Beyond Survival to Thrival: A Narrative Study of an Urban Teacher's Career Journey

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Abstract

Teacher burn out contributes to the epidemic of early career exit. At least half of all new K-12 teachers leave the profession by the time they reach their fifth year of teaching. Conversely, there are urban teachers who survive burn out and thrive as career-long educators.

This qualitative study is an in-depth look into one 40-year veteran teacher’s career narrative, answering the question: How did this teacher not only survive but also thrive as a career-long urban teacher? Additionally, the following sub-questions are explored: a) How is her spirit sustained throughout her teacher lifecycle? b) How can her story contribute to the literature as a counter-narrative to the current rhetoric focused on “teacher bashing”?

A critical socio-political lens guides this study. The socio-political forces that lead to urban teacher burn out are explained. The idea of teacher burn in, in which educators experience the symptoms of burn out, but choose to remain in the profession and exist as toxic influences, is discussed and related to teacher career theory. However, the more hopeful idea of urban teacher thrival is uncovered through narrative methodology.

This narrative study reveals three salient themes. First hope springs eternal is the idea that sustaining hope supported the veteran teacher’s career thrival. Next, the
extended education family is the notion that familial-like relationships at school nourished the teacher’s longevity. The third theme, creative autonomy, reveals that by being empowered with opportunities for curriculum development and instructional decision-making the teacher maintained her passion. Each theme was influenced by the participant’s internal dispositional factors and external conditional factors. These factors are discussed. The above themes, combined with deeply rooted caring relationships with students, proved to be the most important aspects of the participant’s sustained spirit. Furthermore, this study illustrates how teacher narratives can act as counter-narratives to teacher bashing through revealing the systemic impact that can be made by the career of one thriving teacher. Implications for teachers, educational leaders, teacher educators and researchers are discussed.
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Chapter One: Introduction, Literature Review & Study Overview

“Anybody who has ever taught knows what we mean when we say that teaching can consume us and smolder the glow until it dims and flickers low” (Intrator & Scribner, 2003, p. xiv).

Introduction

Schools are known to be the most highly stressful ecologies in our society, with teaching among the most seriously vexing occupations (Cox & Brockley, 1984; Intrator, 2002; Nieto, 2003; O’Reilley, 2005). Public school teachers juggle the needs and expectations of individual students, parents and caregivers, community members, colleagues, administrators, and policy makers. Stressors are amplified for teachers serving high-poverty contexts (Ayers & Ford, 2008; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Nieto, 2003).

The Report of the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (1996), What Matters Most, shared three key assertions. The first was that teacher knowledge and application of that knowledge have the greatest impact on student performance. The second highlighted the necessity of recruiting, preparing, and retaining quality teachers. The third made a case for setting forth the necessary conditions for teachers to teach well. More recent NCTAF studies have confirmed the importance of quality teachers as essential to student achievement (Barnes, Crowe & Schaefer, 2008; Caroll & Foster, 2010).

While teachers represent the dominant factor in the educational equation (“What Matters Most,” 1996), Intrator (2002) articulated that many teachers feel
underappreciated, mistreated, overwhelmed, isolated, and vulnerable. He pointed out that the energy, vitality, and heart of our teachers becomes depleted due to a lack of honor accorded to teachers in our culture.

A reason often cited for teachers feeling dishonored in our society is due to low salaries. In 2000, Nelson, Drown, and Gould reported that the average teacher’s annual salary, adjusted by the cost-of-living index, was at its lowest point in 40 years. More recent public commentary shows that salaries have not improved in most states (Smolin, 2011). Others argue the overwhelming time bind created by daunting working conditions necessitates teachers to compromise their personal lives in order to adequately meet professional obligations (Jensen, 2005; Swaim & Swaim, 1999). Another argument gives credit to the pressures of the 2001 “No Child Left Behind Act” (NCLB) as the leading cause. The NCLB act has contributed to surmounting pressure on teachers to ensure that all students perform on standardized assessments (Seed, 2008). Stakes are so high that in some schools the primary focus is on test scores rather than meaningful teaching and learning (Curwin, 2013; Giroux, 2012; Strauss, 2013).

Finally, some researchers ascribe a lack of personal and professional opportunities as the key source of teachers feeling dishonored and overwhelmed (Intrator, 2002; Jensen, 2005; Lanteri, 2001; Palmer, 2007). Palmer argued, “students who learn are the finest fruit of teachers who teach” (p. 7). It is for this reason that Palmer’s question “who is the self that teaches?” is the most vital question we can ask about teaching and teachers—for the sake of learning and those who learn. However, in our current educational climate “teacher-bashing has become a popular sport” (Palmer, p. 3) and teachers leave the profession in epic numbers (Barnes, Crowe & Schaefer, 2008).
Constructs and Terminology that Guide this Study

This study will consider teacher burn out, but also a phenomenon I term “burn in.” *Burn in* occurs when teachers remain in the profession and exist in a constant state of burn out. These teachers embody characteristics of being burned out, but choose to continue teaching, existing as toxic influences on the school culture, themselves, and students. This concept is inspired from the work of career theorist Michael Huberman’s (1989) “teacher career lifecycle” findings. Next, I introduce the more hopeful counter-narrative of “spirited teachers”. *Spirited teachers* are highly skilled educators who vehemently preserve their passion, commitment, and capacity to thrive, in spite of the many trials that accompany teaching (Baldacci, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Mathews, 2009; Mitchie, 1999; Wolk & Rodman, 1994). I highlight, compare, and contrast the work of Parker Palmer (2007) and Sonia Nieto (2003) to substantiate the importance of *spirited teachers*. Furthermore, I borrow the term “thrival” from human resources (Lake, 2010) and organizational (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009; Kowske, Lundby, Rasch, 2009) literature. Raade (2000) defined *thrival* as “a state of inner joy that defies circumstances” (para. 1). Throughout this study, I demonstrate how in order to sustain spirited teachers, we should aim beyond teacher survival to *thrival*, where teachers are deeply passionate, committed, and resilient to the many factors that can perpetuate burn out or burn in.

**Rationale for Study**

As a former urban elementary teacher for ten years, I experienced my own symptoms of burn out and witnessed countless other educators struggle with burn out and burn in. I watched too many new teachers exit the profession in less time than it took for
them to earn their teaching credentials. I observed burned in teachers whose level of
disengagement and unhappiness permeated their encounters with students, peers, and
administrators. On a more positive note, a few spirited veteran teachers deeply
influenced me. Their passion, courage, love, and pure talent created inspiring classrooms
in which even the most troubled students were engaged, happy, and learning. These
teachers seemed to defy the obstacles that lead many to burn out. They inspired me and
gave me hope.

Over the last eight years, I have been teaching pre-service and graduate level
teachers while also consulting with educators across the country. In addition to teaching
educational foundations courses on the topics of critical pedagogy, multicultural
education, and literacy I have worked to equip new teachers with the tools necessary to
recognize and retaliate against symptoms and impacts of burn out. Constantly, through
these changing roles, I am reminded that although the nuances of my personal
experiences in the classroom were mine alone, the global story and ensuing problems of
perpetual teacher burn out are entirely too common.

I have come to acquire a socio-political view of schooling in which I believe that
schools hold a mirror to society (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Throughout this study, I weave in
relevant aspects of my teaching narrative. The literature review will include vignettes
inspired from a typical morning during my first year of teaching. I relate this story to
socio-political theories about schools. My positionality (Creswell, 2007) undoubtedly
permeates this study.
A union of the literature combined with my experiences as an urban teacher and teacher educator have inspired this study. The purpose of this study is to explore the career narrative of one urban, spirited, veteran teacher to answer the following question:

1) How did this teacher not only survive but also thrive as a career-long urban teacher?

In addition, this study will seek answers to the following sub-questions:

a) How is her spirit sustained throughout her teacher lifecycle?

b) How can her story contribute to the literature as a counter-narrative to the current rhetoric focused on “teacher bashing”?

The literature review that follows will discuss the socio-political forces that lead to teacher burn out. In addition, vignettes portraying one urban teacher’s experience will help contextualize the issues that lead to teacher turnover. I will connect these ideas to teacher career theorist Huberman’s (1989) research on the lifecycle of teachers with specific focus on teacher stress, burn out, and burn in. Furthermore, I will discuss how hope, passion, and possibility can be restored through examination of narratives of spirited teachers who defy the typical burn out epidemic. An organizational overview of the study, including contents of upcoming chapters, will conclude this chapter.

**Literature Review**

The depletion of the energy, vitality, and heart of our teachers has led many teachers to leave the profession (Intrator, 2002; Karp, 2010; Naison, 2013; Wilson, 2012). Even though it is more cost-effective to keep established teachers than to recruit and replace teachers on a regular basis (Barnes, Crowe & Schaefer, 2008; Jensen, 2005; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012), at least half of all new K-12 teachers leave the
profession by the time they reach their fifth year of teaching (Intrator, 2002; Smolin, 2011). Other studies point to a critical three-year mark in which many new teachers either leave the profession or change teaching assignments (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009; Chandler, 2004; Jensen, 2005). Novice teachers who begin their career in diverse high-poverty schools tend to transfer to wealthier and predominately white schools (Henry, Bastian & Fortner, 2011; Ingersoll & May, 2011).

**Socio-political Forces that Lead to Teacher Burn out**

Urban schools serving a high number of minority and low-income students face the most significant teacher attrition rates (Barnes, Crowe & Schaefer, 2008; Boyd et al., 2009; Ingersoll & May, 2011; National Commission on Teaching for America’s Future [NCTAF], 2003; Rethinking Schools, 2010; Ronfeldt, Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2011). One of the current issues afflicting the nation’s schools is how to recruit and retain teachers who are capable of teaching successfully in diverse urban classrooms (Johnson et al., 2012; Wasley, 2007). High-need schools are often staffed with inequitable concentrations of under-prepared, inexperienced teachers who are given little training on how to meet an array of student needs. This contributes to a prevalence of new teachers who quickly abandon teaching, leaving a revolving door of more new teachers to pick up the pieces (Boyd, et al. 2009; Carroll, 2007; Henry et al., 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2011).

The injustices of many urban public school systems encompass dilapidated facilities, inadequate resources and materials, overcrowding, truancy, students with health and psychological obstacles, high student drop-out rates, a disproportionate number of students diagnosed with learning disabilities, an influx of Culturally, Linguistically,
Diverse (CLD) students, and surmounting pressure to perform on standardized tests (Ayers & Ford, 2008; Cummins, 2000; Gay, 2000; Herrerra, 2010; Kozol, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2008). In addition, a significant proportion of educators do not identify with the day-to-day realities of children living in poverty. Furthermore, a hefty number of urban teachers of white, middle-class upbringing lack cultural congruency and competency to authentically relate with many urban youth and their families. This lack of cultural understanding creates barriers in shaping authentic relationships essential for student learning (Andersen & Collins, 2004; Au, 2009; Cornbleth, 2008; Gay, 2010; Herrerra, 2010; Howard, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McIntosh, 1990).

Although many school policies and practices have evolved in an attempt to deal more equitably with student diversity, the opposite may often be the case (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Darling-Hammond (2010) argues that the United States, in contrast to countries that make more equitable investments in public education, is losing ground: “The wealthiest school districts in the United States spend nearly 10 times more than the poorest, and spending ratios of 3 to 1 are common within states” (p. 12). School policies and practices such as tracking, packaged curriculum and instruction, retention, standardized testing, and zero-tolerance disciplinary policies exasperate the inequities created by our socio-political structures. These practices add to the challenges that teachers encounter on a daily basis, create a disconnect between teachers, students and administrators, and perpetuate issues of conflicting priorities (Johnson et al., 2012; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Ronfeldt, et al., 2011).

Although teachers are often blamed (Giroux, 2012; Karp, 2010), socio-political issues that perpetuate injustices such as lack of funding, negative organizational

Historically teachers have experienced low-status in our society (Giroux, 2012; Karp, 2010). Current public rhetoric, fueled by neo-liberal education reform policies (Chaltain, 2012; Giroux, 2012; Naison, 2013; Rethinking Schools, 2010; White, 2012; Wilson, 2012), has evolved into a pervasive culture of teacher bashing. According to journalist Sam Pizzigati (2013), “in affluent cocktail party circles, a certain casual demonization of teachers has become culturally prevalent” (p. 2). Reform efforts aimed to close the “achievement gaps” point a daunting finger at ineffectiveness of teachers, often ignoring the larger realm of educational “equity gaps” that larger societal issues of poverty, systemic racism, and linguistic discrimination perpetuate (Rethinking schools, 2010; Spayde, 2011; Thomas, 2013).

Spawned as part of the “War on Poverty” the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was amended into the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act
(NCLB) is instrumental to today’s culture of accountability-based reform. These policies have begun to shift away from the federal government’s historic role as a promoter of access and equity in public education through efforts such as school integration, Title I funding for high poverty schools, and services for students with special needs (Karp, 2010). NCLB and successors such as elite political and corporate sponsored “Race to the Top” and the Common Core Standards movement are influential in current education policy, impacting the daily lives of administrators, teachers, parents, communities, and students (Tierney, 1998; Thomas, 2013). According to popular education activist and author Stephen Karp (2010), “taken together these policies, embodied first in NCLB and now in a Race Over the Cliff, have helped create an impression of public education as a failure that is steadily eroding the common ground it needs to survive” (p. 4).

Ironically, over the last decade, these acts have increasingly resulted in an oasis of detrimental consequences for many schools serving the high poverty students that policies were intended to benefit. High-stakes testing practices have led to massive school turnovers, takeovers and closures; disrupting whole communities that many students and families relied upon. These school closures are disproportionately prominent in black and low-income communities (National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, 2013). In Chicago the closure of 54 public schools impacting 38,000 children, the largest group of campuses to be closed at one time, was announced in April of 2013 (Shibata, 2013).

An overemphasis on test preparation, creation of scripted “teacher proof” curricular mandates, and fear-based accountability measures have “squeezed the life out of teaching” (Naison, 2013, para. 1), especially in high-needs schools, driving out good
teachers who feel reduced to test preparation (Curwin, 2013, Giroux, 2012, Strauss, 2013). In his epic resignation letter that swept international media attention and led to many other public resignations, 27-year veteran teacher Gerald J. Conti stated:

My profession is being demeaned by a pervasive atmosphere of distrust, dictating that teachers cannot be permitted to develop and administer their own quizzes and tests (now titled as generic “assessments”) or grade their own students’ examinations. The development of plans, choice of lessons and the materials to be employed are increasingly expected to be common to all teachers in a given subject. This approach not only strangles creativity, it smothers the development of critical thinking in our students and assumes a one-size-fits-all mentality more appropriate to the assembly line than to the classroom. (Wilcox, 2013, para. 9)

The above factors paint a harsh picture that bears on the lives and careers of teachers serving high-poverty contexts. Consequently, when teachers suffer, students endure a heavy blow (Carroll, 2007; Palmer, 2007; NCTAF, 1996). Bandura (1977) emphasized that children learn by modeling. Building from Bandura’s work, Agne (1999) argued that children “learn by absorbing who you are to them, not by memorizing what you say. They will become you, like it or not” (p. 166). Plausibly, when teachers are consumed with cynicism that can result from the many factors depicted above, their students endure harm from teachers’ gloomy temperament and ensuing modeling. Conversely, when teachers are successful, research studies indicate that they report higher job satisfaction, a lower rate of burn out, and a tendency to remain in diverse high-need schools, benefiting the students they serve (Boyd et al., 2009; Henry et al. 2011; Naison, 2013).

One teacher’s story or the story of too many? The following vignettes paint a picture of an urban teacher whom we will call “Burnadette.”¹ This story of one typical

¹ I chose the spelling “Burnadette” to match the theme of burn out and burn in.
morning is told in order to illustrate the complex nature of urban teaching that can lead to
disengagement and burn out. Burnadette is a fictional character, but born from
experiences during my first years of teaching in an urban high-poverty elementary
school. It is important to note that my cultural background—a white, heterosexual
woman who grew up in a middle class family—undoubtedly influenced how I perceived
these experiences. Burnadette’s story is triangulated through my observations from
mentoring many newer teachers combined with narratives of early career urban teachers
reflected in the literature (Ayers, 2001; Baldacci, 2004; Cornbleth, 2008; Mitchie, 1999;
Ladson-Billings, 2009; Wolk & Rodman, 1994).

Each vignette will be followed by a discussion that joins the story of Burnadette
to the bodies of literature around the socio-political nature of urban teaching and factors
that lead to teacher burn out and what I call burn in (Huberman, 1989; Nieto, 2003; Nieto
& Bode, 2008; Palmer, 2007). As shared previously, I refer to burn in as cases in which
teachers experience symptoms of burning out, but rather than leaving the profession, they
choose to stay, existing in a state of disengagement from their work, students, and
original idealism that called them to teaching (Cornbleth, 2008; O’Reilley, 2005, Palmer,
2007). Teacher burn out is broader than the issue of holding onto teachers for the life of
their careers. As Moire (NCTAF, 2003) puts it, “I worry about the teachers we’re losing
physically as well as the teachers we are losing spiritually, mentally, and emotionally” (p.
3). The teacher vignettes are italicized in order to decipher from scholarly commentary.

**Burnadette: 6:30 am.** Burnadette, a first year teacher, arrives to work at 6:30
one spring morning with hopes of capturing an uninterrupted hour to prepare her lessons
for the day. At this early hour, hers is the only car in the parking lot. Everyone tells her
she’ll spend less time at the school once she gets the first year under her belt. She finds this hard to fathom, having stayed until 8:30 the night prior and still swimming in a sea of unfinished work. On top of her daily teaching responsibilities and after school tutoring, she is also preparing for parent-teacher conferences, report cards, and the anticipated superintendent walk-through.

As she makes her way to the entrance, walking past several empty beer bottles, a syringe, broken glass, and a discarded condom, she promises herself that she will not cry today, at least not in front of the students and certainly not when her boyfriend asks her how her day went. She’s beginning to realize that he is growing tired of the constant tears and, although supportive, tells her she needs to stop taking this job so seriously and enjoy some time away from school work.

Taking a deep breath, she pounds on the door, freshly tagged the night prior, and waits for the custodian to let her in. He opens the door and greets her with his customary nod. Burnadette makes it down the long dark hallway until she reaches her classroom. She pushes the light switch and promptly realizes that the past flickering light bulbs have finally burned out.

Thankful for a bright and sunny day and her wall of windows, Burnadette opens the dilapidated blinds and pulls open a bullet-cracked window, letting in some morning air. She turns on all 3 of her fans, recently purchased at a garage sale. She then hurriedly heads for her desk to let her 20-year old computer warm up and sort through the pile of notes she gathered the night prior from her in-box.

As the newest teacher in the building, Burnadette was hired three days prior to the first day of school. After signing her contract at the district office, she returned to a
classroom that was scavenged by more senior teachers, leaving her with broken chairs, wobbly desks, a smelly pet ferret that seems to “come with the room” and only a few random materials. Materials include one class set of old basal readers (the same ones she remembers from when she was in 3rd grade), and a few dated teacher-made math games.

Since she was a late hire, she only recently received the district-mandated math workbooks that she was supposed to follow since the first day of school. The superintendent purchased these for each classroom in hopes that this scripted curriculum would be the solution to grim standardized test scores.

**Discussion.** It is not uncommon for teachers, especially new teachers, to spend countless hours on schoolwork. The learning curve for new teachers and the many responsibilities outside of student contact (report cards, meetings, professional development, testing, committees, etc.) leads many new teachers like Burnadette to be the first to arrive each morning and the last to leave in the evenings (Ayers & Ford, 2008; Nieto, 2003; Nieto & Bode, 2008).

The time and energy she puts into her work and the culture shock as she acclimates to the grim realities of her student’s lives left Burnadette emotionally drained (Cornbleth, 2008). Gregory Mitchie (1999), a former teacher on the South Side of Chicago turned urban education professor, mirrored a similar sentiment stating:

I’d been feeling an exhaustion caused by too many extra hours at school, too many late nights planning, and too many weekends spent videotaping or devising new projects instead of rejuvenating myself somehow. I felt as if school had taken over my life, and it had left me physically, mentally, and emotionally drained. (p. 111)
For some teachers, the countless hours that they must dedicate to the early years of teaching can take a toll on their overall wellbeing. This stress can signify an initial step toward burn out.

Burnadette serves in a typical under-resourced urban school. This first vignette begins to paint a picture of the socio-political factors that contribute to burn out and disengagement (Ayers et al., 2008, Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kozol, 2005; Nieto, 1999; Nieto & Bode, 2008). In Burnadette’s case, she faced a classroom without working light bulbs, needed several fans blowing in order to keep the room at a comfortable temperature, and worked on an archaic computer. Additionally, as the newest teacher, she was left with the least desirable furniture, and the fewest materials and resources.

It is well known that the segregation of public schools directly impacts inequitable funding (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Karp, 2010; Kozol, 1991; Nieto & Bode). The highest poverty schools are left with minimal funding, resulting in decaying and deteriorating buildings similar to Burnadette’s. Despite peaks of progress towards desegregation of public schools since the Brown vs. Board of Education Act of 1954, more valleys currently exist (Darling- Hammond, Kozol, 1991, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Reports show that U.S. public schools are more segregated now than at any time in the past three decades (Darling-Hammond; Orfield & Yun, 1999; Willink, 2009).

Signs of violence loomed throughout Burnadette’s school setting. In her case, the tagging on the building entrance was symbolic of gang activity; bullet-damaged windows imply that violence is a regular occurrence. Kozol (1991) shared stories of elementary aged children in East St. Louis experiencing gruesome violence including witnessing rapes and violent murders of loved ones. These encounters were a regular part of their
lived experiences. Mitchie (1999) shared stories from his own teaching in which teenage pregnancy, homelessness, abandonment by parents, drug abuse, and physical abuse were a way of life. In her autobiography, Liz Murray shared similar realities growing up with drug-addicted parents and becoming homeless in New York City (2010). The violence, abuse, and injustice that many high-poverty children encounter daily (Ayers, Ladson-Billings, Mitchie & Noguera, 2008; Bourgois, 2003; Kozol) can be a traumatic shock to teachers, especially those unfamiliar with the landscape of poverty (Cornbleth, 2008; Nieto, 1999, 2003).

**Burnadette: 7:00 am.** Sorting through her in-box papers, Burnadette suddenly panics as she realizes that the principal has called an emergency morning meeting. A nice man, her principal is new to the building, recently hired after the former principal walked out. The meeting is scheduled to begin promptly at 7:30 and attendance is mandatory. Burnadette is suddenly left with a mere 30 minutes to throw something together for the day.

Trying to think on her feet, Burnadette decides she doesn’t have time to prepare materials for her original intent of an interactive and creative morning literacy block. She quickly skims through the basal reader, searching for enough material to successfully get the class through the morning. Sadly, most of her students won’t be able to read the stories in the book or complete the dreaded comprehension questions.

Burnadette runs to the copy machine, in hopes of putting together some activity packets for when the basal lesson goes awry. Unfortunately, the machine is jammed again. She should have known better! She should have run by the print shop and paid to have her copies made last night. She rushes back to the room and grabs a novel she
recently checked out at the library, hoping that the students will enjoy a read aloud. Just then, the principal gets on the intercom, sternly announcing that the mandatory meeting will be starting promptly in 3 minutes.

Discussion. The initial vignette showed some of the societal issues that inhibit educational success for many lower-income students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kozol, 1992, 2005; Murray, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2008). This second vignette reveals how Burnadette came face to face with school-based practices that impede effective instruction. These practices included a lack of planning time and resources, inappropriate curriculum, and unorganized administration (Nieto & Bode). Undeniably, these roadblocks impede academic achievement for students (Nieto, 1994).

Toxic systemic practices, such as those experienced by Burnadette, not only add stress to the teacher, but trickle down to students (Ayers & Ford, 2008; Nieto & Bode, 2008). It is not surprising that teachers who do not see their students learning are less likely to stay in the profession (Henry et al., 2011; Johnson et al, 2012; Ronfeldt et al, 2011). “Teachers need to keep hope alive, not only for their students but for themselves as well” (Kincheloe, 2007, p. 11). When teachers lose hope, they begin to burn out and disengage (Nieto, 2003).

Nieto and Bode (2008) illustrated the limited role teachers are given in school practices and that “as a group, teachers are shown little respect by our society and are usually poorly paid and infrequently rewarded” (p. 143). In the case of Burnadette, despite her best effort to arrive early in the morning, she has little control over her morning planning time. Even when supplied with curriculum and resources, urban teachers often find them inappropriate, having to adapt and reinvent (Baldacci, 2004;
Mitchie, 1999). Burnadette arrived to school with great intentions of constructing a student-centered morning literacy block, but her time was cut short due to a last minute faculty meeting.

**Burnadette: 7:30 am.** Burnadette grabs a pile of papers to grade, concealing them in a notebook, hoping that she can sneak a little work in during the predictably monotonous meeting. Arriving at the meeting just in time, she sees the crotchety old teacher glare at her. Burnadette still can’t figure out how this woman ever became a teacher. Irma seems to hate kids and people in general. At least the other teachers who are catching her attitude are either quitting the profession, being forced out, or transferring to new schools next year. Administration claims their hands are tied with Irma. The time and legal resources to break her tenured contract are too risky, so the district plans to just “wait her out.” As she sneaks over to a seat in the back of the room, Burnadette promises herself that she will never resemble this terrible, nasty woman.

The principal appears frazzled and nervously explains that the superintendent and his instructional coaching team have changed their walk-through visit—originally scheduled for next month—to today at 10:00am. Since the annual district focus is math, the principal passes out a list of “must-see” math initiatives for each classroom. The checklist includes a class-made number line that must be posted exactly in the middle of the wall, math objectives and standards recorded on the right hand corner of the board, a detailed daily schedule, and evidence that the teachers are following the scripted math curriculum and preparing students for the upcoming high-stakes test.

The room is tense and only a few teachers seem to be paying any attention to the principal’s hurried lecture. He grows agitated as he sternly reminds the staff of how
important a successful walk-through is for their school. If the administrative team does not see improvement this time, a serious school overhaul will inevitably follow.

Discussion. The “mean and nasty” teacher is an example of how teacher burn out can manifest to burn in. As previous discussion pointed out, an epidemic of 50% of new teachers exit the profession by the fifth year (Barnes, Crowe & Schaefer, 2008; Jensen, 2005). Irma embodies the other concerning and recurring example of one who burns in, choosing to remain in the profession, but existing in a state of bitterness and disengagement (Huberman, 1989; Kozol, 2005; O’Reilley, 2005). This concerning trend is further developed in the preceding discussion of teacher lifecycle research (Huberman).

Bryk and Schneider (2002) termed “relational trust” as an organizational property with distinctive qualities or interpersonal social exchanges in school cultures. Their study found that urban schools that foster relational trust improve student learning outcomes. Many urban schools lack the relational trust necessary to collaborate in meaningful student-centered work, leading to distrust that distracts from putting students first (Bryk & Schneider; Intrator, 2002; Lopez, 2010; Ronfeldt et al., 2011; Swaim & Swaim, 1999). In Burnadette’s case, faculty meetings are sporadic and tensely focused on hasty policy related reforms, rather than student needs. Moreover, in an effort to increase student achievement, many school systems attempt to implement a breadth of curricular upgrades without giving teachers ample time or guidance to effectively implement (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Schmoker, 2006; Strauss, 2013). In the case of Burnadette, pressures to perform well on the standardized math test have framed surface level priorities that are tangibly observable to administrators.
Since the inception of the NCLB act and more current related reform efforts (e.g., Race to the Top, Common Core) urban schools have experienced surmounting pressure to increase student performance on standardized tests (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2008). In many instances, these pressures create disconnect between administration, teachers and students (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Strauss, 2013). Consequently, teachers feel forced to prioritize student test preparation over deep level student-centered outcomes (Intrator, 2002; Nieto & Bode; Palmer, 2007). In some instances, such as the scripted math curriculum that Burnadette’s school is tied to, students in urban schools spend their days receiving low-level instruction aimed to teach test-taking strategies rather than the higher-level thinking and interventions necessary to function and excel in a global society (Darling-Hammond; Schmoker, 2006).

**Burnadette: 8:05 am.** Finally, the bell rings, cutting through the tension in the staff meeting room. The teachers rush out to gather their students on the playground. Burnadette heads outside to find most of her 33 third and fourth graders lined up, many excitedly greeting her and several offering her cheerful smiles, hugs, and other symbols of affection.

She notices a new little boy in her line, shyly holding the form that indicates that he has been assigned to her class. She smiles at him and wonders where she will fit him in her cramped classroom. Her class is like a revolving door, with students constantly dropping and new ones added on. It seems that just when she starts to figure a child out, he or she leaves the school and a new student arrives. She shrugs her shoulders and figures that the newest arrival can take the spot of one of her many truant students until she makes a space for him after school.
Despite the stress of adding a new student to her class, she gazes at the sea of children and takes a deep breath. At that moment, Burnadette feels a glimmer of happiness, recalling the hope, convictions of a more just society, and passion that drove her to teach.

A few parents and guardians are also in line and quickly approach her, seemingly talking to her all at the same time. Maria’s step-mom speaks limited English and Maria’s older brother attempts to translate. She wants Burnadette to know that the family was evicted from their home the night prior, so Maria may be a little tired and more agitated than usual. Deshawn’s aunt says they lost his homework packet again but finally found the library books on the roof of their motel building. Heather’s grandma and legal guardian, slurring her speech and swaggering, appears to be using again. She just wants to remind Burnadette that Heather needs to take her ADHD medication with food.

While simultaneously returning affectionate hugs and engaging in dialogue with caregivers, Burnadette notices from the corner of her eye two parents who are rival gang members engaged in a heated banter. She hears another parent yell a racist comment to Maria’s step-mom. Burnadette plasters on a cheerful smile and quickly ushers the children inside to safety.

