,296 middle-school teachers showed that only 82 were certified as “middle-school generalists,” with the rest being either elementary- or secondary-certified teachers who had likely never had an adolescent psychology course to prepare them for the middle-school teaching experience (Marinell, 2011). During a single year in Philadelphia, 34.2% of new middle-school teachers quit after their first year, compared with 21.1% of elementary-school teachers and 26.3% of high-school teachers (Gootman, 2007). Poor job satisfaction among teachers, and the accompanying teacher attrition, has impaired student achievement at the middle-school level as well, with scores either remaining static or decreasing with each middle-school year (Gootman, 2007).

SDT has been most frequently applied to teaching practices meant to increase students’ self-determination and subsequent motivation or engagement (Keimer, Gröschner, Kunter, & Seidel, 2018; Reeve & Halusic, 2009). Educational leaders could be damaging both teacher and student achievement by ignoring or
deemphasizing teachers’ psychological needs in favor of a more student-centered approach in which teachers are expected to sacrifice for the good of the student.

**Applying Theory to the Study**

The use of self-determination theory can help shed light on why middle-school teachers leave the grade level or the profession entirely. It could help answer whether middle-school teachers need especially high levels of autonomy, competence, and relatedness because of the unique population with which they work and the specific stressors they endure. Knowing this information could help districts frame induction and mentoring programs to best serve middle-school teachers and prevent early burnout. The terms *induction* and *mentoring* are frequently used interchangeably, but induction refers to offering introductory knowledge deemed needed to begin in a school district (e.g., technology, routines, and schedules), and mentoring refers to a sustained counseling and support mechanism that helps teachers with ongoing issues related to curriculum, pedagogy, classroom management, collaboration, teacher–student relationships, teacher–parent relationships, and stress. Chapter 2 examines the existing literature on this topic.

**Conclusion**

Upon leaving their teacher preparation programs, many teachers feel confident in their content and theoretical knowledge and have likely received support and feedback throughout their fieldwork experiences. Upon beginning their first assignment, however, their confidence has been shown to falter as they attempt to apply their learning in the real-world setting. Colleagues and mentors can assist them with information, procedures, and the mechanics of teaching, but ultimately, teachers are at risk of feeling alone, isolated, and overwhelmed. The most successful mentoring programs strive to counter these feelings by offering new teachers opportunities to collaborate with colleagues. These opportunities can focus on the specific
strategies and useful techniques needed for instruction and for workload and classroom management to build confidence and increase feelings of adequacy and competence. Although many reasons exist why teachers might leave the profession (e.g., low pay or poor parent relations), if teachers feel proficient at classroom management and instruction and feel part of a supportive community, they might overlook the other reasons for leaving and continue to teach. For this reason, it is imperative that educational leaders focus on building and reinforcing new teachers’ skills, competence, and therefore confidence, by aiming specific supports directly at their needs. Without these supports, job satisfaction will continue to decline, and teacher attrition rates will continue to rise. In Chapter 2, the literature to support these conclusions is presented.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Job dissatisfaction is the major reason cited by teachers who leave the teaching profession or transfer to other schools. Several factors contribute to job dissatisfaction, including a lack of autonomy, confidence in one’s ability, and relatedness to others. Middle-school teachers face especially challenging job assignments, as adolescent behaviors compound the normal transitional difficulties new teachers face when beginning in the teaching profession. Research has shown that the best and the brightest teachers are the hardest to retain, so if middle schools wish to hold on to quality teachers, they need to create a culture which supports middle-school teachers’ specific needs.

Study Topic and Context

The dearth of proper middle-school teacher training follows logically from the small number of teacher education programs that offer a middle-school focus. An internet search revealed how few middle-school certification programs exist, and even these results can be misleading. A deeper look at the coursework of such programs betrayed a striking lack of difference between middle-school and secondary-school certification programs. It is not surprising, therefore, to hear principals’ common lament that middle-school hires arrive well-prepared in content but lacking in the skills needed to teach adolescents, such as classroom management skills, specific curriculum and instruction expertise, and culturally and developmentally appropriate practices (Howell, Cook, & Faulkner, 2013). Furthermore, research has shown new teachers struggle to make positive instructional decisions because they do not properly understand the age group’s physical, social, and emotional needs (Howell et al., 2013).

States and school districts have tried to compensate for these deficiencies by requiring new teachers to complete a mentoring program during their first few years on the job. However,
many mentoring programs are unorganized and also lack focus on middle-school-specific issues. Most programs instead cover the more technical aspects of the first year (e.g., how to use technology, prepare and submit forms, and maneuver the building) or provide content-specific support (e.g., resources and lesson plans). Although these supports can be helpful and necessary to any new teacher, they do not address the specific needs of a middle-school teacher. Job satisfaction has been strongly linked to teacher turnover, with one study showing that 25% of teachers who left the profession cited job dissatisfaction as the reason for leaving (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Other studies focusing on novice teachers found that the most important influence on teacher retention is job satisfaction (Koedel et al., 2018; Stockard & Lehman, 2004). There are three categories of excellent teaching: sound subject knowledge, proper pedagogical strategies, and “skills and way of being a person” (Chen, 2016, p. 572). Strengths or weaknesses in these areas could account for as much as a 30% variance in student progress (Chen, 2016). Most middle-school teachers enter the profession with sound content knowledge but lack proficiency in pedagogical strategies specific to adolescent students and have not developed the interpersonal skills needed for proper classroom management and effective relations with colleagues.

The lack of context-specific preparation for teachers might leave highly qualified teachers unprepared for some teaching assignments (Alexander, Jang, & Kankane, 2017). Site-specific training should be offered for teachers working in particularly challenging environments. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to reduce teaching loads, provide strong administrators, and offer mentoring opportunities for teachers (Alexander et al., 2017). Common sources of distress have been grouped into four categories: student misbehavior, inadequate working conditions, time pressure, and a tense relationship with administration (Bora, 2017). Teacher stress has been
shown to lead to poor mental health, low work productivity, and low self-efficacy (Bernard, 2016).

Teachers play a central role in student learning. However, with classroom diversity on the rise, available resources on the decline, and increasing pressure to produce strong student outcomes, teachers are struggling. Teacher turnover, especially among new teachers, teachers of color, and teachers in high-poverty schools is at an all-time high; reformers have focused on student achievement related to teacher effectiveness but not on teacher job satisfaction and its effect on student achievement (Banerjee et al., 2017). Retention is even lower among special education teachers, 13.2% of whom leave their professional positions every year (Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). Most leave special education entirely, but more than half transfer to general education positions, which can be costly for school systems due to the constant need to retrain replacement employees (Viel-Ruma et al., 2010).

**Significance**

Teacher job satisfaction has been declining for at least a decade, resulting in higher rates of teacher turnover and an influx of young, novice teachers (Metlife, 2013). In the years between 1978 and 1988, the average teachers had been teaching for 15 years, but by 2008, the average teacher was in his or her first year (Gilles et al., 2013). Teacher attrition has had a negative impact on school climate, for both teachers and students (Reiser et al., 2016). Novice teachers face the added stress of a challenging teacher evaluation system and therefore feel constant worry about losing their jobs. In middle schools, student test scores tend to decline upon entering which suggests that middle school teachers are more at risk for negative evaluations than high school teachers, who see less of a decline (West & Schwerdt, 2012).
Once new teachers are hired, they typically have 2 to 4 years, depending on the state, to prove themselves worthy of a continuing contract. During these years, teachers are considered probationary and can be dismissed for almost any reason that is nondiscriminatory. After being moved to a continuing contract (i.e., tenured), the employer must provide just cause and conduct a hearing before dismissing a teacher (Find Law, n.d.). Those first years in a middle school can be especially challenging, as many unique factors add to the level of difficulty (Coelho et al., 2017). Eccles (2004) contended that there is a mismatch between adolescent needs and the middle-school setting. From the student perspective, the school itself is intimidating, especially if it represents a new environment for the student, or a new physical space to navigate. Anxieties and confusions compound each other as students adjust from a school day taught by a single teacher in a single classroom to a school day spent shifting among a number of teachers in a number of classrooms, the latter often separated by distances difficult to traverse in allotted times, adding a hurry-up element to the educational experience that students likely will not have previously encountered (Coelho et al., 2017). Add to these challenges the management of lockers, the joining of school activities, participation in extracurricular sports, being forced to develop independent learning methods, and most important, undergoing puberty and all of its attendant consequences. Student stresses compound the existing teacher stresses related to accountability, expectations, pace, and workload (Gootman, 2007).

One third of teachers reported regularly feeling stress at work; psychological stress can lead to increased sick-day use and, when present, decreased motivation due to low self-efficacy (Mulholland, McKinlay, & Sproule, 2017). Motivation is affected because teachers no longer believe that they have the ability to cope with or manage the stress; they perceive the job as more than they can handle, even when it is, in reality, not (Ho, 2017; Reiser et al., 2016; Zhang, Wang,
Lambert, Wu, & Wen, 2017). Therefore, middle-school teacher retention might require that administrators assist teachers in limiting negative self-perception and self-doubt and bolster teachers’ beliefs that they are capable and competent.

The stressful factors contributing to teacher attrition are real, however. Educational researchers have noticed an upsurge in both work assignments and the pace at which teachers must complete them (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Schedules often do not include time for rest or reflection, which can contribute to emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction. Therefore, employers must consider alleviating pressures imposed on teachers or face a teacher burnout crisis (Ho, 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Burnout often results from a long period of chronic stress and can be accompanied by physical symptoms such as low energy and chronic fatigue. This fatigue can cause teachers to have negative opinions about themselves or the value and import of their work and can cause them to detach from students and coworkers, thus increasing their negative feelings and attitudes towards others (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009).

There are typically three stages to teacher burnout. The first stage involves a lack of balance between resources and demands. In the second stage, the teacher begins to express the outward signs of exhaustion, such as sleep disturbance, headaches, and forgetfulness. Finally, in the third stage, the teacher begins to change his or her attitudes and behavior (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). In a study of teachers in Hong Kong, teacher exhaustion predicted decreased job satisfaction and intentions to leave the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). This research clearly showed the need for preventing teacher burnout long before it occurs. The stresses on teachers have increased over time, so teachers new to the profession will burn out much more quickly if school leaders do not find a way to mitigate the factors contributing to job dissatisfaction, of which stress is a primary indicator.
Legislation at the national level has compelled states to implement complicated evaluation systems that, in many cases, use student achievement as a factor in teacher evaluations (Donaldson & Papay, 2014). With subsequent rising teacher attrition rates, communities struggle to maintain their teacher workforce for a long duration (Dunn, 2018; Ingersoll, 2012). A rigorous evaluation system is not negative in and of itself, but the cost of a system with unrealistic goals and expectations, such as Race to the Top and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, has proven to be great (Donaldson & Papay, 2014). Further legislation has chipped away at union influence, which has damaged the security of teacher tenure and benefits that once made teaching a profession one would find difficult to leave.

**Problem Statement and Organization**

Although almost a third of all teachers leave the profession in their first 3 years, the few studies that have been conducted on middle schools indicated that middle-school teachers, especially in urban schools, leave at a higher rate than their peers teaching at other education levels (Akos, 2002; Albright et al., 2017; Coehlo et al., 2017; Gootman, 2007; Marinell, 2011; West & Schwerdt, 2012). In this literature review, the researcher explored the factors that collectively lead to intrinsic motivation: increased feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

**Autonomy**

Autonomy has been defined in many in different vocations and philosophies. Moses (2007) defined autonomy as a freedom of decision making without fear of interference or influence by those in authority. Sitch (2005) defined autonomy as the ability to effect change and manage oneself in a beneficial way. Relating the concept to teaching, Benson (2000)
described autonomy as freedom from control, and Little (1995) specified that it is the capability to be self-directed. Jumani and Malik (2017) defined autonomy as “the teacher’s right to take initiatives and implement their professional practices to maximize the progress of institutions” (p. 36). Teachers must see their own beliefs and skill set as making positive contributions to the effective functioning of the school system, thus giving them control over the outcomes. However, Jumani and Malik (2017) also stressed that autonomy can be a negative attribute if it grows into an arrogant defiance of authority.

Teacher autonomy might include professional, collegial, or individual autonomy (Jumani & Malik, 2017). According to Jumani and Malik (2017), professional autonomy refers to control over the operational aspects of the school, such as rules, curriculum, and professional development; collegial autonomy centers around the idea of the “collective freedom” (p. 34) of teachers to make influential decisions collaboratively, and individual autonomy applies more to classroom activities and involves the individual’s relationship to content, teaching practices, materials, assessments, and classroom management. Jackson and Stewart (2012) believed that autonomy empowers teachers to become leaders who more effectively address students’ needs. If principals and other administrators work to ensure that teachers feel competent and autonomous and that they feel part of a larger, collaborative community of professionals, they might increase the likelihood that teachers will promote their students’ autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Jacobs & Struyf, 2013; Marshik et al., 2017).

**Professional autonomy.** The term professional autonomy refers to teachers’ feelings of control over the factors of school operations that affect their abilities to effectively fulfill their responsibilities (e.g., routines, structures, discipline policies, curriculum, and professional support mechanisms related to meeting accountability standards; Hermansen, 2017). Overall
improvements in curriculum, discipline, and school status within the community make a significant difference in teacher retention and student performance. An organizational framework in middle schools boosts morale of both staff and students (Howell et al., 2013). A Canadian study found that teachers who felt substantial pressure from administration, especially in the areas of mandatory curriculum and accountability to standards, felt less autonomous and began exerting more control over students in their own classrooms (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). However, a Norwegian study found that teachers who were given freedom to participate in the creation and implementation of curriculum as part of a national reform effort expressed fear and skepticism about their abilities to do so. This was attributed to the conclusion that the overall reform plan was too multifaceted and overwhelming, so teachers could not imagine themselves capable of a task of that magnitude (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015; Mellegård & Petterson, 2016). Thus, it is important to find a balance between providing opportunities for teachers to be heard and regarded as professionals in control of their environment and setting unreasonable expectations that they feel powerless to fulfill.

In school systems where principals reported low levels of teacher participation in school management, math test scores were a significant nine points lower than in schools where principals reported higher autonomy, regardless of the school’s socioeconomic or demographic makeup (Schleicher, 2016). This showed that a culture that encourages participatory leadership promotes autonomy and produces better learning outcomes. Teachers in Hong Kong who were allowed to establish their own curriculum and teaching methods as well as choose their own materials reported high levels of self-esteem and internal motivation. When schools in the same study did not perform well, leaders in Hong Kong relied on each individual school’s administration and staff to solve the problem internally (Schleicher, 2016). In Shanghai,
however, the government oversaw all policies and designed all instruction, and teachers were expected to implement the curriculum they were given. In Finland, the teachers were given almost complete autonomy (Schleicher, 2016). Context and culture should be considered when evaluating the effectiveness of autonomy in education; in countries where teacher education was determined to be comprehensive and rigorous, often involving extensive apprenticeship opportunities, more autonomy was given to teachers because it was understood that the teachers were well-trained professionals capable of making important decisions (Schleicher, 2016). In the United States, a primarily capitalist ideology has promoted accountability and corporate influence, which has resulted in a loss of professional autonomy in the teaching profession (Frostenson, 2015).

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2009) have shown that teachers perceive school principals as supportive when they place confidence in teachers, provide autonomy, reduce time pressure, and take responsibility in matters where parents are involved. Perceived support from school leadership can have the psychological effect of reducing feelings of time pressure and increasing feelings of autonomy and general optimism about teaching (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Therefore, employers should pay close attention to not only the actual working conditions of teachers but also their perceptions of those working conditions. How teachers perceive stress directly relates to the number of stress-inducing factors and their intensity; however, perception of these things also depends on how much support teachers receive and how in control they feel (Ho, 2017). Teachers who have reported feeling high amounts of stress in conjunction with high degrees of autonomy more frequently participated in professional improvement activities (de Neve, Devos, & Tuytens, 2015; Schleicher, 2016). This demonstrated how stress by itself
can be demoralizing and exhausting, but stress plus control over the factors that contribute to the stress can produce positive action.

**Collective efficacy and collegial autonomy.** Evidence has shown that school principals play a vital role in supporting early career teachers by fostering collaboration in schools (Heikonen et al., 2017). Howell et al. (2013) contended that all middle schools need to add an organizational framework in which there are interdisciplinary teams, common planning times, and advisory periods. In order to feel empowered to make positive choices, newer members need to feel the support of experienced members, including receiving feedback and rewards in order to inspire feelings of confidence and reassurance. Positive collaboration can result in feelings of a collective teacher efficacy; although collective teacher efficacy contributes to collegial autonomy, they are not the same (Howell et al., 2013).

Collective teacher efficacy refers to the belief that, together, teachers can accomplish their goals and effect change for students; collegial autonomy refers to the freedom, as a group, to influence and make decisions about their own practices (Frostenson, 2015). Mentoring is ultimately a community effort and distributing mentorship across the staff allows for everyone to learn from each other, building collective efficacy. In this way, everyone from the principal to the support staff can help induct new teachers into the building (Gilles et al., 2013). Jacobs and Struyf (2013) argued for a whole-school approach that recognizes guidance, counselors, custodians, secretaries, and specialists as contributors to student achievement. They added that a successful school will be one in which all of the parts work together as a community on behalf of the whole. A whole-school approach can build collective efficacy, if successful, but can also encourage collegial autonomy where all the stakeholders believe they can work together to effect
positive outcomes and practices. The collective has power to make common goals come to fruition (de Neve et al., 2015).

Teachers’ collective efficacy affects student achievement. Several studies have shown that collective efficacy perceptions correlate with reading and math achievement (Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). Furthermore, teacher efficacy among groups of teachers significantly improves job satisfaction, suggesting that individual teacher efficacy might be contagious. A study in Italy found that individual teachers greatly affected each other’s feelings about their work environments. The greater the collective efficacy, the greater the teachers’ commitments to remaining in the profession and at the particular school where they worked (Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). A Belgian study found that even in schools with a low socioeconomic population, when teachers built strong relationships with the parents, students, and each other, the collective teacher efficacy levels were higher than when those relationships were weak (Devos, Dupriez, & Paquay, 2012). Most American middle-school teachers have reported that they have never cotaught classes, while about one third of teachers in Finland were shown to commonly practice with other teachers. In addition, 42% of American teachers have reported never working cooperatively with other grade levels in the same school, which is more common practice in Finland (Sahlberg, 2015).

However, there can be a sense of collective teacher efficacy when there is little autonomy. For example, some school administrators direct collaborative efforts and mandate who is to meet with whom and what is to be accomplished during meeting times. The teachers in these scenarios might accomplish goals and gain a sense of collective efficacy, but they do not have collegial autonomy, which could be built through teacher-created protocols, meeting agendas, and goal setting as part of a distributed leadership team (Schleicher, 2016). This
suggests that autonomy does not translate to teachers doing solely what they see as necessary or important but can also be part of a joint agreement or plan stemming from participation in the process. Collegial autonomy, Frostenson (2015) argued, may represent many individual preferences—or autonomy at the individual level—which could result in collective action. Collective action was a frequent result of the power that teachers’ unions once held, but that power has diminished in recent years, prompting teachers to feel like they have significantly less control over their working conditions and curricular decisions (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015). For example, Teach for America teachers in Philadelphia, who regularly faced layoffs and often worked in charter schools, reported they felt that they needed to follow the scripted curriculum or risk losing their jobs (Carl, 2014). Diminished job security and frequent turnover makes both collective efficacy and collective autonomy very difficult to achieve, especially in the neediest communities.

**Individual autonomy.** Individual autonomy refers, in this context, to a teacher’s control over teaching practices in their own classrooms, which can include teaching methods, materials, discipline, and general classroom operations. The teacher must still operate under the authority of school administration or state regulators and therefore does not have complete freedom (Frostenson, 2015). Both policy makers and administrators have experimented with how much control they need to impose over teachers to achieve the desired outcomes while still showing faith and trust in the teachers’ professional abilities (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015).

In Norway, where there have been shifts in recent years towards more curricular control of the schools, teachers have faced the dilemma of wanting to retain their classroom autonomy and lacking confidence in their abilities to individually implement new and unfamiliar curricula. This has suggested that teachers would like more power over a chosen curriculum in addition to
how it is implemented in the classroom, but they do not wish to simply receive a curriculum and be expected to determine a way to implement it (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015). In this atmosphere, it can be taxing for teachers to maintain autonomy because they must always justify their classroom choices (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015). In South Korea, when more autonomy was given, teachers expressed fear about making such complicated and important decisions on their own without direction (Hong & Youngs, 2016). These examples suggested that complete autonomy was not always wanted or received well by all teachers, which could suggest that the response might vary depending on teachers’ levels of self-efficacy.

Autonomy can also be undermined when textbooks or scripted programs are mandated, and teachers lose individual power over the content and materials used to teach their subjects. Most teachers adapt or supplement materials to meet their students’ needs, regardless of mandates for fidelity. Consequently, reading comprehension programs that allow for some choice when it comes to selection of literature, teaching methods, and materials have proven to be more effective (Duncan-Owens, 2009; Fang, Fu, & Lamme, 2004; Tivnan & Hemphill, 2005; Wilson, Martens, & Poonam, 2005). Scripted programs cannot meet the needs of all students, and teachers need autonomy to fill the gaps in generalized curricula. Reading comprehension programs are usually most effective with inexperienced teachers who might need support and guidance, but more seasoned teachers often find them frustrating as they feel they know how to best teach their students. Teachers need to be able to give input on the purchase of any program so that they are more likely to feel invested in the proper implementation; they also need to be properly trained on how to use the program effectively and how to differentiate instruction and provide interventions within it (Duncan-Owens, 2009).
In schools in general, but especially in middle schools, issues constantly arise that need immediate attention, and a teacher must always be ready to respond to a variety of situations on any given day. Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2009) have shown that a teacher’s perceived inability to handle issues as they come up can lead to a lack of perceived autonomy and can contribute to teacher burnout. However, teachers are not always clear about how much autonomy they have. Administrators can help build teacher autonomy simply by telling teachers that they have it. If principals are clear that teachers have autonomy to choose what they think is the best solution given their qualifications, then they will feel more confident in their abilities to do so (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Researchers who conducted a study in Tennessee found that teachers who received higher ratings on their teacher evaluations felt more satisfied with their jobs than those with lower ratings. The state of Tennessee mandated that untenured teachers must have high ratings (of 4 or 5 on their scale) during the last 2 years of their probationary period in order to continue, and teachers in disadvantaged schools who received a 3 or a 4 could earn a pay bonus or a promotion (Koedel et al., 2018). Those who were acknowledged and rewarded for their efforts felt a greater sense of autonomy and confidence, which resulted in greater job satisfaction. However, middle school requires creative and engaging approaches to teaching, and if autonomy is undermined, teachers lose their enthusiasm and energy for instruction (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Research has shown that the more administrators attempt to control what happens in the classroom in the name of accountability, the more likely they are to see a decline in teacher motivation and thus learning outcomes; external regulation or expected behaviors enforced through punishment have produced the least autonomous environments (Deci & Ryan, 2002).
It has been shown that if teachers are provided with evidence during professional development workshops that practices are effective, they change their perceptions about the value of what is being taught. Once they change their practice and see success themselves, their beliefs also change. Even if this happens just one time, teachers are more likely to be open to additional changes in the future (Mitchell, Hirn, & Lewis, 2017). When the professional development being offered targets the teachers’ needs, or is chosen with teacher input, teachers have shown greater engagement in sustained practice, with the best outcomes involving a learning cycle of practice and reflection resulting in increased teacher efficacy (Mitchell et al., 2017). However, this has not been common practice, with most workshops being short term and disconnected from the real needs of teachers and students. Teachers have been sent back to their classrooms and expected to apply newly learned theoretical concepts or practices with no support, coaching, or follow-up in place (Mitchell et al., 2017). Research has shown that when no direct connection is made among common values, initiatives, or goals, professional development initiatives build little collective efficacy, and only a portion of the staff successfully implements new practices (Mitchell et al., 2017). Teachers in urban districts have faced even more roadblocks to student success; nevertheless, when urban teachers were given the time and opportunity to participate in professional development specific to urban schools, and when those teachers were permitted to collaborate with colleagues both within and outside their schools, their confidence in their abilities grew, as did their positive feelings (Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Zijlstra, & Volman, 2015).