**Discussion.** In addition to the many socio-political constraints that add pressure on teachers, the lives of high-poverty urban students are complex, challenging, and often heartbreaking. Urban youth are often faced with issues of poverty, immigration, gentrification, and the criminalization of youth (Dee, 2008; Giroux, 2012; Murray, 2010). Some come to school lacking proper sleep, nutrition, and the emotional bonding
necessary for healthy development. Many are raised by single parents who are most often mothers who struggle to financially, educationally, and emotionally provide for their children (Ayers et al., 2008; Kozol, 1991; 2005; Mitchie, 1999).

As an elementary urban teacher, I served a child who spent her evenings washing dishes at the local bar where her grandmother and legal guardian worked until closing time at 2:00 am. Another child was haunted from witnessing the brutal murder of his gang-affiliated father. One of my 3rd graders was visited by the local police, handcuffed in front of my classroom door, and threatened with jail for being caught stealing mail (that included holiday gifts of money) from neighbors. Many of my students lived in crowded cars, mobile homes, or motel rooms with parents, caregivers, siblings and/or other relatives.

A high proportion of urban youth are culturally and linguistically diverse (Banks & Banks, 2008; Cummins, 2000; Herrera, 2010), learning to speak, read, write and function both socially and academically in United States public schools. In 2010, Denver Metro area school districts reported 35% of their student populations as non-native English speakers (Meyer, 2010). Some students struggle with learning disabilities, developmental delays, physical disabilities, emotional disorders and other cognitive and emotional challenges. In this era of accountability to standardized testing, teachers like Burnadette are expected to skillfully meet each of these needs in under-resourced school systems that often lack the professional development, human and material resources, time, support and context to adequately offer each child optimal opportunity (Kozol, 1991, 2005; Nieto 1999, 2003; Nieto & Bode, 2008).
**Burnadette: 8:10 am.** Students enter the classroom and immediately put their backpacks on the hooks that Burnadette’s boyfriend recently mounted, their cards in the appropriate “hot” or “home” lunch pile and sit down to work on their bell work.

Burnadette filters around the room—answering questions, solving dilemmas, resolving conflict—and most importantly offering crackers to children who likely didn’t eat breakfast.

She notices that Karina has a fresh bruise under her eye. Students seem to be in a cheerful mood today and are for the most part, following the morning routine with little disruptions. Verle is absent and Juan Carlos seems to be less agitated than most mornings. At the moment, he isn’t having a violent outburst and is quietly talking to himself in his “cozy corner.” Burnadette takes a deep breath and approaches Karina to ask her about the bruise. Burnadette prepares for the usual encounter, regretfully foreseeing that the story will always be the same—Karina was “clumsy and fell down...again.”

Since students are still working on their bell work, Burnadette does a quick check of the classroom to make sure she has everything posted on the principal’s “must-see” checklist. She hurriedly writes standards and lesson objectives on the “board” which consists of chalkboard paint she added to the torn up wall. Someone (probably the mean, nasty, old Irma) seemed to have ripped the white board off during their scavenge. She glimpses up at the clock...8:20, takes a deep breath and hopes for a good day.

**Discussion.** This final vignette alludes to the lack of simple resources, such as a chalkboard that many new teachers are left providing for themselves (Kozol, 1991; Nieto, 1999). Additionally, the teaching staff lacks trusting or collaborative relationships (Bryk
& Schneider, 2002; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Finally, the poverty of her students means that Burnadette has to supply food to satiate their hunger (Kozol).

Karina’s fresh bruise reminds us of the many painful life circumstances that students bring with them to and from school (Kozol, 1991, 2005). For Karina, child abuse is a way of life and something that she has learned to cover up with excuses of clumsiness. Juan-Carlos suffers from extreme emotional issues that often lead to violent outbursts in the classroom. The horror that children face add to the pain and shock that many new teachers experience. Many seasoned teachers learn to distance themselves emotionally from these dreadful realities (Huberman, 1989; Nieto, 1999).

After her first few days, Baldacci (2004), a reporter turned urban teacher on the south side of Chicago, quickly concluded, “I understand the teacher shortage and why a third of new teachers quit after three years and half bail out after five years. No other industry would survive—or allow—such a personnel hemorrhage” (p. 6). Given the complexities of teaching in high-poverty contexts, one must wonder if an urban teacher like Burnadette can survive, and more notably thrive, in a career of urban teaching.

The above depiction of Burnadette’s morning illustrates some of the barriers that many urban teachers face on a moment-by-moment basis. The numbers are grim for urban teacher career survival. In 1999, the new teacher turnover rate in Philadelphia’s public school district was 70% in the first six years, higher than the alarming student dropout rate of 42% (Carroll, 2010). More recent statistics show similar trends with teacher attrition spiraling out of control (Barnes, et al., 2007; Kain, 2011).
Stress and Burn out in the Teaching Life

According to emotional intelligence expert, Dr. Jean Segal (2011), stress is a symptom of too many physical and psychological demands. The previous vignettes and discussions have illustrated the exhaustive and agonizing demands put on Burnadette during the first two hours of her morning: report cards, bureaucratic accountability measures, curriculum, lack of materials, intense administrative pressure, poverty, violence, child abuse, substance abuse, gangs, racism, hunger, lack of resources, meeting the unique needs of students with learning differences, and more (Ayers, et al. 2008; Nieto, 2003; Nieto & Bode, 2008).

As Burnadette’s story illustrates, stress is undeniable in the realm of teaching. Although challenging, according to Segal (2011), those experiencing stress can imagine that once they get everything under control, they will feel better. When people learn to manage their stress, they see a light at the end of the tunnel, maintaining or even increasing their original passion and hope for teaching. In fact, stress can be productive, lighting a fire to the hope and passion that drives teachers (Nieto, 2003). Those experiencing healthy doses of stress are usually aware of their stress level (Segal, 2011).

Gradually, however, the multiple stressors of teaching can lead to burn out. The intensity of urban teaching includes lack of control over work, lack of recognition or rewards for good work, unclear or overly demanding job expectations, and working in a chaotic and high-pressure environment (Nieto, 1999; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Although the story featured in this study doesn’t offer a literal conclusion, Burnadette experienced all of the above stressors that forecast burn out.
Unlike stress, burn out leads to hopelessness and a sense of emptiness, and loss of motivation and care. Teachers who experience burn out lose their sense of hope. Their passions dwindle. Sonia Nieto (2003) studied the question: “What keeps teachers going in spite of it all?” In her analysis of teachers’ autobiographies, she found that “hope is the very essence of teaching” (p. 53). Consequently, if teachers lose their hope, they have lost the essence of their teaching. Fried (1995) affirmed that:

To be a passionate teacher is to be someone in love with the field of knowledge, deeply stirred by issues and ideas that challenge our world, drawn to the dilemmas and potentials of the young who come into class each day—or captivated by all of these. (p. 1)

Teachers who burn out, and those who burn in, lose the passion, love, depth and captivation that initially drove them into teaching.

Those experiencing symptoms of teacher burn out don’t typically notice when stress shifts to this perilous point. Yet, there are common physical, emotional, and behavioral signs and symptoms of burn out (Segal, 2011). Burnadette displayed many of the signs that are common to the phenomenon of teacher burn out.

Physical signs that one is on the road to burn out can include a change in appetite or sleeping habits, frequent headaches, back pain, or muscle aches, lower immunity, and a feeling of tiredness and being drained on a frequent basis. Emotional signs are aplenty and include a growing cynicism, a negative outlook, a loss of motivation, feelings of helplessness, feeling trapped and defeated, and a sense of failure and self-doubt. Those experiencing burn out become detached and feel alone in the world. Lastly, one’s sense of accomplishment and satisfaction dwindles. Behavioral signs can include
procrastination, isolating oneself from others, withdrawing from responsibilities, taking frustrations out on others, and using food, drugs, or alcohol to cope (Segal, 2011).

**Burn in and Detachment**

Although it is alarming that burn out leads a high proportion of teachers to exit the profession prematurely, it is perhaps more traumatic when teachers remain in the profession and exist in a constant state of burn out, or what I call *burn in*. The “terrible nasty” teacher that Burnadette works with is an example of this type of teacher existence. Irma embodied the characteristics of being burned out, but chose to remain in the profession, existing as a toxic influence on the school culture, herself, and students.

In an extensive Grawemyer-award winning study of the teacher lifecycle, career theorist Huberman (1989) concluded that the majority of teachers who remain in the field develop a state of “non-resolution” with the profession, spiritually giving up on the hope that their work offers and existing in a state of disenchantment. Alas, after the 3-5 year career-exit mark, we are likely left with 50% of new teachers who remain, but many have lost their original heart and hope for their work.

**Huberman and the teacher lifecycle.** In his seminal study of career life cycles, Michael Huberman (1989) explored the professional lives of educators with 5-40 years in the classroom. Drawing on career theory of teachers (Ball & Goodson, 1985, Baltes & Brim, 1982), Huberman engaged veteran teachers in a qualitative discourse of unpacking their teaching narratives, and explored how teacher careers evolve and what determines how they unfold. His study attempted to predict later phases of teaching from earlier ones, anticipating types of beginnings that led to career crisis, or predicting which teachers would report ultimate phases of satisfaction or disenchantment during the final
years of teaching. The disenchantment depicted by the participants in his study is similar to the burn in phenomenon explored in this study.

Huberman (1989) divided teaching careers into stages, depicted by years in the field. Each career stage was thought to be a significant phase in the “teacher lifecycle”, similar to lifecycle stages of infancy, toddler, preschooler, school age, adolescent, young adult, and so forth. These stages were divided as follows: 1-3 years, 4-6 years, 7-18 years, 19-30 years, and 31-40 years of teaching service.

Huberman (1989) asked 160 participants to reflect on their career trajectories, identify distinct phases, and affix original thematic titles to each. Aside from the structure of placing their career stories into phases, there were no constraints on participants who could choose any theme, sequence, and configuration of features. Data were then matched to three teacher career phases. The initial phase defined types of beginnings. The second phase of stabilization is followed by the final, in which affirmation or emancipation from teaching occurs. The phases and sequences of Huberman’s findings are visually depicted in figure 1.1.

**Phase 1: Beginnings.** The first phase is the type of beginning a teacher experienced. Participants referred to their initial years (1-3) in teaching as either “easy beginnings” or “painful beginnings.” Those who experienced easy beginnings had positive relationships with students, a sense of pedagogical mastery, “manageable” pupils, and generally felt enthusiastic. In contrast, those who had painful beginnings felt isolated inside their school, felt a sense of constant overload and anxiety, were overly monitored by teacher education staff, felt a heavy time investment, and had “difficult” pupils (Huberman, 1989).
Painful beginnings had a familiar litany. These teachers tended to begin their careers feeling overwhelmed. Their interactions with students often vacillated between excessive strictness and permissiveness with students. They had continual difficulties with pupil discipline and were intimidated by some students. These teachers were in a continual state of trial-and-error with their teaching methods, and struggled to feel at ease with instructional delivery. Finally, participants who followed this sequence often recall fear of judgments on the part of other teachers or administrators.

**Phase 2: Stabilizing.** In phase 2, participants experienced a stabilization period that took place typically during years 4-6 of teaching. During this phase, teachers began to feel at ease in the classroom. They started to collect a basic repertoire of strategies. Pedagogical stabilization meant that teachers were able to differentiate materials and interactions around student needs. During the stabilization phase, participants grappled with the question of commitment to the profession. Interestingly, the typical time period in their career that teachers faced questions of commitment intersected directly with years of experience required by most districts to earn tenure. Ironically, this is the common timeframe in which 50% of teachers leave the profession (Barnes et al., 2008; Chandler, 2004).

**Phase 3: Affirmation or emancipation.** In phase 3, participants either affirmed themselves as teachers or left teaching. For those who remained in the profession, there were new concerns and challenges. This is the first phase teachers typically felt the “stale breath of routine for the first time” (Huberman 1989, p 54.). Once a basic level of classroom mastery was achieved, Huberman found that there was a need for refinement and diversity. Those affirming their practices started to see they could achieve better
results by diversifying their materials and modes of classroom management. Huberman found that diversification of materials often led participants to increased collaboration outside their own classrooms.

**Career-sequences after affirmation.** For the teachers who affirmed themselves and remained, Huberman (1989) uncovered four model sequences typical of teacher career trajectories: “harmony recovered”, “reassessment and self-doubt”, “reassessment: resolution and non-resolution”, and “renewal.” Teachers could find themselves in the throes of a sequence during varied years of experience and repeat a sequence more than once. The following is a discussion of each career sequence in Huberman’s professional lifecycle of teachers.

*Sequence 1: Harmony recovered.* Teachers who followed this sequence recovered their harmony with the teaching profession. This sequence typically took place during 5-10 years of teaching experience. Other teachers experienced a second round of this sequence during the later stage of 11-19 years. These teachers typically experienced painful beginnings similar to that of Burnadette’s.

One-third of Huberman’s sample lived their initial teaching experience with a typical “painful beginning” in phase 1 of their career. These teachers were able to survive the initial painful beginnings and moved to a phase of stabilization by tenure, remaining in teaching. Once these teachers stabilized, they began to experiment with their practices and affirm themselves as teachers.

*Sequence 2: Reassessment and self-doubt.* Similar to the harmony sequence, teachers who followed the reassessment and self-doubt progression experienced a phase of career stabilization. However, rather than moving to a stage of experimentation, these
participants experienced a stage in which they seriously reassessed their career choices, having self-doubts about their teaching trajectory. Younger teachers in the 5th-10th years of teaching as well as more seasoned teachers serving in the 11th-19th years of their careers experienced this sequence. Huberman (1989) found that over half of the reasons given for self-doubt and career reassessment were institutional. These teachers described themselves as worn down by the routine aspects of the profession, or disappointed by the social climate or quality of administration within a building.

**Sequence 3: Reassessment.** Teachers who survived the second sequence of career reassessment and self-doubt often later experienced a subsequent period of career reassessment. In this sequence, teachers followed one of two paths: resolution and capturing a “second wind.” or non-resolution where they were embittered by the “system” and lost hope. Reassessment was a typical stage during the periods of 11-19 years and 20-29 years of service. Huberman (1989) found that “among this subset of teachers from twelve to thirty years into the profession, fewer achieved resolution—on their own terms—than did not. Moreover, their descriptions have the ring of definitiveness; they saw no sign of evolution in succeeding years” (p. 46).

Women who had experienced change and novelty in their careers were most likely to achieve resolution. Classroom assignments, departments, disciplines, and new schools were all significant forms of changes. These participants seemingly found that even forcible introductions to novelty and challenge every 5-6 years were essential; otherwise teachers would experience a slow erosion of their spirit (Huberman, 1989).

**Sequence 4: Renewal.** Participants experienced periods of renewal during the years 11-19, 20-29, and 30-39 of the teaching lifecycle. Renewal by Huberman’s (1989)
definition was synonymous to administrative level reform or major structural change, and primarily linked to socio-political influences. Essentially, renewal in Huberman’s study meant imposed change. Those who followed this sequence took two distinct paths. For some, renewal led to refocusing while for others the same sequence led to disenchantment and bitterness.

For those who experienced positive focusing, it was not uncommon for these career teachers to specialize in a specific teaching role (such as Title 1 reading teacher, or Special Education). Participants who followed this more positive sequential trajectory, still tended to emotionally pull back from larger school reform efforts, sometimes even articulating what Huberman interpreted as a “narcissistic entitlement” (p. 49). They described that the satisfaction derived in the later years of their careers came from activities that the larger system had yet to corrupt.

However, for many others renewal led to disenchantment and a sense of bitterness. It appears that for those teachers who followed a renewal sequence, this refocus was usually connected to school reforms that were imposed upon them. These teachers saw this phase as “defensive focusing” on the newest educational reforms du jour. Some withdrew serenely, others smugly, and others with a sense of betrayal.

Huberman (1989) concluded that the teachers who had been heavily involved in school-or district-wide projects earlier in their careers were less satisfied in their later teaching years. Heavy involvement in school-wide innovation was a fairly strong predictor of disenchantment after 20-25 years of teaching. Huberman said, “… tending to one’s private garden, pedagogically speaking, seems to have more payoffs in the long
haul than land reform, although the latter is perceived to be stimulating and enriching while it is happening” (p. 50).

Figure 1.1: Huberman’s Phases and Career Sequences
Related findings. Other more recent studies substantiate Huberman’s (1989) findings. Feiman-Nemser’s (2001) work suggested that most new teachers come into the profession with an upright sense of personal integrity. But the normalizing inductions of schools apply vast pressure to conform. This pressure sorts novice teachers into one of three possible strategies for surviving: rebellion against the normalizing influences, abandoning beliefs that no longer work in the social context of schools and giving in to values that are more aligned with the norms of the school, or departing from the system entirely.

During the induction period of their careers, teachers initially experience coexistent phases of struggling to survive countered with enthusiastic discovery (Frieman-Nemser, 2001; Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999). The survival characteristics of this phase are characterized by: a reality-shock, confronting the complexity and simultaneity of instructional management, experiencing the gulf between their professional ideas and the daily grind of classroom life, and fragmentation of tasks (Palmer, 2004, 2007; Intrator, 2002). Discovery translates into initial enthusiasm about having one’s own classroom and students, and feelings of oneself as a colleague among peers. Studies suggest that excitement of discovery allows some novice teachers to tolerate the characteristics of survival, while for others the stressors are an early symptom of burn out (Baldacci, 2004; Canter & Canter, 1994; Cornbleth, 2008; Frieman-Nemser, Huberman, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Mitchie, 1999; Wolk & Rodman, 1994).

Ultimately, based upon Huberman’s (1989) work and related literature, there exists a compensatory model of investment and reward in which a growing sense of serenity in the latter parts of teacher careers only occurs at the expense of lessening
involvement. The majority of career teachers who achieved a sense of peace with teaching disengaged from the larger socio-political aspects of schooling. It was as if they had to armor themselves with a defensive shield in order to guard what was left of their hope and passion.

**Hope, Passion and Possibility Restored by the Spirited Teacher**

The revolving door that prematurely exits teachers from the field is alarming. According to Lipka and Brinthaupt (1999), it takes on average five years of quality teaching experience before reaching a level of mastery. At the current teacher turnover rate, we are lucky if half of new teachers reach the five-year mark, mastering the complex nature of effective teaching. As Huberman’s (1989) work pointed out, the problems of teacher turnover do not end upon early career exit. Instead, as in the case of Burnadette’s colleague Irma, many teachers can mentally and spiritually turnover, even when they physically remain in the field. Despite the grim realities, there are teachers who not only survive urban teaching but also thrive. They push past symptoms of burn out or burn in and preserve inner joy that fuels their teaching.

Teacher effectiveness is often attributed to technical aspects of teaching such as content knowledge, assessment practices and management skills (NCTQ, 2010; Rice, 2003). There are a range of qualities and competencies that policy makers, teacher educators and administrators consider valuable to student outcomes. In the case of Burnadette, the tangible checklist and student workbooks are considered signs of school improvement. However, curriculum, resources and checklists can only take us so far. Mem Fox (1996), renowned children’s author and researcher said:
The plain fact of the matter is that teachers and children have heart, and those hearts play an enormous part in the teaching-learning process. Although I am a passionate advocate of whole language, I believe it is perfectly possible for whole language to fail in the hands of a rude, thoroughly nasty teacher who hates children. Similarly, although I believe the teaching of phonics outside meaningful texts is the least efficient way to teach reading, I believe absolutely that a joyful, enthusiastic, experienced teacher who uses phonics and only phonics will nevertheless have a large measure of success in teaching his or her students to read. (p. 2)

Although technical aspects of teaching are important to student outcomes, O’Reilley (2005) pointed out that teaching “at root, is a spiritual occupation” (p. 2). A growing body of research suggests that teachers who are grounded in their identities, existing with a deep sense of purpose and passion for teaching, are resilient from career disenchancement and produce favorable student outcomes (Britzman, 1991; Danielewicz, 2001; Grossman, 1990; Korthagen & Vasalos; 2005; Lantieri, 2001; Lipka, & Brinthaupt, 1999; Osguthorpe, 2009; Palmer, 2007). Others may agree that technical elements contribute to good practice, but view teacher effectiveness as equally non-technical. This includes dispositional domains such as teacher beliefs and values, relational skills, passion, resiliency, and self-reflection (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; O’Reilly, 2005; Traudt, 2002).

Although this literature review has illustrated many of the factors that are painful to teachers and contribute to an epidemic of burn out or burn in, this study aims to explore the more hopeful teacher thrival counter-narrative. Betsy Wise, an experienced teacher featured in the Teaching with Fire (Intrator & Scribner, 2003) poetry collection said:

Teaching consumes me. At night I grind away my teeth over the previous day’s events and the next day’s possibilities. I come home from school ravenous for chocolate, for sugar, to restore my depleted blood substance. Weekends, summers, are barely long enough to restore an even tempo to my walking, my breathing. And I wouldn’t have it any other way. (p. 76)
Counter-narratives critique the hegemonic stories that are a societal norm (Maynes, Pierce, Laslett, 2008). In the case of this study, the official story is contradictory. On one hand, our society values teachers and the promise they offer to a democratic nation (Rose, 1995); on the other hand, the educational ills currently faced in public education are blamed on teachers (Nieto, 2003, Palmer, 2007), contributing to a demoralizing public attack on them (Pizzigati, 2013). Teachers who embody the counter-narrative explored in this study survive urban teaching and thrive, maintaining a deep spirit of passion and hope. In the following section, I elaborate on the promise and benefits of research on spirited teachers. I feature the work of Sonia Nieto and Parker Palmer as exemplars and inspiration for this study.

The Spirited Teacher Framed Through the Eyes of Sonia Nieto and Parker Palmer

Sonia Nieto (2003), a prominent researcher in multicultural education, studied dedicated urban teachers, asking the question: “What keeps teachers going in spite of everything?” Nieto studied experienced teachers who were especially effective with students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Despite the current “punitive climate” in public education, fixated on rigid conceptions of standards and accountability, Nieto’s participants remained in teaching and dedicated their lives to the profession. Her central question aimed to tell the counter-narrative to the discouraging stories of teachers who burn in, “drinking the acid” that was pouring into Burnadette’s vignettes (Sexton, 1999)².

² Sexton’s poem titled “Courage” refers to “drinking the acid” as a metaphor for giving into outside influences that are counter to acts of courage and resilience.
Similar to our exploration of Burnadette’s stories, Nieto’s participants engaged in their autobiographies for answers to her central research question. Nieto (2003) contends that “teachers bring their entire autobiographies with them: their experiences, identities, values, beliefs, attitudes, hang-ups, biases, wishes, dreams, and hopes” (p. 24). By delving into teacher autobiographies in an inquiry group setting, Nieto found five important factors that were vital to her participants’ continued engagement with teaching: teaching as intellectual work, teaching as democratic practice, teaching as love, teaching as hope and possibility, and teaching as anger and desperation.

Nieto’s (2003) findings are important lessons that can support teacher thrival. She argued that all teachers should develop a stance that teaching is an intellectual endeavor. Although teaching is painful, agonizing, and exhausting, she found that “becoming and staying smart are part of the very fabric of teaching” (p. 123). She explained that if teachers thought of their work as an intellectual endeavor, there would be no limit to what they could accomplish and consequently their expectations of students would soar.

Additionally, Nieto (2003) established that teachers benefit from remembering that teaching is about—and for—democracy. Unpacking teacher narratives in her study revealed that effective teachers find multiple avenues to focus on equality and democracy as part of their curriculum and pedagogy. A third related theme was an understanding that teaching inevitably involves love and respect. Nieto’s participants accepted this element of teaching with urgency, placing high demands on students who others may not believe are capable.

For Nieto (2003), “autobiography is part of teaching” (p. 123). For some participants, their own identities and life experiences impacted their staying power. However,
autobiography isn’t destiny. Some teachers were driven into the profession by their own experiences growing up with injustices, while others were inspired by experiences that occurred later in life.

No matter how the stories of teachers unfolded, the opportunity to tell and analyze their narratives in the inquiry group brought heightened consciousness to these teachers, allowing participants to experience renewal through the research process. In this context, renewal is an opportunity to live “wholeheartedly with vocational vitality” (Fetzer, n.d.). Nieto (2003) found that the close companionship study participants developed through the inquiry process was vital to their renewed sense of purpose. Nieto’s study suggests that creating communities of learning among teachers is crucial if they are to remain bonded to the profession, students, and one another.

Unlike Nieto’s participants who thrive as teachers, many of the participants in the increasingly popular Courage to Teach network have experienced the painful consequences of burn out or burn in. The writings of Parker Palmer (1993, 2004, 2007) offer hope for the many teachers in our society who feel disheartened and disconnected from the profession. Palmer proposed a pedagogic model in which elements of one’s spirituality are interwoven with the work of teaching. He offered educators a means of connecting one’s personal ideologies to one’s work in an attempt to make one’s professional endeavor something that is meaningful and deeply connected to one’s sense of self.

Palmer (2007) argued that in our hurry to reform education:

> We have forgotten a simple truth: reform will never be achieved by renewing appropriations, restructuring schools, rewriting curricula, and revising texts if we continue to demean and dishearten the human resource called the teacher.
on whom so much depends. Teachers must be better compensated, freed from bureaucratic harassment, given a role in academic governance, and provided with the best possible methods and materials. But none of that will transform education if we fail to cherish—and challenge—the human heart that is the source of good teaching. (p. 4)

Under the guidance of Palmer (2007), the Fetzer Institute (Fetzer Institute, n.d.) created Courage to Teach, a retreat program for practicing K-12 educators, administrators, and educational leaders. The Courage to Teach opportunity has gained considerable momentum, uniting thousands of educators as they collectively regain passion for their work (Fetzer Institute, n.d.).

One important element of the Courage to Teach, and Palmer’s related writings (1993, 2004, 2007) is that of helping individuals connect to their identities. Palmer argued that when educators lose heart they begin to distance themselves from students and their teaching assignment. In order to reclaim heart and passion for teaching, Palmer said one must be guided to re-bonding with selfhood. A major foundation of Palmer’s theory was that effective teaching couldn’t be condensed to technique. Instead, good teaching stems from the identity and integrity of the teacher.

Palmer (2007) also said that identity comes forth through the union of the diverse forces that make up one’s life. Identity relies on self-understanding and the more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching—and living—becomes. Technical questions of what, how, and why are common to teacher education, professional development, and policy. Seldom, said Palmer, do we ask the question: “Who is the self that teaches?” Additionally, he argued that the “work required to know thyself is neither selfish nor narcissistic. Whatever self-knowledge we attain as teachers

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will serve our students and our scholarship well. Good teaching is self-knowledge: it is a secret hidden in plain sight” (p. 5).

Palmer (2007 argued that fear is one major contributor that undermines teaching and learning. Teachers and students alike tackle fears of diversity, fears of conflict, and fears of losing identity. Fear, Palmer said, is a cultural trait that permeates every area of common American life including politics, consumerism, religion, and education. Palmer contended that fear can also be healthy. Once teachers are able to identify their own fears, they are able to see the fears in their students. In fact, according to Palmer, “The fear that makes people porous to real learning is a healthy fear than enhances education, and we must find ways to encourage it” (p. 40).

Like Nieto (2003), Palmer (2007) emphasized that community is vital to sustaining the teacher’s heart. He emphasized three facets of community: knowing in community, teaching in community, and learning in community. Although reconnection to one’s identity is largely private work, Palmer felt that community connectedness is at the heart of good teaching. Beyond the dialogue and written autobiographies that Nieto facilitated in her study, Palmer includes poetry and metaphor as tools. Reflecting on self-hood through poetry and creating metaphors allow teachers to embrace the vulnerable work of identity formation by examining the “truth at a slant” (Dillard, 1982).

**Meshing Nieto and Palmer to explore teacher thrival.** The work of Nieto (2003) and Palmer (2007) has several complementary threads. Foremost, both relied on teacher’s stories as vital for reflecting on teacher identity. Also, both saw teaching with integrity as deeply rooted in teacher self-hood. Although both recognized that there are technicalities to teaching, the art of teaching is viewed as spiritual work in which one’s
identity cannot be estranged from the profession. As Palmer said, “…technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives” (Palmer, 2007, p. 6). Nieto and Palmer maintained that spirited teachers preserve resiliency from the social forces that work against them by engaging in meaningful reflective dialogue with their colleagues. A growing body of research substantiates the importance of teacher identity and reflective communities in surviving and thriving in the ecology of public education.

Identity matters. Britzman (1991), Danielewicz (2001), and Lipka and Brinthaupt (1999) have explored the role of identity formation in pre-service teacher preparation. Danielewicz’s (2001) case studies of pre-service teachers indicated that identity is malleable and ever changing. She contended that teaching is a state of being. Britzman’s study focused on the lives of student teachers as they struggled to make sense of learning to teach. Similar to the experiences of Burnadette, Britzman concluded that there exists a tension in which new teachers’ “… taking up of an [teacher] identity means suppressing aspects of the self” (p. 4). Lipka and Brinthaupt (1999) emphasized that in the absence of functional self-knowledge we lack the ability to overhaul or fine-tune those aspects of ourselves that may be blocking out teaching effectiveness. In short, they asserted, the spirited teacher is able to look within.

Self-understanding is one’s personal knowledge about his or her own psychology (Hamacheck, 1999). According to Hamacheck, this level of identity means being cognizant of oneself, or plainly put, “thoughtful”, exuding a sense of “withitness” (Agne, 1999). Spirited teachers are willing to deeply reflect upon who they are. They believe that their selfhood holds a mirror to which students will become (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999). Teachers who have a strong sense of identity tend to balance their personal and
professional development, seeing the two as complementary (Agne, 1999). Thoughtful self-reflection is a continual process for thriving teachers (Danielewicz, 2001; Hamacheck, 1999). They give self-conscious consideration to their actions, beliefs, and acts of teaching.