Just like teachers, students need to feel a sense of autonomy and competence in order to be successful, and self-determination theorists have shown that students are more motivated and score better on tests when their teachers support their socioemotional health. When teachers’
own psychological needs are not met, they struggle to assist students (Marshik et al., 2017). If teachers do not feel autonomous, they will not effectively support student autonomy, which has been shown to directly affect student achievement in reading. This is an effect that has been shown to worsen over time if the lack of support continues. Conversely, students who have received sustained support develop the skills they need to become independent self-supporters (Marshik et al., 2017). Teachers should intervene as soon as they have concerns about a student’s mental health because otherwise students tend towards low grades, substance abuse, isolation, and dropout (Moran, 2016).

The relationship between academic success and behavioral success has been well established, yet educators receive little to no training in behavior and classroom management (Mitchell et al., 2017). Teachers’ abilities to manage their own socioemotional learning often relates to how well they manage that of their students. A controlled, calm, organized teacher with a controlled, calm, organized classroom often results in a controlled, calm, organized student body (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013). Secondary-school teachers have reported more disruptive behaviors in their classrooms and schools than elementary-school teachers. This disruptive behavior has been further reported as a leading cause of stress because it reduces feelings of being in control, especially among female teachers (Mulholland et al., 2017). At the same time, high-school teachers with more coping resources have reported less classroom stress and higher job satisfaction (Reiser et al., 2016). Furthermore, teachers not receiving classroom management training in their preparation program or in their schools during their first year have expressed feeling powerless and unable to teach their content and have said that those feelings evaporated after they received training (Güner, 2012).
However, according to Greenberg, Putnam, and Walsh from a report by the National Council on Teacher Quality (2014), classroom management skills are rarely taught explicitly in undergraduate settings or as part of induction programs. Greenberg, Putnam, and Walsh (2014) found that while most preparatory programs cover classroom management as part of their curriculum, they do not give it the time or depth that it deserves. Further, the classroom management content is delivered as all theory and no practice or application, with little to no direct connection to how student-teachers are evaluated (Greenberg, Putnam, and Walsh, 2014).

Professional development should use evidence-based practices that correspond with student need and school culture (Mitchell et al., 2017). Recently, the U.S. Department of Education produced a document and accompanying practice guides outlining evidence-based preventive and response strategies that can be applied with all students. These strategies can be intensified for students who need additional teaching and practice opportunities, specifically focusing on social–behavioral challenges (Simonsen et al., 2015). Although these guides made clear that sustained professional development is important to a properly functioning school, often schools do not train, support, and monitor implementation.

Several factors influence the success or failure of classroom management training. Hough (2011) has shown that successful programs begin before the school year starts, provide useful constructive feedback, and continue throughout the year. Those training programs that falter do so because they start too late, lack a targeted plan for implementation and follow through, or do not enforce fidelity. Teacher fidelity has been shown to clearly lead to student fidelity, which suggested that consistency is an important part of successful classroom management training experiences (Hough, 2011).
Summary of autonomy. Professional, collegial, and individual autonomy are necessary for job satisfaction among teachers. However, teachers must be or feel competent in order to be given autonomy or to feel worthy of autonomy. Thus, school districts must increase supports that build competence before, or concurrently with, efforts to increase autonomy. This can be accomplished by providing training, especially in school operations and planning, curriculum implementation, classroom management, and instructional strategies.

Competence

According to self-determination theory, autonomy and competence are intertwined and must both be present to promote intrinsic motivation. To encourage feelings of competence, teachers and students need to engage in appropriately challenging, inquiry-based tasks while also giving and receiving formative feedback (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). According to Butler and Shibaz (2008), instruction is more effective when teachers endeavor to learn and become more competent than when their main goals are to avoid failure and the appearance of being inferior. In any organization, both employees and leaders need to feel they are capable of successfully completing the tasks they are assigned. An organization’s members must, at a minimum, be able to secure a series of small, short-term victories that they can register as reinforcement of their ability to achieve (Kotter & Cohen, 2002). Teachers who leave the profession after only 1 to 3 years have cited a lack of confidence in their teaching ability as one of the most significant factors contributing to their departures. Their feelings of inadequacy can stem from a variety of sources, including lack of classroom management knowledge, lack of control over the curriculum or ability to deliver it, lack of support from administration, teacher blame, lack of time management skills with the required workload, too-high expectations around testing and evaluation, and low salaries. The literature has shown that any or all of these factors...
lead teachers to leave the profession. However, when teachers are supported and given the tools they need to be successful, they gain confidence and self-efficacy, overlook other limiting factors, and stay in the profession (Battle & Looney, 2014).

The term self-efficacy refers to the belief that humans have the ability to shape their own actions. Teacher efficacy specifically relates to teachers’ beliefs that they can affect the learning and behavior of their students (Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). Teachers who have a strong sense of self-efficacy have been shown to believe that their personal skills are responsible for positive student outcomes and that they and the student together can overcome obstacles to student success (Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). Viel-Ruma et al. (2010) explained that teacher efficacy strongly predicts job satisfaction and can prevent teacher burnout. New teachers have lower self-efficacy than their more experienced colleagues. This is especially true for special education teachers, as those who teach students with emotional and behavioral disorders may experience less job satisfaction than their general education colleagues due to feelings of inadequacy and inability to meet the demands of the job (Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). In general, teachers’ difficulty with problem solving and coping with the challenges of the profession has affected their feelings of competence, ultimately leading to an inability to adapt and focus on improving instruction (Heikonen et al., 2017).

**Expectation versus reality.** New teachers who expressed feeling despondent or disillusioned in their first year of teaching usually had very positive teacher preparation experiences and held strong preconceived notions about how teaching was going to proceed, but they found reality to be very different. In other words, they had an idea of what effective teaching should be, how students should behave, and how adults should behave within a school (Youngs, et al., 2015). They began their teaching careers optimistically and confidently,
but when faced with a lack of administrative support that resulted in stunted growth, they lost their enthusiasm and confidence in their abilities to perform their jobs effectively. They consequently reported a desire to leave the profession (Curtis, 2012; Ferguson-Patrick, 2011; Gallant & Riley, 2014). Some teachers felt, for example, that they were well versed in managing diverse populations, but when they began teaching, they felt they lacked the skills for practical application of their theoretical knowledge (Fontaine, Kane, & Duquette, 2012). The resulting feelings of incompetence and subsequent perceived lack of support led many teachers to leave the profession after their first years.

Teachers have often struggled with classroom management in the beginning of their careers but have seen improvement through trial-and-error over time (Fontaine et al., 2012). Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering (2003) contended that great classroom managers are made, not born, which suggested excellent, well-executed training programs can be effective. Their meta-analysis showed that specific tested classroom management techniques produced larger positive effect sizes at the middle- and high-school level than at the elementary level (Marzano et al., 2003). This demonstrated that proper classroom management training is necessary for existing and prospective middle-school teachers. A feeling of inadequacy with respect to classroom management was one of the top reasons given for new teacher attrition (Mee & Haverback, 2014). In one study, 83% of new teachers felt underprepared for the classroom management issues they faced in their first years, especially concerning whole-class management and managing students with disabilities (Stough, Montague, Landmark, & Williams-Diehm, 2015).

Many schools labor under the misapprehension that the best educators naturally possess the qualities necessary to run their classrooms effectively. Although that might be true of some people, those skills can also be taught. Some studies have suggested that knowing how to use
humor in the classroom can lessen disruptive behavior and ease teacher burnout, and even this skill can be taught and nurtured through professional development (Ho, 2017). One program, first offered to nurses, provided an 8-step “humor development” program (Ho, 2017). Ho (2017) claimed that developing a sense of humor can lead to feelings of optimism and improve an individual’s ability to deal with stress. Emotion-focused training, it has been argued, can also help educators cope with stress, frustration, and challenges resulting from students who have suffered an emotional trauma. Such training uses reframing, problem solving, and emotional management techniques (Jones et al., 2013). Use of the RULER approach (emotion recognition, understanding, labeling, expression, and regulation) involves a 2-day training and five follow-up coaching visits to help educators focus on the elements identified by the acronym (Jones et al., 2013). Relationship-building interventions also exist that rely on coaching to help build positive teacher–student interactions. Examples of this kind of approach include the 4Rs (Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution) and MTP (My Teaching Partner approach). In the latter, the teacher accesses personal video consultations and online support (Jones et al., 2013). Other interventions involve directly teaching mindfulness and stress-reduction techniques. These include CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education) and SMART (Stress Management and Resiliency Training), which have been shown to improve job satisfaction (Jones et al., 2013). For best results, administrators should follow the training with clear and structured routines to reinforce social–emotional learning and norms; these must be followed with fidelity across buildings and throughout the school day (Jones et al., 2013).
Summary of competence. Many teachers begin their careers with a confidence derived from their perceptions of what likely lies ahead. When met with a challenging reality that contradicts their expectations, teachers can feel ill-prepared and incompetent. Teachers arrive at their teaching positions from myriad different universities, each with a nonstandardized curriculum, so school districts must compensate for gaps in preparation by providing training and support in order to prevent rapid burnout and attrition.

Relatedness

According to Deci and Ryan (2002), in addition to autonomy and competence, individuals also need to feel connected to others. Simply put, people need other people. One study found that relatedness plays a secondary role to competence among teachers, reporting that emotional exhaustion was higher when teachers did not feel competent, but work enthusiasm was higher when teachers felt more related to students and colleagues. This same study showed that teachers with less experience were more likely to feel emotionally exhausted when their relatedness needs were not met (Aldrup, Klusmann, & Lüdtke, 2016). Thus, teachers in their first years are especially vulnerable to decreased job satisfaction when they do not feel related to others in their schools.

Each school’s routines and practices may or may not provide a supportive environment for novice teachers. This is important because novice teachers’ perceptions about the overall collegial climate within the school influence their intent to remain in their positions (Youngs, et al., 2015). When teachers feel they are not improving students’ lives, they have been shown to lose faith in their abilities to teach effectively. On the one hand, when they feel like they are part of a community that establishes and follows norms together, the teachers have reported having the perception that they are making a difference and are therefore more satisfied with their
jobs (Belfi, Gielen, De Fraine, Verschueren, & Meredith, 2015). Teachers reported often not receiving any training on how to best build these relationships, especially with parents, but those who reported that they did receive training were shown to be more successful and feel more confident (Belfi et al., 2015). Another study identified a “person-organization fit” as essential to job satisfaction. In this study, if a teacher did not feel like they fit within their school’s culture and values, then they were more likely to leave (Youngs, et al., 2015). In fact, collaborative interactions can have a negative effect when a teacher perceives that he or she is not successful in the classroom. Research showed new teachers might see others as more successful and competent and feel inadequate by comparison, making them feel reluctant to share their own difficulties for fear of being judged or seen as incompetent (Devos et al., 2012).

Stress, mental health support, and its effect on relationships. Reiser et al. (2016) argued that feeling connected to students and colleagues correlates with elevated engagement in teaching and decreased psychological stress. This is especially true when groups of teachers intervene to support an individual. Programs like SPAM (Stress Prevention and Mindfulness) are designed to educate teachers about stress and how mindfulness can prevent it. SPAM also includes a group component so that teachers can get support from peers about specific, job-related issues (Reiser et al., 2016). In 2006, 46% of teachers expressed that they felt the need for emotional support, but in 2018, that number jumped to 87% (Gilles et al., 2013). Both teachers and students reported feeling great stress, and in the latest MetLife Survey of the American Teacher (Metlife, 2013), higher levels of stress were reported than in previous surveys.

Teacher–student relationships make up the backbone of successful middle-school instruction and can be simultaneously uplifting and exhausting (Heikonen et al., 2017). Highly challenging settings have been shown to affect teachers’ perceived self-efficacy, motivation,
work engagement, and willingness to learn (Heikonen et al., 2017). Teachers new to the profession need opportunities to analyze their practices through reflection on both the positive and negative aspects of their classroom experiences. Beginning teachers have reported feeling like they don’t have time to sit and reflect while they are in the hectic, fast-paced world of teaching, but if they do not reflect and adjust, the negative practices might spiral out of control and teachers will lose confidence (Heikonen et al., 2017). In addition, it has been shown that teachers’ poor mental health can impair the quality of their instruction, as they show less enthusiasm and therefore do not motivate students (Wolgast & Fischer, 2017). Further research showed stress among teachers and students can be mutually reinforcing, and without strategies for coping and building relationships, teachers can lose their ability to be a calm and have a positive influence on students and their achievement (Jones et al., 2013). The more stressed a teacher feels, the more stress students will feel physically; student cortisol levels were actually shown to change to match that of their teachers (Wolgast & Fischer, 2017). If teacher–student relationships are filled with conflict, other research showed, then students are less likely to be engaged in school, but when those relationships are positive, students are more socially adjusted and perform better academically (Jones et al., 2013).

Whether stated explicitly or not, new teachers primarily reported looking to mentors for psychosocial support, specifically seeking someone who would provide a positive, trusting environment in which they would be heard and motivated to continue (Gilles et al., 2013). The emotional support that new teachers receive from their colleagues, mentors, and administrators in terms of acceptance, confidence, listening, and trust, has been shown to lift the confidence of beginner teachers and increase feelings of job satisfaction. This, in turn, affected their attrition-related decisions (Gilles et al., 2013). Mentors can also help teachers cope with emotional
classroom experiences for which teacher preparation programs have failed to equip them. Mentors can help new teachers have positive interactions with students, even in challenging situations, and can show them how to reflect on and learn from mistakes, develop strategies for improvement, and establish routines that bolster safety and allow for instruction to continue unhindered (Heikonen et al., 2017).

The trust-building process in mentoring relationships should start as early as possible, ideally beginning in the summer at or before orientation. Boundaries and parameters should be cemented, especially when establishing a nonevaluative role (Gilles et al., 2013). Mentees must know that when they struggle, they can approach the mentor for assistance without fear of repercussions. Once the trusting relationship has been established, the mentor can offer meaningful, social–emotional support that mentees have said they need most, especially after the honeymoon period ends in November and stress levels increase (Gilles et al., 2013). Teachers reported needing to debrief student classroom happenings in order to gain perspective, learn not to take things personally, and come to an understanding about the realities of the job and their need to build stamina for job demands. Research has shown that conversations with colleagues can reduce stress, increase resilience, and reduce feelings of isolation (Bernard, 2016).

Research suggested there is little in teacher preparation programs about becoming an effective member of a community of practice. Student teachers should be given more opportunities to be part of professional learning communities in meaningful, continuous ways so that they can build the interpersonal skills necessary to communicate with colleagues and students (Heikonen et al., 2017). The more collaborative experiences teachers have, the less likely they are to leave the profession or a particular school, but many times the neediest schools do not have enough stability to provide these opportunities (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004).
Furthermore, relationships are sometimes strained due to personality conflicts, difference of opinion, or a lack of time to establish a positive working relationship (Khasnabis, Reischl, Stull, & Boerst, 2013).

According to social interdependence theory, frequent cooperative activities with colleagues might lead more people to give and receive needed support, and research has shown that teachers who do not engage in cooperative activities might feel more stress because they feel alone in their struggle (Wolgast & Fischer, 2017). Professional learning communities in schools lessen feelings of job dissatisfaction, research showed, which leads to an increase in student achievement in reading and math; their influence cannot be overlooked when administrators are looking at school reforms (Banerjee et al., 2017). According to Devos et al. (2012), a school environment focused on intrinsic motivation and that recognizes effort and growth related to positive outcomes; conversely, a school emphasizing comparison, competition, and proving one’s worth or hiding one’s failures related to negative outcomes and emotional stress (Devos et al., 2012).

**Summary of relatedness.** Because teaching is a challenging and stressful occupation with high demands, teachers need to feel they belong to a community that is collectively part of the same struggle. In order to feel related to others, trusting relationships must be built along with opportunities for thoughtful and reflective collaboration. When teachers feel like they don’t belong or that their values are not shared or respected, they are more likely to leave a school for another better fit. Therefore, school districts need to be mindful of how to build positive relationships and provide a framework in which those relationship can thrive.
Conclusion

Autonomy, competence, and relatedness must exist simultaneously for intrinsic motivation to be maximized. For example, a strong, warm, and supportive relationship can exist between a mentor and mentee, but it is not adequate to promote feelings of competence; furthermore, frequency of mentoring visits alone only supports competence when there is a clear direction towards common mastery of a goal (Devos et al., 2012). Ingersoll and Smith (2004) found that, on its own, mentoring had little effect on new teachers’ attrition rates. However, when new teachers benefited simultaneously from four types of support activities (i.e., mentor in the same field, supportive communication with colleagues, scheduled collaboration time with colleagues, and participation in seminars), the probability of attrition after the first year decreased significantly. This suggested that leadership is extremely influential. Poor management of school operations and a lack of planning for a common vision will lead to decreased feelings of competence, relatedness, and potentially professional, collegial, and individual autonomy.

Many components must work together for schools to run effectively. These components include facilities, budgets, scheduling, human resources, guidance counselors and therapists, leadership, teachers, specialists, parents, school committees, and the community. The school is a machine with systems and subsystems and many moving parts. Therefore, managing a school or a district effectively is no small task. Teacher turnover damages the smooth operation of a school district as each loss and new hire can set back cohesive teamwork, requiring retraining and adjustment to the school culture. School districts must adopt the same expectations that they place on teachers and students by supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This is
essential because the research supported the idea that when teachers feel autonomous, competent, and connected to others, these positive feelings transfer to their students.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Middle-school teaching is challenging due to a variety of dynamics, and middle-school teachers often view their assignments to middle schools as stepping stones to positions in either elementary or high schools. Furthermore, administrators frequently assign middle-school teachers to subjects outside of their specialties (Marinell, 2011). These hurdles interfere with feelings of self-determination in the middle-school workplace. The purpose of this study was to explore how novice middle-school teachers’ feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness affected their intrinsic motivation to remain teaching at the middle-school level. In this study, an answer to the following research question was sought: How intrinsically motivated to stay at the middle-school level do novice teachers feel based on how well their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are being met? This chapter introduces qualitative research in general and then the specific interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach that was used. The chapter continues by outlining the participants, procedures, and ethical considerations of the study.

Qualitative Research Approach

Creswell (2013) characterized qualitative research as a process that uses inquiry to understand a social or human problem. He further expressed that the research should provide a comprehensive picture of a person’s experience through listening to his or her words in a natural setting. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) gave a more detailed definition of the purpose of qualitative research:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)
The role of theory in qualitative research is not as straightforward as in quantitative research. In quantitative research, the researcher begins with a theory that is to be proven or disproven. In qualitative research, the researcher does not necessarily begin with a theory but might hold a belief which guides the direction of the study and affects the research questions and methodological choices (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). Anfara and Mertz (2006) state that some scholars believe there is no need for theoretical frameworks in qualitative research, but just as all researchers have bias, whether or not they are aware of it or not, a researcher cannot be totally without a theoretical framework, especially when it comes to critical paradigms.

**Interpretivism**

Just as postpositivists reacted to the failings of positivism, interpretivists responded to the weaknesses of the postpositivist methodology and belief system. Interpretivists differ greatly from the positivists by opposing rigid adherence to the notion that objectivity and the scientific method can yield apprehensible truths. Knowledge, in interpretivism, can never be regarded as objective or singular but rather should be considered an outgrowth of reality. Moreover, because reality, according to the interpretivists, is itself constructed by the individual, society, or culture, any knowledge gleaned from reality will be fraught with all the uncertainties inherent in perceptions of reality (Ponterotto, 2005). The unstable relationship between perception and reality undergirds interpretivists’ disbelief in objective knowledge and singular truths. Therefore, interpretivists believe reality is constructed by individuals, society, or culture, and multiple realities are possible in any given study. Immanuel Kant’s belief that each person’s perceptions differ because each person processes information through the five senses in different ways aligns with interpretivist thought (Ponterotto, 2005).
Interpretivists try to use their collected data to move towards an understanding that involves meaning and that can inspire action. Interpretivists use qualitative methods of data gathering, relying heavily on interviews with the participants and empirical observations by researchers who are enmeshed in the participants’ worlds. Interpretivism is epistemological in that it depends on the relationship between the “knower” (i.e., the participant) and the “would-be-knower” (i.e., the researcher; Ponterotto, 2005, p. 127). An interpretivist researcher collects data and attempts through careful scrutiny to understand the perspective of the participant in relation to the rest of the world. Interpretivists draw from the social sciences, especially cultural anthropology, and therefore prize the dialogue between the researcher and participant above other considerations. Without a substantive dialogue, the goals of understanding mutual experiences remain out of reach. The interpretivist values the participants’ unique perspectives and aims to document them thoroughly and use the information to discover a novel interpretation. Using the interpretivist paradigm, researchers embed themselves in the world of the participants and interact as much as possible in order to experience the participants’ world fully. Lack of objectivity is not a concern for interpretivist researchers as long as they are aware of their own biases and can describe them, account for them, or set them aside (Ponterotto, 2005).

Interpretivists, unlike postpositivists, require no consensus of opinion. Because perception and interpretation vary for each person, each version of an event or experience can be considered valid in its own right. Variation does not ipso facto indicate conflict or contradiction. Furthermore, no outside confirmation is needed to validate interpretivist findings as long as the study is sufficiently rigorous. Butin (2010) explored possible positivist and interpretivist approaches in a study on leadership in education. In the study, Butin collected data on the
requirements of superintendents and how they balanced their responsibilities in the performance of their jobs. Butin (2010) stated that researchers using an interpretivistic paradigm would examine why there was a high turnover rate among superintendents, questioning the way things are done and asking how and why.

**Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

IPA is a metacognitive approach to qualitative analysis which requires the researcher to consider the context and intersubjectivity involved in interviewing participants because the goal is to understand others’ experiences in context (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). The goal of IPA is to examine how participants make sense of their environments and what meaning they derive from the people, places, and events in which they exist. Researchers conducting IPA focus on personal experience and do not attempt to provide an objective reality (Smith & Osborn, 2015). There are three main theoretical underpinnings to IPA methodology: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Oxley, 2016).

IPA was first used as a separate research method in psychology in the mid-1990s. In his first important paper on the topic, Jonathan A. Smith (1996), a professor of psychology at Birbeck University of London and the primary scholar of IPA, argued that psychology could be both experimental and experiential (Shinebourne, 2011). Smith relied heavily on Husserl’s work with phenomenology, in which Husserl posited that reflection on one’s own consciousness and lived experiences is essential to understanding (Smith, 1996). Smith also referred to the work of existentialists Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, who spoke of people as being part of a larger world and context, and who saw qualitative research as interpretive (Shinebourne, 2011). Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) performed seminal work that grew out of Smith’s original paper on the subject. Researchers conducting IPA further espoused that the research
process is a “dynamic” or “double hermeneutic” one (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 53) in which an interaction exists between the researcher and the participant. A researcher listens to the experiences of the participant but then must also interpret the participants’ responses (Oxley, 2016). The participants try to make sense of their experience, but the researcher also tries to decipher the participants’ sense-making (McNabb, n.d.). Smith et al. (2009) argued that the researcher’s own interpretation might add insights into the participants’ experiences that they did not previously consider or were not capable of sharing. This hidden element might be uncovered by the researcher’s probing questions and interpretation of the responses. IPA also has a basis in idiography because it does not require that generalizations be made but rather requires the researcher to focus on the significance of a small sample of individual accounts (Oxley, 2016).

Scholarly Debate

A common criticism of IPA is that it lacks a sound theoretical basis. Sousa (2008) contended that there are only two pages worth of theoretical defense of IPA (Shinebourne, 2011), and psychologist-professor Amedeo Giorgi, stated that: “The originators of IPA have given no indication as to how their method is related to philosophical phenomenology” (as cited in Shinebourne, 2011, p. 16). Others have considered it to be too vague and unscientific (Tuffour, 2017).

There are four major specific criticisms of IPA: its practitioners ignore the role of language; rely too much on interpretation, which can lean towards opinion and some participants and researchers might not have the capacity to properly interpret a person’s experiences; seek to understand experiences but do not explain the reasons why those experiences occur; and practice research in a way that is incompatible with cognitive psychology. Smith et al. (2009) have responded to each of these criticisms over the years. In response to the first criticism, Smith
argued that language is enmeshed with experience and that the focus on narrative accounts makes that clear (Tuffour, 2017). The second criticism is problematic because it suggests that only those who are capable of high-level intellectual thought get to share their experiences (Tuffour, 2017). Smith et al. (2009) responded to the third criticism by explaining that the analysis and interpretation of culture would provide enough context to explain why phenomena occur. Finally, Smith et al. (2009) directly connected IPA to cognitive psychology, pointing to the required reflection on interpretation. Tuffour (2017) conceded that many IPA studies are conducted poorly, not giving enough voice to the participants or providing sufficient in-depth interpretation, and therefore cautions IPA researchers to attend to these areas.

**Participants**

Researchers using IPA tend to choose a smaller, homogenous sample because the sample is not meant to be random or generalizable (Smith & Osborn, 2015). However, the number of participants varies from study to study, with numbers ranging from as small as one to as large as 20 or more. Most recent studies tend towards smaller numbers so a detailed and thoughtful analysis can take priority over a large sample size. Smith et al. (2009) has argued for a single case study for this reason. However, a sample of three to six is common in those conducting an IPA study for the first time, allowing the researcher to not only dive deeper but also to more easily see common themes across the interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

In keeping with IPA philosophy, the researcher in this study used purposeful and convenience sampling to recruit six teachers who met at least one of the following criteria: a) were within their first 5 years of teaching, both in general and at the middle-school level; b) were within their first 5 years of teaching middle school, having previously taught at another level; c) had taught middle school as a new teacher in the last 3 years but had moved to another grade
level, or d) had made a career change and were in their first 5 years of teaching middle school. These four categories ensured that all teachers who were new to teaching middle school were included. There were no criteria for age, gender, or ethnicity.

**Procedures**

Although many IPA studies consist of three interviews, this study began with a short questionnaire administered online in advance of the first interview, followed by an in-person interview. The data gathering concluded, when necessary, with follow-up questions asked via phone or email. Participants were provided background data in the questionnaire to preserve the in-person interview time for more in-depth questions. Following that, an in-person, phenomenologically based interview was conducted during which open-ended, exploratory questions were asked to best understand each participants’ lived experiences (Seidman, 2013). The researcher actively listened and asked probing questions, making an effort not to interrupt unless clarification was needed. The purpose of the follow-up interview was to ask further questions that were brought about by reflection on the previous interview. This final interview allowed for the participants to reflect on what they had shared and to make sense of or ponder the meaning of their experiences (Seidman, 2013).

**Data Analysis**

Most IPA data collection involves semistructured, one-on-one interviews, but it can also include questionnaires, emails, focus groups, observations, and diaries (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). There is a basic process to IPA but there is no one procedure that is recommended (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Senior, Smith, Miche, and Marteau (2002) began their research by recognizing broad themes in the interview transcripts and then discovering more specific themes within them; Collins and Nicolson (2002) searched their interview transcripts for anything
related to previous literature or theoretical models (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Conversely, Turner, Barlow, and Ibery (2002) used open coding to guarantee no connections to previous literature or interpretations were made intentionally (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Smith and Osborn (2015) suggested that great care be taken to ensure that interpretation is based on the actual words of the participants and that these words are cited directly in the analysis, arguing that the researcher must distinguish between their own interpretation and the actual words of the participants. Collins and Nicolson (2002), for this reason, recommended a final rereading of the transcripts to guarantee accuracy. Some researchers have others read their analysis to check for credibility (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Clearly there is no one prescribed way to interpret the data, but scholars consistently recommend coding, finding themes and subthemes, and interpreting the words of the individuals while simultaneously keeping an eye on the bigger picture.

Often in an IPA study, researchers present each of the themes one-by-one, give examples from the transcripts in order to support each theme, and provide an analysis; in this way, both the words of the participant and the interpretation of the researcher are represented (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Often, use of the theoretical framework helps to organize of the findings. Self-determination theory, for example, could be presented with sections on autonomy, competence, and relatedness, with subthemes found through the coding process. When deciding which coding system to use, the researcher in this study went through many stages. After reading Saldaña (2015), the researcher first considered an initial coding approach to reign in the impulse to look for a specific answer. The researcher wanted to take a more open-ended approach and liked the idea of looking for “antecedents, causes, and consequences” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 118). Ultimately, however the researcher chose not to take a wholly grounded theory
approach, as the research questions were based on a specific theory that focused on clear themes. For this reason, the researcher then considered concept coding (Saldaña, 2015, p. 119) because use of self-determination theory would focus on the concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and the researcher wanted to show how these factors influenced middle-school teachers’ attrition and retention decisions. The researcher planned to code in this manner, labeling each response as it pertained to these three concepts and their corresponding subordinate themes.

The researcher applied Saldaña’s (2015) structural coding system, which was framed around the research questions and used their conceptual one-word titles. Using structural coding, the researcher began to see “commonalities, differences, and relationships” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 98) among all of the concepts. As the researcher proceeded with coding and began to see relationships, simultaneous coding (Saldaña, 2015, p. 192) was used and additional subcategories were added to be more effective. For example, the researcher could code a response about how mentoring helped form relationships with both mentoring and relatedness, thus including the broad category of mentoring with the conceptual category of relatedness, thus connecting it to the research questions.

**Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research**

Institutional review boards (IRBs) are committees designed to protect the rights of human subjects involved in research. Therefore, a process must be followed in order to comply with IRB regulations before recruiting participants. The researcher completed IRB training and thus applied for and received IRB approval with knowledge of the following considerations.
Ethical Considerations

The authors of *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978) outlined ethical considerations for conducting research. Seidman (2013) also outlined the components of informed consent. Using both as guidelines, the following were considered:

- **Informed consent:** All participants signed an informed consent form and all efforts were made to clarify the nature of their consent, ensure their understanding, and further explain the voluntary nature of their participation.

- **Invitation to participate:** In order to demonstrate respect for the participants, the researcher clearly outlined the purpose of the study and made clear that participation was voluntary.

- **Risk:** There was very low risk to the participants in this study as long as confidentiality was maintained. The research was conducted in three schools, one in which the researcher formerly worked, one in which the researcher currently worked in a supervisory role to English and social studies teachers, and one in which the researcher had no personal connection. In the school where the researcher served in a supervisory role, only participants who were not directly supervised by the researcher were included to minimize the risk the participants might perceive.

- **Rights:** Participants were again reminded that their participation was voluntary and that there was no harm in refusing to participate.

- **Possible benefits:** Participants were informed that this study would benefit them and other middle-school teachers as the resulting information would inform future administrations about what could increase middle-school teachers’ job satisfaction.
• Confidentiality of records: Participants were informed that all interviews would be recorded and transcribed, but upon the completion of the study, all records would be destroyed. Further, no names or identifying information would be included in the final dissertation in order to protect the participants' identities.

• Dissemination: Participants were informed that their words might be directly quoted in the final dissertation and permission to do so was confirmed.

• Special conditions for children: There were no children to be considered in the study.

• Contact information and copies of the form: The researcher’s contact information was shared with the participants as well as how to contact the IRB in case of questions or concerns regarding participants’ rights or other information.

Credibility

One measure taken to ensure the credibility of the study was to maintain an open dialogue with the participants. The transcript shows that participants were verbally informed that they had access to interview transcripts and the final dissertation if they wished to check for inaccuracies, misunderstandings, or confidentiality breaches (Seidman, 2013). However, care was taken to be sure that the participants did not dictate the course of the research. Validity was also be checked during the follow-up interviews when the researcher asked the participants to clarify or reflect on previous answers in order to guarantee that the previous answer was not, for example, an emotional reaction on a bad day that, upon further reflection, should be reconsidered. Finally, the researcher was transparent with the readers and the participants regarding researcher positionality.
Transferability

IPA is idiographic in nature and researchers performing it do not seek to generalize results. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that the researcher’s task is to fully explain the context using extensive description, both in the introduction and in the data analysis, so that connections can be drawn by the reader.

Internal Audit

An audit trail was maintained to provide documentation of and justification for decisions made within individual interviews. When using qualitative inquiry, researchers frequently must make decisions in the moment based on the responses of participants. Analytic memos and reflexive journal entries after each interview aided the researcher in understanding thought processes and assisted in the double-hermeneutic process required in an IPA study (Given, 2008).

Self-Reflexivity and Transparency

The researcher was raised in an upper-middle-class household with a father who was a poet and English professor and a mother who was a stay-at-home mom turned chef. The researcher was exposed to literature and the arts her entire life, which helped to develop intelligence but not necessarily a work ethic. She did not fail, but she did not exceed expectations either. The researcher went to college having no passion for any particular subject matter and chose an insignificant major. Upon graduating, she was unsure of what to do next, so her father suggested trying the new education program at the college where he taught. He knew the researcher had worked with children at camps and in other summer job settings and had always had a positive rapport with children. The researcher agreed and attained an elementary teacher certification after completing her student teaching in a third-grade classroom. The
researcher’s route to working full time was circuitous, as she moved states several times. She struggled to get hired as a new teacher and took a variety of long-term substitute and paraprofessional jobs. Finally, she interviewed at a middle school in Maine and was hired. She was terrified as she always expected to work with younger children and did not know what to expect, but she accepted the position because she wanted to finally be in a classroom.

It was a harsh transition into a job where she was expected to teach small-group remedial readers in Grades 6, 7, and 8 with no given curriculum. The only support came from the math teacher, who held the same type of position. Hired only 3 weeks before school started, the researcher had to scramble to create lessons from scratch by doing research on the internet and making or buying materials with personal funds. At the time, the mentoring law had not been passed, so she was without much guidance, but was observed three times that year by the assistant principal. It was sheer luck that all the lessons that were observed went smoothly. It was mentally and physically exhausting. The one positive at the time was that parent interaction was minimal as students often had rough home lives, so liberties were taken in the classroom with little interference.

Much later, the researcher became a professional development leader for the school district and also served for 2 years as president of the teachers’ union. During her union tenure, she was part of contract negotiations when scheduling time for professional development was discussed and negotiated. Several teachers were on the negotiations committee, as well as administrators and school committee members. It quickly became clear that following the neighboring communities’ example of late starts or early releases would be problematic for the district. The majority of the residents were low-income working-class families who had limited resources for transportation and child care. If school started 2 hours later, the children of many
working parents would be left without care and some students would go without the breakfast that schools provided. Similarly, a 2-hour early dismissal would leave many children without supervision during the afternoons. The local police reported increases in juvenile arrests on days when students were released early from school. These arguments evoked sympathy in the researcher but the decision was still made that the educational outcomes justified the risks. From her position of privilege, it was easy to look at only the big picture and see how the time would benefit the education of students and the health of the community in the long term while disregarding the immediate hardships the changes would create for the families. The families were seen as the other, and the researcher looked at them as lacking understanding of the cost–benefit analysis made in these kinds of education-related decisions. In contract negotiations, taking this position could lead to one side refusing to participate in the discussion due to a perceived lack of understanding.

When conducting this study, the researcher recognized the need to be mindful of not repeating the mistake of assuming the participating teachers lacked an understanding of the issues. Care was taken not to begin with assumptions about what the teachers needed to be successful. Teachers begin their first years of teaching with different training and different life experiences. The researcher’s own experience as a struggling learner and socially reserved student influenced the decisions she made as a teacher, trying to do for her students what she felt had not been done for her. It was acknowledged that this might not be the background knowledge that others drew from, creating differing pedagogical approaches that could lead to different opinions regarding the value of professional development or mentoring. Similar to how women in southern Asia and Africa did not respond well to Western feminists who approached them as people who needed to be educated or changed in order to become stronger
women, people often do not respond well to researchers who condescend to their experiences and needs (Fennell & Arnot, 2008). It was understood, therefore, that the participating teachers would want to be treated as products of their own cultures and backgrounds, and the researcher would have to conduct the study in a way that recognized their unique contributions and strengths rather than looking at them as rooted in places of deficiency or failure (Carlton Parsons, 2008).

The researcher had similar feelings when transitioning from teaching remedial readers to a traditional, large classroom. The same approach was taken with the regular education seventh graders, which was not fair to the higher performing students because this approach catered to the lowest common denominator—which was the researcher’s comfort zone. The researcher had an affinity for those students, and it took some time to adjust to teaching all students fairly. In a mentoring relationship, it was evident the same events could repeat themselves if assumptions were made about the struggles of new teachers. The researcher took care not to assume all new middle-school teachers were unprepared either academically or emotionally.

In any position, the researcher must also bear in mind the culture of the school itself. The culture of a community greatly influences the culture of the school, and to change one might be perceived as changing the other. Agents of change can be considered outsiders, and as someone who did not live in the community and was not raised in the area, the researcher was further at risk of being regarded as someone likely to be indifferent or hostile to long-established cultural norms. The researcher reflected on the existing nature of the school and its community to anticipate and be respectful of the fact that the participating teachers may not have valued mentoring and targeted training in the way the researcher did (Jupp & Slattery, 2010).
The researcher acknowledged a strong belief in the value of mentoring and targeted training would predispose her to act as a person of privilege over a perceived inferior. She was careful to use the interviews as a chance to form a complete understanding of the participants’ background learning and cultural beliefs, and to incorporate that knowledge into a mutually beneficial solution. The researcher’s positionality was formed from a privileged upbringing in a middle-class, academic setting, and a learning experience unique to her. It was recognized that this experience might not be the same as the subjects’ and that study participants were not objects or lumps of clay to be molded by research, but individuals with their own understanding and contributions. Reflexive writing practices were incorporated into the process to detect biases that could be corrected and to manage subjectivity as best as possible as it cannot be eliminated completely from research.

**Limitations**

This study was limited by its small sample size, IPA method, and specific theoretical framework. When conducting an IPA study, it is recommended that the sample size be small in order to devote the researcher’s time to careful analysis. However, this approach restricts the researcher’s ability to suggest generalizable results, which is undesirable and limits the scope of the study. Use of IPA also allows for the researcher to inject personal experience and reasoning into the process which could present biases that could interfere with accurate results. Reflexive journaling measures were implemented to check for such biases. The chosen theoretical framework further limited the study by narrowing the focus onto a single definition of intrinsic motivation.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore how novice middle-school teachers’ feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness affected their intrinsic motivation to remain teaching at the middle-school level. Self-determination theorists have posited that social environments can affect feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness and thus influence feelings of intrinsic motivation and overall well-being. Using self-determination theory as a guide in this study, the researcher examined the following overarching research question: How intrinsically motivated to stay at the middle-school level do novice middle-school teachers feel based on how well their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are being met? The superordinate themes were autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Once the interviews were conducted, several subordinate themes emerged. Autonomy broke down into the subordinate themes of professional autonomy, collegial autonomy, and individual autonomy. Competence subdivided into the subordinate themes of content competence, classroom management competence, administration’s influence on feelings of competence, formal and informal mentors’ influence on feelings of competence, the effect of teacher preparation programs on feelings of competence, and the effect of self-criticism on feelings of competence. Relatedness was segmented into the subordinate themes of: the effect of school culture on feelings of relatedness, feelings of relatedness to coworkers, feelings of relatedness to students, and support for socioemotional health. All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms. Table 1 shows school district demographic data; Table 2 shows relevant information about each participant, and Table 3 shows participants’ responses for each theme and subordinate theme.
### Table 1

**School District Demographic Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Total #</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Native American</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>NH, PI</th>
<th>Multi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>8,822</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>55.7%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1,983</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>.8%</td>
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*Note. NH = Native Hawaiian; PI = Pacific Islander; multi refers to those of mixed race*

### Table 2

**Participant Background**

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Table 3

*Participant Responses*

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<th>Themes</th>
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<th>Carlson</th>
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### Themes

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<th>Frank</th>
<th>Rendell</th>
<th>Carlson</th>
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**Autonomy**

Autonomy has been defined in many ways in different vocations and philosophies. Moses (2007) declared autonomy to be a freedom of decision making without fear of interference or influence by those in authority. Sitch (2005) defined autonomy as an ability to effect change and manage oneself in a beneficial way. Relating the concept to teaching, Benson (2000) described autonomy as freedom from control, and Little (1995) described it as the capability to be self-directed. Jumani and Malik (2017) defined autonomy as “the teacher’s right to take initiatives and implement their professional practices to maximize the progress of institutions” (p. 36).

Jackson and Stewart (2012) claimed that autonomy empowers teachers to become leaders who more effectively address students’ needs. If principals and other administrators work to ensure that teachers feel competent and autonomous and believe that they are part of a larger, collaborative community of professionals, administrators might increase the likelihood that teachers will promote their students’ autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Jacobs & Struyf, 2013; Marshik et al., 2017).
Professional Autonomy

Professional autonomy refers to control over the operational aspects of the school, such as rules, curriculum, and professional development opportunities (Jumani & Malik, 2017). Ms. Walker, who was a high-school teacher but had formerly taught middle school, lamented that school policies in her workplaces were either nonexistent or did not incorporate the contributions of the teachers when she said:

I wish that there were more policies in place that I could have just followed instead of having to come up with my own. For example, [my current school] is instituting a cell-phone-in-the-pocket-pouch-thing when you come into school. It’s something where I didn’t set the expectation clear enough at the beginning of the year, and this year it’s become a big problem, but it’s hard to go back. If there had just been that policy to begin with, it would have helped me a lot because I didn’t know where to start. I think it’s just easier if the school—if someone had just told me to do this like: “This is what your rules should be, and if you want to adjust them later, then do that.” But given a better place to start and then adjusting them once you feel more comfortable would have been helpful. I wish someone had sat me down and said: “This is what you’re going to expect. These are the rules that you should have. Adjust them how you think, but this is where I would start if I were you.” That would have been helpful. . . I think, being a part of such a large school, it can be difficult to really have a say in a lot of the day-to-day things. There are a lot of committees that are open to anyone, and you can have direct say in the policies the committee is reviewing. They also ask for a lot of feedback to be given through department heads, and the department heads then relay the messages to the administration. I think in a smaller school, it can be easier to make a direct impact, just by the nature of there being less people involved.

Ms. Montgomery explained that she felt there was some professional autonomy among teachers, but the overarching policy and rules were created by the administration:

As an individual, I feel like I have a fair amount of influence when it comes to rules, discipline, procedures in my classroom. My administration understands that teachers have different ways of interacting with students and managing student behavior. In terms of school-wide rules, those are usually set by our principal. I’m sure she would be open to discussion if we didn’t agree with something, but that is not a situation I have come across. Curriculum wise, I feel like I have a lot of influence when it comes to how I implement the curriculum, but, especially for math, the curriculum is pretty standard. Some [professional development] days are mandated, but we also have 1–2 [professional development] days a year where we get to choose our [professional development] courses, which adds a nice element of choice. We usually have [teachers’ union] day
where teachers are able to offer any [professional development] they think might be helpful to teachers and they can sign up for whatever courses they would like.

Mr. Frank, an English language arts teacher at the middle-school level, commented that he felt he had autonomy in his own classroom but not when it came to school-wide policies:

I would say I have minimal influence in regard to the power I have regarding the way the school is set up. The only true power I would say I have is in regard to the curriculum that I am teaching. I have complete control over the curriculum and the things I can discuss with the class. . . . I believe teachers are quite low on the totem pole when it comes to changing things around.

Collegial Autonomy

Collegial autonomy centers on the idea of the “collective freedom” (Jumani & Malik, 2017, p. 34) of teachers to make influential decisions collaboratively. Ms. Montgomery perceived opportunities to develop collegial autonomy but stressed the importance of presenting the opportunity in a way that did not feel daunting:

Overall, my school is pretty fair about crowd-sourcing protocols and policies. I think some would say that they don’t have input to school policies, but they are usually more passive in the processes that are in place for having input. I think that, overall, most teachers would say that as long as what you are doing in the classroom is working, and obviously ethical, administration won't interfere much. For example, administration asked all sixth grade teachers to implement a new tardy policy in class. . . . This new policy was presented to us in a meeting with teachers and administration. They made sure that we felt comfortable and not overwhelmed. That being said, they are not constantly in our rooms checking to see if we are using the policy—and I know some teachers who do not follow it with fidelity. . . . They understand that micromanaging will not lead to productivity. I think that teachers feel like they could effect change at school as long as their reasoning made sense and was presented in a well thought out, responsible way.

Mr. Frank expressed that administration could often reduce teachers’ feelings of collegial autonomy by bending or altering the existing rules in order to accommodate students, thus transferring the autonomy to the students:

I do not feel that teachers feel empowered to make changes to the school. Teachers feel that there are times when administration undermines what they can or cannot do within their class when it comes to rules that students should be abiding by. A lot of times,
teachers feel that administration can enable a lot of students, and in return students sometimes feel that they have more power than their own teachers.

Ms. Walker explained that she felt administration would often make an outward display of soliciting opinions or feedback but would then ultimately make a unilateral decision:

My school does not love the administration within the building. Often times, collective teachers are able to voice their opinion, and the administration seems receptive, but then decides either to not change the policy or go in a different direction. It often seems as if administration wants feedback but then does not listen. Overall, I would say the teachers don't feel as if they have much say in changing what happens within the school. For example, we had a school-wide discussion at a faculty meeting regarding the way in which the schedule would be made next year. Administration wanted to have a program randomly make the schedule and make adjustments from there. A significant number of teachers volunteered reasons as to why that wouldn’t work as well—then we got an email saying it was being made randomly.

**Individual Autonomy**

Individual autonomy refers more to what occurs in the classroom including issues related to content, teaching practices, materials, assessments, and classroom management (Jumani & Malik, 2017). Most teachers in the study expressed a strong sense of individual autonomy, especially when it pertained to the content they taught, even though they were all middle-school teachers in their first 5 years. Some of the teachers attributed their individual classroom autonomy to the fact that they began teaching at a school with little to no existing curricula for the content they were teaching, and therefore, they had to create their own curriculum. This lack of curriculum led some teachers to have positive feelings about freedom and control. Ms. Walker, for example, related that she completely lacked a curriculum, saying “I’ve had free reign because we haven't had a set curriculum. . . . We’re not adherent to certain, like we [don’t] need to make sure we’re at this book at this time.”