Integrity goes hand in hand with the identity aspects of inspired teaching. Spirited teachers have a heightened self-knowledge that they embody with integrity. Palmer (2007) defined integrity as the relating of identity factors in ways that bring wholeness and life, rather than fragmentation and death. Put simply, spirited teachers are able to align their values and beliefs to their teaching (Britzman 1991; Korthagen & Vasalos; 2005, Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999). Ralph Waldo Emerson (1867) once said, “Who you are speaks so loudly I can't hear what you're saying” (p. 96). In the case of the inspired teacher, the values one verbally communicates are authentically mirrored in their actions (Hamacheck, 1999).

Spirited teachers are able to unite their personal and professional identities, living a life of integrity. As the story of Burnadette illustrates, urban teaching can be a chronically painful act. Those who live with heightened identity and integrity are more resilient to the painful aspects inevitable to teaching. They are objective and open to outcomes, living as Arrien (2001) described a life of quality and integrity.

Community matters. Professional Learning Communities (PLC’s) have become popular in educational reform attempts. PLC’s create opportunities for teachers to collaborate to improve student outcomes and school reform efforts (DuFour & DuFour, 2010; Eaker, 2008). These procedures continue to gain momentum in educational theory and practice (Eaker). Most PLC efforts predominately focus on the technical aspects of
teaching. The most popular literature on PLC’s suggest the best use of time is when teams engage in shared examination of student work, data analysis, backward mapping, developing cultural competencies, and unit planning (DuFour & DuFour; Jacobs, 2004; Stiggins, 2001; Wiggins & McThigh, 2005).

Huberman (1989) emphasized collaboration with peers as highly impactful to teacher sustainability. Authentic relationships are known to be vital for schools, teachers, and students to thrive (Bondy, et al., 2007; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Lortie, 2002; Palmer 1998; Rowland, 2002; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001; Wheatley, 1999). In their work on avoiding teacher burn out, Canter and Canter (1994) discussed the power of peer support. Similar to the technical work shared in PLC’s, Canter and Canter asserted that teachers needed technical support and technical challenge. Moreover, they argued that in order to avoid burn out, teachers needed emotional support, emotional challenge, active listening, and colleagues who shared similar teaching circumstances.

While becoming teachers, Danielewicz (2001) found, “… students [pre-service teacher candidates] must develop an internal, personal sense of themselves as teachers. But in order to thrive as teachers once they leave our classrooms, they must develop an external, public, collective identity as a teacher” (p. 151). Similar to the work of Nieto (2003) and Palmer (2007), Danielewicz viewed teacher identity as fundamental to effective practices. She simultaneously regarded engagement with a larger network of educators as crucial to teachers thriving and surviving symptoms of burn out and burn in.
Drawing on the Wisdom of a Career Spirited Teacher

Many of the studies mentioned above focused upon teacher preparation. However, Nieto (2003) and Palmer (2007) aimed to reach out to practicing teachers. Similarly, Huberman (1989) studied the career-cycle phases of seasoned teachers and asked how career phases impacted attitudes towards career satisfaction. Lipka and Brinhaupt (1990) examined four stages of teacher self-hood that correlate with pivotal phases in the career lifecycle: selecting teaching as a career, becoming a teacher (pre-service), the first years of teaching, and the master teacher. In their epilogue, Lipka and Brinhaupt posed that if “… in the real-world, experiences of the ‘old timers’ are actually more important and relevant to learning the ropes of teaching, then how can those experiences be conveyed to or obtained by the ‘newcomers’”? (p. 227).

The first section of this literature review served to describe many of the problems that lead to teacher burn out or burn in. The second section discussed the hope that spirited teachers embody. Similar to the moments portrayed in the vignettes of Burnadette, many contemporary studies that inquire into the wisdom offered from surviving and thriving urban educators examine “small stories” or participant vignettes (Nieto, 2003). These narrative forms of data have provided insight into the field. I take this a step further through collection and analysis of one thriving veteran teacher’s entire teacher career lifecycle, which will be the focus of the remainder of this study.

Organizational Overview

This study comprises 7 chapters. Through a review of the literature, this chapter has painted a picture of the current urban teacher climate that leads many to burn out or burn in. Teacher career lifecycle theory was explored. The research question and sub-
questions that guide the study were unpacked. Next, the more hopeful concept of spirited
teachers is portrayed.

In chapter 2, I explain narrative methodology and discuss how it was used to
address the question of this study. I then describe participant selection, introduce the
participant, and share the research design, data gathering, and sources of triangulation. I
illustrate the data analysis process, member checking, and how I achieved catalytic
validity (Cohn, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Kridel, 2010).

Chapters 3 through 6 weave a retelling of one veteran, urban, spirited teacher’s
career story with connections to the literature, my interpretations, and scholarly
reflections. Chapter 3 tells the story of the participant’s career beginnings, chapters 4 and
5 examine her middle career through retirement, and chapter 6 explores post-retirement
in which the participant rejoined the teaching force. In order to allow the teacher’s voice
to guide readers through the text, I chose to write her story from the position of the first-
person (Kiesinger, 1998). A texturing of my interpretations that are supported by the
literature are embedded throughout these chapters. Each chapter concludes with salient
trends that help answer the research question.

Finally, chapter 7 offers an analysis of significant themes that address the research
question and sub-questions. The study’s implications for teachers, school leaders, and
teacher education are offered. Finally, I conclude with comments on the study as a
whole, personal reflections, and recommendations for future research.
Chapter Two: Method

“The universe is made of stories, not of atoms” (Muriel Rukeyser in Kaufman & Herzog, 2005, p. 466).

As unpacked in chapter 1, for the purposes of this study, I refer to spirited teachers as highly skilled educators who vehemently preserve their passion, commitment and capacity to thrive, in spite of the many trials that accompany teaching (Baldacci, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Mathews, 2009; Mitchie, 1999; Wolk & Rodman, 1994). In previous studies, teachers’ deeply rooted identity or educator “self-hood” is an essential ingredient to sustaining spirit.

Research studies that shed light on spirited teachers draw on qualitative methodologies and tend to rely on tools including interviews, focus groups, inquiry groups, observations, and examination of artifacts (Creswell, 2007; Woods, 1999). For example, Nieto’s (2003) study focused on the question “What keeps teachers going in spite of it all?” and relied on field notes collected in a teacher inquiry group and participants’ written narratives.

Identity, by nature, is personal. Life stories shape our self-hood. Yet, as the work of Nieto (2003) and Palmer (2007) demonstrates, identity is also a collective endeavor. Nespor and Barylske (1991) found that teacher identity is “created by the narratives” and can be connected to people and things that are “distant in time and space” (p. 817). One
gains a deeper sense of self-hood through the process of unpacking significant stories in
the presence of trusted others (Nieto, 2003; Palmer, 2004, 2007).

Narrative researchers contend that the social scientific methodology of narrative
inquiry gives voice to participants, unpacks their identities, and sheds light on self-hood
as it relates to the individual, the social, historical, and cultural contexts (Angrosino,
1989; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Denzin, 1989; Kelchtermans, 2009; Maynes, et al.,
2008). Narrative, according to Creswell (2007), can both be a method and the
phenomenon of study. Just as narratives were intuitive to studies exploring teacher
identity, narrative inquiry is an intuitive methodological approach for pursuing the
research question and sub-questions of this study:

1) How did this veteran teacher not only survive but also thrive as a career-long
urban teacher?

Sub-questions:

a. How is her spirit sustained throughout her teacher lifecycle?

b. How can her story contribute to the literature as a counter-narrative to the
current rhetoric focused on “teacher bashing”? 

**Narrative Inquiry: One story Impacting One society**

“Narrative inquiries almost always are about people’s lives, their interests,
concerns, and passions” (Phillion, 2002, p. 17). Narrative inquiry takes advantage of the
natural human tendency to record and transmit our experiences in story form. Dewey
(1938) viewed experience as a connected whole in which experiences led to and impacted
further experiences in an unbounded backdrop of life stories. The telling of one’s story is
a means of recreating, reflecting upon, and sharing how our experiences shape our identities. Reflection on human experience often occurs narratively, allowing the method of narrative inquiry to simultaneously be a form of reliving narrative experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).


Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe narrative inquiry as “stories lived and told” (p. 20). They contend that the study of narrative is research in the “ways humans experience the world” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Additionally, they argue that education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories. Students, teachers, parents, administrators, teacher educators, policy makers and researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and others’ stories. Perceptions of power and oppression vary and are dependent on the cultural values and agenda of the stakeholder, characters involved, and the personal and social moral of the story being told. For example, when current educational reform narratives are told from the perspective of many urban teachers, students, and parents, silencing and affliction in the face of massive school closures and teacher firings are revealed (Shibata, 2013).

Those who recognize teachers as central to the development of curriculum and pedagogy have established a widely respected narrative understanding of teaching. Narrative research on teaching has progressed from the belief that teachers’ knowledge has a storied form. When teacher stories are told and unpacked, practical and theoretical insight can emerge (Carter, 1993; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007).

Research Design

This section describes the research setting, the process for participant selection, and provides an introduction to the study participant. I examine the nature of my role as a narrative researcher. The research design, including the features of narrative interview processes, and fieldwork, that triangulated in-depth interview data, are discussed.

Participant Selection

Narrative studies encompass common procedural conventions. First, careful participant selection is key. The narrative researcher must be deeply attentive to whom she will study. In some cases, such as my study, the individual may be convenient to study, while also fitting into the criteria for the specific research questions and framework. Depending on the purpose of the study, inquirers might select a participant who fits the ordinary circumstances of a specific phenomenon, someone who attracts political attention, or someone who is marginalized (Creswell, 2007). However the participant is selected, she has a story to tell, a story that can stand alone and add insight
to the body of inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell; Denzin, 1989; Maynes et. al., 2008). For the purpose of this study, I focused on one talented, spirited, career-long teacher who mirrors the hopeful trends found in the literature review section of this dissertation.

I accessed the participant through professional networking, careful recruitment, and good fortune. I began the recruitment process by emailing an urban district team of 45 master teachers on special assignment as district level “peer observers”. Since this team reaches all district teachers and rates their effectiveness I thought they would be perfect “gatekeepers” to access potential study participants (Siedman, 2006, p. 43). The recruitment email can be found in Appendix A.

Over the next two weeks, I received twelve names of potential participants. I then emailed each of the recommended teachers to tell them about my study and gauge their interest. A phone conversation with each of the teachers who replied with interest followed. These conversations allowed me to explain the study, helped us to build rapport, allowed us to learn more about each other’s teaching careers, provided insights into how they sustained passion and spirit for the work, and identified what factors they felt contributed to their longevity. I shared how I came to this study, the study design, and participant commitments. In addition, I asked probing questions to get to know the teachers and get a sense of how well they fit my ideal criteria. I kept notes on each conversation, using the checklist found in Figure 3.1 as a guide. This guide allowed me to keep track of demographics, such as how long the teacher had taught, descriptors
related to the type of participant I was seeking, and pragmatics, such as someone who was interested, had time to participate in the study, and was willing to share their insights.

**Figure 3.1: Participant Selection Criteria “Ideal Characteristics”**

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**Final Participant Selection.** One of the interested teachers, a local middle school reading intervention teacher, showed immediate passion for the study and was also the best fit in relation to descriptors in Figure 1. After our initial phone conversation and a few email exchanges, we set up a coffee date to meet in person. The goals of this meeting were primarily centered on relationship building. Since this study was aimed to
dig deep into the participant’s career biography, I felt that it was important that we got to know one another and established norms for how we could work together. Additionally, I explained narrative methodology and in-depth open-ended interviewing. We discussed potential artifacts that could help substantiate her story and went over the informed consent protocol (Appendix B). Along with the informed consent, I also sent her home with a participant a questionnaire (Appendix C) designed to get further background information. Finally, we scheduled our first interview.

Meet Janice “Jan” Sullivan. Jan, who has consented to be named in this study, is in her early 60’s. She is a vivacious career teacher of Caucasian descent. She grew up in a working class family in Commerce City, Colorado. Jan reminisces that her parents were highly devoted to her and her siblings’ education. Her older sister loved to play school with her, which Jan attributes to excelling her academic skills, allowing her to skip the 3rd and 5th grades and graduate from high school at the age of 16. As a high school senior, Jan became involved in drama. Her natural acting talent and hard work earned her a full-ride drama scholarship at Colorado Women’s College.3

Jan describes her entry into teaching as a “happy accident”. Education was her minor, a fallback should her dreams of acting on Broadway not materialize. Yet, Jan fell in love with teaching during her one semester of student teaching. This enthusiasm prompted Jan’s former high school drama teacher and mentor to help her to apply for an opening in the high school she graduated from. At the age of 20, Jan was hired in the English department of her alma mater high school. Although she used her drama and

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3 Colorado Women’s College was named Temple Buell College during the 4 years of Jan’s enrollment.
musical talents to contribute to drama productions and student enrichment opportunities, she remained an English teacher throughout her career, identifying herself as passionate about language and an avid reader.

After nine and one-half years at the high school, Jan spent 25 years as an English teacher at Adams City Middle School. Although she was forced to transfer from high school to middle school, in no time she became captivated with middle school students and hasn’t looked back since. Upon reflection, Jan sees her high school experience as a time in which she taught a subject matter, whereas in middle school, she sees herself making a meaningful difference in student lives.

Jan retired from Adams 14 School District in 2007, but quickly realized she missed teaching. Two years after retirement she found herself hired as a middle school reading intervention teacher in the northwest part of Denver Public Schools. The high poverty and majority Latino student population was a familiar match to the demographics Jan served in Adams City schools. She has enjoyed her position at this middle school for the last 5 years. As of today, Jan has no immediate plans for a second retirement and feels that as long as she continues to make a difference in student lives, she will remain teaching.

Jan is energetic, kind, personable, and fun loving. She is enthusiastic about life, learning, and teaching. She enjoys a close-knit relationship with her three grown children and two granddaughters. The running joke in her family is that her oldest daughter can’t take Jan anywhere without being approached by a former student. With 40 years of teaching under her belt, she is invigorated by her encounters with former students and
humbled that they fondly remember her and the lessons she instilled. Jan’s grown children are a part of her daily life, often calling to check up on her at school. According to Jan, her children and grandchildren permeate a familial value that manifests into a sense of extended family with esteemed colleagues and beloved students.

Jan beholds her students as she does her own children. She consistently calls students “my kids” and tells them, “I treat you the same as I would treat my kids…these are my expectations, this is what I want for you, this is what I want from you, this is for your own good. You have to believe that I have your good at heart.” Values of respect and fairness permeate Jan’s interactions with students. Her keen sense of humor, grave patience, and unyielding kindness are consistently apparent, even when students veer off task or engage in common middle-school folly.

As we will see in upcoming chapters, Jan is a highly accomplished educator. Her story reveals that tenets of hard work, collegiality and lifelong learning have ensued cutting-edge classroom practices, invitations to share her expertise state-wide, and inspired contributions that have touched the lives of thousands of students and other teachers for over four decades. As a researcher, former urban teacher, and teacher educator, I felt invigorated, inspired, optimistic, and hopeful in Jan’s presence.

**Research Setting**

Most fieldwork for this study, including classroom observations, two of the in-depth interviews, casual conversations, and my exploration of the school and surrounding community, took place at the urban school where Jan currently teaches. This middle

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4 Italics added for emphasis
school is located in the northwest part of Denver, Colorado. The research site is over 90 years old and situated in one of Denver’s earliest neighborhoods, a historically immigrant neighborhood, primarily home to Hispanic populations since the 1970’s, now in the process of gentrification. Signs of gentrification are evident through burgeoning real estate fix-ups and sales of homes that were historically rentals. In addition, as I walked the surrounding neighborhood, I witnessed young Caucasian families strolling the neighborhood, and a mixture of newer coffee shops, restaurants, and health food markets aside aged taquerias, ample check cashing establishments, and run down liquor stores that were the norm in this area less than a decade ago.

As a result of rapidly changing demographics, district level performance-based school closures, and school choice initiatives, the school was anticipating a 66% population increase over the 2012-2013 class of 6th graders, increasing the student population from 370 in 2011-2012 to over 500 students in 2013-2014 (Denver Public Schools, 2013b). Along with a steady growth in student population, this middle school has demonstrated academic improvement over the last three years, shifting from a school targeted for closure and on the district’s “priority watch” in 2010, to a school that currently satisfactorily meets, and in some areas exceeds, district level performance expectations (Denver Public Schools, 2013c).

Since 2008, when the area sprouted into a burgeoning “hot-spot” for young white professionals and families, the school has seen a slight decrease in the percent of “free and reduced lunch” populations, moving from 89.9% in 2008 to 86.8% in 2011-2012. Additionally, as the student population has increased the minority populations have
decreased from 91.7% in 2008 to 83% in 2011-2012. Percentages of English Language Learners and students receiving special education services have remained steady over these time periods. According to Jan, the changing demographics of the neighborhood have resulted in increased resources, such as music and Spanish programming. Furthermore, she sees parents, including those contributing to shifting demographics, choosing to enroll their children in this middle school.

In addition to the time I spent at Jan’s school, I also spent two of our interview sessions in her home. The time spent in Jan’s home served as a valuable and comfortable opportunity for me to gain a deeper understanding of the many aspects that contributed to her career longevity. I was also able to meet her family and engage in casual conversation around this study. These experiences allowed me to know and appreciate Jan on a more personal level. Finally, in between meetings, we often emailed to coordinate future meetings, clarify ideas we discussed, and gather feedback on my written interpretation of Jan’s narrative. Details of my study design are elaborated below.

**My Role as Researcher**

In qualitative inquiry the researcher is “a key instrument” in the research process (Creswell, 2007, p. 38). Qualitative researchers collect data through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants. The qualitative researcher interprets data and these interpretations cannot be separated from their own background, history, context, and prior understandings. In essence, qualitative researchers bring themselves into the study. A credible qualitative researcher should be thoughtfully aware of her biases and make these biases known (Cavendish, 2011; Creswell, Clandinin &
Connelly, 2000). In chapter 1 (see page 3), I shared my background as a former urban elementary teacher turned teacher educator. I also shared glimpses into my first year of teaching, through the vignettes of Burnadette (pages 10-24). I explained my positionality (Creswell, 2007) that influences the study design, including the socio-political lens through which I interpret the findings. Throughout the remainder of this study, I will weave in relevant personal experiences that help substantiate the findings. My experiences as an urban educator and teacher educator inspire my personal and professional investment in this study. Simultaneously, my narrative undoubtedly influences the filter through which I interpreted Jan’s story.

**Data Gathering: Being in the Field**

Being “in the field,” is the narrative equivalent of data gathering. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), fieldwork is where we see ourselves as in the middle of a nested set of stories – those of the researcher and those of the participant. Essentially, once fieldwork begins, our stories begin to intermingle. For example, Jan recounted the experience of her first teaching assignment in which she was hired a mere 3 days prior to the start of the school year with absolutely no materials or resources aside from a ball of yarn left in a filing cabinet. This story sparked vivid memories of my own last minute hire, nearly twenty years later, and similar lack of resources in my first teaching position. As future chapters will reveal, many of our stories intermingled, allowing us to relate through common experiences and connect these experiences to the wider body of literature.
Fieldwork for this study occurred over a six-month period during the Spring and Summer of 2013. The main source of data entailed four in-depth open-ended interviews which were designed to reconstruct and analyze Jan’s teacher biography. Each interview lasted around two hours and was audio recorded and transcribed. Secondary sources included community walks, classroom visits, examination of teaching memorabilia, and conversations with Jan’s colleague. These data served to triangulate, substantiate, and check for accuracy of interview findings (Creswell, 2007). I kept detailed field notes, a reflective research journal, research memos, photos, and other artifacts for each data point. I elaborate on each aspect of fieldwork below.

**Narrative Interviews.** “I interview because I am interested in other people’s stories” (Siedman, 2006, p. 7). As with many narrative interviews, I borrowed extensively from oral history interview practices (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Oral narratives have a rich history in most cultures. They have served for many generations to hold cultures together. In addition, oral history has a reputable social justice contribution, capturing and collecting the counter-narratives that the history books and media often omit (DeBlasio, Ganzert, Mould, Paschen, & Sacks, 2009; Stack, 1996; Willink, 2009).

Nespor and Baryliske (1991) defined oral narratives as “Culturally specific representational technologies for moving past and distant events into the context of storytelling” (p. 809). Nespor and Baryliske’s study examined teacher knowledge as a joint construction by teachers and researchers. Drawing from the rich history of oral narrative and findings on teacher knowledge, they concluded that in the context of education, narrative research serves as “a representative technology that teachers used to
formulate selves in the particular interactional encounters” that occurred through a collaborative research process (p. 817).

My goal was to have Jan reconstruct her experiences as a thriving career-long urban teacher. I used what Siedman (2006) calls “in-depth, phenomenological based interviewing” that comprised of open-ended questions, meant to solicit her career biography and answer the research questions (p. 15). Interviews were originally structured to work backwards in time, with the initial interview focused on Jan’s current career stories to establish present context, and the final interview focused on her career beginnings. This method of starting with the present and moving to the past aimed to serve as a “memory jogger” (DeBlasio et al., 2009). Table 3.1 outlines the time spent interviewing and conversing with Jan. Additionally, the purpose of each encounter is explained.
Table 3.1
Interview and Conversation Data Chart

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<tr>
<th>Field Activity</th>
<th>Month in study design</th>
<th>Purposes</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Time in hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial meeting, participant questionnaire</td>
<td>Month 1: March 2013</td>
<td>Build rapport, informed consent, gather general participant background</td>
<td>Coffee Shop</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recorded Interview 1</td>
<td>Month 2: April 2013</td>
<td>Present career narrative</td>
<td>Participant’s classroom</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recorded Interview 2</td>
<td>Month 3: May 2013</td>
<td>Career beginning to mid-career narrative</td>
<td>Participant’s classroom</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recorded Interview 3</td>
<td>Month 4: June 2013</td>
<td>Mid-career to present narrative</td>
<td>Participant’s home</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recorded Interview 4</td>
<td>Month 5: July 2013</td>
<td>Exploration of emerging themes and clarification of prior interviews</td>
<td>Participant’s home</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group interview with participant’s colleague (Note: This interview took place on the same date as recorded interview 4)</td>
<td>Month 5: July 2013</td>
<td>Triangulation of oral narrative &amp; member-checking</td>
<td>Participant’s home</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing dialogue</td>
<td>Ongoing March-September 2013</td>
<td>Clarifying interview content, emerging participant memories or reflections, shared data analysis and member-checking</td>
<td>Email and telephone</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recorded sharing of teacher memorabilia (Note: this data gathering took place on the same date as interview 3)</td>
<td>Month 4: June 2013</td>
<td>Triangulation of oral narrative</td>
<td>Participant’s home</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total time</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>31 hours</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a novice researcher, my challenge was to maintain a delicate balance between providing ample openness for Jan to tell her stories and enough focus to allow the interview structure to work (Siedman, 2006). In an effort to achieve this balance, prior to entry into the field, under the guidance of an oral history expert who is a social acquaintance and esteemed professor in the Human Communications Department at the
University of Denver, I constructed four detailed interview protocols. I approached the interviews using the protocols as mere guides to structure our conversation and a sort of “safety net” to allow myself, as novice researcher, to feel prepared and mentally rehearsed to facilitate our dialogue (See Appendix D, Appendix E, Appendix F & Appendix G).

With the help of the oral history mentor, I rehearsed the interviewing process, practicing techniques such as telling my own related “mini” stories. This technique was intended to prompt relatable examples to illicit Jan’s memories and storytelling (DeBlasio et al., 2009). For example, during our first interview I asked Jan to explain why she teaches. As she paused to think through her response, I successfully prompted her thinking, by sharing my own reasons for teaching.

In addition to specific prompts meant to illicit Jan’s career biography, I borrowed from career theorist Huberman’s (1989) method by engaging her in pre-interview “homework” of mapping out her career trajectory. In his study, Huberman asked 160 participants to reflect on their own career trajectories, identify distinct phases, and affix original thematic titles to each. Aside from the structure of placing their career stories into phases, there were no constraints on participants who could choose any theme, sequence, and configuration of features. Jan agreed to participate in this process, initially with reticence, admitting at the start of our second interview that she struggled to find a “lead in” to the project, but later thanking me for the opportunity and finding herself enthralled in the process, claiming that “Now I’m like a dog with a bone! Now I can’t let go… my biggest problem is getting going”. This assignment successfully recreated
Huberman’s work on an in-depth micro-level (See Appendix I). This project was an opportunity to allow Jan to “wake up” memories and further examine and reflect upon her career story. The process also aided in my own “re-storying” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of the data and offered a metaphorical form of representation that honored Jan’s passions and means of making meaning of her narrative. This exercise became the focus of interviews 2 and 3; open-ended participant led interviews in which Jan walked me through her career, using her chosen theme of a comical opera, with three acts, intermissions, and various scenes, each metaphorically tied to the theme and her conceptualization of focal career experiences. In addition to the time Jan spent with me engaged in interview and dialogue, she spent 10 hours of her own time preparing for the open-ended retells of her narrative. Over the course of the study, I estimate that Jan spent a minimum of 40 hours of her own time preparing for interviews, collecting memorabilia, reading drafts of the study, offering feedback, and engaging in regular dialogue with me.

Data Triangulation

An interweaving of data served to triangulate and substantiate the body of work (Creswell, 2007; Woods, 1999). According to Clandinin & Connelly (2000) narrative field texts can comprise participant stories, autobiographical writing, journaling, letters, field notes, conversations, research interviews, family stories, artifacts, and life experiences. Many of these forms of field texts organically emerged through the data collection process, often surfacing initially through research interviews. For a summary of observational and contextualization field activities see Table 3.2.
### Table 3.2
Observation and Contextualization Data Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field Activity</th>
<th>Month in study Design</th>
<th>Purposes</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Time in hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research of participant’s district &amp; school websites</td>
<td>Month 1: March 2013</td>
<td>Contextualization of past and present teaching circumstances</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community walk of current school</td>
<td>Month 2: April 2013</td>
<td>Contextualization of present teaching circumstances</td>
<td>Participants current school (Northwest Denver) &amp; surrounding community</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community walk of past schools</td>
<td>Month 2: April 2013</td>
<td>Contextualization of career beginning and middle career circumstances</td>
<td>Participants previous schools (Commerce City) &amp; surrounding community</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom observation # 1</td>
<td>Month 2: April 2013</td>
<td>Contextualization of student populations</td>
<td>Participant’s school hallways and classroom</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom observation # 2</td>
<td>Month 3: May 2013</td>
<td>Contextualization of student populations</td>
<td>Participant’s school hallways and classroom</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom observation # 3</td>
<td>Month 3: May 2013</td>
<td>Contextualization of student populations &amp; triangulation of narratives &amp; emerging themes involving students</td>
<td>Participant’s classroom</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total time:** 10 hours

Throughout my time in the field, I kept a field notebook that consisted of detailed school observations, immediate reflections and information gathered while in the field, methodological process, adjustments and insights, photographs of the research site and Jan’s career artifacts. This field notebook also included double entry notes from classroom observations and transcribed interviews. One side was a recording of objective observations, the other side my own related subjective reflections and emerging insights (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Sustein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012). Additionally,
the field notebook included regular email exchanges between Jan and me, in which we would often engage in further dialogue about emerging ideas, her surfacing memories, or themes that percolated with one or both of us. For example, in response to chapter 1 which I shared with her towards the end of the study, Jan emailed the following:

You have done a masterful job on Chapter 1. The way you have bridged the research on teacher burn out/burn in to pave the way into teacher thrival is both effective and thoughtful. I truly can't imagine the amount of time it has taken you to study all the literature involved in this chapter and extract the powerful information you have presented. You have clearly set the stage upon which my story can unfold…There were many things in this chapter that caught my attention. One was Nieto's assertion that teachers' own identities and life experiences impacted their staying power. Another was Palmer's writings about individuals connecting to their identities—that identity comes from the union of diverse forces that make up one's life—that identity relies on self understanding—and the question: Who is the self that teaches?

Her feedback and reflections consistently sparked further dialogue that helped me gain a deeper sense of Jan’s thrival and added details that fine-tuned the study. Our dialogue was a consistent and spiral process that permeated throughout fieldwork, writing, and beyond.

I also kept a subjective reflective research journal throughout the project which served as a space for me to relive my own teaching stories, explore my feelings and biases around the research process and products, think through emerging trends, reflect
upon tensions, and keep track of my day to day project goals and accomplishments. I routinely and rigorously kept field texts in order to aid myself in moving back and forth between full involvement with the participant and creating subjective distance (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Three field experiences, comprising school visits, artifacts, and colleague stories, were particularly significant to data triangulation. These processes allowed me to understand Jan’s career narrative from multiple sources of information and added supporting testimony to the oral recount of her narrative.

School Visits

Contextualizing stories is an essential element of narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) propose that a metaphorical “three dimensional narrative inquiry space” in which temporality, the personal and social, and the place all interact in contextualizing storied experiences (p. 50). In my effort to contextualize Jan’s narrative in relation to the places and socio-political aspects that encircled her experiences, I toured and took photos and field notes on Jan’s school grounds and the surrounding community. I followed this same process on the two campuses and surrounding community in which she previously taught. I researched these same school and district websites to uncover current and past student demographics, district and state level accountability standings, and indicators of school culture and values.

In order to hone in on the present dimensions of Jan’s narrative, I spent time in her classroom, observing and taking notes on themes that emerged from the interviews, such as Jan’s values of humor and respect in the classroom. Although the scope of
human subjects protection prevented me from directly involving Jan’s students in the study, the time spent in her classroom enabled me to understand her teaching style, her student population, and how she relates to her students.