Mr. Frank conveyed that he enjoyed the autonomy within his classroom and would therefore find it difficult to have that autonomy taken away in the future:
I feel like I have complete control. Which is good. Now I feel like it’s so good. My first year not so much, but this year, I do like it, and now I’m at the point where [if that changed], I feel like it would be hard for me to get back to, “Oh, I actually have to follow this curriculum, and I actually have to follow this pace and guide and things like that.” I think it would be different, so I do like it now.

Ms. Montgomery shared that her school’s curriculum is standards-based but not beholden to a set text or program:

We just base it on the standards. Yeah, we might have a textbook next year, but we don't have one this year. We had one that we kind of used my first year, but it's not completely aligned, so we would supplement a lot of our own material.

However, not all teachers felt positively about the lack of a curriculum. Some teachers felt pressured by having to create their own, which was time consuming and stress inducing. Ms. Rendell said she found this to be true for her and her coworkers:

I was talking to my coworker and this is [not her first year of teaching], but this is her first year at our school, and she would go home [upset] because there’s no curriculum that was set because so many, that role has seen so much turnaround. Since I’ve been there, not one teacher has stayed. I don’t think any teacher has made it through the year in that position, so there’s been no curriculum and she’s had to create it all herself and that’s daunting. Even if you’ve done this before, that’s really hard coming into a new school and creating curriculum. . . . That’s what happened to me, too, and I [taught more than one course] . . . well, they said we have a curriculum but it’s all in [Google] drive and nothing’s organized. There’s nothing, so it was easier just to make it myself at this point. I felt like I was burning myself out.

Mr. Frank also expressed that having too much freedom could be difficult and

overwhelming for a new teacher:

It was just, “Go ahead and here’s your opportunity to be creative,” but I felt like with the first year teacher having too much of a wide open space to be like, “Oh, go ahead and do what you want,” was too much, and then I feel like not only was I dealing with the curriculum and not knowing exactly where to go with the class, but I was also dealing with developing my teaching style and where to be strict and where to loosen the reins. And I feel like definitely that first year was challenging in terms of the students, my teaching style, the curriculum, so that first year was not good. . . . Now I don’t feel burdened by not having a curriculum because I feel like I’m developing it. Whereas, in my first year, it felt overwhelming—it’s almost to a point where sometimes there’s a little too much freedom, sometimes—where it’s just, “Make sure they’re in the room and don’t wander around.” I feel like [my class] is this exploratory world. . . . I feel like I have
complete control, to be honest, because I don’t think anyone is really like, “Oh, I wonder what they're doing.” I guess if I was one of those teachers who weren’t motivated or really cared, I could be doing nothing and I would feel like they still wouldn’t be like, “Oh, what's going on in that class?” But I feel like because I have now, in my third year, have that freedom, I feel like it’s allowing me to develop my own teaching style.

One teacher reported an instance where a new curriculum was implemented after a period of having no curriculum, and the new curriculum conflicted with the teacher’s preferred way of teaching the content as well as her understanding of proper methodology. Ms. Rendell worked with students who spoke English as a second language. She said they often entered into a social studies class with no background knowledge of U.S. history. The new curriculum, Ms. Rendell explained, was expected to be taught based on the grade-level expectations:

So, my level-one kids need to learn about hominids? So, I'm struggling with that a little bit. It’s been a bit of a fight because it just doesn’t seem relevant for them. I would like to give them the background knowledge of what the kids who are already in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade already know, so that when they get to high school it’s going to be U.S. history. It’s kind of nice for them to have the background information, but I also, again, I understand that they need to be learning what the other kids know. When it comes to state testing, if they’re going to be asked some of these questions, they need to have some of that, and they’re expected to know this information.

Mr. Carlson spoke to the mixture of autonomy and prescribed curricular structure in his classroom:

I’d say it’s pretty free to the point where obviously I know we have a set expectation for math. Three out of the five days of the week is usually we’re doing stations and centers. I have my interpretation of it—of how I set my stations up, whether it’s two stations or three stations, for whether one’s inside the class or outside of the classroom. I feel like that has been left up to us as long as the core shell of it [is still there]. I definitely have total ability to have the fluctuation of being able to teach a style that I think is appropriate.

Ms. Walker relayed similar feelings about teaching middle school:

Last year we had [a prescribed curriculum], which was pretty much structure for us and gave us an outline. This year we don’t really have—I don’t know where the curriculum came from exactly. I think maybe it came from a textbook a while ago and we just don’t use the textbook anymore. It was the textbook’s curriculum, but we just have our own materials from it now. I feel like I had a good amount of free-will without being thrown
into it on my own. I thought it was a good balance between structure, and I had an idea of what I was supposed to do for that day, but within the day, I had an opportunity to structure a lesson the way that I thought. I think it was a good balance. Whereas this year [in high school], I feel very structured. The lessons look the same as everyone else’s do. Last year [in middle school], I felt like I had more opportunities to try stuff out without feeling too thrown into it on my own. [In middle school], it was good because different math classes had that same feature [stations] throughout, so sixth graders know what to expect, but when you do stations you have opportunities to pick three different opportunities that you think will work best. While they had the same general structure, they looked different teacher-to-teacher, depending on how you wanted to do it. In this high school, the entire year is structure day-to-day. . . . We pretty much take notes and practice. There isn’t much—we could do a few interesting activities, but for the most part you know what you have to do day-to-day and there isn’t much wiggle room. [In the middle school], if I was observed, it was pretty much expected that’s what my lesson would look like, at least most of the time. I would say that was pretty clear, I wouldn’t have done [stations] in the first year.

Ms. Rendell agreed, mentioning that different teaching styles changed the approach to the mandated curriculum and could therefore change the student's experience in the classroom:

[There’s a curriculum], but you can go more slowly, and I feel like I’m given, that lends itself to a little more room for creativity, going at my own speed, and I tend to be a lot more relaxed in my approach. I’m not a teacher who demands silence and likes a silent class and working independently. I do a lot of: “You can work in small groups. That’s fine. You guys want to go to that table over there? That's fine with me. You kids want to go out in the hall and sit in the hall and do it? Sure, here’s a clipboard. Go do it.” I’m pretty relaxed and I think my school does support that.

Ms. Montgomery agreed, demonstrating how important administration's support for independent teaching styles could be to feelings of autonomy:

I feel pretty free to teach the way I want to teach. Obviously, there's the standards that have to be covered, but in terms of how to go about those standards, I feel like I could do whatever I wanted. I try to stay matched with my counterpart in sixth grade, but she and I kind of see things the same way.

**Conclusion**

Participants harbored mixed feelings about their own autonomy. Although some teachers admitted that there were opportunities offered that allowed them to provide input on school-wide issues and administrators were outwardly receptive to feedback, teachers nonetheless
reported reduced feelings of professional and collegial autonomy. Administrators made some
gestures toward increasing professional and collegial autonomy, such as forming committees or
soliciting input at meetings, but teachers felt that the administrators’ subsequent actions did not
necessarily reflect genuine interest in teachers’ opinions. However, some teachers chose not to
participate on committees or offer feedback in any way, thus giving tacit support to any
administrative decisions.

Conversely, participants reported strong feelings of individual autonomy. Most teachers
felt that they had complete autonomy regarding teaching style and methodology but less so with
respect to the choice of curriculum. Teachers’ responses also varied when speculating on the
root causes of their autonomy. Some felt they were autonomous because they were recognized
as professional and as displaying competence, and others felt that administrators were too busy
with disciplinary and other matters to regulate or micromanage teachers outside of formal
observations and walkthroughs. Ultimately, teachers felt like they were, for better or for worse,
granted autonomy in their individual classrooms but did not feel they had much influence or
power within the school or the larger community.

**Competence**

According to self-determination theory, autonomy and competence are intertwined and
must both be satisfied in order to promote intrinsic motivation. To encourage feelings
of competence, teachers and students need to engage in appropriately challenging, inquiry-based
tasks, plus give and receive formative feedback (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). According to Butler
and Shibaz (2008), teaching is more effective when teachers endeavor to learn and become more
competent instead of striving to avoid failure and the appearance of inferiority. Moreover, in
schools as in any organization, both employees and leaders need to feel they are capable of successfully completing the tasks they are assigned.

**Content Competence**

Many of the teachers expressed feelings of confidence regarding curriculum and content knowledge, but some noted that they were not provided with a concrete curriculum when starting out as a teacher, which led to reduced feelings of competence. Mr. Frank conveyed how terrible it was to begin his first year this way: “The first year, I would say, was awful—because in terms of curriculum for [my class], there was no curriculum at all.”

Mr. Carlson worked from a curriculum but lacked a comprehensive understanding of his grade-level core standards and expectations because he had not taught at his grade level before. He said:

> As for challenges this year, I think really the only challenge for me would be understanding the curriculum. Understanding the frameworks, understanding what needs to be met, what goals and what expectations the students need to be meeting for benchmarks in order to prepare them for the [state test] and the [next grade level]. I think another challenge for me would be properly accommodating all of my students, making sure that students are on track for the IEP. . . . I feel a lot more confident about curriculum. I know that when we have to move and make sure that we cover everything, this is how we are doing it. If the kids need extra time on it, I feel competent enough to provide a supplement activity or set of instructions or a minilesson for it. . . . I feel very competent and confident enough to try out many different forms, ways of constructing curriculum and implementing it, too. I think the curriculum that I teach is one I enjoy. . . . It’s all stuff that I’m personally comfortable with, so I feel like I can convey that better to the students, that I know the curriculum well.

Mr. Willis agreed, as he was entering teaching from a career in the corporate world and did not feel confident with standards that were very different from the standards he learned as a student. He explained:

> The most difficult part was learning the curriculum. In that first year, it’s like I’m learning as the kids are learning. So, learning that and then also what aspects are going to be best taught to these kids, that they’re going to remember the content, because that’s difficult, because what I learned, the last time I did math [in school] was when I was in
eighth grade. You know that curriculum, and that curriculum has changed. They've pushed so much down from the high school — now it's on the eighth grade . . . so that was my biggest difficulty, was getting to know the curriculum. What are the best ways to teach it? How were these kids taught in previous years? Because the way I was teaching long division on a problem was the way I was taught, and then there were kids that were showing me two other ways . . . from what I’ve heard, they say 3 to 5 years to master a curriculum. So now this is my third year teaching, and I feel very confident in what I’m teaching. I know what to expect. I know the questions kids are going to ask. I know the main concepts that they’re not going to understand the first time, but they’ll understand it after once or twice or three times of practice on your own. So that was my struggle, and keeping my sanity after the first year, because it’s like, “What do you mean, you don’t understand that? It's right here. It's plain and simple.” It’s like, “All right, well, now what way do I have to connect with this kid to get them to understand?” So that's the difficulty not having an education background, because I'm going off of what I was taught 14 years ago.

Ms. Walker added that changing from middle school to high school presented a great challenge in that teaching high school forced her to prepare for multiple topics and levels within her subject:

As a first-year teacher [at the middle school], it was awesome to have one thing to plan for in a day. I feel like the longer that I stayed, I could have handled way more. I think that giving new teachers less preps makes a big difference in the amount of time that goes into planning—especially this year [at the high school], comparing it, this year is so much harder to plan for a day. It was also really helpful last year having time, common time, with the teachers you work with to plan.

Ms. Walker also discussed the importance of checking to ensure her students had learned the content in order to judge how well she was teaching the content:

I was taking classes—to get my licensure. We talked a lot about what a lesson should look like using exit tickets to assess if they’d met the objectives. I would try to do that, and I would try to collect the evidence at the end of class. Some days it was a complete failure, and they didn’t learn anywhere near what I hoped they would and other days they did. I think that was a fairly big tool in whether or not I got the message across that I was hoping to get across.

Ms. Montgomery reflected on her lack of confidence in her first year but ascribed it more to her personality and demeanor than to the content itself:

Content wise, I felt completely prepared. I didn't feel stumped or anything by the content. I felt like I wanted to be there, so that I felt prepared about. I was still nervous.
I knew management would be my struggle. I just know my personality. I'm kind of timid. I'm kind of quiet, so I knew that would be a struggle for me, so in that regard, I didn't really feel super prepared, but otherwise, I felt prepared. The first time I felt really successful was probably about May or like late April. We did a design task. We had to learn percents, and I gave them four clothing items they had to buy and four coupons and they had to go online and choose a shirt, any shirt they wanted and apply the coupon. They loved it. The next day, kids were like, "I went out to eat last night and I found the tip because..." So that felt really good, but it wasn't until like May when I was like, "That was a really good lesson."

**Classroom Management Competence**

Classroom management can be an extremely important factor in a teacher's feelings of classroom competence. Ms. Walker said she had needed more support with respect to understanding how to set strong expectations at the beginning of the year:

It was hard to know where to set expectations without having any experience. I feel the same about this year, too. There's so many things I would start doing from the beginning that I didn't. It's hard to implement them once you already have routines and people are already comfortable, especially with one class that was particularly challenging. If I had set their expectations and been harsher from the beginning, I think I would have had better results with the classroom management later on, but it's hard to do that once the year has already started. It's hard to go back on what you have already done. That's so important for setting what the whole year is going to be like. . . . It's hard to reestablish, especially with middle-schoolers, who the second you try to implement a rule that wasn't there, they push back. . . . If I had gone back another year, I would have set clear expectations from the beginning, and it would have made it easier.

Ms. Montgomery agreed, saying:

It was still a really overwhelming year. It was overwhelming because I didn't want to look like I didn't know what I was doing, but at the same time, I'm sure there's things I could look back on and be like, "I have no idea why I did that." It seemed like a good idea at the time, but it wasn't. I didn't know any better, but all the teachers said that, objectively, that that class was a tough group of kids to have, and I was like, "Oh, this must be normal." They had a lot of behavior difficulties. So that was a bit of a struggle and my management was not so good at the beginning because I'm kind of a quiet, timid person, so I would just be like, "Guys," so I had to learn to be louder and command the room a little more. So more learning what works, what doesn't work, like the experimenting a bit and then realizing in March like, "Oh, I should've done this," but it's too late at that point to start it so you're waiting for the year to end so you can start fresh and do the things that you wish you had done the year before.
Ms. Walker also suggested that without guidance and support, teachers were left to a trial-and-error process which could be detrimental teacher and the students both:

I thought I was nervous going in. I didn’t know if I had the classroom management skills that would be necessary to manage middle-schoolers. It definitely showed at some points, and then there were moments that were awesome. It was definitely up and down, but overall I felt like the year went well, and I enjoyed being there, and the kids I taught got something out of me teaching them. . . . That’s a big difference. The actual teaching is much easier in high school. It’s much easier to get across what I am trying to teach. . . . It definitely got better. The beginning of the year I felt fairly incompetent, even though I don't think I was, looking back on it now, but in the moment, I didn't feel like I was doing a good job, but it definitely got better. I think it was mostly the classroom management. It wasn't the teaching part of it. I had this great plan for everything that you get done, and then it never got done.

However, Ms. Walker explained that she felt the administration reinforced her disciplinary decisions, which helped her feel that she had made the right choices with students:

Having an administration that backs you up and lets you know that they're going to back you no matter what you do. I’m sure I made some mistakes, but I always felt like they had my back when I did something, and that was extremely helpful. Especially from someone who is unsure about some of the classroom management decisions that I made throughout the year.

Ms. Rendell discussed the difficulty of learning how to manage a classroom in a middle-school environment.

The second you kind of break and give kids a little bit of leeway, if you don't have the kind of classroom management skills to do that, which I didn’t as my first year teaching; oh, my God. Classes went to chaos. Just that classroom management aspect was completely different because they're just not evolved. They’re not mature human beings yet. They have no impulse control. They have no, I don’t know — being able to pick themselves back up. Their emotions are, one second they're happy; the next second they’re angry; the next second they're crying. They'll come and be like, “I’m fighting with so-and-so,” and I say, “Oh, I thought you guys were best friends,” and they tell me “Oh, we haven’t been friends in a week.” I’m so confused. And then you spend your time on your prep period and you’re walking the hall and you see one of your kids crying, and then, you know, not that I’m crying about prep period but you wind up spending a lot of time doing a lot of social–emotional and behavior stuff which I actually like now, but my first year it was like a big “What? What is this?" I think sometimes, some of the kids know that I don’t really have control over them. I can't do anything. I can’t make them or force them to do anything and some kids know that, and that’s what’s really hard. I think in elementary school, that fact hasn’t dawned on them yet, and by the time you get
to high school, a lot of those kids are like, "I know this is still what I’m supposed to be doing. Middle school, they’re playing with the rules and seeing how far they can take things, and what they can get away with, and unfortunately, I think schools nowadays, too, those kids can get away with a lot more, and so I’m seeing that as a challenge. . . .

You have restorative circles and the kids now know to say, “Sorry, I won’t do it again.” Yes, okay, shake hands. At a certain point, it needs to go deeper than that and have some punishment. . . . We have to have the touchy feely stuff again, and it all sounds nice in theory, but when you're trying to get kids to follow certain procedures and rules, and I'm expected to teach them and get them ready for all this testing that they do — when kids can literally walk out of the room and just tell me to go f— myself, and then they’re right back in my room . . . and then when you have a bunch of kids who are in the office sitting there, it turns into a party, and then if you’re going to do detention, well, who’s going to help with the detentions? Is it a teacher? And then if we want to do detentions, we have to do a 24-hour notice and call the parents, so the parents know that they're going to have late bus. . . . We’re just understaffed. We need more people . . . and I’m not trying to throw anyone under the bus, but it doesn’t help because administration is all busy dealing with all these other things, and there’s really no one there to help support the teachers, and yeah, I think it’s really hard. And at a certain point, you just don’t know what to do. What more can I do? What do I need to fix? How do I fix this? Can we fix this? And you always think if there’s a will, there's a way, but how? It can be very daunting, and it can eat you up inside if you let it. You can’t take away all of these resources and all of these things that are in place to help us and then expect us to also be able to teach if you’re taking away every support. They also won’t suspend any kids because that counts against our absences.

Mr. Frank reinforced Ms. Rendell’s comments about how administration handled discipline, explaining:

I feel like there’s a lot of enabling for the students and letting them get away with things, and I went to [this school] years ago, as a student, and I feel like—back then it was not even that bad, and now, actually, in terms of the students, I don’t think they’re really bad kids. I think they’re kids who, for a long, long time, they’ve been able to get away with things, and that's also on the parents, too, but I feel like it’s here, too, not having a culture of, “All right, we understand you're going through things that are socially and emotionally, but we're not going to use that as a crutch or an excuse.” And I think, here, we use it as an excuse not to persevere. . . . We have to be able to give them the mindset of, “Yes, I’m going through this, but we have to push through.” But, I feel we enable them so much. . . . If they have that consistent thing, I feel like it could change, so I feel like that comes from the principal or admin . . . I feel like we’re not working towards any mission or goal, and it’s like, "Make sure the kids aren’t wandering in the classrooms.”

Mr. Willis suggested that administration should spend less time reviewing data and more time checking on teachers and offering assistance:
They need to stop worrying about looking at data all the time, and [start] making sure that those new teachers that are coming in—make sure they’re fine. Go double check. “How are you doing? What’s going on?” Without a computer. “Is there any way I can help you out? Are you having trouble with certain students? This is what I suggest to you”. . . and when you have administrators crunching numbers all the time, which is not a bad thing, but you need to prioritize, think about the grade level you're at, this is a major maturity [problem] 6 to 8.

The Influence of Administration on Teachers’ Feelings of Competence

Administrators can have a profound positive or detrimental influence on new teachers’ feelings of competence. Ms. Rendell indicated that even in moments when she felt confident, an administrator could make one comment that made her question her abilities:

I think sometimes if you're questioned by administration on why you did something, and not always, but especially if an administrator’s having a bad day, too, and they can just make you feel like crap for doing something — last week, none of our language objectives were correct, and even though we’re doing it the right way or how I was taught in grad school, that’s not correct and they’re nitpicking language objectives and nothing I can do is right, but aside from wordsmithing my objectives, [how about] teaching? It’s just frustrating when you’re criticized for things that just seem irrelevant, and that just makes you feel kind of somehow even more downtrodden because it’s like, well, am I actually teaching and doing a good job? Because I thought I was — so give me something that’s going to make me a better teacher. When I was in high school, I got a good education, and not one teacher has ever given me a language objective, a content objective, a daily agenda, or a criteria for success. I don’t think they even gave me rubrics when I was in high school.

Mr. Frank echoed this sentiment:

I do feel competent, but I feel like I wish, being evaluated, there was something substantial, where it’s like, “All right, you can work on this with your students or work on this with your teaching style.” Whereas being evaluated, like last year all I was told was, "Oh, have a word wall in your room.” That was my feedback. And I was like, “How is this helping me as a teacher? I feel like I always want to grow as a teacher, so my thing is I feel that's the inner battle for me: Am I competent enough to do this? Because I don't know if my evaluations are, "You're good. You’re fine.”

Mr. Carlson spoke of how he experienced the same feeling with a previous employer, but with his current employer, the opposite was true:

That's one of the reasons why I left my previous position. I had an administrator—where it was a clashing issue. We just unfortunately would butt heads on different opinions,
[but in my current job] I just remember the first time [my evaluator] came in. It was just a quick 20 minutes—we were going over notes. He left after that, wrote up a good review, great recommendations, and it was just a nice, like breath-of-fresh-air moment. Receiving constructive feedback has been even more of a reason why I enjoy being here.

Mr. Willis also had positive experiences with administrative feedback and coaching even though his two administrators had differing leadership styles. However, he also discussed the stresses the local administration and the state exerted on teachers:

The nice part is my principal. She would actually come in to do an observation and she would set up a meeting after, right after, the next day, “Let’s meet, let’s discuss. This is what I saw, the good and the bad,” and it worked awesome, and then the nice part is she also introduced me to our math coach, and I would always be in that room asking questions—and you know what? She would come in and observe me, and so it was great. I learned a lot, but you know, the freedom aspect of it was not really there. Just because I think they wanted to mold me into the teacher they wanted to see. I have no problem being coached at all. I’m very open to that, and as long as I can have a conversation with admin and push my ideas and they're open to hear it. I don’t care if they say yes or no, as long as they are willing to listen. I think that’s big. . . [The principal] was almost very regimented. I felt like she would walk through the halls and be like, “Alright, ten-hut!” My current principal is friendlier with the students. His demeanor and personality really blend well with most of the staff—and I tell people this all the time—“Go talk to him. He will listen to you, and he will give you [advice],” so it’s two different styles, but also two different demographics. . . . In [previous district], you needed to be that, you needed that structure and it needed to be done this way because you know what? You could lose your classrooms like that. . . . When I took my master’s courses, 2 years ago, they were saying that—close to 50% don’t stay in the field—[certification requirements are] an issue because there's going to be a shortage of teachers and there’s going to be a shortage of good teachers because what’s going to happen is you do your job well, more gets dropped on you, and then you get the emails, and then you start stressing yourself out and then you leave. It happens everywhere, so they need to take some things off. You're requiring a lot of these teachers—I could see maybe some people being hesitant to say, “Oh, there’s so many requirements after so many years. Why am I even doing this? Is it worth me doing?” . . . There are teachers who have been here for 30 years, and the requirements that are needed now—they’re saying, "Why am I doing this?" It's more being added every single year, and less is being taken away. And you know what's not moving? The salary. So, you're putting more on my plate, compensate me for it or take it away, or take things off our plate.

Ms. Rendell indicated that students were the easiest part of teaching and that the pressure that administrators faced forced them to be tough on teachers:
It's all the pressure from administration, what you're supposed to do, and we're a failing school. And we have some of the lowest test results in the state, and what are you doing? It beats you down after a while, and then when you are dealing with kids that are tough. . . I think our school has seen a lack of consistency in discipline. . . And I think a lot of really good teachers are getting pissed off and are going elsewhere. Trying to keep kids in the classroom as much as possible, which I understand in theory, but it’s not necessarily working. [My principal] is not the most tactful person. . . He has the worst delivery and it can really rub people the wrong way.

Mr. Frank spoke of similar circumstances, relaying that in his first year of teaching, administration frequently asked him to handle difficult situations himself while simultaneously blaming him for inadequate classroom management:

The first year for anyone is hard. . . But then it's like, “Okay, handle this yourself.” Then, when there’s issues in the classroom, that first year, it’s like, "What are you doing wrong?” It’s like, okay, I’m not supported. What am I supposed to do? Because I would have 28 or 29 students in one class. . . I’ve definitely gotten used to it and I think I’ve developed confidence with my teaching style, so it’s not as bad, but [there are] still times where it’s overwhelming, not even because of the students but just because you look at the class list and you’re, “How is this supposed to be an intervention class when there’s all these students are jumbled up together?” I didn’t feel very supported.

Mr. Frank further suggested that in a school with a challenging student population, administrators were often overwhelmed by disciplinary matters and had little time to support teachers in the classroom:

I just feel it’s like, “Okay, keep them in the class and that’s it. As long as they're in the class, then you’re doing a good job. . . There’s no advice like, “Oh, you could do this with this specific student.” It’s like they say one thing and then do another, and then it’s like, “Oh, we have nowhere to move them, but when there’s something that happens where a certain student has an issue with someone or two students are ready to fight with them in class, it becomes, "Oh, we have to move them.” It’s like, “We’ll move them once it’s a dire situation.” . . . So, I feel like it’s a lot of excuses, and it’s like, “Oh, for the most part he stays in your class and he doesn’t wander around the building, so, oh, he must be doing . . .” I feel like that doesn’t mean anything. . . He’s still disruptive and disrupting others.

Mr. Frank also mentioned that administration did not observe him enough and seemed to be unaware of what he actually accomplished in his classroom:
I feel like if they actually took the time to figure out what I was doing, I think they’d be like, “Oh, that’s cool. That’s nice.” It’s not that they don’t care, but I don’t think it’s one of their main priorities. . . . Some admins check and say, “Are you good? Are you okay?” Of course, they’re busy, but some check-in would be nice. . . . You wear so many hats within the classroom, where it’s like I can only do so much. You’re the teacher; you’re the disciplinarian; you’re the mother/father in some way. You wear so many hats where it’s like, “All right, where’s the support?”

Ms. Walker suggested that even with quality teachers, administrators were forced to manufacture criticism:

I often felt like when I got observed it was very picky. It would be a lesson that I felt good about. Then I would get feedback and it would be mostly good, but then it would be nitpicking things that I was at the point where if that’s the only thing that was wrong, then I felt pretty good about it. It definitely got frustrating every time to have things that were nitpicked. I think it would have been helpful to have—I always wanted to just have an honest conversation, where someone would just say, “You know what? You’re fine. You’re doing a good job.” It would have been nice. Even something small to have a little bit more encouragement from somebody, especially as a first-year overall teacher where I had nothing to compare it to. I don't even think I was that badly nitpicked. It wasn’t being criticized harshly. It just gets frustrating after a while.

Mr. Frank also lamented that the bulk of the responsibility for success in the classroom was put on teachers, but added that the decisions made by administration had a significant impact on outcomes:

It's a battle every day, where it’s you putting one fire out and another there, and then when everything’s going well, it’s like, “All right.” You have to put in that effort all of the time, and I know that's what teaching is, but if the class sizes were smaller for everyone, I feel that it would be easier. . . . I feel like—that’s not conducive [to learning].

Ms. Montgomery said she had positive relationships with her department head and administrators, which made her feel more at ease about experimenting:

My department head . . . as long as you're not saying you're going to just have them do worksheets every single day, she's down to try new things. She always wants to come see them, see how it's going, and see what works well. She has a pretty open mind about those things, too, which makes me feel like I can kind of try something and if it doesn't go well, then the next day I'll be like, "Okay, let's try this again." I just love my administrators, too, so they were always pretty much the same as my department heads. They were very, I guess clinical is the word, so if they were looking at classroom management, that's what they would look at. Then if they were looking at whatever the
next standard was, like a well-planned lesson, they'd say, "You did have a well-planned lesson. Execution wasn't so good, but it was proficient planning wise. So that was okay." They kind of like looked at things very objectively and according to what the standard says and that sort of thing, so they were also good at giving suggestions and things to try. I felt like I could go ask them questions if I was like, "I don't know what to do about this kid. What could I do?" They're very nonthreatening in giving you feedback.

Ms. Montgomery also expressed that she appreciated the initiatives put forward by administration in her school because they were helpful in the classroom:

Yeah, I mean, we always have—I know everyone talks about schools always have too many initiatives and stuff like that, which can be frustrating, but our principal and our vice principals, I think it's probably coming from the district. We spend 1 year learning about [universal design for learning] and they'd encourage you and show different ways to try [universal design for learning] in your classroom. Then, we did [positive behavior interventions & supports] and learned different ways to put that in your classroom, so it seems like each year they're trying to expose you to new things that you can try in your room so it's not always the same and so that you can adapt and say, "This worked for me. This didn't work for me." They're kind of showing you a bunch of different things.

**The Influence of Mentors on Teachers’ Feelings of Competence**

When discussing the influence of mentors on feelings of competence, all teachers felt that both formal and informal mentor relationships had value. Mr. Willis said he used both formal and informal mentors frequently as issues arose both inside and outside the classroom:

I go to mentors a lot. I'll speak to a mentor. I'll speak to a principal. I speak to them probably once a day with things that just come to my mind, and it doesn’t hurt because somewhere down the line, something's going to happen. For example, there was a parent email that I got, and the way I approached it was a little aggressive, and I said, "Hey, just read this over." Turned it around, made it more reasonable for a response. So that’s how I see mentoring, instead of: “How should I teach this?” It’s not about classroom management, not so much anymore. At the beginning, yes. What do you advise when a student does this? Now that I've seen a lot of repetitive behaviors, I know how to handle them pretty well. I’d also go in and talk to [my principal] and say, "Hey, can I run this by you quickly?" Mentor meetings were more of your day-to-day, like computer—logistics, and then there was also your evidence—that was the evaluation . . . in my eyes, I feel like, in a group setting, if you have five [content area] teachers, they should all be talking. I'd rather talk to my one-on-one about evaluation, too.

Mr. Frank, however, said he relied on informal mentorships much more than the formal mentorships arranged by the school district:
We had mentors, but it was just a checklist of things. I would say [what was most helpful] was just getting more used to the building and having conversations with other teachers, and also being part of [a team of people who do the same job]. Being able to see those teachers do either very good things or things like, "Wait, that doesn't work." I think that helped me, and also talking to specific [content area] teachers. Last year there was a teacher who was very, I would say, controversial in the way she would go about things, but her passion was there and . . . her expectations that she demanded from her students were there, and that really rubbed off on me, even this year with [teacher name redacted] and [other teacher name redacted], and seeing them do what they do . . . I feel I've seen them do what they do in their classrooms and how hard they work, and the expectations they have for their students. I feel like talking to them and just being in their classrooms from time to time, that's rubbed off, and I would say they support me whenever I would need help. . . . People who are passionate and care about the students, because I feel like that's the heart of it. . . . My official mentor was very nice and would give me teacher supplies and things like that, but in terms of advice or things like that, there were little to no things, and even when I would ask about it, it'd be like, "Oh yeah, do this and then it'll work out eventually." Other than that, it was "Let's check what we did. Do you need this? Do you need that? All right, we're good to go," and occasional gossip. Even after the second year, there was none of that, so that's why I feel it was so impactful to have the [other teachers]. It felt more like mentoring than the actual, official mentoring. . . . So, I feel like I was thankful for the informal mentoring because that's when I feel like I did my learning and could do better and have a chance to mess up, but also have a chance to fix it with another person. Whereas, the official mentor was just—she was very nice but not much in terms of helping me grow as a teacher. [They could] assign a veteran teacher but have them do some kind of required observation with the mentor/mentee and then one person from admin, maybe one to two weeks do some kind of meeting where they meet up and say, "How are you doing? How are you feeling? What's going on with your thought process?" At least if you started that with people who are new to the building, or first-time teaching, at least they would feel like they are supported because whether or not . . . it's not going to be easy that first year, but at least if you feel supported, at least there's something there.

Ms. Montgomery spoke about how formal and informal mentors each had something different to offer:

I think just observing other teachers was really helpful for me. Watching what they do or even just watching them in the hallway, how they interact with kids in the hall or occasionally being like, "Oh, I have to go bring this across the hall," and give them whatever I need to and watch what they're doing and just observing other teachers. I think it's really helpful because even just talking about it in a classroom management class, every situation is so different that it's hard to say, "When this happens, do this. When this happens, do that." Because for some kids that might work. For some kids, that might not work, so it was just really helpful watching other teachers teach the kids that I have. Watching them do that or watching them just teach other students and seeing how they handled certain situations. That was really helpful. . . . My mentor was a seventh
The grade math teacher, so it was useful bouncing ideas off of her, but it was almost—what was more useful was the informal mentors, like the other sixth grade math teacher or the other teachers on my team or my department head because the other sixth grade math teacher, she was helpful for planning curriculum things. But in terms of seeing someone every single day, because I didn't see her every day, the other teachers around me were really helpful, watching them model things and seeing how they interacted, so it was helpful learning from them from a professional standpoint, like how to be a professional teacher without focusing on the content so much. My mentor was really helpful for focusing on the content.

Ms. Montgomery said she also found her department head and coteacher to be very effective unofficial mentors on matters of content but not with respect to classroom management:

I felt like some things I was good at, and I felt like the things I wasn't good at I could get better at. Maybe one of the other issues was growth mindset. I just love my department head, so she's always very much like, especially my first year, she'd always come in and check in on me, but it never felt like she was second guessing me or anything or checking up on me. More just like checking in on me. Like, "Are you doing okay?" She'd just kind of walk through for like 15 minutes and leave, and then if she felt like there was something—she addressed it in a very nonthreatening way. We'd meet and she'd say, "How about you try this? How about you try that?" I felt like when I did try new things, I would get better, so yeah, content wise I was like, "This is fine." Management wise, I felt not so good, but I can get better because I know this is what I want to do, so I'm sure there's got to be a way I can get better at this. I just gotta kind of figure out what works for me. I had a coteacher in two of my classes... so she would also give me suggestions like, "Hey, why don't we try this? Why don't we try that?"

A few teachers found their respective official mentor programs to be very helpful, albeit flawed. Mr. Carlson explained that his official mentor was helpful in a variety of ways:

I just remember the teachers who were here early, getting their classrooms set up, just being overwhelmingly helpful, guiding me in the right direction, getting me on my feet, giving me a little bit of insights, some helpful tips about the first couple of days with lockers, seating arrangements, all the little stuff that may not be taught or may not be experienced in an undergrad position or a graduate position. Once we had gotten started with our department meetings, we met once a week, every Monday to go over curriculum, go over planning to plan out our entire year. We sat down with my department head, got everything organized right away, which was helpful for me because I like going into something and having a plan for it... talking with staff about questions like, "How should I break down grading of the quarter? How should I rearrange my seats in the classroom? Hey, you got a couple of kids who are—do you have an idea for—being able to get input from somebody who's already done it, was able to help me. The
A mentor program has been a big help. My mentor has just been, whatever you need, ask, and we'll help you out... and everybody's just got everybody's back, which has been great. He’s been over-the-top helpful... right when I first started out, he threw himself at anything I needed for assistance. Sat us down, we all got organized. We made a plan to meet once a week. I think it's definitely beneficial to also have our mentor meetings, but I do wish there were a couple more—just to hear from the other teachers what everybody else is experiencing. I like hearing what other teachers might be having challenges with in their classrooms so that if somebody else comes up with a good solution for it, I can be like, all right, I’m going to save that for when it happens in my own classroom. It's just overall a great feeling to know that there [are] other teachers who are also in the [same situation]. I love it because you know what? Not everyone’s perfect. We need to get better at it.

Ms. Walker pointed out the importance of having a mentor in close proximity so that he or she could help address issues in the moment:

My mentor last year was awesome. He was a very experienced teacher that ran a really good classroom and did everything great. The problem was that we were so far away physically that I feel like I never actually talked to him about any of the problems that I can up with in the moment. A lot of my day-to-day problems. I went to the [content area] teacher that I was with or somebody else on my team instead of going to the person that was paid to mentor me. This year my mentor and I share a room, and I feel like I ask her everything. She’s right there. I ask her five questions a day about something that comes up. I can ask it in the moment, and she’s also there. She has some free periods while I am teaching, so she is informally observing me every day and can give me tips. I think that was a place that it really lacked last year. No matter how good the mentor was, it wasn’t in a position where he could actually help me. We were just too far apart... It's just more for those day-to-day small questions that come up that I kept to myself last year, and this year I feel like I am asking all of them. It’s a huge difference having a mentor that is with you all the time. It's not always logistically easy to do that, but it makes a huge difference. Am I going to go at the end of the week and remember every question that I thought of that week? Probably not. At the end of the lesson this year, I’ll say, “While I was doing this, what could I have done better?” and she's just telling me, and it makes a very big difference. I think the mentoring program is really good, mostly because I’m somebody who would be hesitant to ask a lot of questions if I felt I was being a burden to somebody. Knowing someone is getting paid to answer my questions is a good feeling. As a first-year teacher, I would have never gone to the person that was my mentor last year had I not known that, that it was his job to do that. All the teachers I work with are nice. I'm sure they would all love to answer questions if I had them, but it’s nice to have a program that is specifically designed where you can ask questions without feeling like you’re bothering somebody. The fact that it’s there, and that’s her job is nice. It’s a good thing.
Ms. Montgomery stressed that formal mentor meetings had their benefits but could also be more targeted to the immediate needs of teachers:

All the mentors would come [to the monthly mentor meeting] and all the new teachers would come. Then, they'd talk about different strategies or that kind of thing, so that was helpful—even just talking to other new teachers to see how they're feeling, make sure you're not the only one who's feeling the way you are. It would have been helpful if those meetings talked a little bit more about management because I feel like the meetings were helpful, but they talked a little bit more about loftier things like [universal design for learning] and things like that, which at the time, you're like, "That seems like a great idea, but I can't get this kid to just sit down and do his work, so I don't know what to do," so a little more like practical, simple skills would have been helpful.

Family Support

Mr. Willis had the benefit of having two close family members who were in the education profession. He explained how this provided added support:

The nice part is that my mother has been in education for 20-something years, and my uncle just retired after 35 years, so I did have a background, I had a support system at home that I could say—could run ideas by them. I feel like having my mom and my uncle to guide me, they always had that teacher background, even prior to me getting into education, so it kind of put me, even prior, going through school and college and my first place in the business world, I kind of always had those teacher competencies, so I feel like that's why it's like, I don't see a big change [in my teaching] over 4 years. It's more like a change over just my generations going through the school system because I had my mom and my mom was home all the time. My dad was always working two or three jobs, so my uncle always stopped by. They all live close, within five blocks. All these teacher mentalities were always instilled in me at an early age. . . . The support systems are big. I feel that's everywhere. If you don't have a support system, people you can talk to—you need a support system because you need people to build you up when you’re down and motivate you to keep going.

The Effect of Teacher Preparation Programs on Teachers’ Feelings of Competence

In a variety of contexts, all of the teachers spoke of experience in schools and classrooms as more valuable than teacher-preparation coursework. Ms. Rendell, when asked how her first full year would have gone without her short-term experience to guide her, stated that it would have been “a disaster.” She continued:
We’ve had such turnarounds. We’ve had a lot of teachers who have come in, and this was their first position, and they have just been eaten alive. Completely eaten alive—coming from being a long-term sub in an inner-city school and seeing what some of the kids there do and hearing stories where I’ve had students, one student who killed another student and another student who was killed, so coming into middle school it was like, oh, these kids are, this is a lot easier, but I think, again, I don't think I was too ill prepared because of my background, but I think it took me a good little bit of time to figure out how to deal with the middle-school students and best discipline and classroom management. That took me a couple months to figure out. Almost a full year probably—I went to [university name redacted] and everything was hunky dory, and a lot of the theories that we studied, and a lot of the best practices—even though they talked about how they used them in some tougher schools where it's lower socioeconomic backgrounds—maybe if you were an experienced teacher, you could do that, but as a first-year teacher, I felt like I was completely unprepared because I was just told to—everything was about—keeping the peace and making sure students’ feelings were taken into consideration—it wasn’t anything practical for me, and I felt like that was really missing . . . instead of just being like, well, how are you feeling today? You need to know more. Should I take him out in the hall? Do I just call the office? What do I do? How do I deescalate this? There was not too much of that. There wasn’t really any fieldwork. . . . I think I got a lot of it because I had worked in schools before. . . . I did my practicum at [school name redacted] and it was really good. It was great, but it was also—the school was very tightly run; in terms of behaviors, it was very good.

Mr. Frank also described his university coursework as not useful because it provided more theoretical knowledge than practical know-how for the classroom:

I went to [university name redacted], and I took the education classes, and—to be honest, I don’t think they helped very much at all. Of course, there were specific terms and things, the educational terms, and that’s nice and everything, but when I did my student teaching, especially here [at his current school], it was completely different. I feel like, with those educational classes, they more-so talked about what a potential classroom could look like, and we weren’t out there seeing it, besides maybe doing our observation hours, and even then it's completely different from you standing in front of students . . . you're taking notes and observing . . . it’s another level when it’s your actual classroom, and it's actually much harder than student teaching. . . . I wish there was somehow—I don’t know if we could go into schools and do a demo or something like that where we could have maybe a small group of students and just try because even when we did demos within our class for students within our class, other college students, it never felt the same because it's completely different. Of course, everyone's going to listen, of course everyone's going to be attentive. I just feel like it wasn't a realistic experience, whereas I wish there was more time for us to actually go into this building and like, “All right. Go ahead and try.” Because I feel like that's the only way I learned with student teaching. . . . "All right. Try this and fail, and then see how you can make it better.” [At the university level], it’s just talking about it . . . it didn't feel very enlightening. . . . I feel like I was not prepared for student teaching, and then you get thrown into it . . . I was
learning the ropes in student teaching, and then trying to apply what I learned, and it still wasn’t enough.

Mr. Carlson said his only classroom management preparation was embedded in a literacy course:

It's been a complete one-eighty since the start of the school year. I previously had worked at my afterschool program’s summer camp for years as a counselor, for years as a director, so what's nice is, I feel from working there, I have a good sense of being able to judge—judgment for disciplinary issues within the class and being able to handle the students. [The university] offered a course which involved a lot of classroom management. It was my literacy course. She was a great professor, and that had a field study as well. The requirements were a lot of classroom management focus on how to set up—what's the procedure for students when they enter the room? What does it look like when they’re working, when you’re ready to get everyone’s attention, all of this little stuff? [Working at a] summer camp helped with that, too, like little callbacks . . . that's also helped with a large group settings and small group settings in my classroom, so a combination of both my schooling and my previous work [helped me].

Ms. Walker also explained that the university programs failed to prepare students to apply what they learned but also noted that she was learning on the job because her first year counted as her student teaching. She said:

I didn't initially plan on going to middle school. All of college, I thought I would teach high school, then I didn't end up doing student teaching. I technically student-taught through my middle-school teaching last year. I didn't have a ton of experience at either level and was open to whatever job I would be hired in. To be honest, [I didn’t feel] very well prepared. I feel like it was probably because I didn’t student teach, and I think that’s a unique case for me, but I learned significantly more in 1 week of teaching than I did in education classes in college. I don’t really know what to do differently in college. I mean, education classes are what they are for now. I learned more in a week of teaching than I did [in college]. I think a lot of education classes aren’t extremely practical. A lot of time is spent on writing formal lesson plans, which I haven’t written in 2 years. I know how to plan an effective lesson without writing formal lesson plans. I think that’s a good skill to have, but do we need to spend an entire course learning how to write a lesson plan? Probably not. I think there are just ways to make it more practical. I took one course where we did a lot of mock lessons in front of our peers, and you had to plan a lesson and teach it. That was probably the course I got the most out of. . . . Another thing a lot of the education classes I took were geared towards elementary education majors, or if it was secondary, it was geared towards a lot of reading and writing and English. The strategies you use to teach [English language learners] in and English class is a lot different from strategies you use to teach [English language learners] in a math class. In the [sheltered English immersion] course I took, I don't think I got one effective strategy
that I used in math. I learned more about teaching [English language learners] in a
classroom than I have in a course.

Ms. Montgomery concurred, expressing that teaching is a balance between the theoretical
and the practical:

It was also a struggle to balance the theory learned in grad school versus the practical
applications. Like grad school is all about, "Let's help a kid get a deeper understanding,
and this and that," and it almost made me feel like any sort of procedural practice was
bad, but I had to kind of overcome that to realize there's a time for both and it's okay to
do some procedural practice. It's good and it's okay to do some of the deeper concept
practice. You’ve got to balance both. . . . In undergrad we didn't really cover much
management. . . . I remember talking to a professor about it and she's like, "Well, if you
just make it interesting, you won't have to manage." I said, "Well, it's math." I love math,
but I know not everybody does, so I don't know how interesting. Then, in grad school,
we had to take a management class, but that management focused more on special
education students, which was useful, but when I have the general population, I still feel
like I don't know. I experimented with so many things my first year like three strikes or .
. . that kind of thing, so I didn't feel super prepared that way.

Mr. Willis offered the perspective of someone who had changed careers and had no
education background, other than his upbringing in a family of educators, explaining:

I had previous background, not in education, but in management and talking to people, so
it helped me those 4 years, but I can see someone coming out of school and being like,
“Oh my goodness, what did I get myself into?” . . . While I was working at the [business
name redacted], I was doing my MTELs [exams for teacher certification] every year—
every year I was promoted; I was doing well. . . . It took me about 3 years to finally get
my certification, and then once I finally passed my final MTEL, I started to apply, and I
actually gave my 1 week’s notice because the school year was starting in September. . . .
They call me all the time like, “When are you coming back?” and I say, “Never.” Then
after—I taught in [school district] for that first year, and then when I moved here, my
year-2 in education, I started taking my master’s . . . even for my master’s, I had no idea.
I was on my own, looking things up—that path for those who did not go to undergrad for
education, they’re on their own, they need to figure it out, and it can be stressful. . . .
Luckily I had my mom and my uncle who could advise me. . . . I’ve coached youth
basketball, ran the basketball program for parks and rec, so I had management style for
kids at that age.
The Effect of Self-Criticism on Teachers’ Feelings of Competence

Some participants admitted that their feelings of incompetence were self-created rather than based on others’ outward criticisms. Ms. Rendell described an ongoing inner dialogue based on her perceived performance, saying:

I think every year I feel more and more confident. I think when you start out teaching, you realize just how little you know and how you actually know nothing. You are just constantly reminded of how much you need to figure out. You are relearning yourself, and I think a lot of teaching is also, trial-and-error, because every book is going to tell you how to do it this way. It’s just all these different ways of doing things, and you don’t know what’s going to work for you. . . . It depends on your style of teaching, and you have to do a lot of, “I’m going to try this and I’m going to fail,” and I have to be okay with knowing I’m going to fail, and that failing is a possibility, a very real possibility. That being said, this is my third year, and I still know nothing, you know? If you look at me now, where I was 3 years ago, I think I’ve grown infinitely, leaps and bounds, but I think I will have so much more to figure out.