When school was in session, interviews took place after school hours in Jan’s classroom. This allowed me to visit the school prior to interviews, gaining a better sense of Jan’s relationship with students and the school context. After each visit and interview, I completed routine analysis memos, borrowing prompts from Sustein and Chiseri-Strater (2012) in which the researcher answers the following questions: (a) What surprised me? (to track assumptions), (b) What intrigued me? (to track positions) and (c) What disturbed me? (to track tensions).

Artifacts

Artifacts add material culture to research data (Beudry, Cook, & Mrozowski, 1996). For this study, Jan shared artifacts in the form of teaching memorabilia that she collected over the years. These included curriculum notebooks, student projects, letters of appreciation from former students and student teachers, newspaper clippings, teaching evaluations, recognitions, event programs, and photographs. Artifacts aided in contextualization of Jan’s biography, provoked her memory of significant periods in her career, and enhanced the meaning of her experiences. I took pictures of these memorabilia to facilitate my memory and audio recorded Jan’s explanation of many of the artifacts. These recordings allowed me to listen for further detail and explanation of the stories Jan had previously recounted. Some artifacts were woven into Jan’s storytelling while others were shared during separate conversations. As the project took
shape, Jan came across and generously shared more artifacts that helped substantiate and add texture to the story.

**Colleague Stories**

Field texts can take many forms including family stories that are handed down across generations (Clandanin & Connelly, 2000). For the purposes of this study, I adapted the concept of family stories as field text to encompass “colleague stories.” Jan contends that two long-term colleagues were particularly influential in sustaining her passion for teaching. Facilitated by her introductions, one of her most esteemed colleagues, Phil Sorensen, was able to join us for a recorded interview. This interview included Jan, Phil, and myself, and allowed me to member-check my interpretations of Jan’s story and the major findings related to the research question. This meeting also contributed to my understanding of Jan’s unique attributes and how collegiality supported her longevity (See Table 3.1).

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of organizing and making sense of data. Miles and Huberman (1994) defined analysis as consisting of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (p. 10). In narrative inquiry, data analysis is the process in which the researcher moves from “fieldwork” to developing “research texts”. Throughout the process, the researcher is learning to think narratively, to attend to lives as lived narratively, and to position inquiries within a metaphorical three-dimensional space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

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5 Phil has consented to be named in this study.
The method of composing research texts involves theoretical, practical field text-orientated, and interpretive-analytic considerations. Unlike other traditions of qualitative inquiry that rely on comparative analysis of various theoretical methodological frames, narrative inquiry tends to begin with explorations of the phenomena of experience. As the researcher considers field texts, she reads and rereads field texts to aid in conceptualizing research texts. The process of reading and rereading field texts facilitates the transition to narrative coding of field texts (Cavendish, 2011).

In this study, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, allowing me to search for meaning in and across each in-depth interview and related field texts. This section will describe how research interview transcription, data coding, and re-storying of Jan’s narrative facilitated the process of data reduction, analysis, and drawing of final conclusions.

**Transcription**

During my “off times” such as going on a walk, driving, or cleaning, I listened to the recorded interviews, developing an inherent sense of the data and emerging themes. Like Woods (1999), as a writer I often found my “off duty” hours as my most productive times in conceptualizing data and making mental breakthroughs. My time spent listening to the interviews also eased the process of transcription by allowing me an enhanced memory of Jan’s stories, flow of language, and speech patterns. I carefully transcribed three of the four interviews\(^6\). The comfortable and intimate dialogue that emerged in our

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\(^6\)Due to time constraints, I hired a transcriptionist for the final interview. After the text was transcribed, I carefully edited—adding in nuances such as expression and pauses—based upon my knowledge of Jan and the time spent listening to the recorded interview.
interviews led me to elect inclusion of non-verbal communication and non-speech utterances. These non-verbal cues included laughter, tears, humor, sarcasm, and other displays of emotion. The process of interview transcription facilitated meaningful coding and analysis and became its own form of discourse that facilitated my intimate understanding of Jan.

**Data Coding**

This study borrowed from constant comparative data analysis (Glasser, 1992; Boeije, 2002) in which I engaged in the “art of comparison” with creative processes that allowed me to use the interplay between the data and myself as the researcher when gathering and analyzing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). My data collection and analysis involved several steps. The first step of analysis occurred in between each interview. After each interview, I transcribed the audio recordings and carefully listened to, read, and re-read transcripts. These readings led to open coding in which I studied every passage to determine what was being said and labeled each passage with a code. After initial coding, I compared the codes within the interview, considering consistency or inconsistencies in the interview as a whole. This process allowed me to refine my codes and place similar ideas under the same code (Creswell, 2007).

For each phase of this study, once I coded and examined the interview transcript, I compared it to other field texts collected for that phase of the study. For example, prior to the first research interview, I took a walking tour of Jan’s school and the surrounding community. I wrote careful field notes of my observations and photographs, and mapped out the school in relation to community resources. This process enhanced my
understanding of Jan’s current school context and student demographics. I also compared the interview coding to my first set of research memos. Finally, for each step in this process, I created new research memos that aided in reducing data into themes and manageable chunks.

I repeated the above process for each subsequent interview, comparing each interview to itself as well as to previous interviews and field texts. I looked for emerging themes or patterns in my open coding. Each phase of data collection and analysis allowed me to refine future interview protocols and follow up questions. Data collection and analysis became a spiral process with each stage informing the next.

Finally, after all data were collected, I engaged in a final analysis in which I compared all data, and used axial coding which entails putting data together in new ways by making connections between categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This final coding allowed me to analyze Jan’s biography in terms of the three-dimensional narrative space in which temporality, the personal and social, and the place all interact in contextualizing storied experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In addition to axial coding of the raw data, I also coded the completed narrative (chapters 3-6) and compared it to the raw data codes, which proved fruitful in substantiating salient trends. This final phase allowed me to identify phenomena or thematic insights that supported solving the research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Re-storying

An essential aspect of the narrative research process is to construct the biography into a chronological sequence (Creswell, 2007). Narrative inquiry is set within
individuals’ personal, social, and historical contexts. The method highlights the important themes from participants’ lived experiences. The narrative researcher rigorously considers the contexts that govern how story elements link together in narrative logics. This method commences with the experiences as expressed in the lived and told stories of individuals, typically involving the in-depth study of one or two participants (Angrosino, 1989; Creswell, 2007; Nespor & Barylske, 1991). Personal narratives are infused with convictions of temporal causality that link individual life with stories about the collective destiny (Maynes et al., 2008).

My research design facilitated the re-storying (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of Jan’s career biography. The Huberman (1989) process, in which Jan chose to retell her story from the perspective of a comic opera, was most significant in facilitating my re-story of her narrative. Each act consisted of various scenes that were metaphorically titled based upon significant experiences of the time period. For example, in the first act of Jan’s story, she termed her second year of teaching “man your own station” to symbolize her feelings of isolation upon learning that in her high school, “border crossing”, or collaboration from one department to another, was a cultural gaffe. This metaphorical exercise proved invaluable as a meaningful process for Jan to share her story sequentially. This chronological interviewing process allowed me to easily contextualize Jan’s narrative in terms of the personal, social, and historical happenings of each phase.

In order to foster interpretation of Jan’s narrative, after initial coding of interviews and related field texts, I reduced Jan’s acts and stages to five to ten-year timelines. On
each timeline, I plotted the high points and low points of Jan’s career, relative to the titles and related stories that distinguished each career phase. I then reduced her stories of each scene to main bullet points. These bullet points were derived from the constant comparative process of open coding described above. In addition, each timeline indicated the actual time period in years, whether the time period was in Jan’s early, middle, or later career trajectory, and major public education policy initiatives occurring during these phases. This process of reducing Jan’s career biography to a series of timelines allowed simultaneous re-story of the data as well as opportunities to reduce data, contextualize, and reveal re-occurring phenomena (See Appendix H). In her interview preparation process, Jan also outlined her career story in bulleted points. I compared and merged my data reduction to Jan’s bullet points as a means of member-checking (See Appendix I).

Furthermore, I found that the process of writing Jan’s narrative aided in continual analysis and interpretation. I chose to retell her story in the first person, while weaving in relationships to the literature and scholarly interpretations. This choice proved fruitful in allowing me to alternate between Jan’s narrative voice to my researcher voice and craft a complementary flow between the two. Upon crafting each phase of Jan’s narrative, I gained a deeper understanding of the factors that contributed to her career thrival. These understandings impacted how I interpreted and developed subsequent phases. Simultaneously, as I constructed the later phases of her story, my growing insight into Jan’s identity allowed me to revise earlier phases. This was an iterative process that defied linear thinking or a lock-step methodological approach.
Researcher Reflections

The research process unfolded as an educational one in which I learned a great deal about myself as a scholar and researcher. I came into this study from a reformist paradigm, undertaking this narrative inquiry to have something to say about the human condition (Polkinghorne, 2007). I was far from a conventional “neutral” researcher (Patton, 1990). Rather, I charged myself with the responsibility of consistently reflecting on the research process, ruminating upon and naming my biases, questioning myself when I experienced points of tension, honestly sharing these tensions with Jan, and asking her to help me understand her perspectives (Kridel, 2010).

This section will describe the essential lessons that I learned through the research process, including reflections on my transformation into a critical researcher, achievement of catalytic validity, and how member-checking aided in our co-construction of knowledge.

Stepping Back to Become a Critical Researcher

Prior to fieldwork, I had carefully constructed four in-depth interview protocols designed to facilitate Jan’s storytelling, contextualize her experiences, and prompt topics deemed significant to teacher vitality in the literature. Since these protocols were intended as guides, I approached the interview process knowing that an open mind and flexibility were essential. I wanted this project to evolve into a co-construction of knowledge with Jan. Yet as a novice researcher I did not know exactly how to do this. I was apprehensive that perhaps Jan wouldn’t want to, or wouldn’t have time, to engage in the analysis process or offer feedback to my interim texts. I also became uneasy when by
interview 2, we began to veer off of my original research “plan”. However, by letting go a bit and trusting in the process, I was able to take on the role of a critical researcher, transforming the research process by “refusing the stance of research expert, studying people who are mere objects of research” (Kridel, 2010, p. 921). Instead, I was able to redesign the process into collaborative research with and for Jan, who contributed to collection, analysis, and data interpretation (Kridel). (See Appendix J & Appendix K).

Trusting Jan to take the reins and tell her story, in her unique way, proved to forge an important juncture in the depth of data obtained. Jan is extremely articulate and a natural storyteller. By her taking the lead in the interview process she told her story with passionate animation, reflected deeply on her experiences, and thoughtfully considered the questions of the study. Often she would remark “You make me think about things in ways I never thought, I appreciate that.” or “Now that I stopped to think about what that meant and how it shaped me...” As Polkinghorne (2007) put it, “It is the interviewer’s task to empower participants by acknowledging that they are the only ones who have access to their experienced meaning” (p. 12).

**Achieving catalytic validity.** My transformation into a critical researcher was aided by careful examination of the second and subsequent interview transcripts. As I examined these data, it became apparent that veering from the original protocols contributed to catalytic validity (Cohn et al., 2011; Kridel, 2010). According to Cohn et al., catalytic validity is the depth in which the research process empowers the research community. This community includes the participants and the researcher alike. Jan and I
both experienced personal transformation and new insights that have empowered each of us in our own ways. I describe these transformations in future chapters.

Along with shift in our interview process I believe that the catalytic validity achieved in this study can be attributed to the trusting relationship that developed between Jan and me. Jan is a naturally warm and relational person. In addition, I believe development of this relationship was a result of careful observation, adaptation, and an authentic caring relationship cultivated through time together. Early on, I planned to use voice dictation software, designed to recognize a speaker’s voice and automatically transcribe. One shortfall of this technology is that it can only recognize one voice, meaning that I had to remain silent, or turn off the recorder when I spoke. Within the first 30 minutes of our initial interview, I found myself more focused on the process of managing the recording, rather than listening and engaging in authentic dialogue. I quickly gave up the recording constraints, allowing myself to offer verbal feedback, laugh with Jan, share in sarcasm and humor, and ask clarifying and probing questions. Although this decision resulted in hours of transcribing, the time proved fruitful, providing me with an intimate knowledge of Jan and her narrative. Most importantly, this shift in my technique proved invaluable in forging a relationship in which our interviews unfolded like an intimate dialogue between trusted colleagues, rather than a sterile question-answer interview. This dialogue allowed Jan to dig deep into her stories, sharing potentially vulnerable details and raw emotions. Consequently, the honor of Jan’s trust allowed me to gain a deep understanding of her and how she has thrived throughout her career.
**Member-checking.** In addition to our interviews, throughout the data analysis and construction of the research report, Jan willingly member-checked my interpretation of trends and re-story of her narrative. Member-checking included review and feedback on data reduction, written descriptions of Jan and her experiences, and theoretical analysis of her narrative. She was always gracious in her feedback, consistently offered clarifications and new memories that surfaced. Her commitment to co-construction of this project enhanced the validity, which according to Polkinghorne (2007) upholds on “consensus within a community of speakers” (p. 4).

**Conclusion**

Narrative research is the study of stories. Stories permeate everyday conversations, fictional novels, fairy tales, history, autobiographies, and many other genres. In addition to the stories that appear in people’s daily lives, narrative researchers study stories they solicit from others. Narrative inquiry takes advantage of the natural human tendency to record and transmit our experiences in story form. Phillion (2002) contends:

Narrative is about understanding the complexities of experience, honoring the subtleties of experience, and understanding the dynamics between individual experience and the contexts that shape experience. Narrative reaches out to the past, is rooted in the present, and turns an eye to the future; narrative evolves with changes and shifts in time, place, and interactions. Narrative, as both phenomenon and form of inquiry, is a perspective that provides illuminating ways of viewing the world. (p. 20)

I am interested in how teacher stories impart wisdom. I am interested in the possibility that teacher stories can not only empower the wider teacher community but also empower the storyteller. Furthermore, specific attention to teacher stories is
imperative in order to dismantle the many injustices of urban schools discussed in chapter 1. Teacher narratives can offer insight into how some urban teachers thrive, despite the harrowing statistics of burn out.

Dana and Yendol-Hoppy (2009) argued for teachers to be positioned as “story tellers” in the education research community. Others have found that attention to teacher narratives have proved fruitful in exploring a wide array of concepts including identity, diversity, and multiculturalism (Kelchtermen, 1993; Nias, 1996; Phillion, He & Connelly, 2005). Conway (2013) viewed teaching as transformational to human change. Transformation, in his words, is achieved through storytelling:

I am convinced that stories—well-told stories at least—are necessary to unearth and understand the dynamics, temporal and emotional layering, and interpersonal thickness of lived experience…Not only can stories articulate change, they are also vehicles for it. If we stop to listen to educators talk about their lives, it is immediately apparent how the stories they tell and retell have shaped those lives…Lives are formed and informed through the telling of stories. The same, I believe, is true of teaching. (p. 9)

Through my research process I was able to gain an intimate understanding of Jan’s career narrative. Her story reveals insight into her lived experiences as a spirited career long urban teacher. In the following chapters, we will explore Jan’s career biography and the hopeful lessons that her story reveals.
Chapter Three: Career Beginnings or “A Happy Accident!”

“Your smile is one of your strengths; don’t let it fade way with the rigorous years of teaching” (Principal feedback on Jan’s teacher evaluation, 1974).

This chapter is the first of three in which I weave a retelling of Jan’s career story with a review of the literature, my interpretations of Jan’s career narrative, and scholarly reflections. Along with a brief overview of Jan’s upbringing, this chapter explores her career beginnings, spanning the first 10 of her 40 years of teaching.

As discussed in chapter 2, I borrowed from Huberman’s (1989) method by engaging Jan in pre-interview “homework” of mapping out her career trajectory. Huberman asked study participants to identify distinct career phases and affix original thematic titles to each. Aside from the structure of placing their career stories into time periods, participants were free to adopt themes, sequence, and configurations of their choice.

Jan’s interpretation of this assignment successfully developed a metaphorical form of representation that reflect her passions and helped us make sense of her narrative. With a musical and drama background, she chose the theme of a comical opera including acts, intermissions, and various scenes; each metaphorically tied to her conceptualization of focal career experiences. Since she taught in three schools, she chose to tell her story in three acts, each representative of a specific school and career phase. Each act has been
re-storied (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) with Acts 1 and 3 their own chapter, and the longer Act 2 told in two chapters. This process proved invaluable in the telling and joint interpretation of Jan’s story.

Jan’s comedic opera, titled The ACS Pinafore (With Apologies to Gilbert from Sullivan) was inspired by the 1878 comic opera, HMS Pinafore, that took place on a ship. The first of its kind, with music written by Arthur Sullivan and storyline authored by W.S. Gilbert in London, England, this international sensation served as the inspiration for Jan’s storytelling (Ainger, 2007; Gilbert & Sullivan, 1987). I chose to keep her nautical concept intact as I retold and interpreted Jan’s career story in this and the following three chapters.

**Jan’s Background**

The story I constructed in this study evolved out of interview transcripts, along with review of artifacts provided by Jan, visits to her classroom, my field notes, and reflections. In order to allow Jan’s voice to guide readers through the text, I chose to write her story from the position of the first-person (Kiesinger, 1998). Her story is deciphered from the interpretations, relationships to the literature, and my reflections by italics.

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7 ACS stands for Adams City Schools
8 Jan’s last name is also Sullivan. The parenthetical apologies component of the title offers a tongue-in-cheek quality, which is characteristic of her creative sense of humor. In addition, Jan and her long time colleague of 25 years were nicknamed “Gilbert and Sullivan.”
As Jan and I reflected upon her career narrative, it became apparent that certain aspects of her upbringing are important in understanding her evolution into a spirited career-long urban teacher. The vignette that follows is a brief recount of Jan’s childhood.

**A Snapshot into Growing Up**

*My name is Janice Sullivan. I go by Jan. I was born in 1951 in Commerce City Colorado, an industrialized extension of Denver. I was lucky to be raised by two loving, working-class parents. I am the middle sister of three girls.*

*Although it wasn’t common at the time, in order to make ends meet my mother worked full time as a secretary. My maternal grandmother lived with us and helped raise us. Although a busy working mom, my mother was steadfast in her determination to ensure that my sisters and I lived a life in which our education was prioritized. Mom was the eternal PTA president and school fundraiser extraordinaire.*

*Dad was a heavy equipment operator. He had something like 93 tattoos all over his body. He was a no nonsense man. He had a very difficult childhood and he ran away from home at 13. He put himself through high school and graduated as a self-made man. Dad could do anything.*

*Looking back, I see Mom and Dad as two ordinary people who did extraordinary things with their lives. Their founding of the Metropolitan Troopers is an example of their remarkable contributions. This was a volunteer entertainment troop that spawned out of Mom and Dad’s shared passion for music, performance, and steadfast determination to offer budding performers opportunities to flourish through the arts. My parents ran the Metropolitan Troopers on top of their full-time day jobs. My sisters and I*
were regular performers, typically casted in two shows per week. Both of my sisters were self-taught guitar players. In addition, my oldest sister played the drums and my younger sister danced. I played the organ and piano. Other performers included baton twirlers, dancers, acrobats and more. Our venues included Colorado hospitals, psychiatric wards, youth correction facilities, nursing homes, and jails. My parents had an appreciation for music and they provided us constant opportunities to perform and compete, which really shaped my character and confidence. I was “discovered” my junior year and recruited into my high school drama program during a performance in which my sisters played guitar while we all three shared in vocals.

I won a full ride drama scholarship to Temple Buell College upon High School graduation. This was a true gift, wrapped in a silver bow that I attribute to landing me where I am today. I had skipped the third and fifth grades, so I graduated from high school at the fresh age of 16. I lived at home during my college years, studying hard to fulfill my dreams of acting on Broadway.

As a back-up plan, all drama students minored in Education. The most practical training for teaching consisted of a class in which Professor Monroe taught us how to write drama lesson plans and a semester of student teaching.

My semester of student teaching was the happy accident that changed my life course forever. It was like love at first lesson! I was hooked on teaching. With the encouragement of my high school drama teacher, Ms. Baker, I was hired for my first teaching job at my alma mater at the age of 20. I taught for almost 10 years at Adams

Aside from Jan’s and long time colleague Phil, who participated in the study, all names have been changed.
City High School, another 25 at Adams City Middle School and just completed my 5th year at Skinner Middle School in Denver. This is the story of my career, how I have thrived as an urban educator, and the lessons learned along the way.

Act 1: The ACS Pinafore on Board the ACHS Ship
(With Apologies to Gilbert from Sullivan) as told by Jan Sullivan

Prologue

I started my teaching career on strike! I was one of 17 new teachers hired for that school year. Our principal told us that we were free to choose to partake in the strike or wait to fully board the ship until negotiations were settled. Dad was a union man, so it felt natural to me to join in on the picket line. Besides, my measly starting salary of $6,900 forced me to continue living at home. After 3 days on strike, a court ordered injunction ended the protest and it was time to teach.

Scene 1: On Board the ACHS (Adams City High School) Pinafore

My degree was in drama. My training was minimal and the only courses that I found helpful consisted of Professor Monroe’s guidance on writing drama lesson plans and my semester of student teaching drama and literature at Aurora Central High School. Yet, the summer after graduation in 1972, a mere 3 days prior to the first day of school, I was hired as the new Creative Writing teacher as Adams City High School. My students were competent writers who were ready to expand their skills.

There wasn’t a single thing in the file cabinets of my classroom except a ball of yarn. I often wondered what that was even for! I started my voyage with no curriculum. We had a book room in the language teachers’ lounge that was filled with textbooks, but
not one was for creative writing. My starting point focused on Mark Twain’s humorous work titled The Apple Tree (Jerry, Harnick, & Twain, 1966). I figured students could relate to the humorous depictions of Adam as a sort of recluse who is being bombarded with talkative Eve’s many ideas. Plus it was material I was intimately familiar with from college.

I felt like I had no idea what to expect. There weren’t teacher-mentoring programs back then. There certainly wasn’t any kind of welcome booklet. As a former student of ACHS, at least I knew where the bathrooms were. I felt thrown into the mix, set adrift on a lonely and daunting voyage upon a massive ship carrying almost 2,000 high school students. I wasn’t prepared to navigate this vessel.

It was just pure survival. If I could learn the drills, I was able to keep my head above water. This was before technology so everything was keyed into the secretarial tasks, such as keeping track of where everyone was. I had no sense, no direction. It really was just a matter of staying afloat.

Along with my full-time teaching responsibilities, I was descended upon for many duties outside of teaching. Now as a veteran teacher, I recognize how often new teachers get pulled into that. You don’t know any better, you’re young, you have energy, and you typically don’t have a family. I can see it in the fine print now, but nowhere in teaching 101 did they talk about that!

So that first year, I was Junior class sponsor which entailed a massive prom fundraiser, camping chaperone where I learned to gut a fish and cook for the first time, and the musical director for a drama production. My role as Ms. Baker’s first mate for
the musical was the one experience that made sense to me. I felt at home in this realm with Ms. Baker, who was my high school drama teacher, and the opportunity to use my performance talents. I can’t say that I was a good teacher that year, but I made it through and somehow the ship did not sink.

**Scene 1 Discussion**

Jan’s was one of 17 new teachers her first year. High-need schools are often staffed with inequitable concentrations of under-prepared, inexperienced teachers who are left to labor on their own to the meet complex student needs (Boyd, et al. 2009; Carroll, 2007; Henry, et al., 2011; Ronfeldt, et al., 2011). In Jan’s case, she had little pre-service training, no curriculum, and no mentor. She was able to rely on her drama background to pull familiar literary resources to design her creative writing lessons. She forged relationships with students through her extracurricular endeavors. In addition, as a young 20-year-old high school teacher and former ACHS student, she was able to understand how to relate to and motivate her students.

**Timeless survival characteristics.** Like Jan, many new teachers initially experience coexistent periods of struggling to survive countered with enthusiastic discovery (Frieman-Nemser, 2001; Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999). While she characterizes her first year as one of pure survival, Jan is a passionate lifelong learner. To this day, she gets giddy over sharing a new discovery! This important trait helped her maintain her stamina during her first years of teaching.

The survival characteristics typical of the initial phase of teaching are distinguished by: a reality-shock, confronting the complexity and simultaneity of
instructional management, and experiencing the gulf between one’s professional ideas and the daily grind of classroom life, and fragmentation of tasks (Palmer, 1998, 2004; Intrator, 2002). Discovery translates into initial enthusiasm about having one’s own classroom and students, paired with feelings of oneself as a colleague among peers. Studies suggest that excitement of discovery allows some novice teachers, like Jan, to tolerate the characteristics of survival, while for others the stressors are an early predictor of burnout (Baldacci, 2004; Canter & Canter, 1994; Cornbleth, 2008; Frieman-Nemser, 2001; Huberman, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Mitchie, 1999; Wolk & Rodman, 1994). In addition to Jan’s zealous passion for discovery, she carries an optimistic outlook that she imparts as an important personality trait. These values and dispositions undoubtedly fostered resilience to factors that lead some teachers to burn out.

In my first year as a teacher, I experienced a similar sense of barely staying afloat. Even though 25 years later, like Jan, I was hired days before school started and lacked resources and curriculum. I invested my own money in a classroom library and other resources to support my struggling students. Luckily my starting salary was three times that of Jan’s! My support network consisted of two second-year teachers, who although well intended, were equally oblivious. Although I was assigned a formal mentor, her support was minimal and consisted primarily of ensuring induction paperwork was in order. In retrospect, I doubt she had training in how to mentor a new teacher.

**Novice teaching today.** In my current work with new teachers, I have found that modern-day first year public school teachers often experience the polar opposite of Jan’s starvation for physical and human resources. Many say they are in fact over-resourced,
making it difficult to prioritize. I have witnessed countless committed new teachers who are overwhelmed with copious amounts of new curricula to learn, bogged down with a slew of induction responsibilities necessary to keep their job, on top of learning how to teach, develop classroom culture, deliver and analyze multiple assessments, and the other many day-to-day responsibilities of the job. Learning to teach is a daunting task.

It is commonly estimated that it takes on average five years of quality teaching experience before one achieves a level of mastery (Cuban, 2010; Huberman, 1989; Lipka & Brinhaupt, 1999; Prietula & Cokely, 2007). Jan concurs that she wasn’t “good” until around her fifth year. Sadly, oftentimes the education pendulum swings so far that the resources Jan would have embraced with open arms are transposed into an overwhelming and unrealistic burden. With profound teacher turnover rates, propagated by organizations such as Teach for America that perpetuate the revolving door, it is no wonder urban schools are in crisis (Strauss, 2013).

Mentorship of new teachers is now standard practice (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006). In fact, Jan has enjoyed a long career of mentoring new teachers herself. Barlin (2010) reasoned, “When mentors are well-selected, well-trained, and given the time to work intensively with new teachers, they not only help average teachers become good, but good teachers become great” (p. 1).

Since Jan’s inception, education has made great strides when it comes to preparing and supporting new teachers. Concurrently, I have seen new teachers deem their mentoring opportunities, professional development, and curriculum training as just another item to check off of the “to do” list, rather than an authentic opportunity to
nurture student learning and their own development (Sherman, 2009). Much of this struggle is attributed to a lack of time and overwhelming expectations. In 1999, a married teacher and economist team calculated that in order for experienced public school teachers to give minimal individual time to each of their students, they would typically work at least 60 hours per week (Swaim & Swaim, 1999). Newer statistics reveal an average 12 to 15 hour workday (Weber, 2013). Considering the learning curve for new teachers and the many responsibilities outside of teaching itself, such as the various activities Jan found herself pulled into, it isn’t surprising that she barely kept afloat and that new teachers today experience an exasperating time crunch (Ayers & Ford, 2008; Nieto, 2003; Nieto & Bode, 2008).

To this day, Jan arrives at work at seven. She religiously, yet happily, works a ten to eleven hour day. She spends much of her summers on curriculum writing and preparation for the following school year. Clearly, teachers who thrive are intrinsically motivated. Teaching is a labor of love.

**Scene 2: Man Your Station**

I started that second year feeling like I was stranded on my own little island. So, when our principal, knowing that I was a theater person, proposed that I assist Ms. Baker on a school-wide performance project, I was thrilled. The idea behind this project was to develop a performance that was accessible to students outside of the typical drama clan. The play was Li’l Abner, which was the first play I ever acted in! In one scene, the scrawny men of Dog Patch get sent through a machine that turns them into muscle men.
So we had these 6 smaller drama guys go into the machine and out came the big ACHS football jocks! I thought it was a great way of getting the jocks into drama.

I’m a naturally social person. Not only was this an opportunity for students to cross social boundaries, it was also an opening for me to meet teachers outside of the English department. Adams City was a big school, so I found this venture to be a great way to expand my horizons, see the school from a wider-angle lens, and collaborate with other teachers.

I was still the English teacher, and this play was an outside responsibility, one in which I knew my place as Ms. Bakers’ first mate, her assistant. However, Ms. Baker grew resentful of my involvement. It was almost as if I was upstaging the captain. I really felt like I had stepped on her toes. But that was not my intent at all. She had done so much for me that the last thing I had wanted was for her to think that I was trying to undermine her. Somehow, my involvement really created a rift. I clued in very quickly that in high school everybody has his or her place, and evidently you’re supposed to stay there. This encounter taught me an important lesson about my place at Adams City High School: you might be able to visit other islands, but “border crossing” was offensive. It took me breaking the rules to discover them.