Mr. Frank spoke about the importance of having a growth mindset so as to learn from his mistakes and rebound quickly:

Of course, there are times when I’m stressful and think, for me, it’s when a kid's disruptive in class or the class didn’t go as planned, but I think for me it’s, I'll be upset or down about it for—it’s not to the point where, "This sucked. This lesson sucked.” I'll be down on myself for a day, and then the next day for me, it’s like—this [next lesson] gives you the opportunity to change that.

Most of Ms. Montgomery’s coworkers and administrators were kind and constructive in their criticism; she explained that she was most critical of herself:

[I am mostly] self-critical. I mean, there were obviously a few times when my department head would say, "Why did you do that? Maybe a better idea would be this." She always said it so nicely that it didn't seem like it was coming from a critical place. Yeah, it didn't feel like she was like, "Oh, [name redacted] really blew that." It didn't feel like that, so I'm sure there was some coming from the outside because people would give me like hints or things you could try, this, that, but I think most of the judgment came from within myself, whereas most of the helpful suggestions came from outside from others.
Conclusion

When discussing their own feelings of competence in the classroom, participants reported very similar experiences. Most of the teachers felt very competent in their subject area, although some were not as confident with a specific grade level or current methodology. Those who were not confident, however, seemed to build confidence over the span of the first year. Classroom management was an area of greater difficulty for all participants. Many expressed feeling unprepared and unsupported in their efforts to establish and then enforce classroom expectations, and most stated that theirs was a trial-and-error system that helped them determine what worked best in the end. That said, both formal and informal mentors proved helpful in their efforts. The middle-school model, which involves teams of teachers working together with the same population of students, was also cited as supportive of teacher competence because it gave teachers ample opportunity to discuss specific students they had in common and problem-solve together. The opportunity to observe and learn from other teachers was extremely valuable to all teachers, with most suggesting that they learned more from informal mentors than they did from any formal mentoring program. Nevertheless, they found the formal mentoring helpful with logistical concerns or subject content.

Participants reported that they found their administration helpful but prone to unconstructive criticism. They also described a lack of support that undercut feelings of competence, especially when administrators’ actions or words contradicted or subverted the teacher’s actions or words. Several teachers perceived administrators as overwhelmed by disciplinary matters and inclined to favor teachers who could manage their own classrooms without extra support. Participants also generally noticed an administrative deference to trauma-sensitive or positive behavior systems that result in students rarely receiving any significant
consequence for inappropriate or unacceptable behaviors. As a result, students returned unpunished soon after incidents, which seemed to project that no matter what the teacher said in the classroom, no serious repercussions would be incurred. This dynamic made teachers feel frustrated and incompetent at classroom management. Some teachers, however, reported feeling supported by their administrators when taking disciplinary action, and these teachers responded most positively when asked about school culture and climate. Other teachers, however, admitted that a significant amount of the criticism they felt was self-inflicted. They either read a possibly nonexistent subtext into an administrator’s words or actions or were just more dissatisfied with themselves than others might have been under similar circumstances. Following a perceived inadequacy, teachers spoke of self-deprecation, but they also described moving past the negative experience, learning from it, and trying for future improvement.

All teachers who attended a university education program spoke of a lack of coursework geared toward the practicalities of teaching in an actual classroom. Participants found student teaching to be insufficient preparation that varied widely based on who was chosen as their cooperating teacher. Several teachers completed student teaching during their first year of teaching, as they did not complete coursework at the undergraduate level. All participants reported learning most of what they needed to know through their first 2 years on the job through trial-and-error or by watching other teachers, good and bad. Most feelings of incompetence centered on lack of experience in front of students.

**Relatedness**

According to Deci and Ryan (2002), in addition to autonomy and competence, people need to also feel related to or connected to others. Simply put, people need other people. One study showed that teachers placed relatedness second to competence in priority (Aldrup et al.,
The same study found that emotional exhaustion was higher when teachers did not feel competent, but work enthusiasm rose when teachers felt more related to students and colleagues. Furthermore, less experienced teachers were more likely to feel emotionally exhausted when their relatedness needs were not met (Aldrup et al., 2016). Thus, teachers in their first years are especially vulnerable to decreased job satisfaction when they do not feel related to others in their schools.

**Relatedness to Coworkers and School Culture**

All participants stressed the importance of feeling connected to their coworkers, even if those coworkers formed just a small group within an otherwise deficient school culture. Several teachers said sharing and venting of frustrations with coworkers was essential to staying positive. Ms. Rendell spoke of coworkers who offered praise when administration or students were not giving positive feedback or were critical: “I think—finding a couple of teachers who are going to be your support, and be like, ‘You know what? You did a good job today.’ That can help.”

Mr. Frank said his end-of-day ritual of communing with coworkers helped to alleviate any negative feelings he might otherwise have carried into his home life:

“I hang out with [teachers] just as peers to debrief after school and just talk about what the students didn't do or what staff member said this. Just a debrief of taking all that. My first year, I would bring things home to grade and stuff like that—and that didn’t help at all. Now I have my certain teacher–friend group, and I am not bringing the stresses home.

Ms. Montgomery agreed that commiserating with colleagues about the day’s difficulties helped to reduce feelings of stress:

I mean, just talking to my coworkers in sixth grade is really good. We all eat lunch together, which is nice. Kind of just the time to either vent or talk about something completely different from school. We always have a lot of fun. So that's good. Or if I do have a class that was particularly difficult that day, I can go to my sixth-grade counterparts’ room and just be like, “Can I just vent for 5 minutes?” And she's like, "Okay," and we close the door. Then it's over and we move on, which is really helpful. . .
I think the team model, at least at my middle-school is helpful because you—me and the social studies teacher or science teacher or English teacher, we all have the same kids, so I can go talk to them and be like, "Hey, did you have this issue in your class today? Did you call home about this one? I'm going to call," so you feel you have something to talk about because you have all the same kids. It's easy to start up a conversation or just have something to talk about with them, so that's helpful. Plus, since we're on a team, all our classrooms are really close to each other, so in passing time, we're all out there supervising, making sure things are okay, chatting about the last class, and then getting to our next class.

Mr. Carlson indicated that the helpfulness and support of his coworkers contributed to the overall culture of the school and his positive feelings about his workplace:

I just remember the teachers who were here early as well, getting their classroom set up, just being overwhelmingly helpful, guiding me in the right direction, getting me up on my feet, giving me a little bit of insights, some helpful tips about the first couple of days with lockers, seating arrangements, all the little stuff that may not be taught or may not be experienced in an undergrad position or graduate position. Then, as the school year went on, it was just this warm, welcome feeling by the staff, whether you've been here for 20 years or were new. We were all on the same page that, okay, we're in this school year together. . . . My lead teacher has also been a fantastic role model, and that's pretty much carried on throughout the entire year. I tell my friends and family at home all the time how just welcome and happy I feel coming into work. Not only from the staff but the kids that are here, too. My relationship with my mentor has been great. He's been over-the-top helpful. All the team leaders were extremely helpful. . . . Everyone was looking out for one another. There's something about the middle-school sphere. . . . I think that it allows for time to be able to really connect with the other teachers that they work with. . . . It's just been a very pleasant surprise that all of those worries at the very beginning of the school year, of being like, you're not qualified for this, somebody's going to come up to you and be like . . . "Hey, you're doing a great job. We're happy to have you."

Mr. Willis spoke of how his outgoing personality enabled him to make connections with other people in both of the schools that employed him:

As a new teacher, if you don't have connections with people on your team or more specifically in your department, it was like, seriously, good luck to you. You're on your own. Luckily, at both schools, I’ve had the support systems. I have a very strong personality, so I am not afraid to go out and ask questions, where I can see if someone’s very shy or reserved—I can’t see them maybe even leaving their classroom after a couple of months. I’d seen that at my first job. There was this one teacher who would just sit in his classroom, do his work, not talk to anyone at the printer, and I would be like, “Do you need help with anything?” and he said, “No, I’m good,” so I mean, those types of relationships, I think, play a big part, especially as a first-year teacher, and I was a career
change. The support systems are big. I feel that's everywhere. If you don't have a support system, people you can talk to, I mean—in refereeing [a sport], we're under the microscope all the time, we're being videotaped and critiqued and [there are] coaches yelling at us, and fans hate us. You make one bad call, it could be the end of your career, so I've learned that you need a support system because you need people to build you up when you’re down and motivate you to keep going. I was extremely connected to my team in the bigger school [because they were the only ones near me]—but in a small school setting like this, I'm everywhere. I like to see people. I want to talk to pretty much everyone. I want to make people comfortable, and I try to do that, but it's difficult in a big school. . . . It also comes down to the people you are working with. You might not get the outgoing and the people that are looking to really know people outside of work. I think it's important to know people's backgrounds because you can have a sense of them, you can relate to them, and then you can see how they teach. I think your lifestyle also affects the way you teach. . . . I feel like it also comes down to administrators, too. If your staff is working for you, they're going to enjoy their job, they're going to be looking to connect. When I was in [my previous district], some people were rubbed the wrong way by the administrator there and would just stay in their classrooms and didn't want to be seen or looked at, so I think that creates a big role as far as connections.

Ms. Walker also commented on how the size of the school might factor into how many connections could be made as well as the team structure of middle school:

I don't know if it's the nature of it being a small school, and I also really liked being on a team of seven teachers where I felt like there was a group that I saw every day. That made a difference in how close I felt to the people I was around. Whereas, this year [at a high school], everyone has a different prep period, everyone eats lunch in a different place, and the school is 10 times as big. Last year [at the middle-school], I felt much more a part of a community, and I felt like I developed good relationships with the people I worked closely with, especially compared to this year where it’s just the nature of it is more spread out. You find a couple of people that you work well with and that’s the extent of it. Having the same prep time as the other math teacher to plan a unit makes a big difference, whereas I don’t have that this year. Scheduling time for teachers, especially new teachers to meet with people teaching the same thing, or even on the same team teaching the same students, is really nice. It doesn’t happen everywhere. . . . I didn't think about it last year [at the middle-school], but I’ve noticed it now, that there’s no one to talk to about students when you teach high school because all of my friends, all of the people I work with don't have the students that I have. It makes a big difference to talk to students' teachers about what they see in their classes. I haven’t talked about a student with anyone this year, really. I think that's something that connects teachers. You have something in common in middle-school, and in high school you don't have that at all. I think it was good for me to talk to other teachers about the students I had, and it was something that brought a group of teachers together as you share these people in common.
Mr. Frank suggested that even a smaller school can make one feel isolated if the overall culture does not support connectivity:

It felt like I was on an island, to be honest with you, because I feel like even when I see teachers who come here, this is their first year, not even their first teaching but their first year here, I feel like a lot of them are on this island where people are saying, "Oh, feel free to ask me any questions," but then when it comes to the dog days of the school year, I guess everyone’s on an island, but I feel like specifically for people who are new here, it’s almost like, “Well, how do we feel supported here? I definitely felt that my first year. I guess everyone gets busy within teaching, but I don't think, if it's a community, I don’t think people were very supportive. I felt like I had no one, and I guess that goes with getting to know people better also, but I feel like knowing these people now, I feel supported by a small group of people. Some have said to me that I should apply [for a better position within the district because there are openings], but seeing other teachers and having the experience of not being supported myself—I don’t say anything, but in my head I am thinking, "Why would I do that if I already know I am not supported here?"

Then, [with the new position] there are [more] eyes on you, and it's determined by your scores and all that. It's like, I don't think I would want my fresh start here if I wanted [that kind of position]. You're on this team. You have a team, but it never feels like that . . . at least I have enough respect or care to say, “All right, we feel like your class is going this way. Here's how we could help you.” . . . It felt more like “Oh, this class is awful," or you just hear rumblings or backhanded comments like, “Is this student supposed to be doing this? Is this student supposed to be doing that?” Why don't you help me and give me pointers or tips on it instead of just being catty about it? . . . I think it made me do worse, to be honest, because I was self-conscious, and the classes were still awful, so I didn’t feel supported that way. . . . It feels cliquish sometimes. How do you invite people to go out for drinks and food, but then you don’t even say “hi” to me for 5 days or I’ll pass by you and you barely say good morning? Why would I want to spend my free time with you if you don't interact with me within school? I feel like, the people that do hang together, tend to share the same feelings and thoughts about this school. . . . There's zero culture here. There's no culture at all. Whereas I feel there are other schools—there is a least morning rallies that get everyone motivated and things like that. There is nothing here. . . . I feel like if we don’t build that culture in, I don't think people are going to be motivated to stay, whereas if it feels like we’re all one family . . . I feel like that's sometimes not realistic, but at least make it a place where—I feel like some people like coming here, and others are miserable coming here to work, and I feel like that could change if the school culture changed, but it’s let’s survive with the kids, let’s make it through another day. I don’t think it's a healthy mindset.

Ms. Montgomery saw some of the same dynamics in one of the schools she worked in but noted the contrast in the other:

I always compare it with where I was student teaching. That kind of gave me a—sad is not the word, but kind of a down version. Like no one said “hi” to each other in the
hallways. At lunch, teachers would eat together, but no one acknowledged that I was sitting there, and that sort of thing, so I just kind of felt like I was like—so, I just felt like, "Maybe this is just how it is." I was only there for like half a year, so maybe I missed out. I could have totally been oblivious, but even just to hear the other teachers talk. They'd be like, "That principal doesn't do anything, blah blah blah. That's not helpful, this and that." I was like, "Is this how it's always going to be? Okay." My school is different now, so it just feels a lot more settled, which I think helps me feel a lot better. They're like, "Okay, I can handle this. Everything's fine. I like going there,"—that kind of thing—but then at my school now, everybody says “hi” to you in the hallway, everyone asks how you're doing. Even teachers, like sixth grade is down stairs, seventh and eighth grade are upstairs. Even if you pass them in the office or whatever, they're like, "Hey, how's it going. Blah blah blah." It was really helpful. Our principal at staff meetings always makes it a point to start off with a celebration, and then people raise their hands and are like, "My kid went to college," or whatever. They share things about themselves, which is really nice, so the leadership in my school does a good job of helping people feel comfortable around each other.

Coworkers Who Are Not a Fit for Middle School

When asked to talk or speculate about why coworkers have left teaching at the middle school, participants gave a range of responses, but many spoke of a specific type of personality that seemed common to middle-school teachers. Mr. Carlson mentioned that some teachers did not participate in fun activities with students:

I think you might see some tension where—maybe some teachers, “Well, I was just out there doing this and you were sitting there off to the side, just watching.” There's definitely, of course, a time and place, and teachers are in their own comfort zones. I feel like, for the most part, teachers are willing to jump in and have that little bit of a silly side with them and step out of their comfort zones.

Mr. Frank agreed that a teacher's personality needs to match the grade level that he or she teaches, but also suggested that some teachers might have personality conflicts with urban and diverse school populations:

If you're going to work in the middle school, you have got to be quirky and crazy, just like middle schoolers. I think we all have a little bit of it, and I think definitely the only hard part about connecting with other teachers might be if it's just like an extra oomph isn't there. So maybe there's a little bit of a disconnect. Middle-school teachers should be a little childish, in a sense, because middle-schoolers are still childish. Maybe this just wasn’t their demographic—like an urban school with—because I feel like there are teachers who can teach, but it depends on the specific population. I feel like
that's another [reason] where they get a new job somewhere else. I feel like it's more a population thing, where this is not their bread and butter, and I get it. It's not easy sometimes.

Ms. Montgomery concurred with the assumption that the specific population of students was not a match for some teachers but added that, in her school, the larger dilemma could be the higher rate of English language learners and emotionally disturbed students. She said:

We do have a difficult population, so I know for some, is just that. They like the principal, they like this, but just the population's not right for them, so I know for some people, that's difficult. . . . I think they just realized, "This is not what I want to do," and have gone elsewhere. I feel like there were a couple that maybe—yeah, there were a couple that decided, "We're just going to do something else." That's fine that they realize it sooner than later, so there have been a couple who've done that, but there's more the ones who have left have gone to different districts with different populations. I think a lot of it probably does have to do with management. We have a lot of students who come from homes where their parents might not be around a lot, so there isn't a lot of management at home, which translates into making management at school a little more difficult. We have a very high [English language learner] population, and most of the students who are very low [English language learners], which can be no matter how hard they're trying, it's hard to get past that, too, so I think that's a little difficult for people. We do have an EBDV group at our school—Emotional Behavior Disorder—some of the behavior can be very extreme, and I don't know if that's a lot for some people, too, so I think it's mostly the management that's been tough on making people want to go other places. Yeah, and then also, sometimes it doesn't feel like you get a lot of support from home, either. There are some parents who feel that when they're at school, it's completely the teacher's issue, so if some parents are being called and then saying, "I don't know what you want me to do about this. They're at school. You take care of it." I know that's really frustrating for some. It is frustrating for me, too, but I think that's frustrating for teachers because they feel like their hands are tied. There's only so much you can do at school, and then at home, you're not getting any support either, so it feels like there's nowhere else to go from there.

Mr. Willis, who does not work in a diverse district, posited that some secondary teachers might be more suited to high school than middle school, as they do not adjust their lessons to the developmental level of a middle-schooler. He said:

I'm thinking of a teacher who would be a better fit for high school than middle-school, and the reason is that the expectations they have in their classroom where—we still have to baby our students a little bit, okay? We still need to kind of hold their hands a little bit, so as a teacher who thinks they are going to come into the classroom, and just going to give a 35–40 minute presentation and expect the kids to actually know what you’re
talking about may not be the right fit for your middle school. You have to be engaged with—you have to be connected to your students. You have to be able to go around and talk to them and help them and have the patience to really—they may have to see it three times. They may have to see it four times, where if you go to high school, it’s “Let’s go. We’re lecturing today, get the notes, study on your own and figure it out.” That’s the personality that I see of a middle school versus a high school, and I feel there are some teachers that I think they love middle school so much because of who they work with, but they’d be a better fit in a high-school classroom. . . . You can tell a high-school teacher the way that they talk is not as nurturing and [caring] as a middle schooler. I think that's why some high-school teachers could never do it because they don’t have that ability to change the way they talk to middle school. I think elementary school is definitely babying more than middle school. I feel like I talk to middle schoolers more like adults than I would to a fourth grader. I think the middle-school teachers that I think didn’t belong with middle schoolers were just too harsh and had no wiggle room and no leniency as far as their expectations. I think you maybe need to have good classroom management, but there also has to be a balance to make it enjoyable for kids. Those teachers had great classroom management, but the kids were miserable in their classes.

Engagement and Humor in Middle School

Many teachers spoke about the fun, humor, and lack of boredom that comes with teaching middle school. Ms. Walker testified to the difference between middle-school and high-school teaching, saying:

Right now, I have classes [in high school] that don’t talk, and they sit there for an hour and a half in the morning and don’t say a word. It's great classroom management, but it's not fun. I feel like I am talking at them, and they're all miserable. I never had that in middle school. There was never a time where I felt like they were all bored because they're more crazy. There’s never a dull moment, which is a good thing. They weren't bored, and I wasn't bored, and I didn't feel like I was lecturing at them, but it also makes it harder. There are times in the morning where it’s not horrible to just teach for an hour and a half and not have to deal with it, but then a huge part of math is also communicating and knowing how to discuss math with peers, and you get that more in middle school. They’re willing to talk to each other and discuss, but sometimes there’s way too much discussion, but they're willing to do it, and that doesn't always happen in high school. I think it’s somewhere in between. It's makes it harder because it's harder to manage when classes get crazy, but it also makes it more interesting, and you don’t feel like you’re lecturing a bunch of people that are bored. . . . Middle school is really fun, and the kids have a lot of energy and they're excited to be there. They are really cute, and they like you. There are a lot of good things about the actual kids and their energy. If you can focus on that and not the craziness, then that’s good.

Ms. Montgomery, who had also worked in high school, agreed, saying:
I feel like in middle school it can be a little less serious than in high school. Maybe it's just the team I'm on, but since they're younger and a little more innocent, a little sillier, you can also be a little bit that way, which makes it feel a little better in that way. . . . I just feel like it's fun. That might just be because it's right in front of me. I just feel like middle school is fun. They say a lot of crazy things, and as long as they're not crossing the line . . . they say a lot of silly things that you're just like, 'I don't know where that came from, but it's funny, and okay we can laugh a little and then let's get back to work.' I just think middle school is fun. . . . You can build a relationship. You can joke around a little and be like, 'Okay, let's get back to this.' They're still kids.

Mr. Willis added that the same facets of middle-school students that aggravate teachers could also help break the monotony of work and make it interesting and fun. He said:

That's why I love this age group. They are difficult. They're immature, but it's so funny—and it's never boring. When I worked at [my corporate job], I knew what I was doing at 9:21 every single day, and I go, 'How am I going to do this for the rest of my life? There is no way.' You get into a classroom, and it's like, ‘All right. What are we dealing with today at the middle-school level?’ . . . It’s great. Outside of the academic role, you have that the kids are becoming—they’re growing up—smiling and laughing, the most important things to make sure you aren't worrying about yourself and making sure everything is all good. I don’t like seeing kids frowning.

Mr. Carlson also confirmed how important it was for middle-school teachers to be able to see the humor in children of this age:

Just the overall dynamic of them, there's more flavor to it. It’s just a wider variety of kids where I find myself laughing at some of the silliest things that the kids just do in class, and it’s just quirky because you figure when an 11- or 12-year old is doing—gets up out of his chair and just starts dancing around the room. It's hysterical.

Mr. Frank agreed that he perceived high-school teachers and students as being more serious:

I feel like I'm not at the maturity level to teach high school yet. That’s my biggest thing. I’m funny, goofy, silly. I can be serious when I need to be, but I just don’t— feel like I fit the characteristics of a successful high-school teacher.


**Relatedness to Students**

How teachers relate to students at this age is just as important as how well they relate to their coworkers. Mr. Carlson, as a teacher of sixth grade, mentioned that students at this age were still happy to see their teachers and want to connect on a personal level:

The students were super excited to find out who all of their teachers were, and that was a cool feeling for me, and just knowing that they enjoy coming to class. Even when there’s a lot of work that needs to be done, just the way that I’m able to keep them engaged and keep them excited through the different activities, funny things we do in class, funny connections that we make outside of class, related back to our subject content. It's just, the student body has been very welcoming, and now we’re in May, where we've had events—students in the seventh or eighth grade, who of course I don’t have, are now starting to say things like, “Hey, [Mr. Carlson]! Good to see you” I still have two boys come up to me and say, "Hey, that was a great game. Good job,” and just that connection right there is just awesome. . . . I think definitely school-wide programming, after school, during school, helps build camaraderie. I think if the school really sets a precedent that we want to make sure that every kid who walks through that door feels included. . . . I think at this age, you have more of an opportunity to relate whatever content you are teaching to something they could definitely latch on to. I think sixth grade is a good age for me, for my type of personality, where we can be a little silly in class, but when we have to get to work, the kids know the expectations and are at an age where they know the difference between work and play.

Ms. Walker agreed and suggested that middle-school students were much more interested in knowing their teachers:

I would say I felt pretty connected to [middle schoolers], but I also think I feel connected to this group of high schoolers, too. I don’t know if that’s just the nature of teaching or if it’s more so in the two groups of people I have had. . . . I think it’s partially because I'm young, and kids feel I'm closer to their age than maybe some of the other teachers. I know a lot of the social references they use, and I like sports that they all like. I try to ask them about their weekends, and I try to see how they are just outside of math. I think I try to build those relationships and talk to kids more than just teaching the math. I like how [at the middle-school level] there is just more of an innocence and that wanting to be there, more than high school. In high school, for a lot of kids, you’re dragging them away from their video games and places they would much rather be than there. I didn’t feel that in middle school with most of the kids.