I have to say, this epiphany made me sad and added to my feelings of isolation. Over the years, I have learned that my early instinct for teamwork has considerable merit. Teaching is a profession where collaboration works so well. Why would you not want to do that? Li’l Abner was my first glimpse into how, in the teaching profession, we
often say that our actions should reflect the best interest of the students, but we don’t always act that way. That was shocking to find out.

**Scene 2 Discussion**

Jan quickly learned the hard way that her desire to cross departmental borders was unwelcome. Anthropologists view borders as social constructs that encompass differences in rights and obligations for the dominant groups in comparison to the minority (Gollnick & Chinn, 2008). In order for schools to become equitable, educators must embrace culturally pluralistic practices that facilitate border crossing (Anderson & Collins, 2004; Gay, 2010; Gollnick & Chinn; Herrera, 2010).

**Teaching in community.** The conversation around cultural pluralism and equity in schools is typically centered on students (Au, 2009; Cartledge et al., 2009; Nieto & Bode, 2008). However, as this scene portrays, there are unwritten cultural norms that teachers must also uncover. Fried (2001) revealed a pervasive urban school cultural phenomenon that he coined “The Game of School.” The “game” is an organizational mindset that learning is a mindless duty. The “game” can become toxic and prevent collaborative practices amongst staff. Although Jan learned that veterans in her school did not value collaboration, engagement with a larger network of educators is crucial to thriving and surviving symptoms of burnout (Danielewicz, 2001; Neito, 2003; Palmer, 2007).

Nieto (2003) found that when teachers experience a close companionship with their peers, they “often feel as if their colleagues—or at least their colleagues’ wisdom and insights—are walking in with them” (p. 124). Community among teachers is crucial
if they are to remain bonded to the profession, students, and one another (Nieto). Like Nieto (2003), Palmer (2007) emphasized that community is essential to sustaining the teachers’ heart. He stressed three facets of community: knowing in community, teaching in community, and learning in community. Palmer contended that community connectedness is at the heart of good teaching.

Jan felt isolated during her first years of teaching. Yet, her attempts to collaborate with colleagues were not only instinctually grounded, but affirmed in the literature (Fried, 2001; Graves, 2001; Nieto, 2003; Palmer, 2007).

**Scene 3: Setting Sail**

*I had been stuck in the harbor, not fully realizing my potential, for too long. I was hungry to set sail by my 3rd year of teaching. I started gravitating toward two of the younger teachers in the English department. Victoria and Angela seemed to really know what they were doing. I wanted some of that. I wanted to be confident with what I was doing, just as they were. Angela was in charge of the school newspaper, Victoria was a speech coach, and with my drama background we just kind of starting clicking together, complementing one another’s abilities.*

*That was when one of the first ideas of curriculum notebooks\(^{10}\) came up. They were very methodically planned out, but those two ladies really had vision of what that looked like. I learned from them. I could plan a lesson, but trying to see through an*  

\(^{10}\) The curriculum notebooks developed by Jan and her colleagues were backwards-designed semester courses that included syllabi, course objectives, daily lesson plans and materials, assessments, and student projects. Jan saved and shared examples of these teacher-designed curricula during fieldwork. The quality and depth of these notebooks could serve as exemplars for the current popular practice of “backward design” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).
entire unit, I really didn’t have the vision for what it might look like. So knowing that I
could depend on people who were more expert really allowed me to become that expert
on my own too. Because where else do you learn it?

We were building our curriculum notebooks; we were refining our courses,
deciding what worked and what didn’t work. We were offering courses that we felt would
be fun, were beneficial, that suited the needs of the kids. We were team planning;
Victoria and I began co-teaching. We had two rooms that had a connecting, big folding
door. We could open up the door and co-teach, which was a brand new idea back then. I
felt really intimidated because I didn't feel like I was as strong as Victoria, but I learned
so much. And it really did work.

Our classes grew, and grew, and grew. They were popular and kids liked them.
We felt like we were offering something that was vital to kids. Kids were definitely
learning. We were getting things done and it felt good. So that was when I felt like I set
sail for the first time and it was really a pleasant voyage.

Scene 3 Discussion

Jan found solace in collegiality with two of her departmental peers. Together, the
threesome developed innovative curriculum, co-taught, and complemented one another’s
expertise. Graves (2001) suggested that teachers who forged a long-term relationship
with at least one colleague profited from a mutually beneficial bond that was a source of
shared personal and professional energy.

Easy career beginnings. Through his interviews with 160 participants,
Huberman (1989) found three distinct career phases. Earlier phases revealed a predictive
quality for subsequent phases. Jan’s third year presented similarities to the teachers who referred to their initial years (1-3) as “easy beginnings.” Those who experienced easy beginnings had positive relationships with students, a sense of pedagogical mastery, “manageable” pupils, and generally felt enthusiastic. In contrast, those who had painful beginnings felt isolated inside their school, felt a sense of constant overload and anxiety, were overly monitored by teacher education staff, felt a heavy time investment, and had “difficult” pupils.

Teachers who experienced easier beginnings, Huberman (1989) found, were more likely to remain in the profession. Although Jan’s early career narrative reveals trials and tribulations including a lack of resources, mentorship, and initial teamwork, her third year was a source of professional accomplishment and collegiality that undoubtedly kept her going.

Scene 4: Smooth Sailing

Those next few years were really smooth sailing. Back then, we could really decide what classes we wanted to teach, what classes were necessary, design them, and then offer them. Some of the older teachers were more comfortable teaching traditional classes such as basic composition and paragraph development. And that was fine. Then there started being specialty classes like Journalism 2 that Angela pioneered and Victoria’s popular Communication Theory class.

As I grew more confident about what I could offer, I developed Creative Writing 2. I had this student, Lilia Hobbit, who was a tremendous writer and she loved humor and satire. So it occurred to me that in Creative Writing 2 students were a little bit more
sophisticated, they could handle humor and satire. They turned out some of the most ingenious writing I have ever seen! Lilia did a spoof off of the Dick and Jane series. She made Dick into a drug runner and Jane a prostitute. And she did it very well. Initially I was a little horrified, thinking “Oh we’re talking about what?” But it was just so clever and done in a really sophisticated manner. I realized that students really need that outlet.

Creative Writing 2 grew to the point where we needed a Creative Writing 3 class to produce our literary magazine. Angela had a journalism background, so with her help I learned how to format and publish magazines. And that’s what we did! Creative Writing 3 was about writing things to produce in our magazine. We started taking in artwork from other students as well. We had a magnificent magazine. It was just incredible!

During that time period, I started teaching summer school, which was a real eye opener for me. I taught 16 eighth through tenth graders. They needed everything from writing to speech classes. My honors English students were motivated to work hard and they came to me with skills in place. On the contrary, summer school was my first experience teaching students who lacked skills, lacked motivation, and were just overall lackluster. One of my most memorable summer school students actually became a Colorado Lieutenant Governor. He was in my summer class for speech, but overcame that challenge!
Scene 4 Discussion

Jan’s metaphor of smooth sailing resembles Huberman’s (1989) second phase of teacher career development, known as stabilization. According to Huberman, this phase typically took place during years 4-6 of teaching. During this phase, career teachers experienced pedagogical stabilization in which they began to feel at ease in the classroom. They started to collect a basic repertoire of strategies. Pedagogical stabilization meant that teachers were able to differentiate materials and interactions around student needs.

It wasn’t until her fifth year of teaching that Jan encountered struggling learners who lacked the skills and motivation she had grown accustomed to. Her summer school teaching experience offered her a new opportunity to further develop her teaching repertoire. Through this new experience, Jan was challenged to differentiate instruction for varied student needs and abilities and learn to motivate students disenfranchised by schooling. Unlike brand new teachers assigned to struggling learners, Jan came into this new experience with know-how, confidence and a body of teaching strategies to build from.

Longevity through autonomy and trust. Novice teachers who are deemed successful are more likely to stay (Boyd et al., 2009; Henry et al., 2011). Jan and her team were autonomous in the courses they offered and were able to be creative in curriculum design and instructional delivery. Consequently their courses were very popular and deemed successful.
According to McGrath (2000), an autonomous teacher is one who has control over her own life by engaging in “self-directed professional development” (p. 100) and who operates with “freedom from control by others” (p. 101). Jan and her peers were able to flourish professionally through their collaboration, sharing of expertise, and attending workshop opportunities relevant to their current endeavors. For example, when Jan began to develop the literary magazine, she sought workshops on journalism and also solicited support from her colleague Angela.

Autonomy entails the ability to self-reflect and develop personal theories about teaching and learning. Continuous reflection fosters teacher confidence and enables teachers to be grounded in their beliefs about teaching and learning. Reflection and deeply rooted beliefs are fundamental to development of effective autonomous teachers (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). Jan and her colleagues relied on one another for continuous brainstorming, reflection, and refinement of their craft.

In 1975, around the same time period that this scene occurred, researchers Farris-Berg, Dirkswager, and Junge examined the experiences of teachers they called “liberated.” They argued that teacher autonomy could influence classroom and whole school success. Teachers, they argued, must be trusted in order for schools to become high performing. When teacher trust is granted, they collectively operate in ways that emulate the cultural characteristics of high-performing organizations. This includes a shared purpose focused on students as individuals and development of learning programs that individualize student learning (Farris-Berg et al., 1975). Presently, many urban schools lack the relational trust necessary to collaborate in meaningful student-centered
work. Bryk and Schneider (2002) termed relational trust as an organizational property with distinctive qualities or interpersonal social exchanges in school communities. Their study found that urban schools that foster relational trust improve student learning outcomes.

**Student centered curriculum.** As described in this scene, Jan became increasingly confident in her instructional design and pedagogy. Stabilization led her to further develop student-centered (Ayers, 2001; Noddings, 2003) creative writing curriculum based on student needs, interests, and passions. Through an intimate knowledge of her students, such as Lilia, Jan was able to customize curriculum that motivated and inspired them to refine their writing and take ownership in the development of a sophisticated quarterly literary magazine. As Ayers (2001) put it, “good teachers become students of their students in order to create more vital opportunities for real learning” (p. 136).

**Scene 5: Trouble in Paradise**

*Our principal was attacked in the stairwell. It was a gang of four boys from another school. I had been married for 3 years and all of the sudden I’m pregnant and I’m walking around serving campus patrol duty. That was a real eye opener, that schools aren’t safe places. The fact that they aren’t. The fact that we’d have to use plan time to patrol campus. And “Do I need to worry about my own safety?” It’s when I realized it isn’t the perfect world that I had thought it should be.

It’s always been that way ever since and things have gotten worse. That’s the year I learned that we need to protect our students. What are you willing to do to put yourself
Scene 5 Discussion

The U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention began tracking the incline of youth violence in the 1980’s. It wasn’t until 1990 that they began to track incidence of school violence (Shafii & Shafii, 2001). Over the years, violence in schools has become increasingly lethal. School violence ranges from bullying, vandalism, theft, assault, to shooting sprees and mass killings (Coombs-Richardson, 2000; Kozol, 2005; Mears, 2005).

Schools aren’t safe places. Youth violence is attributed to increased exposure to brutality in the media and pop culture, a lack of opportunity for children to learn pro-social behaviors, increased access to lethal weapons, and rising gang activity (Ayers et al., 2008; Coombs-Richardson, 2000). Others blame systemic oppression, poverty, racism, and apartheid schooling (Kozol, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2008).

Anti-violence and anti-bullying programming is common practice in modern day schools. Some of these efforts include: zero tolerance policies, positive behavior systems, increased presence of police and security guards, simulations of shooting drills, school uniforms, altering larger schools into smaller departments, and behavior modification strategies (Coombs-Richardson, 2000; Kozol, 2005, OSEP Center on Positive Behavior Interventions, 2000). Over the years, Jan has witnessed increased school violence that mirrors the literature.
Although some efforts to eradicate school violence have been fruitful, other schools are criticized for their increasing resemblance to prisons (McKay, 2012). Some modern day high schools require students to enter through metal detectors, spend countless tax dollars on video monitors, and often staff an excessive number of security guards (McKay). Critics view these measures as undermining to the learning environment and school culture (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013). In a recent visit to ACHS, I witnessed the tradition of patrolling campus still in effect. However, this job has been passed on to security guards who patrol in golf carts. During my visits to Jan’s current middle school, dismissal always included the presence of a uniformed security guard. Additionally, like most public schools today, all doors are locked from the inside. Visitors must be buzzed in after video monitor screening. Sadly, in 2000 three boys murdered a teacher from this same school. One of the murderers was a former student.

Jan was not alone in her concerns for her own safety and that of her students. The education field is losing teachers and failing to attract prospective teachers who are willing to work in violent contexts. Some urban districts offer “combat pay” to supplement income for teachers willing to work in schools with a violent tendency (Coombs-Richardson, 2000). Jan currently works in a school that supplements salaries with an estimated $2,000 per year for teaching in a “hard to serve” school (Denver Public Schools, 2013a). Though it isn’t explicitly stated, this stipend appears, in part, to be “combat pay”.

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Scene 6: Walking the Plank – Sink or Swim

It was my 9th year of teaching. It was nearing winter break and I had found a lump in my breast. I was scared. It was evening and I was nervously anticipating a call from the doctor to schedule my surgery. I picked up the phone and it was my principal. “I’m sorry to break this to you Jan, but we are experiencing a Reduction in Forces (RIF). We have to eliminate two teaching positions. You have the least amount of service, so that means you are automatically the one to be let go.” I was equal parts woeful and outraged. At that moment, my life felt in shambles.

I’ve always considered myself a pretty passive person, not one to rock the boat. So, up until this moment I veered away from confrontation as much as possible, enjoying my intimate teaching island with Victoria, Angela, and the students. But with this news I couldn’t be passive. I mean, here I was the captain of an innovative creative writing program and students were thriving. I had designed these courses, continuously refined these courses, and had a large student following. I was providing students an excellent education: so excellent in fact that our literary magazine was award-winning. So excellent that I was consistently called an “outstanding teacher” and earned “above average” and “superior” ratings on my annual principal evaluations.11 So excellent, that my huge following of students organized a walk out in protest of the news of my position cut.

11 Jan saved and shared with me samples of annual evaluations from her first 20 years of teaching.
It was then that I realized school systems are more concerned with convenience rather than excellence. It was one of my first glimpses into the unjustness that I don’t think is in anybody’s best interest. And yet, it happens all the time.

I just felt really sad that that was being taken away from these kids. It wasn’t their fault and what was going to be substituted in its place? What would happen to the kids? Then there was the English teacher down the hall, with his feet up on the desk, reading the paper, while the kids completed monotonous exercises out of a textbook; or the one that would leave his class 15 minutes early to walk to the cafeteria and say “Put your papers on my desk on your way out”. Yet, here I was, offering students innovative curriculum, where kids were motivated, learning, and thriving, and I had to go? How is that even fair?

I requested a meeting with a district administrator. And that was my big question to him. I practically had him cornered in my classroom. My claws had really come out! I said, “How can this happen? You know, not just me, but how can this happen, that we’re trying to provide excellent instruction to students and yet this action clearly shows it’s not valued. It’s not valued.” And I said, “Barry, you have children of your own, how would you feel if something that they had been a part of, that they were excelling at was suddenly just taken away from them and now they don’t even have that opportunity anymore. How is that fair to them?” And he responded with “Well, this is just the way it is, this is just the way it is”. And I’m thinking, “Well this way sucks!”

Nevertheless, despite my protests, those of my colleagues, and the students, I had to walk the plank and bid farewell to Adams City High School, the students I adored, and
the colleagues I had come to consider dear friends. Sink or swim, I was transferred to Adams City Middle School, halfway through the school year in January of 1981.

Scene 6 Discussion

Teacher tenure took root in the 1920’s as part of the women’s movement since teaching was a female dominated profession (Concordia University, n.d.). The system was created as a means to protect teachers from being terminated for personal or political reasons. Prior to tenure, women were sometimes dismissed for getting married, becoming pregnant, or even wearing pants (Procon, 2010). Although Jan had tenure at the time of her transfer, saving her from unemployment, she fell victim to the common administrative policy of transferring staff merely based on seniority.

Schools and society. Socio-political theorists view schools as direct reflections of societal values, norms, and beliefs (Anderson & Collins, 2004; Kozol, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Traudt, 2002). From this perspective, the culture of power silences and oppresses those not in power in order to maintain supremacy (Au, 2009; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto & Bode). In the staffing structure of schools, this includes placing teachers low on the status totem pole, where they are vulnerable to policies that are not always in their best interests or the interests of the students they serve (Ayers, 2001; Giroux, 2012; Karp, 2010). Jan’s forced transfer, despite her exemplary performance, is an example of these types of unjust bureaucratic practices.

Six weeks prior to her transfer, at the North Central Evaluation Banquet, Jan delivered a school community report to a large audience of stakeholders. Many audience members were extremely complimentary of her creative production that included a slide
show with music. Her principal publically referred to her as one of his most esteemed teachers. Yet, her exemplary performance—including numerous contributions outside of classroom duties—was not taken into consideration when staffing cuts had to be made.

In contrast, two more senior male teachers in her same department, who were apathetic and likely bought into “The Game of School” (Fried, 2001), were protected from transfer. In my own teaching experience, I encountered a handful of extremely toxic senior teachers who administration claimed they just had to put up with, as the monetary and time cost of removal was too high and too risky. In fact, some of these teachers were passed, through administrative transfer, from school to school on an annual basis.

**Teacher tenure today.** The concept of tenure and job protection for teachers has become increasingly controversial with the inception of Race to the Top (Education Next, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In 2009, after failing to win Race to the Top funding, Colorado passed legislation making it possible for teachers to lose their tenure status (Colorado Department of Education, 2013a). Opponents of tenure contend that laws preventing job discrimination make tenure no longer necessary. Advocates of tenure point out that school systems can eliminate effective veteran teachers to replace with less costly new teachers, such as Teach for America candidates (Procon, 2010; Strauss, 2013).

**A positive spin on forced change.** Huberman (1989) found that once teachers reached stabilization, they would experience phases in which they would deeply consider career emancipation or affirmation. Women, who had experienced change and novelty in their careers, were most likely to achieve a state of resolution. Classroom assignments,
departmental section, subject matter, and new schools were all significant types of changes. These participants seemingly found that even forcible introductions to novelty and challenge every 5-6 years were needed, otherwise teachers would experience a slow erosion of their spirit (Huberman). As we explore Act 2 of Jan’s narrative, we will see how she was able to sustain her spirit and thrive, despite the painful set back of administrative transfer.

**Act 1 Conclusion**

The goal of this study is to uncover how Jan not only survived a career of urban teaching, but thrived. This first act tells the story of Jan’s career beginnings. Trials and injustices surrounding urban education, escalation of school violence, and socio-political impacts on urban education surfaced. Themes of early career survival influenced by ideas including: teaching as a collaborative endeavor, teacher autonomy and trust, opportunities to create student-centered curriculum, and a comparison of Jan’s narrative to common early career research came to light.

The idea that early career performance can predict future career success is becoming an increasingly popular notion in academic research and education policy (Boyd et al., 2009; Henry et al., 2011). Jan’s survival and thrival during her first ten years can be in part attributed to two important elements that permeate: eternal optimism and what I call *creative autonomy*. As the next chapters will reveal, these factors have persevered as important threads throughout her narrative.

Jan considers herself an eternal optimist. As she puts it, “Sometimes teaching is a real uphill battle and so optimism is absolutely necessary to keep on. I’ve developed
what I call my Scarlett O'Hara kind of attitude. The idea that tomorrow's another day.”
This outlook created a filter that allowed her to push past distressing setbacks including early isolation, exposure to school violence, and even being cut from her ACHS position.

Jan experienced what I refer to in this study as creative autonomy. She and her team were sanctioned to develop and teach innovative curriculum, based off of student interests and needs in conjunction with their own teacher talents and passions. She had creative freedom that fueled her zeal for life-long learning. She saw teaching as an art form in which curriculum and pedagogy were dynamic, ever evolving, and provided for constant reflection and refinement. As Jan’s story continues, much of the foundation set in this chapter will evolve in solving the complicated puzzle of urban teacher thrival.
Chapter Four: Middle Career Paves a Calling

“You and your work have impacted the world in the most profound ways” (Card from three former students presented at Jan’s retirement in 2007).

This chapter explores the first 5 of the 25 years Jan taught Language Arts at Adams City Middle School (ACMS). Many of the findings unpacked in the final chapter of this study can be attributed to her experiences at ACMS. Similar to the previous chapter, I texture a retelling of Jan’s career story with connections to the literature, my analyses of Jan’s career narrative, and scholarly considerations. This chapter tells Jan’s reflections on Act 2, Part 1 of her metaphorical comedic opera. Each of the five scenes portrays a pivotal phase of her career narrative.

Act 2, Part 1: The ACS Pinafore on Board the ACMS Sister Ship
(With Apologies to Gilbert from Sullivan) as told by Jan Sullivan

Prologue

Although she was involuntarily transferred from high school to middle school, Jan has never looked back. In retrospect, her transfer to middle school was a divine intervention that led her to regard teaching as broader than conveying a subject matter. Teaching middle school surfaced a calling. This shift has allowed her to make a difference in the lives of thousands of vulnerable adolescents. Stories of memorable students, and the wisdom they bestowed upon Jan, are examined in this chapter. She explains:
At the high school level, it was more about the subject matter. They [students] didn’t need me, so that component hadn’t quite set in for me. It was more about, “Okay, here’s how I can help you become a better creative writer and a better communicator.” When I came to the middle school, that’s when I realized I could make a difference. I can make a difference being at the middle school. In high school they’re [high school students] kind of already there, they’re kind of already set, but here’s [middle school] where it starts.

Some college students are drawn to teaching out of a passion for a subject matter such as literature, languages, history, and the arts (Danielewicz, 2001; Grossman, 1990). In Jan’s case, she viewed teaching as a security blanket, should her aspirations of a drama career fall short. During student teaching, she was encapsulated and became a successful high school English teacher for a decade.

Teacher identity is a dynamic and evolving process that requires reflection and faithful reaffirmation (Denielewicz, 2001; Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999). Studies exploring why people enter teaching show that those fueled solely by subject matter tend to have a short career trajectory (Danielewicz). Those who identify teaching as a mission or calling are more likely to remain (Nieto, 2003; 2005; Palmer, 2007).

In her high school career, subject matter, students, and creative collaboration fostered Jan’s commitment to the profession. She carried many of these driving forces to the middle school, but also acquired a grave appreciation for the relationships built along the way. Familial like relationships with students, parents, and colleagues nurture her drive and longevity today. Although she maintains a passion for language and a zeal for
learning, she is also driven by her mothering nature that she imparts freely, through acts of care, concern and genuine love. Her mothering nature will be elaborated upon as Jan’s narrative continues to unfold.

**Scene 1: Castaway**

*I felt like I was being thrown out, tossed overboard without a life preserver. Here I was, second semester of the school year, and I had to transfer from honors high school English to sixth grade Social Studies. I had never taught middle school and didn’t have the credentials to teach Social Studies. I felt that convenience was undoubtedly more important to the school system than serving students justly. I faced complete disillusionment with the education system.*

*I filed a grievance and the district quickly changed my assignment to sixth grade English. Although this was a better match for my expertise, it created a domino displacement. A non-tenured teacher had to move from his English position to Social Studies. So now everybody had to change, the students and the other teacher, to accommodate me. I felt really guilty about that. I entered a new school taking kids away from their teacher and kicking someone out of their job.*

*Middle school was a culture shock. I mean, I was sent to sixth grade! And when you think of changing from upper-level honors classes to sixth grade, it was like I was on a different planet. I was absolutely lost. So I started to find my way by looking around to see “Okay, how do people deal with these kinds of kids?” The male teacher, the one I had displaced, had his classroom next door. He had a very loud voice and I remember* 

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12 This teacher persevered as a committed Social Studies teacher for 25 years and retired the same year as Jan.
frequently hearing and seeing him out in the hall, with finger to a kid’s chest, up against the wall, in their faces, shouting. And I remember thinking “Oh, is that what we’re supposed to do?”

Discipline had never been a problem in my high school position. I wasn’t quite sure how to deal with that. I vaguely remember this boy, Mathew Bennett, oh my goodness, what a little troublemaker! At one point, I took him out in the hall and I tried, not finger in the chest because that was too much for me, but I tried to raise my voice, appear authoritative and just really let him know how he was misbehaving. I hated it, completely hated it. I was thinking “This can’t be right, this isn’t good, and middle school obviously isn’t for me if this is how you’re supposed to do things.”

Scene 1 Discussion

Jan’s entry into middle school was one of her first introductions to the student discipline challenges that are common in urban schools. Additionally, she was new to the unique dispositions and nature of children at this developmental stage.

Classroom culture and adolescent development. Urban school climate and the realities of children’s lives outside of school can lead to classrooms that are chaotic, where a teacher feels no sense of control over students who behave apathetically, disrespectfully, and even violently (Ayers et al., 2008; Baldacci, 2004; Mitchie, 1999). On top of the trials of creating an effective classroom environment, Jan experienced culture shock as she attempted to relate to middle school students. She watched colleagues interact with students in a manner that Atwell (1998) described as “regimenting” and trying to control the natural tendency for early adolescents to question
authority. Education blogger and award winning middle school teacher Heather Wolpert-Gawron (2009) playfully described middle school students as follows:

I've always said that Middle schoolers are ready to talk and ponder about the big issues, yet still yell, ‘Crayons!’ when the blessed colored wax sticks appear on their desk. Teaching middle schoolers is like working with a herd of wild fillies. You have to rein ‘em in and give them slack, rein ‘em in and give them slack. It’s harder to find a sub in middle schools than in any other grade level. Why? Because they’re crazy. … chemically crazy. They're wired for it. It's in their middle school DNA. (para. 2)

As the upcoming scene will illustrate, Jan ultimately found her footing. She learned to navigate urban middle school culture and the unique needs of her students.

**Scene 2: Testing the Waters**

In the fall of 1982 the school was arranged in clusters. I was assigned as the Language Arts teacher to a sixth grade cluster with a Social Studies teacher, a Math teacher, and a Science teacher. We shared the same cohort of students.

That year was truly the beginning of my transformation as a teacher. Everything I learned and have put into place materialized then. It wasn’t necessarily about the cluster approach, but the people who were in it. The Math teacher, Nancy, was this tiny little former nun. She would not put up with anything! But behind her no-nonsense approach was true heart. Phil, the Social Studies teacher, became my self-appointed mentor and has been my best friend forever.

My middle school students were challenging. They had their share of hardships, and they could be naughty and trying. I started carefully watching Phil’s interactions

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13 Phil Sorensen is Jan’s long-time colleague and friend who participated in one of our interviews.
with students. I asked him questions about how he would handle specific incidents. I tried mimicking his techniques. What I noticed was that if a kid acted up, he would take them out in the hall and say, “Have I done something to offend you?” And immediately the kid would respond “Oh no, no, no”, and he’d say, “Well I was worried because just then, when I asked you to [change seats] you really snapped at me and I was afraid that I may have done something to offend you.” And consistently, the student would respond, “Oh no, no Mr. Sorensen, no, I was just having a bad day and I’m sorry.” And he would reply with “Oh not a problem, as long as you and I are okay, that’s what’s important to me”. His approach worked miracles!

I watched and practiced the way Phil and Nancy related with kids. I learned that it’s really about respect, limits, and fairness. Those are really the keys. The kids want limits. They want to know what their boundaries are. They don’t think they do, but they do. But you have to approach limits with respect, and you have to be fair about it. That was a critical lesson for me. You don’t have to scream at children, you don’t have to poke your finger in their chest, and you don't have to be an authoritarian. What a relief! I thought, “I can do that.”

My team could be so serious and at the same time so fun loving. They really helped me realize that middle school could be fun. One time Phil and Nancy plotted a prank aimed to frazzle Dan, our team Science teacher, and me. We’d been in school for several months. Dan and I were new to middle school and we were finally getting a handle on things. Phil and Nancy secretly told the kids one day, “It would be really funny boys and girls if you just started acting silly in the middle of Mrs. Sullivan’s and Mr. Duncan’s
classes. You know, just maybe raise your hand and keep asking the same questions, you know goofy things. Don’t be mean, don’t hurt anybody, don’t be outlandish, but just do silly little things and we’ll see how it goes”. Well the kids were all over that!

I remember trying to give a spelling test, and out of the blue voices were humming the Star-Spangled Banner in the background. And I was like “Who’s singing?” The classes weren’t out of control but there were definitely some weird things going on. By the time we were ready for lunch, I was almost in tears, and Dan said, “Well okay, let’s go eat lunch with Nancy and Phil and let them know what’s going on. Maybe the kids are doing the same thing for them. We’ll put our heads together and figure something out.” As we started sharing the peculiar student behaviors I glanced over and saw Phil and Nancy eyeing each other with a smirk. I exclaimed, “We’ve been set up! We have been set up!” Dan and I alleged, “You [referring to Phil and Nancy] put them [students] up to it!” They responded wittily, “Well we just thought you needed to have a little fun!” And I said, “We, having fun?” So, Dan warned, “Just remember, payback is hell!”

His payback was hilarious. About a month later, while Nancy was out of the classroom, Dan got a bunch of kids to take all the desks from her classroom and set them on the lawn outside her windows. When Nancy came to class, everything was set outside and the kids were sitting at their desks, like it was a typical day. For Phil, he rigged up the film projector with a tampon. Phil turned it on to show a movie, and the tampon started flapping around. And the kids kept giggling and asking, “What’s that Mr. Sorensen, what’s that Mr. Sorensen?”

These types of pranks weren’t in the spirit of meanness. It was fun! I learned to
pair a little bit of levity. You know, don’t be so full of yourself that you can’t create humor for the moment. But then be able to move past it, keep going with the learning. Honestly, to this day, I still hold humor to be one of the biggest assets that I carry.

That year was really the start of a feeling of family. Our team knew that we were all working toward the same thing. We were in it for the same reasons and had the same frame of mind. It’s just that mixture of having fun with the kids, having fun with each other; students seeing that we can interact that way too. I think it’s really important for students to see their teachers as human beings who have feelings, that teachers can have fun and tease, but still have absolute respect for one another. It was a new experience for me. One that wouldn’t have been taught anywhere, but by the virtue of those two human beings, that became the way of our sixth grade team culture.

I participated in the Colorado Writing Project\textsuperscript{14} that year. I really connected with that experience. It really hit me at a personal level. Even though I had been a Language Arts teacher for eleven years, I didn’t like to write. It was a struggle for me. The worst part was getting started. Getting started was a killer. Having to write and writing often, sharing my writing with other teachers, made me more confident. I was finally brave enough to start writing with the kids, in front of the kids. I really started thinking about what would make it easier for me and it finally dawned on me that students need a way to think through things. That whole metacognition piece we hear about now. I realized a lot of teachers are not comfortable writing in front of kids. There is something very vulnerable about writing on the spot. But I found the kids really loved it!

\textsuperscript{14} The Colorado Writing Project has offered schools and individual teachers professional development for 3 decades. Their motto is to create teacher writers and writing teachers.
I would say things like “Ooh, I don’t like the way that sentence sounds. Who can help me make the sentence better?” or “Who can think of a better word?” And it would literally become a class project. The kids did well, really well. And so for me that was a huge jump because I really got brave enough in my own abilities as a writer. I think that’s where the sense of humor comes in because I could play off that by poking fun of myself through writing. And having empathy too. I would tell the kids “I don’t like to write, because I struggle at it. It’s hard for me, so I understand where you are coming from.”

Scene 2 Discussion

By her second year at ACMS, things started to look up for Jan. She developed a sense of collegiality, gained classroom management skills, and felt a sense of belonging. The relationships built with her team allowed her to rediscover joy in teaching and fed her social nature. Through professional development, she cultivated self-confidence as a writer and teacher of writing.

Teaching in community. Effective teachers collaborate, share ideas, and assist their peers with difficulties (Stronge, 2007). Long before the concept of teacher effectiveness (Stronge; NCATE, 2010) became a politically laden term, Jan and her colleagues realized the value of collaboration. Ayers (2001) said that superior teachers are those who tend to “teach against the grain, and teaching against the grain can best be accomplished with allies” (p. 126). Schools that foster a collaborative culture are more likely to retain teachers because collegiality often contributes to the “psychic rewards” (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005) that originally drew them into the profession (Deal
& Peterson, 1999; Nieto, 2003). As Jan put it, it wasn’t necessarily about the approach, but “the people who were in it.”

Canter and Canter (1994) emphasized that high-performing teachers reach out to colleagues for technical support, technical challenge, emotional support, emotional challenge, active listening, and a shared sense of reality. Colleagues who are willing to technically and emotionally challenge one another prompt shared growth and impel one another to reach new understandings (Canter & Canter).

Through watching, talking with, and learning from Phil and Nancy, Jan was able to develop a classroom management style that she felt comfortable with. Her values of respect, limits, and fairness mirror the literature around fruitful classroom cultures (Graves, 2001; Fay & Funk, 1995; Mackenzie & Stanzione, 2010; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003; Wong & Wong; 2009). These practices allowed her to develop a responsive classroom culture in which students felt valued and cared for, and learning took precedence (Gay, 2000; Mitchie, 1999). By finding a style that matched her ideals, she was able to experience success. Success is an important factor in teacher retention (Johnson et al., 2005).

When fostering the energy to teach, Graves (2001) suggested that laughter is a key element. He explained that education issues “are too serious a matter not to laugh at our pretensions as we seek to do the near impossible” (p. 168). The witty banter that developed between Jan and her colleagues, as well as the humor she began to apply in the classroom, are the types of interactions that can keep teachers going (Nieto, 2003).
**Becoming what we teach.** Jan’s open mind, curiosity, and zeal for learning have propelled her classroom practices forward. The Colorado Writing Project and similar professional development opportunities allow teachers to dig deep into writing on a personal and professional level (Colorado Writing Project, 2009). Participants are able to experience the complex process of writing, practice crafting writing, engage in peer-to-peer sharing and feedback (Hindley, 1996). This process allows teachers to simultaneously grow personally as writers and understand the intricate nature of learning to write (Graves, 1994; Routman, 2005).

Similar to Jan, Routman (2005) argued that most of us do not understand that writing “enhances thinking and helps develop it” (p. 42) until we experience it ourselves. Teachers must become metacognitively aware of their own thinking processes in order to effectively communicate these processes to students (Reutzel & Cooter, 2008; Routman). Metacognitive awareness is transferable across subject matters and can foster a teacher’s capacity to scaffold instruction (Tompkins, 2006).

Deep, meaningful and relevant professional development experiences allow teachers to better understand themselves (Lipka & Brinhaupt, 1999; Palmer, 2007). Self-awareness cultivates understanding of one’s students (Hindley, 1996). Like Jan, my participation in an intensive teachers writer’s workshop proved to be a monumental experience in the progression of my pedagogical toolbox and identity as a writer.
Scene 3: Manning New Stations

Our team was going strong and we were hungry to evolve and try new ideas. That’s one of the things I love about teaching: there is so much to try and learn. You are never done learning!

That year we mainstreamed special education students, tried a new classroom configuration system, added enrichment activities to our repertoire, and started hosting student teachers. It was also the year that I found salvation in going to work, while my personal life felt like a shipwreck.

Nancy had retired in 1984, so we had a new Math teacher named Kate. We also added Sally to our team. Sally was the special education teacher. The year prior, she had serviced both sixth grade clusters and was really spread thin. Sally is a phenomenal special educator, teacher extraordinaire who is still going strong today. Like Phil, over the years she has become one of my most cherished friends. We taught together for 20 years.

Our team volunteered to take all of the special education students into our cluster if we could have Sally as a permanent team member. That worked great with the other sixth grade team, because they didn’t want the special education kids. So our team was Phil, Kate, Sally and me. We didn’t have a Science teacher so Phil and Kate had to pitch in and teach Science. I continued to teach language arts and Sally rotated amongst us. Sally really taught us a lot about how to be thoughtfully inclusive of students with disabilities. It was a great experience for our team of teachers and all of the students. Many of the strategies I use today can be attributed to Sally’s coaching.
We coined Phil the “idea man.” That year, he proposed that in order help the students feel at home, rather than the students rotating to our classrooms, they’d remain in fixed classrooms while the teachers traveled to them. We had a shared extra room where we put all of our teacher desks, did our planning, and stored our supplies. Well, it became really apparent toward the end of the school year that the teachers were the visitors and the kids were the homeowners! It impacted our ability to effectively manage the classrooms. We all struggled having a strong enough command over the classes. It certainly put a slant on things and didn’t work out as smoothly as we had hoped. But hey, at least we tried. Not every experiment goes smoothly!

That year was our first in a long history of hosting student teachers. We were new to this and it was a learning curve. One of our first student teachers wasn’t taking feedback well and she was really high strung, which is not a good temperament for middle school kids. One day she was trying to teach the class and it was disintegrating rapidly. One student, Sarah, was being particularly critical of the student teacher. Out of frustration the student teacher responded, “Well if you think you can teach this better than I can, go ahead and try.” As any typical middle school student would, Sarah gladly rose to the challenge. The student teacher came crying into the big planning room and said, “Okay this just isn’t working, I was in the middle of a lesson and you know things just started going badly and so I said to Sarah, you teach it.” I went to go check on the class, because of course the student teacher was no longer there, and the kids were all quietly listening to Sarah give the instructions. And I’m thinking, “Well, okay!”
During that year, our team was hungry to engage the kids beyond academics. We decided to capitalize on the three-week span between Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks. The kids were always restless during that time period. We started the tradition of involving the students in afternoon enrichment activities such as holiday crafts, art projects, and singing Christmas songs. There wasn’t a budget for these types of activities, so our team pooled our money together. The kids loved it! This tradition evolved and continued for many years to come. That’s back when you had the time. You wouldn’t be allowed to do this now with the pressures of standardized testing, but students and parents loved these experiences. Our team enjoyed using our artistic talents and seeing the kids in a different light.

That was a not very good time in my personal life because my husband and I were separated. That’s when I realized the value of really connecting with other people and a sense of community at school. Teaching really was my salvation during that time. It gave me a sense of purpose; it gave me a sense of belonging when everything else was out of whack. I felt successful at school, like I mattered. I felt loved. I was giving love back. Sally and Phil were my life preservers that year.

Scene 3 Discussion

Jan’s enthusiasm for teaching continued to flourish through team stability, friendship, and collaboration. The team was innovative in their experimentation with classroom configurations, special education mainstreaming, mentoring student teachers, and developing student enrichment opportunities. Simultaneously, the close relationships
between Jan, her colleagues, and students offered her a compassionate retreat from her personal struggles.

**Creative autonomy.** Jan’s team was empowered to experiment with their cluster framework. Through reconfiguration of the classrooms, the team learned that the visiting teacher approach did not work out as they had hoped. They needed a more balanced shared ownership of classroom culture. However, they were trusted to try something new and learned through the process (Farris-Berg et al., 1975; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009).

An autonomous and trusting school atmosphere allowed Jan and her team to develop enrichment opportunities for students during the three-week span between fall and winter breaks. Students happily engaged in singing and creating. As future scenes will reveal, this custom evolved into an important opportunity to know students better, celebrate culturally relevant traditions (Gay, 2000), engage in community service, and develop relationships with families. As Noddings (2003) put it, “Some things, even in schools, should be offered as gifts—no strings, no tests attached” (p. 37).

At this point in her narrative, Jan and her colleagues began a long tradition of mentoring student teachers. Field and Philpot (2000) proposed that mentoring student teachers can become an opportunity for lifelong learning and professional development for everyone involved. Supporting student teachers evolved into an integral part of Jan’s contributions to the field.

**Justice in special education.** Sadly, other teams at Jan’s school did not embrace students with disabilities. They rejoiced when Jan and her team proposed to host all of
them in their cluster. The team took responsibility for all special education students at their grade level for nearly 20 years.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was originally enacted in 1975 (Hulett, 2009; USDE, n.d.). One of the six elements of the law requires that education be provided to qualified students in the least restrictive environment (LRE). LRE provisions led to the mainstreaming movement, which integrated Special Education students into the general education population (Friend & Bursuck, 2002). This shift began to take root in the 1980’s, but wasn't fully legislated until 1997 modifications to IDEA (Duetsch-Smith & Tyler, 2010).

Although education policy has made extensive progress in protecting individuals with disabilities from the abuses, stigma and injustices that were the historic norm, there is much work to be done (Duetsch-Smith & Tyler, 2010; Hoover, Klinger, Baca, & Patton, 2008). To this day, as I supervise special education teachers serving in public schools, youth correction facilities, and youth treatment facilities, I continue to witness a perpetual segregation, stigmatization, and criminalization (Ayers et al., 2008) of youth with learning disabilities and behavioral disorders.

Jan’s team successfully pioneered mainstreaming before it was legally mandated. They offered numerous vulnerable youth opportunity to experience optimal academic success and social support. General education students benefited and developed compassion and empathy for disability (Duetsch-Smith & Tyler, 2010). Over our time together, Jan has recounted many success stories of special education students flourishing in her classroom and the ACMS team cluster.
**Teaching as love.** Jan contends that the giving and receiving of love during this era helped her weather a painful personal crisis. Nieto (2003) found that love for students was one of the salient themes that kept teachers going. Social theorist Paulo Friere (2000) argued that to be a liberating educator you must have faith in human beings and you need to love.

Love for students is a common theme in the literature (Lantieri, 2001; Nieto, 2003, 2005; Noddings, 2005, Palmer, 2007). However, Jan also credits the love students returned as an important lifeline. Additionally, she experienced a sense of solidarity and empathy with her colleagues, Phil and Sally. Solidarity combined with empathy, according to Nieto’s (2005), is synonymous with love. The mutual care, love, and support that became a part of Jan’s team culture—encompassing teachers and students alike—evolved into a sense of family that became a deeply rooted factor in Jan’s career thrival.

**Scene 4: Staying the Course**

*I felt like I was belonging. I felt like middle school was where I wanted to be. We went back to teacher classrooms that year. We didn’t want to be the visitors anymore! We wanted to be in charge. By this time we picked up a science teacher, so Nick joined our team.*

*And that’s the time when Phil, the idea man, pointed out the similarities in what we do. He suggested we combine forces. One of the first things he suggested was the idea of integrating science and math, the connection between the ecosystem and animal populations. So we turned that into a shared unit between all of our subject matters.*
That was the beginning of our co-planning. We weren’t co-teaching yet, but co-planning evolved into a vital part of our team culture.

We decided that we really loved the three-week Thanksgiving to Christmas break enrichment activities. So the next year, since a large percentage of our kids were Hispanic, Phil recreated La Posada\(^\text{15}\) in Social Studies. It paid homage to student culture and we tied it in with math, science, and language arts. And again we did holiday crafts, and Christmas carols. We would culminate the experience by inviting families to hear students sing the songs and act out La Posada. We did that for several years. It just worked really, really well.

That was the year we had Mukki; he was Native American. What a brilliant kid, he was truly a gifted child. I think because, he didn’t quite fit the mold, he tended to get himself in trouble. Not big trouble, but enough trouble that we always had to stay a step ahead of him, make sure that we could motivate and wrap him in. He was a sweet, sweet kid though.

He got into trouble toward the end of that school year and was supposed to spend the summer in some kind of a boot camp for troubled kids. But rather than going, he hung himself on an extension chord in his basement. And his sister found him. So that was his solution to his problem. He hung himself.

We went to his funeral, and it was horrible, just thinking, that he thought he had no alternative. It just breaks your heart. He was just 13. What did he know, really, in the greater scheme of things, what did he know? But that’s what he chose to do. It was

\(^{15}\)La Posada is a Latin American holiday tradition in which participants symbolically retrace the steps of the Virgin Mary and Joseph on the night that baby Jesus was born.
my first real glimpse into how troubling life can really be for kids that age. It was my first experience with anything like that. I felt, just powerless. And then of course, you start thinking, you know, “Were there warning signs? What is that thing I could have done to change his fate?”

**Scene 4 Discussion**

Jan’s team began to co-plan and experiment with curricular integration. Through team planning, the team began to weave together their subject specialties. In addition, they enhanced the enrichment opportunities offered to students. Despite the many triumphs of this year, the team faced a tragic adolescent suicide.

**Curricular innovation from the ground up.** It was 1984 when Jan’s team began to experiment with curricular integration. The subject of curricular integration has been under discussion in education circles since the progressive education movement in the 1930’s, yet it wasn’t until the 1990’s that curriculum integration, as we know it today, became fashionable (Bean, 1997; 2005).

Bean (1997 & 2005) connected curriculum integration to democratic education (Dewey, 1916) and emphasized its importance during the middle school years. Others emphasized the connections and transference of knowledge that integration can foster (Drake & Burns, 2004; Jacobs, 1989). In order for this approach to be fruitful, a team effort that includes shared planning and co-teaching is essential (Loepp, 1999).

Jan’s team intuitively began to experiment with this approach. Through their close-knit team, they naturally discovered the connections between their subject specialties. Their united values and beliefs around teaching and learning helped lead
them to sharing in the creative work of co-curricular design. Through an autonomous culture combined with strong collegiality, this team was empowered to engage in curricular innovations from the ground up (Farris-Berg et al., 1975; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). This team did not need government mandates, curriculum directors, administrators, consultants, or university professors to impose cutting-edge practices.

Prior to inter-subject collaboration, the team’s first attempt at shared planning was the enrichment period between fall and winter breaks. This was a low-risk means of trying out team planning. They recognized that students needed a creative outlet and opportunity to engage in activities beyond the typical school day subjects (Noddings, 2003). Thus, the team pooled resources and facilitated enrichment experiences. By the second year, they began to integrate the holiday theme with social studies. This led to a cultural celebration that honored the student population (Banks & Banks, 2008; Nieto, 1994). The holiday enrichment tradition was the catalyst for further curricular integration. As discussed previously, the autonomy and creative freedom that Jan’s team were allotted empowered their capacity to continuously push the educational envelope (Farris-Berg et al., 1975; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009).

**Teen suicide: Remembering Mukki.** The loss of Mukki had a profound impact on Jan. As we sat at her dining room table, over 20 years later, Jan tearfully recounted his suicide. At that moment, she was brought back to that time, seeing Mukki as clear as day in her mind’s eye, smiling as she recollected his inclination to keep the team on their toes. She deeply cared for him and appreciated his unique personality and needs. She saw past his challenging behaviors to his brilliance and gifts.
Suicide attempts sharply rise around sixth grade and continue to increase through the ninth grade; high school students report several suicide attempts tried for the first time as early as age nine (Mazza, 2006). According to a 2005 national survey, the top youth risk behaviors that lead to untimely death, including suicide, are: tobacco, alcohol and drug use, sexual behaviors leading to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, unhealthy dietary behaviors, and lack of physical activity (Shanklin, Brener, McManus, Kinchen, & Kann, 2007). According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2013), most teens do not spend a long time planning a suicide. Oftentimes, a suicide results from an event that produces feelings of failure or loss; getting into trouble, having an argument, breaking up with a partner, or receiving a bad grade on a test are common triggers (AAP).

Jan holds on to the memory of students lost along the way. In our time together, she shared the stories of the untimely deaths of six beloved students. She was equally as emotional and reflective as her recount of Mukki. She uncovered important life and teaching lessons that each child left behind. She honors their short lives through remembering the lessons they each bestowed upon her.

**Scene 5: New Captain on Board**

In 1985 we got a new principal. She spent her first year observing and assessing where people were. She spotted who she thought could be the leaders, the real changers, the movers and shakers. Her second year, she split our team up. She figured that if we were all really good together than maybe we could divide and conquer, lead other grade level clusters into a stronger direction.
I understood the idea, but hated it. Hated it. By then, our team was a well-oiled machine. Being split up was abysmal. I was with two other teachers and I don’t think we collaborated on anything, at anytime, for any reason. So I was back to my own island.

The morale around the school was low. Nobody liked being split up from the teams that they felt a sense of belonging to. I was exhausted by mid-afternoon. In retrospect it was probably a kind of a depression. I felt perpetually drained. I was dragging all of the time. It was a terrible time. I didn’t have any sense of joy. I think that joy is the master component. Ultimately you are not going to last without it. You have to enjoy what you are doing, who you’re with, how you’re getting ideas, to stay enthused.

Phil and Sally were transferred to an eighth grade cluster together. One of the things that they noticed was that kids we had as sixth graders were retaining the learning they had with us by the eighth grade. They would bring up all of these things that they remembered about sixth grade. They were transferring and connecting what we taught in sixth grade to the eighth grade curriculum.

Luckily, the divide and conquer approach only lasted one year. By the end of that year we proposed to reassemble our dream team and follow the kids, from sixth grade through eighth grade. We wanted to do a pilot program because at that point none of the other teachers were invested. At the end of three years, we would report back to the staff to explore school-wide implementation. We really felt that this could be in the best interest of the kids.
By the end of the pilot period, we were sold! We made a compelling enough argument that the entire school opted to go on board. So we pioneered looping with middle school students. This practice stayed intact at ACMS for over 20 years. It was just recently terminated due to pressures of SB-191.\(^{16}\)

The new captain really did turn out to be an excellent leader, excellent, excellent principal. She was with us for a long time. She would frequently visit our classrooms and leave little notes, complimenting what she observed. You know, just like kids need feedback, teachers need that too! She trusted her teachers. She gave our team the autonomy to make decisions and teach in a manner that we felt best suited the needs of our students.

The year we were split up was the year we lost Christy Vandussen. Christy was in seventh grade and she was really close to Marsha, one of the teachers in my non-collaborative cluster team. They frequently had lunch together. One day she said to my colleague, “I just think that, I’m not going to live very long. I can’t tell you why, but I kind of have that feeling.” Marsha tried to reassure her with, “Oh honey you’re 12 years old, you’ll be just fine.”

She was on a church retreat that summer and they had pulled over on the side of the highway to do something. A driver who had fallen asleep at the wheel hit them from

\(^{16}\) Senate Bill 191, known as the Colorado educator effectiveness act, is an annual teacher evaluation system that ties 50% of teachers rating to student achievement. One of the major indicators of student achievement is statewide summative assessments. According to some researchers, No Child Left Behind requirements and high stakes testing have made it hard to find teachers willing to take on the extra work of learning a second or third year of curriculum necessary for looping (Thompson, Franz, & Miller, 2009).
Christy was crushed between the seats. It was totally outside her control. The
notion struck me that, “Oh my goodness, these kids are speaking to us. They are speaking
to us and we need to really be able to listen.” I need to listen outside of what I teach. I
mean that is so minimal compared to what kids might need as a person, as a human
being.

Scene 5 Discussion

The break up of Jan’s team resulted in a sense of isolation and low morale.
Luckily, their new principal listened to staff concerns and supported the proposal to
reunite the following year, which renewed the team’s innovative nature. Along with the
struggles of being apart from her esteemed friends and colleagues, Jan mourned the
untimely death of another beloved student.

Breaking up is hard to do. Depression loomed when Jan’s team was broken
apart. She experienced warning signs of burn out, or what I refer to in chapter 1 as burn
in. Some common emotional signs include a growing cynicism, a negative outlook, a
loss of motivation, feelings of helplessness, feeling defeated, and a sense of failure and
self-doubt (Segal, 2011). Teachers who burn in suffer symptoms of burning out, but
rather than quitting, they choose to stay, existing in a state of disengagement from their
work, students, and original idealism that called them to teaching (Cornbleth, 2008;

Huberman (1989) found that at least a quarter of the 160 teachers who
participated in his study experienced a point during the 11th-19th years in which they
seriously reassessed their career choices, having self-doubts about their teaching
trajectory. Over half of the reasons given for self-doubt and career reassessment were institutional. Teachers described themselves as worn down by the mundane aspects of the profession, or thwarted by the social climate or quality of administration within a building.

**Reunited through innovation.** It is unlikely that Jan would still be teaching or be the thriving educator she is today had her team not been resurrected. The principal’s divide and conquer strategy did not work well. However, Phil and Sally realized that eighth graders were transferring learning from earlier years. This epiphany allowed for the team to convincingly propose rejoining forces for a looping pilot.

Looping, also known as multiyear instruction, was most likely originated by Rudolf Steiner in the early 1900’s (Moffett, 1994; Steiner, 1996). Steiner’s Waldorf schools were based on “whole child” education and teachers kept the same students from first through the eighth grades (Ullman, 2005). Proponents of looping contend that teachers, students, and families all benefit from increased time, strong relationships, and student support and engagement (Thompson, Franz, & Miller, 2009).

The pilot pioneered a looping tradition at ACMS that lasted for over 20 years. By 1985 the team had developed a tight bond. Their relationships, dedication to continued improvement, and a school culture that empowered teacher innovation and creativity empowered them to execute curricular integration, looping, and special education mainstreaming from the ground up.

**We need to listen: Remembering Christy.** Christy was lost in a tragic accident. At the young age of 12, she intuitively knew that her life was approaching its end. She
confided this premonition to her beloved teacher. Jan learned through this poignant loss how imperative it is for teachers to listen. To really listen requires teachers to view their role in education as much more encompassing than academics (Kessler, 2000; Noddings, 2005).

Noddings (2005) called for a re-evaluation of the purpose of education. Beckoning an ethic of care in which teachers and students alike care for one another, she explained that, “when I care, I really hear, see, or feel what the other tries to convey” (p. 16). Kessler (2000) emphasized connection, compassion, and character at school. She said that young people are “crying out to be seen and heard so that they, in turn, can take in the world through learning, loving, and serving” (p. 18). She found that students who felt meaningful connection through at least one relationship were less likely to engage in risky behaviors. Students who felt heard were more likely to “discover and contribute the gift they are meant to bring to the world” (p. 18). Christy’s death was a reminder that teaching is a human enterprise that requires authentic care and listening to students.

**Act 2, Part 1 Conclusion**

The purpose of this study is to uncover how Jan not only survived, but thrived as a career-long urban teacher. Jan’s first five years in the middle school were decisive to her teacher transformation. This transformation evolved into love of middle school students, love of cherished colleagues and team collaboration, and fueled her love of ceaseless learning. These passions are still apparent today and critical to her career thrival.
During this era, Jan discovered the art of a respectful student-centered middle school classroom culture. The tragic loss of two beloved students instilled how imperative it is that we compassionately listen to students. She learned just how complex and heart wrenching the lives of her students can be. She resolved that teaching is much more than conveying a subject. Rather, it’s an act of giving and receiving love and care. This epiphany set the foundation for her view today of teaching as alike to parenting. We will explore this subsequent insight in the following chapters.

Like her high school years, Jan continued to experience what I refer to in this study as creative autonomy. Phil, Sally, Jan, and other team members developed an intimate teaching community. Through their shared values, trust, solidarity, and mutual respect, the group engaged in innovative grass-roots practices including: mainstreaming of special education, curricular integration, and looping. They settled into a professional learning community that built off of individual and collective expertise and fostered continuous innovation, reflection, and implementation.

Jan experienced several agonizing events: an initial struggle with discipline, adapting to middle school culture, the untimely deaths of two students, and being severed from her valued team. However, the many positive experiences and relationships built along the way outweighed moments of despair, allowing Jan to sustain her spirit for teaching. As Jan’s story unfolds in the following chapters, much of the transformation she experienced during her first years at ACMS laid roots to nurture a flourishing urban teaching career.
Chapter Five: Middle Career to Retirement or “The Camelot Era”

“Now that I look back on my high school years I realize how much one teacher can affect a student, even if the teacher is completely unaware, so you were the biggest inspiration in my life” (Letter to Jan from former student ‘Darlene Olivas’, 2003).

This chapter explores the remaining 25 years of Jan’s service at Adams City Middle School (ACMS). Similar to the previous chapters, I unite a retelling of Jan’s narrative with relationships to the literature, my analyses of Jan’s career story, and scholarly considerations. The four scenes portrayed in this chapter convey Jan’s reflections on Act 2, Part 2 of her metaphorical comedic opera.

Act 2, Part 2: The ACS Pinafore on Board the ACMS Sister Ship (With Apologies to Gilbert from Sullivan) as told by Jan Sullivan

Prologue

Jan’s first five years at ACMS were the seeds that cultivated the legacy portrayed in this chapter. The passion and dedication that she built for middle school students, families, and her colleagues took root during her initial years at ACMS. Her optimistic disposition, unwavering love for students, and zeal for life-long learning nurtured resilience to teacher burn out or burn in during times of hardship. In her words, when teaching is hard:

You have to believe that there is something better. Because if there is not something better then you’re doomed to just live with the way things are and that’s not acceptable. It’s too depressing. And why would anybody want to be
that way? I would much rather be happy and joyful and hope for something better. Yes, because to me that [dwelling] takes too much, that drains your energy. I’ve been there. I know when that’s happened...and it was a horrible feeling. Why would I want to stay that way?

Nieto (2003) said, “Hope is the very essence of teaching” (p. 53). In her years working with teachers, Nieto found that although perpetually tested, hope was the single quality that all good teachers shared. She found that hope was revealed in teachers’ work in three significant ways: “optimism in the promise of public education and in their students; faith in their abilities as teachers; confidence in trusted colleagues and new teachers” (p. 53). Similar to Nieto’s findings, the following scenes portray how Jan’s resiliency fueled by eternal optimism grew a pedagogical garden that cultivated hope in the lives of thousands of vulnerable urban youth.

**Scene 6: New Destinations**

*It was 1986 and the dream team was reunited and I felt invigorated again! We all felt that way because nobody had a fun time the year prior. There was a restored sense of family, consistency, and continuity. This was the beginning of what I reminisce as the Camelot years. It was an idyllic era that spanned nearly 20 years of my career.*

*By looping with our students, we discovered new students would acclimate more quickly, like a new member of the family. The veteran students mentored new arrivals, and it was like helping a little brother or sister. It was a big school, so we were able to create a small community within a larger establishment.*
One of the biggest arguments against the looping approach was how a teacher and student who didn’t click would survive three years together. But really, any type of friction was minimal because there were three other teachers to balance out personalities. Plus we got to know students so well and on so many levels that we could uncover their endearing qualities. We learned to love each other! The prolonged time spent with them was incredible.

Parents would say, “Oh I have another child coming up. Are they going to be able to get into your cluster?” It became this extended family in education. That was probably one of the most profound changes that helped with the whole sense of community, sharing, nurturing, following, and learning. It was an exciting way to make a difference in kids’ lives. We brought them more than just an education, but an experience in collaboration, family, and making connections. We had great relationships with parents. It really worked.

We developed integrated themed units. We had noticed students would say things like, “Well this is Social Studies, why should we have to write in here?” Or, “This isn’t math, why are we adding in Language Arts?” They saw everything as fragmented. Our integrated units brought it together into a total experience. And I think it really produced well-rounded kids. They absolutely loved it. They just loved it. And so did we!

Attendance improved remarkably during that time period.

We had all of the special education students in our cluster and everyone was very accepting. In Social Studies we studied slavery, and then in my room we’d write slave plays. We’d open up our connected rooms to act out plays. We had a student who was
non-verbal and another in a wheelchair. And so the students would make up stories like, “Well you know Sammy here was hurt in a bailing accident so we have to push him around in this chair because he can’t walk.” Or “Billy had his tongue cut off because he sassed his master.” Students wrote their peers into the scripts. It was really a transformation in the movement towards mainstreaming. It was an incredible time. We had a team of teachers travel all the way from Guam to learn how our team collaborated and integrated special education into an inclusive environment.