Ms. Rendell added that a school’s activities and culture could put systems in place to maximize connectivity between staff and students:
The teacher who [I was working with] came from [another state], and what they had been doing there—is like a mentoring kind of program with the kids where we divvied up our students across the four [core subjects], and every rotation cycle we would meet with them for about 15 minutes and talk about their grades, a goal they want to work on, what classes they are doing well in, classes they are not doing so well in, need some help in. And it's been really nice because we've also been able to talk to kids about setting goals and ways to accomplish that goal and making steps, and then also there have been kids who have talked to me about things they’re really upset about, something going on at home, and you get to sit and strengthen that relationship that I think is really special in middle school. I think sometimes high-school kids can be a little like they’ve got their independence, they’re going to figure it out, and elementary kids can be a little like, I don't even know. I’ve never done elementary, so I can't say. That’s been really good, and I think it’s helped us and our kids. . . . I think, for the most part—they’re just really a funny crew, and they are what make me smile on some days when I’m—it started out a crappy day, and then a kid was like, “Hey, Miss, you all right?” And I am like "Oh, you noticed. Thank you.” They're intuitive because they're so into their own emotions as well, so sometimes they pick up on yours.

Mr. Willis found many different ways to connect with students and show that a genuine interest in getting to know students was an important quality in a middle-school teacher. He explained:

I feel like I have the ability to relate to a lot of these kids emotionally, personally, athletically. I have a wide variety of topics and ideas that I experienced after school that I have a better relationship with my students because of it. I can tell them stories about traveling and jumping out of planes and talking about basketball. . . . I love going to shows. I love listening to musicals. . . . I can relate to students a lot better in middle school, and that's just because of the experiences I have had.

Mr. Frank implied that because of their age, middle-school students are more open to forming relationships with teachers:

Even though there are times when they drive me crazy, I feel like there’s a relationship, where I look at them not only like they’re my students, and what not, but there are times where you feel like a little brother or a sister to me. Whereas with high school or elementary, I don’t know. I feel like either sometimes with high school, they're too grown. They're too cool.

Mr. Frank also learned from observing the teacher–student relationships in respected colleagues’ classrooms, explaining:
I feel like a lot of [middle schoolers] have the mindset and the low self-esteem that they're dumb and they can't do this and seeing [my coworker] doing it from a way of, "I love you and care about you, but I’m going to be hard on you. I'm going to yell at you. I'm going to do all of this, but it’s from a place of loving and caring.” I think that really rubbed off on me, and I feel like that helped me become a better teacher in my second year.

Ms. Montgomery commented on the variety of maturity levels in sixth grade and of having to adjust in order to relate to different students, saying:

I think what's really unique is how many different places the kids are in their developmental stages. We have some kids who come in really, really innocent and they still—it's almost like having a fourth grader. They just really like—you talk to them like a kid, like, "I'm so excited to see you today, oh, my gosh," and then you have other kids that you can be sarcastic with and they get it or other kids who are moving into different points in their maturity, so it's kind of like—it's very unique having to balance and bounce between different personalities and figure out how to interact with them. Yeah, that's the thing that stands out the most to me. Like knowing my friends who teach high school and talking to them, it just seems like, especially, I'm in sixth grade, so it's the first year they're in middle school, so I feel like that's where you see the biggest range. . . . they still are lacking a little bit of a filter, so they're just down to share whatever, so then it's easier that way to make connections about them. Since they're younger, you can just ask them really anything, like, "What do you like to do?" and you don't really have to have a segue into that conversation. They're just happy to tell you, so I think in that regard it's a little easier just because they're younger. It also was harder to do that my first year. I was probably a little more self-conscious, a little more like, "I don't want to look dumb in front of them, or I don't want to be weird," so that was a little more difficult. It can be a little difficult when you have a kid where you're not really sure how to connect with them. No matter what you've tried, they're just kind of like—they don't really seem to—they won't share anything, they don't really want to get to know you, so that can be a bit difficult because some have already settled into that personality a bit in middle-school.

**Middle-School Students Seeking Connection**

Several of the participants explored middle-school students’ desire to seek connections to peers and adults. Mr. Carlson emphasized students’ connections to their teachers as significant because of the amount of time spent in teacher–student interactions:

The students like meeting their teacher, finding out stuff about their teacher, like their birthday, their favorite ice cream flavor. All this little extra stuff, instead of just, okay, “Can you help me add and subtract fractions?” . . . I think at a middle-school age, since the students are still developmentally growing and physically going to, of course, I’m going through all of these changes, figuring out who they are. I think they're looking for
either someone or some people to latch on to be like, okay, this is where I am most comfortable, whether it’s a small group of friends, whether it’s all boys would get together in the morning and sit down in the cafeteria, the back table, whether it's the girls who hang out in [the after school program]. Just being able to have a connection where students are starting to go a step further and even reach out more so to the teachers, like "Hey, you're the person—I really appreciate you helping me out the most. Because you'd figure, of course, we see them arguably more than their own families do.

Mr. Frank felt that building relationships with students led to many of them opening up and expressing that they cared about his opinion. He explained:

I feel like middle schoolers are still in that mindset of, I don’t know, even though they try to play it cool, I feel like they still care, and they appreciate the people who take the time and effort, for the most part. There’s still the jerks and what not, but I feel like, for the most part, they care and they’re not afraid to show that they care, and for me, that's rewarding.

Influencing or Molding Middle-School Students

Several teachers commented on how much they enjoyed middle school because the students are at such an influential age. Ms. Walker said she believed this plasticity was more evident in middle school than high school: “I think a lot of them are just so impressionable, and you can make a bigger difference in a middle-schooler’s life than maybe you can in a high schooler.”

Ms. Rendell appreciated that students wanted and needed her help. She said:

I do like students’ independence [at the high-school level], but I do also like in middle school the fact that they aren't as independent, and I like being involved in their lives. Sometimes it's emotionally and mentally draining on us, but it’s also what I really like about it. I like the fact that my students come to me and I can help them with their problems. . . . You can talk to them. You can help them with things, and I like that involvement. . . . You develop those relationships, and that’s what I really like.

Mr. Frank agreed that students of middle-school age are more easily influenced, which can result in dramatic changes to their development and futures. He said:

I think with middle school, it’s that even though they think, especially eighth graders, think they’re adults. They’re still, at heart, kid, so I feel like there's that sense, not that you can mold them, but I feel like you can still have some impact on them. . . . I think, at
the heart of it, they're still, I don’t want to say impressionable, but they're open to being—having some type of mentor. I think they want to be led, but it's pulling teeth sometimes, but I think they have that in them that they want to do well, and they’re not yet corrupted by anything else. In high school—they could go one way or another way, so with middle school, you still have the chance to actually make an impact on them. . . . Middle school is a higher percentage where you could actually reach them. I used to think, even for me, the first 2 years of teaching, I was like, "Do I actually want to be a teacher?" Even when I was getting better at it in the second year, but then I feel like the best part is, I don't know, the cheesy—but it’s true when they have their eighth-grade graduation and they’re like, “Oh, thank you so much. Thank you for dealing with me,” because I feel like teaching isn't very rewarding, but that part of it where you see or even just at the end of the year where they're like, "Oh, thank you for everything.” I think that’s the best part of it, so I don't think I would leave middle school just because, I don't know, you're seeing them grow into [something].

Mr. Carlson found that middle-school students were more open to sharing information about their lives, which could foster connection. He explained:

Students at a middle-school level are more up to talk about things that are going on with their friends, things that are going on with them. You can get more insight into what's going on, what’s bothering them, and I feel they're easier to help.

Mr. Willis agreed and added that middle-school boys need positive male role models, saying:

My biggest thing, now teaching sixth and eighth grade, is the connection we can make to our students who are trying to figure out who they are, so we can kind of grow or mold our students into whatever example that we feel that would be best for them. Coming from sixth grade in [my previous school], the boys needed male role models there. They didn't have them in their lives, so they came to us to talk. We were able to give them advice, and I always made it clear to those students that I will give you my opinion. That doesn't mean that that is the way you have to go. Either you can take it or leave it but do what's best for you. That’s my biggest thing. That's what I really enjoy the most is the interaction with our students, the advice we can give them. They're going through adolescence right now, so their bodies are changing, their minds are changing. The first week of school and then until the last week of school. You have that group of kids who are like, "Wow, you actually listened, and you matured over the 180 days I had with you.” The best part is to see the success that these kids have after. I love when they walk in the door and you see them years after . . . the first thing I say to them is: “How do your grades look”? . . . You can still push these kids outside those years that you taught them. I haven’t had any graduating classes yet, so I can't wait until that happens.
Support for Social–Emotional Health

A teacher’s social–emotional health can affect how well they relate to students. All of the teachers commented on the importance of learning to separate work life from home life. Ms. Rendell spoke of the stress of a being a first-year teacher when she said:

As a first-year teacher, I felt like I had so much to prove, so I worked every single night after school, working on planning meticulous lessons, and I had—okay, so if this article is at this reading level, and this article’s at this reading level, which one’s better? And this one may be too hard, but this one may be too easy, and you just second-guess everything you do. Are kids going to understand these notes? And I’d make my own. Are they going to know this word? You go through all of that. Then, after a year, I realized that you're going to fail no matter what and it’s okay, so now I've resolved myself to not taking things home and allowing myself to have time after school, and that's my time, and that's okay. I'm a teacher and a professional, but that’s not my life. I have my dog at home. I have my boyfriend at home, and I like to cook dinner and do my meal prep, go the gym, do whatever I need to do. Take my dog on a walk and that’s my time and that’s okay, and that's kind of been what has helped me not fall apart or burn out because I think it’s so easy to burnout as a teacher. I could work until two in the morning every night and still not be done. Between grading, creating lessons, creating units, doing paperwork, doing everything, and it’s just never done, and you have to know . . . it’s okay for me to step away. It will be there tomorrow, and there'll be a new problem there tomorrow, too, and that’s okay, but just do what you can. It's such ups and downs, and I think you take so much of it home with you, and it can really just affect your outlook. I was trying to do something, because you know how back when we were in school, everything was just like, "Here's the next chapter, read the chapter, answer the questions." We try to make it more engaging and all that stuff. You work your butt off, and you do all these things to make it exciting and fun and be like, “Oh, this would be cool. This is a clever thing, and this is a new technology we're trying out.” And then you have some kids who are like, "Oh, thanks, Miss," and then you have other kids who are like, “Why are we doing this? This is dumb.”

Mr. Frank concurred on the importance of a work–life balance, saying:

My first year, I would bring things home to grade and set out the lesson plans, and now I feel like whether it's good or not, it’s like “No, I’ll do what I need to do at school and not bring the stress of school to home." It's two different places now, whereas it used to be all together. . . . I am also not bringing the stresses home.

Mr. Carlson agreed about the importance of separating work from home, explaining:

My big thing is work is work and home is home. I am usually here later than most of the others, so I can stay here. I have all my resources here. I can finish grading, make copies for the next day, prep. Same thing, I’ll get in a little early and make last minute copies. . .
Most of it, I’d say 80%, is done at school, and I believe that obviously when I get home it’s time for me to relax, recharge, be with my family, be with my dog. I’ll do my best to see some of my friends during the week as well just to hang out, just a lot of time for me to decompress, take it all in. If I want to leisurely watch something on TV, take the time for me to do that. If it has to be taken home—I’ve had that happen before, it’s not a big issue, and then of course just staying busy on the weekends . . . I definitely feel like I have a much better grasp on what’s expected of me, what I need to prepare for the type of students that I have, but this being my very first year, I was a nervous wreck to start out. A nervous wreck.

Mr. Willis felt that scheduling his day appropriately reduced the amount of work he took home. He explained:

I get here at 7:00 when we start at 8:30 or 8:00 for contract, so I’m not rushing. I’m not trying to [act like] “I just got in. What am I doing?” I’m relaxed. I can go and walk up and down the halls and see who’s around and talk and get my work done, so I'm not rushing things, and that helps. I feel like that helps a lot because it eases your mind, and then it gives you a nice, smooth sailing into your first period. . . . In my corporate job, I would take the [work] mentality home with me, and I would stress out a lot. I was on major deadlines. . . . So, I learned after that, I said, “You know what? I am not going to bring what happens at work, home,” because you know what? It's just going to affect my livelihood outside of work, so I learned that not in the teaching world, in the business world. . . . That helps tremendously.

Ms. Walker also emphasized the risks of burnout and how to avoid them:

I think I struggled with that at the beginning of the year. I was taking a lot of work home, which was the big thing. It was killing me to spend too many hours on the weekend doing work. I think in the second half of the year, I started going to the gym after school. I also forced myself not to bring home what I didn't have to bring home. Was there more I could have done at home? Probably, but I was at the point where I’m going to stay after school for an hour-and-a-half or 2 hours. I’m going to get done what I can get done, and that is all I am going to do. That helps, and I went to the gym. I really like going to sporting events. I gave it everything I had while I was in school, and then tried to step away from it once I got home. There’s plenty of stuff I could do until 7:00 at night if I wanted to, but I’ve told myself I will not be the teacher that stays until 7:00 at night doing work because I will go crazy, and I will quit after the year. Plan for the next day. That’s been my motto all year. Just have the next day ready to go and figure out the day after that the next day.

Ms. Montgomery added that afterschool activities helped reduce stress:

Outside of school, I go to the gym. I try to set aside either time or places when I do my schoolwork so that I’m not always doing it at home, or if I'm going to do it at home, I'm like, "I'm going to do this for an hour, and then I'm going to go watch TV or something
"else," or grading homework is what I do on the weekends, so I'm like, "Okay, this is what I'll do Saturday afternoon, and then I'll hang out with my friends or go to dinner or something," just so it's not constant. You don't get burned out. I think it's important to be able to draw a line between your life outside of school and your life in school. Obviously when I'm at home I still think about my students but try not to get too caught up in it. I remember during—we had new teacher meetings once a month my first year, and the principal—this made me feel good—he was like, "Don't check your school email when you're at home. You're at home. Go home. Be at home. Come in. It can wait until the morning." That means like, "Okay, if she says I can do that, then I can actually do that." Also, just kind of—I don't know. I try not to put too much—just try to think, "Tomorrow I'll do it differently. It'll be okay," so just kind of try to let things go, learn from them, and move on instead of getting too worked up about everything.

**Conclusion**

The middle-school model has systems in place to foster deep connections among adults and students. It has academic teams of students and teachers, common planning time, advisory periods, and team-building activities. Some participants felt a strong sense of community and positive school culture, and others felt isolated and ignored. Schools with positive cultures featured group activities, strong team building, and a caring formal and informal mentor relationship. Schools with negative cultures hosted groups of teachers that did not interact with each other, provided no structures or opportunities to bridge the divisions, evinced little direct interaction with administration unless for a specific issue, and lacked support for teachers’ disciplinary decisions. Schools with positive cultures fostered strong connections, whereas schools with negative cultures made connection difficult.

Participants asserted that middle-school teaching required a certain type of personality which includes lightheartedness, humor, and fun. According to the participants, teaching and thriving in a middle school required teachers to relate to students on their levels and express genuine interest in their lives. Participants suggested that adolescent students are more open to connection and even seek it out. They felt that if teachers made efforts to reach out and form bonds, students would, overall, reciprocate. Once connections were made, teachers enjoyed
contributing to the molding of students academically and personally and felt gratified by having the opportunity to influence students at this impressionable age.

Teachers described their first years as stressful, challenging, and educational. Many spoke of feeling burned out from too much time spent planning lessons, grading work, and thinking about student issues. Participants highlighted their experience of learning how to separate their work and home life by leaving the former at school and taking time to decompress at home by spending time with loved ones and participating in enjoyable activities. Participants learned to accept that a teacher’s work is never done, so every teacher has to learn when to stop and pick up the tasks again the next day.

Ms. Montgomery expressed that she saw herself remaining as a middle-school teacher and said she would also love to remain at the sixth-grade level:

I feel pretty good where I am. I mean, if they needed me to teach seventh grade at the same school and they really, really needed it, I'd say, "Okay, I'll do it," but I like sixth grade and I like this school. So, I haven't really had thoughts about leaving. . . . I think if my department head and the current administration left and whoever came in it was just atrocious, then I'd probably start looking elsewhere. Or if they just had completely different values or they started to micromanage too much. I think I'd probably, yeah, explore other options.

**Motivation to Remain at the Middle-School Level**

All of the participants expressed an interest in remaining at or returning to the middle-school level. Ms. Walker revealed that she only moved to high school because there was an opening in the town in which she wished to reside and that, although she enjoyed teaching at the high-school level, she would be open to returning to middle school. She said:

A big part of my leave was location, not so much the actual level. It was just a hard place to get to and that's not where I saw myself living and I didn't want to commute for 2 hours. Honestly, if a job had come up in [high school location] that was a middle-school job, I may have taken it. It wasn't so much leaving middle school. I like the high school better now that I'm there. But it wasn't like I hated the middle school and wanted to leave. There are things that I think maybe in the future I want to go back to middle
school. For now, I think with high school I deal with less behavioral issues and while I'm still figuring out the way that I like to do things and my own teaching style, I like not dealing with that. But I think later on once I've established those, it may be a different choice and I go back to middle school. . . . There's never a dull moment, which is a good thing, [middle schoolers] weren't bored, and I wasn't bored, and I didn't feel like I was lecturing at them. But it also makes it harder. There's times in the morning where it's not a horrible thing to just teach for an hour and a half and not have to deal with it. But then a huge part of math is also communicating and knowing how to discuss math with peers, and you get that more in middle school. They're willing to talk to each other and discuss, and sometimes there's way too much discussion, but they're willing to do it and that doesn't always happen in high school. I think it's somewhere in between, it makes it harder, because it's harder to manage when classes get crazy, but it also makes it more interesting and you don't feel like you're lecturing a bunch of people that are bored.

Mr. Willis was emphatic and said that he would never teach at another grade level:

The only way I'd leave if I became an administrator. That would be the only way. I like this age group a lot. Even though people look at me and say, "What is wrong with you?" And I tell them all the time. I go, "I love it." But there's still . . . they're attitudes, they're immature. I go, "But you know what? That's the best part. There's something new every day at work."

Several teachers expressed that they would be more likely to leave the middle school where they were teaching than to leave teaching at the middle-school level. Mr. Carlson mentioned some factors that might make him question his dedication to his current workplace but not middle school in general. He said:

I guess maybe if there was an administrator . . . that's one of the reasons why I left my previous position was . . . we would unfortunately butt heads on different opinions. I'm usually a team player, but I guess maybe I could see that if it was like a whole changing everything changing up and down. It would really have to go against everything . . . obviously if it was somebody who, like if a vice principal was moving into the principal's position, something like that, not really, somebody may be cut, dry brand new and maybe wanting to turn the school upside down. That might push me away. But that's a big might . . . and not necessarily like a deal breaker, but I really do enjoy sixth grade. So like maybe if I got bumped up to like an eighth grade, I think maybe that would be to a point where the students, I don't know if for some reason it might not take me as seriously. I don't know . . . But I wouldn't leave middle-school in general for that.
Mr. Frank said that as time had passed, he had become more positive about remaining in teaching in general and at the middle-school level specifically, but he saw himself potentially transferring schools at some point due to the negative culture at his workplace. He explained:

Yeah, I feel like I would definitely still be in teaching. . . . I think before I was a little reluctant to say, "Oh yeah, I'm going to keep doing this teaching thing." But now I could definitely see myself in the long run. But who knows . . . maybe it won't be middle school forever. But, I think, for me teaching is definitely, I feel like, the place where I should or need to be. And I think I definitely couldn't see myself leaving. And I couldn't say that a year ago or 2 years ago. So, that's definitely a change, I would say. . . . I feel like, especially this year, seeing the impact, I think I would definitely stay in middle school. As for here, I feel like I go back and forth between that because sometimes I'm like if I actually fully want to grow and have the full experience of being a teacher, I think I would eventually need to move into [a regular classroom] . . . to be truthful, I wouldn't want to do it here because I just feel like I wouldn't be supported. But I feel like somewhere down the line, I feel like that has to be the next step.

Ms. Rendell had previously taught at the high-school level and considered a return at some point in the future, saying:

I think at a certain point I might go back up and try the high school, but I think that'll be in like 5 or 10 years maybe. I think it's just good to liven things up and keep things a little fresh and try something new and that's all. There's nothing about, I guess sometimes the immaturity of the middle-school students, that might also get a little exhausting after 5 or 10 years but then it would be nice to kind of go back up to high-school level students, but as of right now, I see myself staying in middle-school for a bit. . . . It's just such an interesting experience and you don't know it until you're in it.

**Conclusion**

This study sought to answer the question: How intrinsically motivated to stay at the middle-school level do novice middle-school teachers feel based on how well their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are being met? The participants in this study communicated the ways in which these needs had been met in their work environments, recounting feelings of strong individual autonomy, especially regarding teaching content in their own styles, but very little professional or collegial autonomy. Participants claimed that many of the established structures promoting professional or collegial autonomy were not genuinely implemented.
Teachers disclosed that they felt very competent in their first years with respect to knowledge of the content they taught but less competent as to classroom management and instructional effectiveness. The participants attributed this dichotomy to a variety of factors: self-criticism, administrative input, lack of administrative input, and the trial-and-error system of learning without professional development or coaching. Formal mentors could act as valuable guides, but if they were not in close proximity to the mentee or only offered minimal assistance with content, then the participants said they were not as effective. Teachers found informal mentors to be much more helpful in building competence than formal mentors, which might suggest that opportunities to observe and collaborate with each other in the first 5 years maximizes teachers’ chances of building competence.

All participants conveyed strong connections to at least a few of their coworkers, but those working in a more positive school culture felt the most connected to theirs schools and communities. The teachers who worked within positive cultures spoke of loving where they worked, of everyone being welcoming, of everyone being supportive, and of students being excited to be present and interacting with staff. Conversely, negative school cultures and lack of connection opportunity led to small pockets of connected teachers in isolation. Teachers in this situation spoke of resentment, disorganization, discouraging practices, and students who didn’t respect them because administration undermined classroom disciplinary choices.

However, teachers found overall that middle-school students are open to forming connections with peers and adults. According to the participants, students of adolescent age sought connection from teachers, who therefore needed to be understanding, flexible, and playful if they wished to form those bonds. Administration was needed to assist in this process by creating school-wide systems and plans that facilitated connections among the entire school.
population. Thus, it was noted that autonomy, competence, and relatedness must all thrive simultaneously in order to nurture self-determination, which leads to feelings of job satisfaction (Banerjee et al., 2017; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Gray & Taie, 2015; Heikonen et al., 2017; Jayartatne, 1993; Koedel et al., 2018; Locke, 1976; Marshik et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2006, 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009; Stockard & Lehman, 2004; Viel-Ruma et al., 2010; Vroom, 1982). In order to retain effective teachers at the middle-school level, administrators must promote professional, collegial, and individual autonomy; increase teachers’ feelings of competence; and facilitate relationships among teachers and students. Chapter 5 explores these points further.
Chapter 5: Implications and Discussion

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore how novice middle-school teachers’ feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness affected their intrinsic motivation to remain teaching at the middle-school level. Autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the key components for intrinsic motivation, as outlined in self-determination theory. Using an IPA approach, the researcher chose a small group of six participants, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the participants and their experiences in context. Using self-determination theory as a guide, the researcher designated three major themes: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). Autonomy broke down into the following subordinate themes: a) professional autonomy, b) collegial autonomy, and c) individual autonomy. Competence subdivided into the following subordinate themes: a) content competence, b) classroom management competence, c) administration’s influence on feelings of competence, d) formal and informal mentors’ influence on feelings of competence, e) the effect of teacher preparation programs on feelings of competence, and f) the effect of self-criticism on feeling of competence. Relatedness was segmented into the following subordinate themes: a) the effect of school culture on feelings of relatedness, b) relatedness to coworkers, c) relatedness to students, and d) support for socioemotional health. Chapter 5 lays out the three major findings of the study, recommendations for practice based on the findings, and suggestions for future research.