Due to budget cuts, electives were eliminated that year. Our planning time was cut in half. So Phil and I co-taught choir. We both had music backgrounds; we were both singers, I played the piano. We continued our three weeks of enrichment between Thanksgiving and Christmas break. This evolved into an annual Christmas program with a full choir and a three-part harmony. It was awesome and the kids loved it! They would write out invitations and we hosted a cake and punch reception for parents. The parents loved it. They really appreciated that we took an extra interest in their child, that we were taking them forward. It was so much fun!

At this point I was invited onto curriculum writing teams, mostly at the district level. It was kind of like, once you got started and then proved a point, or sounded like you knew what you’re talking about, the powers that be wanted you there. I realized that was my chance to make a difference. If I could craft something toward an end that I felt was important or necessary then I needed to be able to do that. This was a new leadership endeavor for me that I have contributed to ever since.
Scene 6 Discussion

Jan’s team was reunited. This reunion proved fruitful in spawning what she reminisces as the “The Camelot Era” of her career. During this period the team realized the positive impact that looping had on all stakeholders: students, teachers, and families alike. Their earlier experimentations and innovations laid the groundwork for advancement in inclusive curricular integration, student engagement, and Jan’s district and state-level contributions to curriculum development.

The integrated looping family. A critical aspect of emotional intelligence is bonding, but schools often fail to satisfy this need (George & Lounsbury, 2000; Ullman, 2005). Jan reflects upon the looping experience as one that promoted a sense of family amongst students, teachers, and their caregivers. Similarly, Ullman asked, “Why should school be just a series of shipboard romances?” (para. 1). Through the practice of looping, integrated curriculum, and team teaching, Jan and her team were able to create a culture in which genuine long-term relationships were established. The familial sense resulted in meaningful bonds between all stakeholders. Short-term educational “shipboard romances” were replaced with lasting relationships on the ACMS Pinafore! These relationships were fundamental to nourishing Jan’s passion for teaching.

Teachers and researchers alike have found that the practice of looping develops relationships and creates support networks for youth to navigate the profoundly complex middle school years (Thompson, Franz, & Miller, 2009; Ullman, 2005). Long-term and meaningful relationships allow teachers and students to develop a shared investment in student achievement and growth (George & Lounsbury, 2000; Jackson & Davis, 2000;
National Middle School Association, 2003; Nichols & Nichols, 2002; Simel, 1998). Like Jan’s recount of how bonds with parents and students were cultivated, research on looping has been found to improve relationships and communication between teachers and families. Consequently, when students know that their parents and teachers are on the same page, they tend to work harder and perform better (Thompson et al.).

Situations in which a class has poor chemistry or a teacher and student do not relate well are common concerns around looping (Thompson et al., 2009). The teachers in Jan’s school shared a similar concern. However, research on looping has found this to be minimal (Ullman, 2005). As Jan recounted, the cluster team of teachers collaborated to minimize friction. Feelings of love, care, and shared quest were prevalent. The time and opportunities to appreciate students beyond the confines of typical academics, such as the enrichment activities offered between fall and winter breaks and Jan and Phil’s teaching of choir, contributed to strong bonds and mutual respect amongst all community members (Cistone & Shneyderman, 2004).

Skeptics question how new students fare after looping community “membership” is established (Thompson et al., 2009). Jan’s experience refutes this as an obstacle. Their team found that new students adapted quickly as veteran students took on the role of ambassadors, helping new students acclimate to the class culture. Similar to case study findings on looping, Jan’s team found that attendance improved and incidents of disruptive behavior decreased (George & Lounsbury, 2000).

**Teacher as implementer or teacher as practitioner?** By this point in her career, Jan had a solid 15 years of teaching experience that included the creative work of
curricular design. She and her high school colleagues developed detailed semester-long units that guided the classes they taught. The middle school team launched integrated units that allowed students to make connections between the various content areas. Her success in these endeavors led to her legacy as an innovative classroom-based curriculum developer and esteemed contributor to school, district, and state level curricula.

Dana and Yendol-Hoppy (2009) share a continuum of three positions that teachers hold in educational research: teacher as technician, teacher as story character, and teacher as storyteller. Principals often debate if teachers are best suited as curriculum implementers, synonymous to Dana and Yendol-Hoppy’s “teachers as technicians”, or instructional practitioners, comparable to “teacher as story teller”. It is not uncommon for teachers today to implement scripted curriculum that is considered “teacher proof” and “scientifically based” (Ansary, 2004; Curwin, 2012). This paradigm positions teachers as technicians who are asked to implement “with fidelity a curriculum designed by those outside of the classroom” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppy, p. 3).

Leading textbook publishing companies boast claims that use of their products will ensure students reach Common Core Standards and consequently perform well on standardized tests (Houghton Mifflin/Harcourt, 2013; Pearson Education, 2013). Yet, when teachers are mandated to scripted curriculum implementation, they often view their role as one reduced to test preparation (Curwin, 2013, Giroux, 2012, Strauss, 2013). The textbook publishing industry is a politically driven, multi-billion dollar business that is dictated by Texas and California adoptions (Ansary, 2004).
Jan and other teachers who thrive (Johnson et al., 2005; Stronge, 2007) identify as practitioners or in Dana and Yendol-Hoppy’s (2009) language, “story tellers”. These teachers play an important role as zealous knowledge generators. They highly invest in designing and constantly refining their curriculum (Pohlman, 2008; Stiggins, 2005). As Jan put it, “I’ve never done the same thing twice because every year there is something that I want to try that’s going to maybe be a little bit different or I can do better, or I think this is a better way to get the kids enthused about what they’re doing.” When teachers are valued as knowledge generators, they view curriculum as tailored to unique student needs, abilities, linguistic and cultural roots, and interests (Cummins, 2000; Herrera, 2010; Tomlinson, 2003; Wormeli, 2006). In addition, they see curriculum as ever evolving through a spiral of inquiry, formative data gathering (Pohlman, Stiggins), reflection, refinement, and consequent new inquiry (Dana & Yendol-Hoppy). These important elements cannot be provided through mass produced impersonal scripted curricula. Jan’s role as a knowledge generator, along with her zeal for continuous learning, has contributed to her career longevity and thrival.

Scene 7: Steady as She Goes

The Camelot era of my teaching career spanned from 1987 through 2004. It was an incredible time to make a difference in the lives of students. During this period, Phil, Sally, and I remained intact, steady at the helm. We continued to serve a cluster of students that we followed from sixth through eighth grades, nourishing a familial sense with students. Relationships with families continued to flourish to the point where
parent-teacher conferences were a collaborative partnership between youth, families, and our teaching team.

Co-planning and team teaching of integrated units of study became the norm. Service-learning became an integral part of our curriculum. We were backwards mapping our units along with developing cross-curricular formative assessments and rubrics, long before these practices were fashionable. Special education mainstreaming was refined. We formalized a partnership with the University of Colorado at Denver’s (UCD) urban teacher preparation program, hosting several student teachers every year.

We were forever pairing writing with science, writing with math, and writing with social studies. It made learning to write really authentic. Students absorbed how science, math, social studies and language integrate. Oftentimes I would just follow the content curriculum and plug it into language arts. It worked just great! When science was studying animals, the science teacher and I would pair up. The kids would choose an animal to report on. I taught them how to integrate what they were learning in science with writing to craft a creative opening paragraph. They had to show the animal in its predatory state. The kids produced the most impressive opening statements! I remember one, “The bald eagle soars high into the air alive and atop the glow of the moon.” The students absolutely outdid themselves! It was brilliant. So the science teacher could teach the content while I was teaching the writing aspect and then we could piece it together.

We did a whole curricular unit called “Too Much Trash” on environmental issues. We integrated it into every single subject area. It was a six-week experience that
the kids just loved. We had a Roman Toga festival that integrated social studies with a culminating poetry demonstration of learning. We studied slavery and then created slave plays. It was so much fun, engaging, and so authentic!

We did a lot of community service projects. We had particular days designated where we would split up into groups. Some of the kids went with an adult for a neighborhood cleanup, some worked at a food bank, and then another group built a playground at a nearby shelter. The students advocated to have playground materials donated and then we built this playground area. It was just beautiful.

At Christmas time we did a toy drive. I had the students write persuasive letters to the businesses around the area soliciting toy donations. I think what was so touching was that so many of our kids were in the same need, but they didn’t see that. They just didn’t see that. I will never forget there was this one young man, James. He could be the worse little thorn in your side. And yet, Channel 4 did a segment on our work with the Santa’s workshop and interviewed him. And here’s this little angelic James looking up into the camera, “We’re doing this because there are kids who don’t have very many things for Christmas and we want to make their Christmas nice too.” You just wanted to grab his little cheeks and pinch them and plant a little kiss! Those opportunities allowed us to see kids in a different light and that’s what made it work. We got to know them on so many different levels. I think that’s what made it easier to love them all. There is always something endearing to uncover, even in the most difficult kid. And there was little James’ angelic face!
It was at that point, that we had total inclusion of special education. Mainstreaming hadn’t been mandated yet when we started. Our cluster team had all the special education kids and they were all mainstreamed. Sally taught us so many strategies and accommodations to support IEP (Individualized Education Plan) goals. Many that we learned worked well for all students. An observer, and most of the students at the time, could not decipher the special education students from the general population.

The only class where some were pulled out for was reading, because we all taught a reading class. Sally took most of her caseload for reading, while some of her kids were with Phil and me. Phil and I always taught the lower reading groups because we thought the more experienced teachers should teach those classes. You’d be surprised how many veteran teachers will say, “Oh no, I have seniority, so I get to teach the higher kids.” To me, that attitude isn’t for the greater good. Struggling readers need the most experienced teachers to forge them ahead.

Phil and I had two rooms connected by a big heavy sliding wall. We would design our units together and then open up the walls to teach. We would have 60 kids, with Sally circulating around and a paraprofessional. Phil would deliver social studies instruction and I would do instruction in writing. It was perfect!

We had people coming in from other schools, other states, and even other countries to see what we were doing. Visitors wanted to know about special education inclusion. They wanted to know about looping with the kids. A lot of it was around curriculum; you know the whole idea of the co-curricular units was really starting to
come into play and we’d been doing it for a while. Phil and I were even hired to go out and talk to other schools across the state. In 1993 our team won the “Phi Delta Kappa Teacher Team of the Year Award.” We were honored at a reception and featured in the district newspaper.

These were all just natural things to do. I credit Phil as an incredible visionary, for getting us started. We weren’t without our frustrations though. I can’t even begin to recollect how many times our district would adopt a curriculum, try it for a year or two, throw it out, and start something new. It’s always been that way. I was still writing curriculum for the district when they started CSAP (Colorado Student Assessment Program). I was one of the teachers that worked setting benchmarks for the seventh grade state assessment.

That era really felt like that “one for all and all for one.” We were there for each other. It was to the point where we were fine-tuned to each other. Phil might come over and I could just see if he had a student with him, I could see by the look in his eyes and say, “Do you need so and so to just visit my room for a little bit?” and he’d say, “Could you do that?”

We knew what a kid was doing for another teacher. If somebody were giving me a hard time, I would let my team know. Then they’d go into Will’s science room and he’d say, “I understand that earlier this morning you were having some trouble in Mrs. Sullivan’s room, so have you taken care of that, are you going to be okay in here?” The kids knew, it was kind of like a strong parent team, you know, “Don’t ask Mom if Dad says no.” The kids knew that we were all on board; they couldn’t get away with
anything. Good teaching sometimes is good parenting as well. In terms of, “These are the standards that I set, these are the rules, under my roof, this is how it’s gonna be!”

What’s interesting is that new members to our teaching team really let Phil, Sally, and I be the parents of the team. They took to that; they were accepting of that too.

This was a period in which we were never stagnant, always evolving, always trying new ideas, and always refining. I truly loved my work! There were many students that captivated me over those years. I continue to keep in touch with them, and have been invited to sing and play the organ in a number of their weddings. My oldest daughter jokes that she can’t take me anywhere without running into former students! I am always moved, honored that they remember me, and fueled by these encounters.

I have always been open with sharing my life stories with my students. I think they need to know, “This is reality.” I can remember sitting down with my advisory group. I would say, “Let’s get to know each other. I’d like you to tell me something about you and you can ask me any questions about me.” And so, one of the first things was, “Are you married?” “No I’m not, I’m divorced.” They’d say, “Oh we’re sorry.” And I’d answer, “No, it’s okay, you know I’m at a good place with that now.” They wanted to know what happened and I told them. I am sure at least half of them are going through the same thing. So when kids are going through divorce, stuff like that, I’ve got that empathy for them.

Through the years, I have used my life experiences—even those that are particularly painful to relive—to identify, share my stories, and offer help. Those life experiences just add an important layer to what we are doing. As parents, and as
teachers, we want to protect the next generation from the hardships we experienced. We want to give kids a better life. I consider myself a survivor and want to instill this in our youth. Even when we can’t save children from the terrible things that can happen—poverty, abuse, neglect, divorce, loss of a loved one—people don't have to be victims; they can choose to be survivors. Our students suffer many kinds of ordeals in their young lives, but staying a victim doesn't have to be one of them. This is the future I want them to see.

One of my real success stories is Darlene Olivas. She is an example of why I teach. If you can make a difference for even one kid in their life then that's amazing. Darlene was one of the products of our Camelot years. We had her for three years, and she was incredible.

She had a horrible life. You wouldn't have known that, by looking at her. She was always well groomed, she was there every day, she participated, and she had her work done. She was my student teacher in resident! She could take charge of DOL (Daily Oral Language) and the kids responded to her like she was a teacher. She was impressive on so many counts.

I knew that things weren’t good at home, but she would never discuss it. And I could never see any marks on her, so I didn't think she was being beaten or anything. I just knew something was off. We’d talked with her mom often, but her mom didn’t seem as interested in her as I thought she should have been. You know, it’s like, “Do you understand just how incredible your daughter is?” I don’t think she did.
When she finished her three years with us, I wanted her to take something with her. I gave her this little plaque that had a shooting star that said, “Believe in yourself”. It was just this little plaque because I thought, “She needs to do that.” I gave it to her at continuation and I said, “You are really an incredible person, you have a future ahead of you that can be anything you want it to be. Don’t lose sight of that. No matter what happens, don’t lose sight of that.”

I received a letter from her a few years later. She had an assignment to write a letter to a memorable teacher. The school counselor, a former colleague, recognized that the letter was written to me, so she gave Darlene my address. I was so incredibly touched by her letter and still hold on to it today. It’s one of those feel goods that keeps you going.

Then, sometime after I received the letter, the Rocky Mountain News contacted me. They were doing an article on Darlene. She had won a full ride scholarship! She had mentioned me in an essay as her favorite teacher. She talked about the plaque I gave her as a source of inspiration over the years.

I learned through the article that it was a terrible home situation. Her mom was on drugs, her mom was often not home and she was out late at night with men. They witnessed their dad beating their mom, and her brother was in prison. The lowest day of her life was when social services came to get her two nieces because her sister was no longer a fit parent. Her life just kind of fell apart. And so, she dropped out of school for a while.
She eventually moved out, supported herself, finished high school and earned a scholarship. She’s now at NYU, working on her master’s degree to be a math teacher! The plaque was one of the things that kept her going. When I gave it to her, I had no sense of the magnitude of what she was going through. I just knew that I saw in her something special and I was afraid she didn't see the same thing.

Another memorable student was Katie Zynell. She was a tough little cookie. She came to us in the eighth grade. She was on probation and always wanted the other kids to know what a “bad girl” she was. I have held on to some of her writing because she was just brilliant. One piece she did is titled “The Singing Sofa”, inspired off of the show “America’s Got Talent.” It’s such a creatively done story that it could easily be a children’s book. She really had a gift for writing. She was really, really creative. And now she is in prison. I’ve hung onto her work and a card she gave me because I keep thinking there are the Katie Zynell’s in the world that still deserve whatever chance we can give them. Maybe at some point, she’ll get her life on track, somehow. This is the reality of their lives and if we can make a difference, then we do.

That era was when we developed the liaison with the UCD teaching program. We started getting more and more student teachers. It was great when we opened up the classrooms to teach 60 kids at one time. Along with Phil, Sally, a paraprofessional and me, we would usually have a couple of student teachers too.

It was very interesting with the student teachers though. There were student teachers that absolutely loved what we did, and wanted to be immersed. But there were others that stood on the perimeter and just kind of absently observed. My colleagues and
I felt like, “Don't waste our time”. You know, “If you really don't want to be in here, if you think this is not up your alley, go to the other cluster. I mean if that’s what you want, because this is where it’s at”. And it was hard, you know, this was hard stuff. But we would tell them all the time, “If you can teach here, you can teach anywhere”.

I had some student teachers that I am still close to today. Margot first arrived when we were doing a DOL lesson. My kids were superb. They could tell you what a relative clause was, they knew their stuff, because we drilled it, drilled, drilled, drilled and they knew their business. She came in; she was listening to them and one of the first things she said to me was “I don’t know if I can do this, they [the students] know more than me.” I reassured her, “No you stick with us and you’ll be good!” Well her second day in, she was still just observing and I got called out of the room for something. She was over on the side and the kids said, “Well aren’t you going to take over teaching?” And she said, “Uhm, well I’m not quite sure how you do this.” And the kids said, “Oh we can help you!” And indeed they did! They knew the routine so well that they got her up there. I was delayed for about 20 minutes and she was well in charge. She said later, “I had never been so terrified in my life!” ACMS hired her when she finished her student teaching. She was an amazing teacher! She is now a successful principal. I know she’s doing no less as a principal, but she was remarkable as a teacher.

Susan Ellsworth was about to be kicked out of the teaching program. She had been doing her student teaching in another district. They were so displeased with her they were about to cut her from the program. And so the UCD team came to me and said, “She’s language arts, would you be willing to take her on in a last ditch effort to see
if you think she’s got what it takes? Would you be willing to work with her?” And I said, “Absolutely.” I remember when she first came in, her lip was trembling, she was just so nervous. And I thought, “No, you can do this.” She was really timid, so the first thing I told her was, “The biggest thing is you have to own the room. You have to have a presence that fills this room.” She struggled with that, but boy we worked and worked and worked. She’s been teaching at ACMS now for over ten years. She’s taught language arts ever since. She teaches sixth graders there and her kids consistently score the highest in reading and writing tests.

It was really an incredible opportunity to nourish the next generation of teachers. There was such a wealth of things coming in. Being able to share those experiences was rewarding. Some are still teaching there now. They learned some really incredible things. Not just teaching, but about kids and communicating and relationships.

Scene 7 Discussion

The Camelot years were an epic time in Jan’s career. These two decades were joyous, innovative, and invigorating. The team was fervent in their professional development, leadership contributions, and determination to give students a well-rounded education. They continued to push the educational envelope. Their steadfast determination to realize authentic and effective special education mainstreaming was fruitful. A sense of family permeated throughout the cluster community. Students fueled Jan’s passion and kept her grounded in her drive for teaching. Along with the many youth that were a part of this era, student teachers became prominent members of the circle.
**Blazing innovative pedagogical trails.** Foundational to Jan’s success is a career in which her creativity and autonomy were embraced. Jan’s team of “knowledge generators” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009) was on top of educational innovations and always compelled to enrich their practices. Their shared hunger for learning, growing, and innovation was never satiated. As Steele (2009) put it, “inspired teachers are inspired learners. They make curiosity their constant companion. They wonder, inquire, read, listen, demand, hypothesize, challenge, and question—themselves and others” (p. 230).

Chapter four highlighted team innovations that encompassed a clustered team approach, curriculum integration (Bean, 1997; 2005; Jacobs, 1989; Lake, 2000), special education mainstreaming (Duetsch-Smith & Tyler, 2010), and a proposed looping pilot (George & Lounsbury, 2000; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003; Nichols & Nichols, 2002; Simel, 1998). During the Camelot era, the team added rubrics and other formative assessment practices (Marzano, et al., 2001; Stiggins, 2005) long before they became standard school practices of the 21st century. They became accustomed to team teaching (Anderson & Speck, 1998; Wentworth & Davis, 2002). Additionally, they further developed their earlier innovations and continued to prioritize cohesive relationships, community (Palmer, 2007), and an extended school family (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

**Curricular integration and special education.** Along with looping, the team integrated curriculum and engaged in team-teaching. These practices supported general education and special education students to form connections between skills and content (Beers, 2003; Jacobs, 2004; Stronge, 2007). Rather than experiencing school subjects as isolated fragments (Cunningham & Allington, 2010; Jacobs), unit integration allowed for
deep holistic learning opportunities (Alverman & Phelps, 2005; Moffett, 1994). Additionally, the practice of team teaching fostered shared investment in the education of all students, allowing special education students to fully prosper in the general education environment (Downing, 2005). Students with disabilities didn’t experience the common disjointed practice of being frequently pulled out of the general education classroom for their services (Stetson, 2013). Rather, services were thoughtfully imbedded in the community routine.

The team offered appropriate integrated and differentiated supports in the mainstream environment (Wormeli, 2006). Jan and Phil reminisced that students were so well integrated that most didn't know the difference between those categorized as special education or general education. When students were staffed out of special education services, nothing changed in terms of their routine. In fact, they expressed that they learned many effective strategies from Sally’s coaching, team collaboration, and their experiences with disability. These practices are now a natural part of their teaching repertoire for any student who benefits.

In discussing culturally relevant practices for African American students, Ladson-Billings (1995) pointed out that “instead of some ‘magic bullet’ or intricate formula and steps for instruction” teachers who were most successful used practices commonly known as “good teaching” (p. 95). However, she questioned why what is typically considered “good teaching” rarely occurred in schools populated by African American students (Ladson-Billings). Many advocates for advancement of disability rights have
pondered the same question when it comes to teaching practices in the special education arena (Beers, 2003; Pohlman, 2008; Stainback & Stainback, 1992).

**The extended education family.** Jan recalls feelings of family, consistency, and continuity during this period. Students, parents, and teachers experienced a solid sense of community. Sharing, nurturing, following, learning, collaboration, and connection permeated. The culture established stretched past common discussion of classroom community and relationship building (Marzano, et al., 2003; Wong & Wong; 2009) to one synonymous to a thriving family (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Community and relationships were important ingredients to what I will refer to in the remainder of this study as the *extended education family*. However, additional ingredients were necessary. The extended education family consisted of close-knit teacher relationships with a shared mission that propelled extensive collaboration and constant innovation. Additionally, the *extended education family* included teachers who viewed their relationships with students as similar to parenting. They were steadfast in their determination to provide students with social support and academic press (Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999).

Genuine love and care was developed between all community members. The *extended education family* concept was a leading factor in Jan’s thrival. This construct will be further discussed in the remainder of this study.

**Keeping students afloat.** The lives of high-poverty urban students, similar to Jan’s stories about Darlene and Katie, are complex, harsh, and frequently tragic. Poverty, immigration, gentrification, substance abuse, domestics abuse, and the criminalization of
youth are entirely too common (Dee, 2010; Giroux, 2012; Murray, 2010). Some urban youth come to school lacking proper sleep, nutrition, and the emotional bonding necessary for healthy development (Kozol, 1991). Many urban youth are raised by single parents that are most frequently mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Parents in poverty often struggle to financially, educationally and emotionally deliver for their children (Ayers et al., 2008; Kozol; 2005; Mitchie, 1999).

Throughout our time together, Jan’s motherly qualities have presented themselves as central to her teacher identity. A single mother herself, she views her role as equal parts facilitator of academic knowledge and that of a social and emotional support system. Similarly, in a large study of Chicago public schools, Lee et al. (1999) found that in order for urban youth to succeed in schools, they need concurrent social support from adults and to be pressed to achieve academically. Jan provided Darlene, Katie, and the thousands of other students she taught with both social support and academic press (Lee et al.).

When describing Jan and her team, Adams City newspaper columnist Pat Shipley along with Dr. Barbara Conroy, who nominated Jan and her team for the distinguished Phi Delta Kappa Award said:

These teachers treat students with dignity and respect. They are firm, fair and flexible, demonstrating a genuine understanding of the problems students often bring with them to the classroom. However, their empathy does not cause them to excuse their students from learning. Conroy says, “Rather, it causes them to develop strategies to support student learning in spite of difficulties and obstacles. That’s the real magic. (Shipley, 1993, p. 4)

Darlene was inclined to perform well academically, in spite of her tragic home life. Jan’s ability to nourish Darlene’s spirit was a type of social support that carried
Darlene through tragedy and inspired her triumph. Sadly, Katie’s life took a different turn, landing her in prison. However, in Jan’s care, she was pressed academically to realize her gift of writing. Jan holds onto Katie’s work as a reminder of her potential and the hope it represents. She sincerely believes troubled youth can realize a bright future, despite the many cards stacked against them.

Jan’s eternal optimism is a salient trait that has kept her thriving, despite the heartwrenching realities of many of her students. She relates her optimism to the idiom “hope springs eternal” (Pope, 1891). As Phil put it “our job is to look hopefully into a future a child can’t see, but we can see for them.” Jan’s determination to maintain optimism and hope has inspired struggling youth, like Darlene, to realize their unique gifts and gather the courage and fortitude to triumph in spite of profuse obstacles. In turn, Jan is fueled by the accounts of accomplishment and gratitude extended from former students.

**Nourishing deck hands: Training future captains of the teaching ship.** Most student teachers embraced the experiences and mentorship offered from Jan and her team. Jan’s stories, accompanied with letters from memorable student teachers, revealed her unwavering kindness, compassion, care, and honesty. Former mentees described her as a second mother. She believed in her student teachers and was steadfast in providing the individualized support and hands-on learning opportunities each needed.

Johnson’s (2004) research demonstrated that new teachers who worked with veteran teachers in a collaborative environment were far more likely to remain in the profession. Studies of effective mentors carry common attributes which include: commitment to the role of mentoring, empathy for beginning teachers, skilled at
providing instructional support, ability to navigate varied interpersonal contexts, models continuous learning, and communicates hope and optimism (Glenn, 2006; Rowley, 1999). Jan’s mentorship of new teachers cultivated novice captains of the teaching ship who continue to pay forward her legacy.

**Scene 8: Change is Inevitable**

In 2005, people started going in different directions. Phil became the UCD site coordinator for our school. We had taught side by side for over 20 years. I missed him terribly. We had different science and math teachers that came and went. Some were better than others. One was an alcoholic. That was a rough spot that really felt like Camelot had crashed! Sally and I were desperately trying to keep the ship together. But we were the only permanent members there. We were trying to coordinate everybody else.

We had this one science teacher, Leyla. She was really quite wonderful, but she only lasted a year. She said, “I just can’t do this. I go home every night and their [students] stories just break my heart.” Yes, they do you know, but the kids need us to see past their obstacles into a hopeful future. One of the last science teachers that we had, Barbara, is still there today. She started as a student teacher on another team then got the job with us. We wanted her because we knew that she was really good. She’s a wonderful science teacher. I remember midway through her first year with us she was just at her wits end. One time she had just lost it and had to leave the building. I walked outside with her and she said, “I just can’t do this, I just can’t do this, I just can’t do this.” I replied, “Yes you can, yes you can, you are a strong woman. These kids need us.
If not us, then who? Who’s going to do this? So buck up, yes you can!” She’s still going strong. I think we’ve all had moments like that. The idea is to have somebody to lean on; you know, somebody that can encourage you. It’s just like the kids. Other teachers become an extension of the kids. You have to hone your teaching group as well as your student group.

After a while you get the reputation of being able to handle the difficult kids, which is why our cluster always got them! I was teaching a group of 4 eighth graders who were on the brink of being expelled. This was the final attempt to finish giving them a middle school education. They weren’t allowed in regular school, so I had them after school from 3:00 until 6:00. I was willing to do that. My own kids were older by then and I didn’t have to be at home so much.

Joshua Dawson had been a former student. We had him as a sixth and seventh grader. His Dad had pulled him out by the time he was in eighth grade. Josh was in special education and really struggled with his behavior. All you had to do was meet with the Dad a couple of times and you understood why. Dad was totally disrespectful, foul words, foul language, you know, just not a very nice man at all. Josh was always getting into trouble and could make your life miserable. Trying to keep up with him and what he needed was hard work. Dad pulled him out of school. He wasn’t being as successful as we had hoped, but we felt like we were making some progress, we kept trying. Kept trying, kept trying, kept trying.

Well low and behold, as I’m teaching this class of “afterschool outlaws” through the back walks this tall grown man, with red hair. And I said, “Can I help you?” He
was too young to be a parent of one of the students. He replied, “Do you remember me?” I said, “You’re going to have to help me out because you’re grown up now!” He answered, “Well I’m Joshua Dawson.” I thought, “Oh my gosh!” I went to give him a great big hug and the kids were looking like, “Who’s this dude?” I gave him a hug. You know, it’s just that, there’s that mentality that you still attach to “that was little Josh”, even if he’s a head taller than I am!

We started talking and he got my students’ attention right away. He told me, “I’m here in Commerce City because I came to visit my little son. I just got out of prison.” Of course the kids are going “huh” and I’m thinking, “Okay, listen up to this kids!” So, Josh continued, “I just got out of prison and I wanted you to know that while I was in prison I really thought a lot about my education and everything. While I was in prison I studied and earned my GED. I also helped three other guys study and get theirs. While I was there, I had a lot of time to think. I really came here today because I just wanted to let you and Mr. Sorensen know how much you guys really meant to me. You guys worked so hard, so hard trying to make me mind and help me learn and I just want to thank you. I know that I could be a real pill sometimes, and so I just wanted you to know that I thank you for that.” I told him, “That just means the world.” He said, “You know, I’ve really tried hard to get my head on straight. I’m ready to get a job and move on with my life. I’d like to do something good.” Well the kids were just enthralled with his message. I thought, “Perfect timing!”