First Finding: Autonomy

Novice middle-school teachers felt a strong sense of individual autonomy but reduced feelings of professional and collegial autonomy. All participants reported that as long as their classrooms seemed orderly and functional, administration took a hands-off approach in the day-
to-day workings of the classroom, which left planning and execution of lessons almost completely up to the discretion of teachers and their colleagues. Participants noted that administration only commented on their instruction during formal and informal observations, and even then, commentary was kept to general praise or overly simplistic suggestions for improvement. Furthermore, minimal professional development or helpful tools were offered or suggested by administration.

In most cases, curriculum was not mandated, but standards were expected to be used as a guide for instructional content. Even in schools where there was a set curriculum, teachers were given the freedom to manipulate the order of instruction and to use supplemental and sometimes teacher-created materials as they saw fit. Teachers reported enjoying this curricular individual autonomy after they became more comfortable in their second or third years, but many felt it was a hinderance in their first year, as they were expected to create their own curriculum and materials from scratch while they were simultaneously trying to reach a comfort level with teaching strategies and classroom management.

This matches findings in studies from Norway and South Korea which found that novice teachers might initially lack confidence in regard to their abilities to create and implement their own curriculum due to reduced feelings of self-efficacy when beginning as a teacher (Hong & Youngs, 2016; Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015). This finding also supports an earlier study that concluded that if principals support teacher autonomy, then teacher confidence will grow over time (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Most participants who had supportive administrators, who acknowledged and rewarded teachers’ efforts to improve, reported growing more confident with each year of teaching. Conversely, participants who spoke of administrators who were critical or uninvolved felt more stress and dejection because of their individual autonomy. Niemiec and
Ryan (2009) similarly found that teachers whose autonomy was undermined lost enthusiasm and energy for teaching. Although teachers in this study still felt dedicated to teaching and positive about the future, those with concerns about their administrators clearly demonstrated more fatigue and stress when speaking about the negatives of the teaching profession.

Deci and Ryan (2002) posited that the more administrators attempt to control what happens in the classroom in the name of accountability, the more likely they are to see a decline in teacher motivation and learning outcomes. No teachers in this study reported any administrative attempts to actively pressure them into changing their chosen curriculum or methodology due to test score data. Furthermore, all participants who were teaching middle school expressed a desire to remain teaching at the middle-school level. This would suggest that Deci and Ryan (2002) were correct, as all of the teachers who felt a strong sense of individual autonomy also remained motivated to continue despite any difficulties they faced, including momentary instances of controlling behavior by administrators. For example, one teacher reported that she was trying to teach students background knowledge they would potentially need for a standardized test, and administration insisted on teaching only grade-level standards. The teacher believed that without historical context, the grade-level standards would not make sense, but she was overruled by administration and felt disheartened. This single instance of being controlled by administration was not enough to override the teacher’s overall perception of autonomy nor her motivation to stay teaching at the middle-school level.

Furthermore, all of the participants felt stress, but those who perceived administrative support reported feeling more job satisfaction than those who didn’t. Only one of the participants spoke in a strongly negative manner about his administration, and only one other spoke somewhat critically of her administrator. Both felt stress due to many factors, including
administrations’ handling of certain issues in their schools, but both also felt individual autonomy. The former teacher felt he had individual autonomy because administration ignored his classroom as long as the teacher demonstrated proficiency with discipline and the students remained in the classroom instead of wandering the halls. Inside his classroom, however, he did not feel positively about how his first year had transpired academically. The latter teacher disagreed with some of the administration’s decisions but felt supported in her classroom and positive overall. These examples support other existing studies which showed stress can be demoralizing and exhausting, but stress plus feeling autonomous and in control of the factors producing stress can create more positive feelings about the workplace (de Neve et al., 2015; Schleicher, 2016). Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2009) also determined that perceived support from school leadership can reduce feelings of time pressure and increase feelings of autonomy and general optimism about teaching.

The dearth of professional and collegial autonomy participants reported is of concern, given that Schleicher (2016) stated that student test scores were lower in schools where principals acknowledged less teacher participation in school management. It is possible that administrators do not trust novice, inexperienced teachers to participate at the management level. Most participants felt, at least in part, unprepared for the demands of the classroom in their first year. A connection could be drawn between the inadequacy of American teacher preparation programs, as reported by participants, and the lack of professional and collegial autonomy given to teachers. In some countries, where teacher preparation is more comprehensive and rigorous, and where there are extensive apprenticeship opportunities, teachers are respected and trusted more because they begin their careers as well-trained professionals capable of making significant decisions about the operations and policies of the school (Schleicher, 2016).
Many teachers reported feeling a sense of collective efficacy, but not necessarily collective or collegial autonomy. Overall, teachers felt that they and their colleagues worked well together, and their collaborations had a positive influence on student outcomes. For the teachers to feel true collegial autonomy, however, administration would need to make them part of a distributed leadership model, wherein they could set their own goals, create their own protocols, and set their own agendas (Schleicher, 2016). Participants did not report any evidence of administrations’ desire to create such a model. One participant decried that there were no collective values or goals in his school, and this made him feel like his efforts were fruitless as he did not know what he was working towards. Mitchell et al. (2017) suggested that if there is no connection to common values, initiatives, or goals, little collective efficacy is built, and only a portion of the staff will successfully implement new practices. Although collective efficacy and collegial autonomy are different, it would seem that teachers need both to be successful.

According to self-determination theory, autonomy and competence are intertwined and must both be satisfied to promote intrinsic motivation. For example, disruptive behavior in the teacher’s classroom is the leading cause of stress because it reduces the feeling of being in control, which can lead to feelings of incompetence (Mulholland et al., 2017). Furthermore, teachers not receiving classroom management training in their preparation program or in their first year of teaching expressed feeling powerless and unable to teach their content, but when given training, those feelings disappeared (Güner, 2012). The next section shows the findings regarding competence.

**Second Finding: Competence**

Novice middle-school teachers felt competent in their knowledge of their subject matter but less competent in regard to teaching strategies and classroom management due to a reliance
on a trial-and-error approach and informal mentor assistance. Most participants reported a struggle with classroom management, especially in their first year. However, it is worth noting that two teachers from the same school communicated that they felt a strong sense of community and togetherness in all facets of school operations and culture, including discipline. This school differed from the others because it was part of a small, almost monoethnic, middle-class community with fewer discipline problems than the others. Teachers working in this school noted a close relationship with an administrator who offered constructive feedback. This suggests that administrators in the other schools might be more preoccupied with disciplinary matters outside of the classroom and therefore have less time to devote to supporting teachers in their classrooms.

Several participants in more urban schools commented that as long as teachers had disciplinary control in their classrooms, the administration was pleased. They also believed that when they did have to send a student to the office, administration often undermined their decisions and sent the students back to the classroom with little or no punishment. This is seemingly the result of a positive behavior and support approach to discipline that many teachers felt had left students receiving no serious or delayed consequences. One teacher referred to the use of restorative justice practices but felt that no one had time to conduct the steps required to come to a peaceful and just solution, so they often didn’t happen until a month after the incident had occurred. Meanwhile, the student would have returned to the classroom during the waiting period with nothing having changed, leaving teachers to deal with a student or students who they previously did not feel confident handling. If administrators are not available to help teachers with discipline inside the classroom because they are too preoccupied with discipline outside of the classroom, a vicious cycle occurs where teachers send students out to an overwhelmed office
that doesn’t have time to help teachers in the classroom. Evidence from this study as well as the literature suggests that urban schools have a greater need for classroom management training for teachers and staff so that administrators’ time can be freed up to focus on academic support. This supports the findings of Gaikhorst et al. (2015), who studied teachers in urban districts and found that they face many more roadblocks to success. These researchers also showed that when urban teachers are given the time and opportunity to participate in professional development specific to urban schools, and when those teachers collaborate with colleagues both within and outside their schools, their confidence in their abilities grow, as do their positive feelings.

Administrators can have a great effect on teachers’ feelings of competence, so if they are not available because they lack the time, teachers will struggle through a trial-and-error process. Research has shown that a trial-and-error process leads to immediate feelings of incompetence but also improvement over time (Fontaine et al., 2012). Literature also suggested, however, that great classroom managers are made, not necessarily born and that specific classroom management techniques produce larger positive effect sizes at the middle- and high-school level than at the elementary level (Marzano et al., 2003). None of the participants attended any dedicated classroom management training either in their teacher preparation institutions or at their schools. They relied on moments of small victories to keep them going, which are important to reinforcing their feelings of competence (Kotter & Cohen, 2002). Battle and Looney (2014) purported that when teachers are supported and given the tools they need to be successful, they gain confidence and self-efficacy, and therefore overlook other factors that might lead them to leave the profession. In the previously mentioned smaller, monoethnic, middle-class community, the teachers were very positive, declared full support from everyone in the school, and exuded a happiness about their workplace. The teachers in the other two more
diverse and economically disadvantaged schools had more mixed levels of administrative support, from almost none to some, but they still maintained a mostly positive outlook about teaching and cited making a difference in students’ lives as important. Some of the participants suggested that although they would stay teaching in middle school, they might leave their current places of employment for a school with a more supportive administration. Therefore, administrative support was important for retention at a particular school, but it might not drive someone from teaching at the middle-school level altogether. Many other studies, however, showed that teachers are often driven from the profession entirely by factors like these (Curtis, 2012; Ferguson-Patrick, 2011; Gallant & Riley, 2014). Further studies have shown that a feeling of inadequacy with respect to classroom management is one of the top reasons given for new teacher attrition, and 83% of new teachers felt underprepared for the classroom management issues they faced in their first years (Mee & Haverback, 2014; Stough et al., 2015). Thus, although this study showed that all participants pledged to remain not just in teaching, but in middle-school teaching, it might not be indicative of the feelings of the greater teacher community.

Administrations do criticize, but some participants admitted that a portion of the overall criticism they faced was self-inflicted and based on their perceptions of what others thought of them. According to the literature, self-criticism affects self-efficacy. Self-efficacy strongly predicts job satisfaction and prevents teacher burnout, and new teachers have lower self-efficacy than their more experienced colleague (Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). All participants reported that their self-efficacy grew over time and that they now felt more confident in their competence, but that self-reflection after mistakes were made was crucial to moving forward with optimism. This might suggest that negative self-efficacy alone is not a great enough factor to deter a teacher
from staying in the profession. Heikonen et al. (2017) supported this supposition by stating that beginning teachers who take the time to reflect and adjust will prevent a negative confidence spiral.

Although formal mentors were found to be somewhat supportive but not essential, all participants reported that informal mentors were much more influential in terms of academic, pedagogical, and classroom management support. This supports research by Gilles et al. (2013) in which they determined that mentoring is a community effort and a distributed mentorship approach allows for everyone to learn and receive psycho–social support from one another. Jacobs and Struyf (2013) also contended that use of a whole-school approach recognizes that support staff from guidance to secretaries all contribute to student achievement, and a successful school will be one in which all of the parts work together as a community to affect the whole. All participants spoke of the value of having people in close proximity that they could rely on for immediate advice when they had failed and for confirmation when they had succeeded. These relationships contribute greatly to feelings of competence, demonstrating the clear connection between relatedness and feelings of competence. The findings on relatedness follow.

**Third Finding: Relatedness**

Novice middle-school teachers found relatedness to both coworkers and students to be essential to persevering at the middle school level. Participants who had taught both in middle school and high school acknowledged that the team structure of middle school provided greater opportunity for bonding and receiving support. This might explain why participants remained eager to teach at the middle-school level because novice teachers’ perceptions about the overall collegial climate within their schools influenced their intent to remain teaching within their schools (Youngs, et al., 2015).
However, another study found that relatedness played a secondary role to competence among teachers, reporting that emotional exhaustion was higher when teachers did not feel competent, but work enthusiasm was higher when teachers felt more related to students and colleagues (Aldrup et al., 2016). In addition, the study found that less experience teachers had, the more likely they were to feel emotionally exhausted when their relatedness needs were not met. The findings of Aldrup et al. (2016), in addition to the current study, suggest that early in teachers’ careers, feelings of relatedness and competence are intertwined. All participants expressed great relief in being able to confide in and consult with at least a small group of coworkers, especially when they were feeling incompetent. Their informal mentor relationships simultaneously bolstered their teaching competence and their sense of belonging. The one teacher who reported a particularly negative culture in his school, in which he had carved out a small group of close, like-minded colleagues, expressed that he would remain in middle school but could see himself switching to another district due to the lack of positive, friendly, and inclusive staff. This supports an earlier study that focused on the significance of “person-organization fit” to job satisfaction (Youngs, et al., 2015, p. 37). The study concluded that if a teacher does not feel like they fit within their school’s culture and values, then they are more likely to leave (Youngs, et al., 2015; Vekeman et al., 2017).

Participants also communicated that although working with students could be challenging, they still retained a positive outlook towards middle-school students and felt that the relationships they had built with them were one of the primary driving forces keeping them in the profession. This supports the study by Heikonen et al. (2017), which found that teacher–student relationships can be both uplifting and challenging. All teachers expressed a fondness for the age group, both because of the fun and humor associated with it and because they felt they could
make a difference in students’ lives at a critical stage in their development. However, teachers also reported challenges associated with puberty, such as friend, romantic, and family drama. These challenges, in addition to classroom management of 20 to 30 students in one room, could make middle-school teaching an especially stressful profession. None of the schools in the study offered any social–emotional support for teachers. Teachers spoke only of close coworkers, friends, and family as a support system. Previous studies have shown the efficacy of formal, structured support, both for the health and benefit of the teacher but also, in turn, for his or her students (Jones et al., 2013; Reiser et al., 2016). The simple existence of professional learning communities in schools has been shown to lessen feelings of job dissatisfaction, leading to an increase in student achievement in reading and math (Banerjee et al., 2017). Thus, the structure of the middle-school model, by itself, with built-in teams and time for teams of teachers to meet regularly, supports relatedness. The question of how intrinsically motivated to stay at the middle-school level novice middle-school teachers feel based on how well their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are being met is answered in the next section.

**Fourth Finding: Likelihood of Remaining at the Middle-School Level**

Novice middle-school teachers are intrinsically motivated to stay at the middle-school level, but if their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are not met at their current workplace, they might be inclined to seek a position and a different middle-school. All participants who were teaching middle-school at the time of the study were adamant that they did not intend to leave middle school to teach at either elementary- or high-school levels, and the one teacher who was teaching at a high school at the time of the study commented that she had no objection to remaining at the middle-school level and had only taken the high-school job because it was what was available where she wanted to teach and live.
Participants highlighted circumstances under which they would consider leaving their current schools. These included: new administration that micromanaged teachers, new administration that does not support teachers, new and restrictive curriculum, being moved to another grade level involuntarily, difficult coworkers, and an opportunity to make a career move to administration. Participants were asked if they would consider leaving middle school in general at the end of the interview, after they had spent approximately an hour discussing all of the pros and cons of middle-school teaching. Although some negatives were touched on at each of their current workplaces, the above examples of why the participants might leave are “what if” situations that mostly do not currently exist in their schools. Each participant smiled or laughed when communicating how much they enjoyed teaching middle school despite all of its challenges, and relatedness to students and coworkers dominated the reasons given. When identifying exactly what made middle school attractive to them, they cited: the humor and fun, the potential to mold young minds, comfort with the curriculum, and opportunities for developing meaningful bonds with students.

**Conclusion**

This study asked the question: How intrinsically motivated to stay at the middle-school level do novice middle-school teachers feel based on how well their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are being met? All participants indicated that they were likely to remain teaching at the middle-school level, although some said they might leave their current workplace. Two participants from the same school both expressed that they felt a high degree of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others. They both felt occasional feelings of incompetence in their first year but expressed that the openness and willingness of their administration, formal and informal mentors, and coworkers to support and assist them, built their confidence, and they
reported that by the second year, most feelings of incompetence had dissipated. In this school specifically, it appeared that the relatedness factor was the driving force in the teachers’ motivation to remain, not only at the middle-school level, but at their particular school. The culture of the school supported all three tenets of self-determination theory, and each seemed to interact with and build off of the other.

Four other participants worked in the same district: three at the middle school and one at the high school. The high-school teacher previously worked at the same middle school referenced in the last paragraph, and her experiences were largely the same as the above participants. The three middle-school teachers expressed they all wished to remain teaching at the middle-school level and the high-school teacher said she would be open to returning to the middle-school level in the future. Each participant reported almost complete autonomy in terms of instructional practices, although they were told to adhere to the state standards and work cooperatively with others teaching the same grade level and subject. They also explained that after the initial trial-and-error period in the first year, that they felt fairly competent in their teaching abilities. They all noted that their informal mentors, rather than administration or formal mentors, were primarily responsible for their feelings of competence because they offered regular advice, resources, and support. Each middle-school teacher also felt that they had established meaningful and lasting relationships with a small group of coworkers with whom they worked closely. These coworkers, in addition to their personal relationships outside of school, acted as their sounding boards and made them feel like they could continue on in the face of the challenges that presented themselves. The high-school teacher noted the vast difference in coworker and student relationships between middle and high school. The structures in middle school do not exist in high school, and therefore, she said the teachers were more isolated and
had no students in common with other teachers in their departments. She lamented the lack of teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-student connection at the high-school level and felt that she might be drawn back to middle school for this reason.

The final participant was at a separate school in a district that had many challenges: frequent turnovers in leadership, lack of structure and discipline, and a negative culture. Because of this, he reported that he intended to remain a middle-school teacher but would consider leaving the district where he was teaching. He claimed to have almost total autonomy, but this autonomy was sometimes undesirable as it often translated into his being left to his own devices without support or resources. He enjoyed the freedom of teaching as he saw fit and said it would be difficult to give up this freedom, but he wished that it would not be at the cost of his feelings of competence. Just like the other participants, he also reported feeling more competent as time went on but gave much of the credit to a small group of veteran teachers with whom he had bonded. They allowed him to observe their classes, and he debriefed with them after school on a daily basis, both for academic and emotional support. Once again, competence and relatedness appear to be interconnected, supporting the theory of social learning posited by Bandura and Walters (1977), who suggested that people learn from one another through observation, imitation, and modeling.

Relatedness to students and coworkers seemed to drive the participants’ desire to remain at their workplaces. They believed that autonomy and competence could be built over time but saw relatedness and school culture as fixed—as something that would not improve. The next section discusses the recommendations for practice that resulted from the findings in this study.
**Recommendations for Practice**

This study relied on self-determination theory and its embedded components of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as a guide for exploring intrinsic motivation of teachers at the middle-school level, so one recommendation for each component is included here. First, this study showed that teachers appreciate autonomy in relation to daily practices and decisions made in their classrooms. However, it also showed they do not want autonomy to be equated with being left alone. These teachers, as trained professionals, wished to be treated as if they were the experts in their field and should be able to run their own classrooms effectively. However, if factors existed that affected the teachers’ ability to do so, then intervention was accepted and desired. This suggests that asking for help should not indicate weakness but rather a learning opportunity for the teacher. For example, if a student is sent out of a classroom because the teacher could not handle the student’s issue in that moment, and an administrator talks to the student and then returns the student to the classroom without communicating with the teacher, the teacher will feel frustrated and confused. If the student must be sent back, a note or a quick phone call could be made to the teacher to explain why the student is back and what the plan should be going forward. Therefore, it is recommended that administration should allow teachers as much autonomy as possible under existing constraints, policies, and curricular guidelines, then stand ready to respond effectively if teachers ask for or need assistance. In order to do so, it is recommended that administrators: a) provide regular, informal feedback to novice teachers aimed at increasing their autonomy by building skills; b) regularly survey novice teachers with the goal of addressing concerns or needs they may have; c) provide professional development based on the results of teacher feedback; d) provide disciplinary intervention for
students of novice teachers when needed; and e) follow up with the novice teacher and provide feedback that respects their autonomy.

Second, because this study found that competence was built by a combination of trial-and-error practices and support from both formal and informal mentors, it is recommended that school administration provide opportunities for more social learning to take place. Teachers in this study expressed that they learned more from trial-and-error and from other teachers than from their teacher preparation experiences. Teachers should be given multiple opportunities to observe other teachers, both inside and outside of their content areas. Teachers can observe each other to learn about: classroom management, routines and procedures, teaching strategies, and teacher-student relationship building. In conjunction with providing teachers with these opportunities, administrators should find time to follow up with teachers on what they are learning and applying in their own classrooms. This could be submitted in writing or just achieved through a simple check-in conversation. Administrators should be careful in their approach to these observations and be cognizant of not establishing hierarchies that involve bad teachers learning from good teachers. They must be fair in their assignments and include all teachers. A school environment that focuses on intrinsic motivation and recognizes effort and growth is associated with positive outcomes; conversely, a school emphasizing comparison, competition, and proving one’s worth or hiding one’s failures is related to negative outcomes and emotional stress (Devos et al., 2012).

Finally, this study found that middle schools have the structures and practices built in to support relatedness, but further efforts need to be made to create a culture of connectedness and inclusivity. Therefore, it is recommended that administrators, in addition to utilizing existing structures, encourage and model positive interactions among staff throughout the year. As this
study showed, this is especially necessary in larger schools. The school in this study that had the best school culture was a small school, which can naturally lend itself to closer relationships. However, a small school does not ensure a positive culture. The school in this study that reported a more troublesome school culture was not much larger than the former. Regardless of school size, administration must still clearly set expectations, model positive interactions, and create structures or routines that foster communication and cooperation. Additionally, professional development can be offered that assists with the social–emotional health of teachers as well as students. Schools are made up of students and teachers, so to say that schools must be student-centered without accounting for teacher needs is a fallacy that could lead to frequent teacher burnout and attrition which, in turn, affects student outcomes (Banerjee et al., 2017; Devos et al., 2012).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research in this area could expand to include a comparison between middle-school teachers and elementary- or high-school teachers. In order to test the seemingly unique nature of middle school, one could interview teachers at the elementary- and high-school levels to investigate whether the findings are comparable or if there are clear contrasts at each grade level. Additionally, a study could be done that compares teachers of Grades 6 through 8 in a K–8 school structure compared to a stand-alone middle school. Studies in the literature review showed that the transition from fifth to sixth grade is detrimental to student achievement levels, which consequently affects middle-school teachers’ evaluation ratings, leading to significant stress and a declining school climate (Mulholland et al., 2017; West & Schwerdt, 2012). Many schools, including Boston Public Schools, are experimenting with a K–8 structure, so a study
that delves into whether removing the Grade 5 to Grade 6 transition would alleviate stress and contribute to more intrinsically motivated middle-school-level teachers would be worth pursuing.

Within middle schools, additional research could be done that would address the efficacy of formal mentoring programs. Further, this study found that larger schools struggled to meet relatedness needs, and all teachers felt they did not feel professionally autonomous. Therefore, it would be worth investigating how larger districts use distributed leadership models to meet one or both of these needs.
References


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