Sadly, three months later he was killed in a police shoot out. He had stolen a car, tried to hide out in somebody’s garage, and got killed in the gun exchange. Broke my
heart. Broke my heart. I mean to see this big man; something had to have clicked with him, somewhere along the way. I think at least knowing that while he was here he did some good for himself. He did some good for other people. And it made sense to him. He learned something. So you know, I still teach today for the Joshua Dawson’s of the world.

Alex Smith was another young man who was really very special. His family had been with us for quite a while. Phil had actually known his older brother Chris. The youngest brother Ted was very disabled. He had choked on a tortilla chip when he was 18 months old and was declared brain dead, but kept alive on a respirator. We supported the younger brother too. One of our paraprofessionals tended to his sensory stimulation and other physical needs. They were a wonderful family. His mom was just so strong. Ted wasn’t expected to live, but he managed to live until he was 19.

We had Alex, the middle son, during the Camelot years. But, in 2005 he was killed in a construction accident. The family just lost everybody. Their older son, Chris, was diagnosed with AIDS. I don’t know how one family can suffer so much. Alex left behind a young boy. The birth mother didn’t want him and so Alex’s mother took him.

When I found out about his death I went to the funeral. His Dad was a Hell’s Angel and the church was filled with these motorcycle bike riders in jackets, tattoos, skulls and crossbones. That was Alex’s life. They did a slide show with his pictures from middle school because we had taken a lot of pictures along the way. And it was just so sweet to see his little face.
I think what really impacted me was when we were going through the receiving line. I had never met his dad. His mom was always the one to engage with the school. I introduced myself to his dad and said, “You know I just wanted to tell you how very sorry I am. Alex was always such a special young man to me. He was such a special young man and I just wanted to pay my respects to him.” And his dad said, “Wait a minute, who are you again?” I replied, “I was his middle school teacher.” He exclaimed, “Middle school teacher? That was a really long time ago.” I said, “I know but he was a really special boy.” And, you could almost just see him stand up a little straighter.

You want to know that your kids were loved. I think it’s important that parents know that it is for that greater good. It’s more than about just the teaching, the lessons, and the grades. It’s the relationships that we build along the way. We lose kids along the way. Urban kids, their lives are hard. I know they’re hard.

Jenny Brown was another student who helped me realize the importance of knowing kids on a personal level. You have no idea what kinds of things they might be dealing with on their own. Even mental illnesses can start to surface at that young age. Jenny was a really sweet girl. Her mom had actually been a student of mine at the high school. Her mom died; she had an asthma attack and didn’t survive. So Jenny lost her mom when she was in the third grade. I think that she really felt that because I had her mom, she called me mom, and was really attached to me. She made a mixed CD for me one time with some of my favorite music. I still have it. She had signed it, “With love to my other mom.” I really embraced her because she was an important girl.
Somewhere along the line, things started shifting. When she was in eighth grade, she told us she was pregnant. As a professional team we were trying to work through that and trying to find out if her dad knew. She told us her dad knew of her pregnancy, but something just wasn’t quite ringing true. We couldn’t quite figure it out. I was elected to call home and talk with dad, offer our support. When I called he didn’t know anything about the pregnancy. But what struck me was that he was really flat on the phone. He didn’t seem the least bit agitated and replied, “Not a problem, I’ll deal with it.” And it just seemed odd. The social worker tried talking with Jenny, but dad really didn’t want any of that. Everything just needed to be kept “hush, hush”. Bottom line, we learned, she wasn’t really pregnant. So I don’t know if she just needed attention, was trying to call out for something else. But she just really changed after that. Maybe she had felt that we had broken her trust. By her ninth grade year she committed suicide. Shot herself in the head with her dad’s gun.

The middle school years are so important for so many reasons. It’s such a vulnerable time. These are life changing years, just life changing. And the kids need somebody to help them navigate those waters of life. Not just book knowledge, but life.

Scene 8 Discussion

Despite the end of the “Camelot Era”, Jan continued to teach. At this point in her narrative, she had over 30 years’ experience. She compassionately supported new teachers as they came to terms with the tragic realities of their students. Her optimistic outlook helped her persist and intensified her determination despite the painful loss of three former beloved students.
Navigating murky waters with novice teachers. Along with mentorship of student teachers, Jan was also a valued support to newly hired team members. She was able to share the wisdom that grew from her experiences to help new teachers see past challenging moments and ground themselves in a greater purpose for teaching. Her natural mothering qualities, combined with her masterful teaching skills, proved fruitful in inspiring the next generation of teachers.

Jan has an ability to relate to others in a very warm, kind, and compassionate manner. This disposition is universal to youth, parents, colleagues, and administrators alike. The same loving nature that she bestowed upon me in our research partnership permeated the interactions I observed with students and colleagues. During my time in her home, I witnessed these same mannerisms with her grown children and grandchild. Her view of teaching as an extension to parenting permeates her teaching identity and is upheld with integrity (Palmer, 2007). Jan’s knowledge and disposition has helped shape the career survival and thriving of novice colleagues.

Experts in various disciplines and contexts of education maintain that there are developmentally appropriate practices that are distinctive to each discipline (Ayers, 1989; Cummins, 2000; Gay, 2000; Downing, 2005; Routman, 2005, Wood-Ray, 2003). However, there are also qualities that are common to all teaching. Infants, young children, adolescents, adults, the elderly, the culturally linguistically diverse (CLD) populations, those with disabilities, and graduate students alike appreciate teachers who are authentically caring, warm, treat them with respect, uncover their unique potential,
and press their learning forward (Ayers, 2001; Kessler; 2002; Lee et al., 1999; Palmer, 2007). Good teaching is universal.

**When students fall overboard: A tribute to Josh, Alex and Jenny.** Josh experienced a troubled childhood and struggled academically and behaviorally in school. Nevertheless, Jan and her team were persistent in giving him the support and kindness to propel him forward. Although Josh’s involvement in criminal activity did not cease and led to his untimely death, Jan and Phil’s persistence and kindness were inspiring. They influenced his determination to earn a GED and help others in prison achieve the same goal.

“The loss of a child is the most devastating experience a parent can face and missing the child never goes away. A piece of yourself is lost and your future is forever changed” (Wiess, n.d., para. 1). Alex’s parents lost all three of their children. Although he passed away many years after his time in Jan’s classroom, she was pained by the tragic loss and was compelled to let Alex’s father know that he was loved and never forgotten.

Signs of mental illness in middle school are often difficult to distinguish from the typical “ups and downs” of adolescent development (Mazza, 2006). Although Jenny’s life ended tragically and too soon, Jan’s mothering nature nurtured a meaningful connection. Jan’s availability to Jenny beyond academics offered her love, compassion, and hope during the vulnerable middle school years.

In this era of standardization and high-stakes accountability it can often feel that schools exist for the mere purpose of proving worth on tests (Johnson et al., 2012; Nieto
& Bode, 2008; Ronfeldt, et al., 2011). Conway (2013) explained, “My sense is that we educators often find ourselves so knee-deep in recommendations and mandates, plans and proposals, rubrics and benchmarks that the connection between teaching and human metamorphosis is easy to overlook, take for granted, and depreciate” (p. 8-9). Jan and her team embraced rubrics, benchmarks, assessment, and many other “best practices” of teaching. Simultaneously, these stories of tragic loss remind us that teaching goes beyond grades and lesson plans. Phil and Jan contend that good teaching is essentially “love between human beings”. Phil shared that in the bible, the word love is often “agave”, meaning to “give.” The team furnished innovative curriculum and academic press (Lee et al., 1999), but they also gave of themselves through acts of persistence, care, compassion, hope, and unwavering love (Conway, Kessler, 2000; Nieto, 2003; 2005; Noddings; 2005; Palmer, 2007). The giving and receiving of love kept Jan going in times of harrowing loss.

**Scene 9: The Final Crew**

*Our final crew consisted of two first year teachers and me. In addition, a brand new teacher from another cluster attached to our group, so I took on her mentorship as well. Phil was their UCD site coordinator and he said, “Okay this is sort of an arrogant group of people, and they think they know their stuff.” Which they did, but knowing your stuff isn’t everything you need to know! They found that out really quickly. Especially with the behavior issues, of which there are many. So the year before my retirement, I mentored a team of first year teachers. It was that idea that somebody’s got to show our new crew the way.*
I always said to myself that I would stop teaching before I came to the point where I was that typical grumpy old teacher. I had had knee scopes and braces along the way. But my knees were so deteriorated that it was time to get them replaced. I was so tired and in such excruciating pain that I felt like I needed to retire. The pain clouded everything. Even Phil pointed out to me, “You’re getting kind of grumpy.” I could hardly move it was so bad. I had a perpetual frozen bag of peas in the workroom fridge that I’d slap on my knees for some relief. When my doctor examined the x-rays he said, “I don’t even know how you’re still walking.” I retorted, “Well barely.”

I spent the year perched on a stool and my kids were so good because we had established a strong routine. Bless them! Whenever we’d have a fire drill, one of them would say, “Okay, I’ve got your stool” and another, “I’ve got the cards” and you know they would take care of me.

Scene 9 Discussion

Jan recognized when her teaching spirit began to wane. Excruciating pain clouded her optimistic disposition. She garnered strength to mentor a new team of teachers before her retirement from the ACMS Pinafore.

Generation Y joins the crew. Generation Y (Dorsey, 2009), also coined the “me first” generation (Lipkin & Perrymore, 2009), the “millennials” (Rainer & Rainer, 2001), and the “trophy kids” (Alsop, 2004) make up the newest captains of the teacher ship. Lipkin and Perrymore depict this generation, born between 1980 and 2000, as “multitalented, over stimulated, socially aware, demanding, and resourceful” (p. 16).
Like Jan and Phil, it is not uncommon for Baby Boomers and Generation X managers to perceive the millennials as arrogant and entitled (Lipkin & Perrymore).

Historical forces of globalization and technology have been particularly influential on Generation Y. The “flattening of the world” (Friedman, 2005) and immediacy of technology has cultivated a culture in which the “short term is key to relevance” (Tulgen, 2009). Tulgen suggests that the “longer you sustain the intensity and support, the more value you will get out of your Gen Y employees” (p. 46). This workforce tends to value meaningful work and thrives in settings that keep them engaged and constantly growing (Dorsey, 2009; Tulgen). Although an initial generational clash is natural (Lipkin & Perrymore, 2009), Jan’s caring disposition, along with her skilled mentorship, have proved invaluable in molding the next generation of teachers.

**Giving and receiving love in the extended education family.** Jan concedes that she thrives on being needed. Reflecting on her relationships with students she explained, “I need them and they need me. It works.” She went on to say, “that’s why I really like middle school kids; they want to be loved and they will give you love back, just as freely, in their own little ways!” During her final year at ACMS, she experienced agonizing physical pain. The students saw to it to take care of her, reciprocating the love she had poured into them over the years.

**Act 2, Part 2 Conclusion**

The two decades of teaching recounted in this chapter revealed that unceasing creative autonomy nourished Jan’s success as a teacher and accordingly her spirit. During this era she flourished into a respected teacher-leader who provided consulting to
other educators, mentoring to new teachers, and developed district and state-level curricula. Most notably, as Jan put it “It was an exciting time to make a difference in kids’ lives.”

Along with her technical contributions to education innovation, the construct of the extended education family came to full fruition during this era. Lasting and authentic bonds were cultivated between teachers, students, parents, and student teachers. Jan and her team fulfilled a teaching dynamic that nurtured rigorous academics, but was also an act of love. Their love of students inspired many troubled youth to break out of the societal molds they were born into, realizing a promising future. Their love of novice teachers inspired many to thrive, in spite of the hurdles that permeate the profession. Jan’s sense of optimism instilled hope in students and novice teachers alike. All of these factors contributed to Jan’s sustained spirit and career thrival.

Humberman (1989) deduced that the teachers in his study who had been heavily involved in school-or district-wide projects earlier in their careers were less satisfied in their later teaching years. Substantial involvement in school-wide innovation was a fairly strong predictor of disenchantment after 20-25 years of teaching. Jan’s narrative diverges from these findings. Simultaneously she remained focused on her classroom and students, while also making a difference as a school, district, and state level teacher-leader and “knowledge generator” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppy, 2009). Her engagement beyond her classroom helped nourish her spirit and imparted novel ideas to bring back to her classroom. Although she retired from the profession at the end of this Act, the following chapter will reveal an unforeseen rekindling of Jan’s career. The factors that
supported her longevity in the Adams City School district beckoned an unanticipated voyage in the Denver Public Schools.
Chapter Six: A Second Wind or What Retirement?

“I just want to say thank you for understanding me when I’m not at my best…I’ve never had another teacher like you. You’re funny in class and serious and I don’t know why other teachers can’t crack jokes once in a while. Thank you for doing that. I honestly think if it wasn’t for your little jokes I wouldn’t make it through the day. Your class is the only class I like” (Thank you letter from reading intervention student, 2013).

This is the final chapter retelling Jan’s career narrative. Act 3 will convey her post-retirement from Adams City Schools to her present teaching position at Skinner Middle School in Denver. I continue to combine a retelling of Jan’s narrative with relationships to the literature, my analyses of Jan’s career story, and scholarly considerations.

Act 3: The SS Skinner as told by Jan Sullivan

Prologue

I was dry-docked for a year, awaiting repairs. I figured I’d be laid up for a while after my knee replacement, but it really went better than I had anticipated. I was helping raise my granddaughter. She and my son live with me. Hannah was in a half-day preschool. So I could take her to school in the morning and then pick her up and she had grandma time. That’s what my grandma did for me. I am my grandma!

Aside from caring for Hannah, I’m an avid reader and don’t have time during the school year. I thought retirement would entail enjoying a good book every other day. But after recovering from knee surgery, I felt like my old self and was itching to teach.
Scene 1: Visitor on Deck

Since I was retired, I had let my teaching license lapse. I was considering renewing it, maybe substitute teaching, when my dear friend Sally called and asked, “How do you feel about doing home bound tutoring?” She explained that there was a student coming from California, an eighth grader who was coming out of the penal system. She needed to have a transition before re-entry into mainstream middle school. I said, “I’ll do it!” I could make my own schedule. I could still take care of Hannah but also reconnect with teaching.

I tutored Cadence for three months. She was incarcerated for stealing a car and running away from home. When I found out her mom didn’t have a car and they had to walk a mile to the bus stop, I offered to pick her up and we would drive to the library for our lessons. I learned so many things about Cadence as we were in the car. And these are the things you don’t learn in the classroom. One time little Hannah had to come with us. We had baked cookies the night prior and she proudly presented one to Cadence. You would have thought my granddaughter had handed her gold! So here’s this little hardened criminal girl, but I was struck by her innocence. I quickly learned that she was really just a little kid. She started opening up to me. And I thought, “This is just like old times. This is a kid who needs another adult to talk to”.

Cadence would tell me some of the ways that she would get into trouble. I’d say, “Well let’s think about that, you know, let’s back track it and think. Now you were here doing this. What’s another choice that you think you could have made, that maybe
wouldn't have resulted in that?” I spent a lot of my time just talking with her about life and then connecting those ideas to her lessons. And she was very bright, very bright.

Right when she was ready to transition back into mainstream middle school, her mom decided to uproot and they moved to California. I was really sad to see Cadence go as she had made so much progress. She gave me a cell phone number so we could stay in touch, but when I called it, the number was disconnected. I think about her a lot and am grateful to Cadence for helping me realize that my heart was still with teaching.

That next fall, Phil hired me back at Adams City Middle School as a consultant. He was the newly appointed principal. I worked with teachers and students trying to build their CSAP skills. Over the few years prior to retirement, I had some extraordinary results teaching kids poetry analysis. The results were spilling over into our CSAP scores and so he wanted me to try to replicate that. Most people don’t really like to teach poetry. I don’t really like to either, but I love the analysis of it. It’s the quest to figure out what people are saying. And it’s really awesome sometimes how that can come about and gets kids to think. That’s what we want to promote, the thinking skills. So I went back there and worked from November to the end of the year. After CSAP was done, Phil had me working on curriculum. He was trying to re-visit the idea of co-teaching in a manner that content areas dictated the scope of things and then English and Math teachers would add in the skills.

During that period, long-time acquaintance Jeff Walton had adopted a young boy and hired me as his summer writing tutor. I just loved that boy. His hard past and resulting academic needs really helped solidify for me that I wasn’t done teaching. If I
could still make a difference, then I had better do that. Jeff was working at Skinner and contacted me three days before the start of the school year urging me to consider an open teaching position. So, next thing you know, I was interviewing to teach in Denver!

Scene 1 Discussion

Jan’s period of dry-dock revealed that teaching is so ingrained in her identity that a lasting retirement wasn’t optional. Recovery from physical pain allowed her a new lease on life and through tutoring she recognized that her teaching spirit was still aflame. ACMS was also not ready to let Jan go, which allowed her to continue her legacy as a teacher-leader and ease back into the profession.

The reignited teaching fire. Jan credits Cadence for helping her see that she wasn’t ready to throw in the teaching towel. Their short time together reiterated her belief that social, emotional, and academic supports are necessary to propel troubled youth toward positive outcomes (Lee et al., 1999). Jan’s ability to see past Cadence’s rough exterior into her innocence and capabilities encouraged academic and behavioral progress. Simultaneously, Cadence helped Jan realize her teaching gifts were still alive. If she could continue to make a positive difference, she needed to heed the call beckoning her back.

Palmer (1993, 2004, 2007) imparted that good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. In his words: “Identity lies in the intersection of the diverse forces that make up my life, and integrity lies in relating to those forces in ways that bring me wholeness and life rather than fragmentation and death” (p. 14). Teaching takes
heart (Ayers, 2001; Nieto, 2003; Palmer, 2007). A teacher’s heart is nourished when she strives for an “undivided self” in which:

Every major thread of one’s life experience is honored, creating a weave of such coherence and strength that it can hold students and subject as well as self. Such a self, inwardly integrated, is able to make the outward connections on which good teaching depends. (Palmer, 2007, p. 16)

Jan realized through tutoring that her selfhood hinges on teaching. Teaching is core to her identity and living a life of integrity (Palmer, 2007). She isn’t complete without teaching.

Her time tutoring and consulting at ACMS reignited her passion and allowed her to share her gifts with students and teachers alike. Along with her fervor to build authentic relationships with students, she continued her legacy as a teacher-leader or “knowledge generator” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppy, 2009). She shared her expertise in poetry analysis, integrated curriculum and team teaching.

**Ironic comes full circle.** The summer after her college graduation in 1972, Jan was hired for her first teaching job only three days prior to the start of school. Fatefully, in 2008 after her retirement from a career of teaching for 35 years, Jan was again hired three days prior to the first day.

Late employment can be as prevalent as one in five new teachers hired after the start of the school year in high-poverty urban districts (Engel, 2012; Samuels, 2001). The common conundrum of late hiring in urban districts has serious effects on student outcomes (Engel; Samuels) and teacher turnover (Jones, Maier & Grogan, 2011). In my recent work as director of an alternative teacher licensure agency, high portions of our
candidates were late-hires. Serving around 100 new teachers per school year, this equated to thousands of vulnerable students left in the hands of novice late hires.

Luckily for Denver Public Schools, Jan’s extensive experience and love of teaching defied the common late hire conundrum. As our next scenes will convey, Jan’s arrival at Skinner Middle School enabled her to resume her contributions as an inspiring middle school teacher and member of a flourishing professional learning community. Jan listened to her inner-teacher (Palmer, 2007) calling her to dust off her captain’s hat and get back on board the teaching ship. She has been a vital member of the SS Skinner ever since.

**Scene 2: Back on Board**

*It didn’t take much to convince me that my heart was still with teaching, especially at-risk middle school kids. I basically spent my entire life in Adams City, so I was apprehensive to step out of my comfort zone. Yet the students at Skinner had a lot in common with those I served at ACMS: the majority were of Latino descent, a number of English Language Learners, many living in poverty and struggling academically. Still, I was a bit nervous and decided to ease back in through a half time position teaching reading and language Intervention.*

*But by September, due to increased enrollment and need for increased reading intervention, my principal convinced me to take on two more afternoon classes. I found myself back on board, teaching full time. The only problem was that the district wouldn’t authorize another half time position. I accepted substitute pay for my afternoons of teaching reading.*
There were a number of students lagging behind. The school had hired a Teach for America candidate for reading intervention. She could not control a classroom to save her life. I tried to help; she asked me for my advice. So I told her what I thought would help, but she wouldn’t employ it. Kids were sleeping during her class, having conversations with each other, and mouthing off. It was like something in a movie. So I was assigned some of her overflowing caseload. I was an English teacher by trade, so figuring out how to accelerate struggling readers was a new learning opportunity for me. I quickly figured out that one of my eighth graders couldn’t read at all. This made me realize how urgent it was that I figure out an intervention program that gave students a fighting chance in high school. It was a serious reading emergency.

At my principal’s request and excited to be of service, I offered some of my skill sets at our first school in-service. Over the years, I had really learned how to model writing with students. My in-service was politely received, but not embraced. I was disappointed, but not wanting to be the new hand that thinks she knows everything, I resolved to sit back and do what I could in my classroom.

I was fortunate to team up with our literacy coach Mary. She was also assigned as my mentor. Even though I had taught for 35 years, I was new to the district and embraced her guidance and support. She is just wonderful! She is now our principal and I just love her. Our principal at the time sent the two of us to a Response to Intervention (RTI) training and tasked us to map out a school-wide Reading Intervention system. The school was working with some materials that they were just kind of using haphazardly. But Mary and our principal supported my experimentation outside of the
I love reading and I've always been fascinated with history. I just love history. It's just so rich with things we don't know about. My reading intervention has evolved to include history that I think will hook the kids. I watch for things now. One of the problems with poor readers is that they aren't actively engaged with what they read. They just sound out the words. And so I really wanted to hit home with that “You need to think about what you know as you read and then always be perpetuating questions in your brain, about what you want to find out, as you continue to read”.

I'd pull a series of articles, YouTube videos, and other resources about something fascinating. One time we explored the Boston Molasses Disaster. I posed a question like “Can you drown in molasses?” Well the first thing I discovered was that students didn’t know what molasses was. And I said, “Well I’m not going to tell you, we’re going to see if we can use context clues to figure it out”. I remember one of my most challenging classes and one of my most challenging boys came back the next day and said “Miss, I know what molasses is!” I responded, “Well shhhhh, you can’t tell anybody. How do you know?” and he said, “Cause I went home and looked it up online and I found four really good articles about it.” I said, “You did, well then you know the story?” and he said, “Yeah, it’s a really good one!” I just wanted to cry right then and there, because he was excited enough to research that on his own. I mean he’s like bad
boy number one. And yet, that caught his attention. He was totally hooked. But that’s how reading intervention has evolved. They’re learning, and they’re asking questions.

I am not on a set curriculum. That’s what I appreciate about I am able to do. My principal is wonderful at letting me take the curriculum where I think it would be best suited for the kids. I have an awful lot of fun doing that!

I had torn my rotator cuff when school started, but couldn’t take a pause to have it repaired. That winter break I finally had surgery and forged through the next few months in a sling. Then, that summer, I had my second knee replacement. I am now pain free due to my many bionic body parts and thankful to not have discomfort get in the way of my love for teaching.

Scene 2 Discussion

Jan’s plan to merge gently back into teaching was short lived. Her zeal for lifelong learning was fueled through a new challenge to figure out reading intervention. The creative autonomy she established in Adams City followed her to Skinner. She suffered the physical pain of a torn rotator cuff and a second knee replacement, but her rekindled passion for teaching helped her forge through.

RTI: Triage in the classroom. Meeting the needs of struggling middle school readers presented a new professional challenge that Jan embraced with a sense of urgency. Response to Intervention (RTI) was a 2004 addition to national special education law (IDEA) that replaced I.Q. testing with more comprehensive forms of data for disability classification (Wedi, 2005). This process is now common practice for identification and selection of appropriate interventions for any student struggling
academically or behaviorally (National Center on Response To Intervention, 2013). RTI involves real-time screening, multi-level tiers of intervention, continuous progress monitoring and use of both formative and summative data to inform instructional decision-making (NCRTI).

Education reformers (Emigholz, 2010; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2102; Zunbaack, 2011) critique the slow-pace rate of progress, calling for a sense of urgency in systematic changes in public schools. Although implementation of RTI law took time, this model promotes a sense of necessity to capture learning gaps for special education, general education, and culturally linguistically diverse (CLD) students and intervene promptly (NCRTI, 2013). In my mentorship of special educators, I would often equate their work to that of an emergency room triage team. The state of urgency necessary to diagnose student needs and immediately intervene can have dire outcomes on a child’s future. As Conway (2013) put it, “teaching is a privilege—and lives are at stake in it” (p. 12).

Illiteracy limits the full development of individuals and their contribution to society (Allington, 2006). It has dire repercussions throughout life, impacting a person’s family environment, impeding access to the benefits of development, and thwarting the enjoyment of other human rights (Friere, 2000). Illiteracy is costly to individuals as well as society (Martinez & Fernandez, 2010). There is a direct pipeline of illiteracy to prison. This pipeline has led the United States to be the only nation in the world to build prisons based upon failed third grade reading scores (Tikkanen, 2005).
Jan has fervently collaborated with her colleagues to develop an RTI identification system and responsive curriculum that helps lift at-risk students out of mediocrity, giving them genuine chances for academic and life success. The creative autonomy she is entrusted with has proved fruitful in motivating and championing struggling readers for a promising future. Her success in this work fuels her passion and continued career thrival.

**Creative autonomy transports.** Jan’s creative customization of curriculum transported to Skinner. In contrast to creative autonomy, many teachers today are mandated to follow scripted curriculum (Curwin, 2013; Giroux, 2012; Sherman, 2009; Strauss, 2013). Her ability to maintain creative autonomy has been an important component of her career longevity. Upon reflection on her autonomous career, Jan explains that she would not survive if she had to follow a scripted curriculum:

> I don’t think that I’d want to do it to be honest. It’s about what’s best for the kids and it would be the same thing to me like lousy parenting tactics. Why would you use them if they’re not working for the good of what you’re trying to do? Why wouldn’t you want to do something that would work better?

**Scene 3: Plotting a New Course**

> Due to budget restraints, my principal informed me toward the end of my first year at Skinner that she could not fund my position for the following year. However, she managed to find money and rehired me again. I was the full time Reading Intervention teacher. She charged me as team leader for our electives group: art, music, physical education, Spanish, and library. This was a new experience for me. I quickly learned
that electives, which I am also considered a part of, are like second-class citizens in a school. It’s interesting and a bit disheartening at times. Regardless, I love my team, we work well together, and we have really made great strides!

I continued to refine our Reading Intervention program and was still finding flaws in the scripted curriculum. I shared my findings, the data I was producing through formative data gathering, analysis and resulting curriculum adaptations. Mary (the current principal) was so thrilled that she asked me to share the ways in which I was capturing data at our next school in-service. She had hoped the staff would become more specific in how they thought about and presented their own data. Like the year prior, the presentation was politely received but practices were not adopted.

Phil (her former colleague at ACMS) had really taught me to embrace data! When used well, data can drive instruction to make real strides for kids. That year, I began analyzing whole school data on district interim assessments. The school leadership again asked me to present my findings during a professional development day. I used this data to suggest that we focus on explicit grammar instruction as a means to raise our writing scores. The data was showing that our students were really falling short in this arena. This time, my presentation ruffled some feathers with a few of the other teachers. Some were steadfast on the idea that you can never teach grammar in isolation. But in my experience, this issue with struggling readers and writers is that their own writing isn’t sophisticated enough to teach exclusively through their work. You have to expose them somehow!
Maybe it’s my age speaking, but over the last 10 years I’ve found there’s a failure in our system to teach the whole idea of grammar and mechanics and parts of speech. God knows we test them on TCAP\textsuperscript{17}, but somehow they’re not being taught to kids or teachers alike. And many new teachers are resistant to teaching it and some are also lacking their own knowledge and application of grammar. You should see some of the emails I get from young colleagues. It makes my English teacher skin crawl! I also find that a lot of new teachers coming in seem to be kind of arrogant. And I don’t know why. As of yet, they don’t have anything to be arrogant about. I think they come in with that, “Oh yes, I know what I’m doing. I’m pretty sure I can’t learn anything from you”. I really struggle with that. So when I introduced the idea of explicit grammar to the staff, one teacher, Sophie, embraced it. She confided to me that she was fearful, as she felt her grammar skills were lacking, but was willing to give it a try if I would coach her. We have been collaborating on this endeavor ever since.

**Scene 3 Discussion**

During her second year aboard the SS Skinner, Jan continued to hone the reading intervention program. She adapted the many tools gained in Adams City to her new role, including assessment practices. Like the previous year, her attempt to share expertise with the faculty was largely met with apathy, while some suggestions surfaced conflicting philosophies. She was charged as team leader for the electives teachers and began to cultivate a new school family at Skinner.

\textsuperscript{17} Colorado State Assessment Program (CSAP) is now under transition in preparation for national standardized testing. The transitional assessment is called Transitional State Assessment Program (TCAP).
**Teachers learning with and from teachers.** Professional learning communities (PLC’s) have become one of many “bandwagon movements” (Sherman, 2009) in most school systems. Authentic and effective PLC’s have a shared purpose, a collective emphasis on student learning, collaborative activity, de-privatized practice, and reflective discourse (Garmston & Wellman, 1999). Yet, as Garmston and Wellman pointed out, “community doesn’t just happen” (p. 265). Along with the time it takes to build community, the process of change in schools is often met with resistance (Senge, 1990; Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). School climates that don’t provide teachers with the time necessary to understand and acquire the skills required to implement change find the highest level of push back (Tomlinson & Allan).

The Skinner faculty met Jan’s initial contributions to sharing of expertise, and thus imparting school change, with indifference. Without asking her colleagues, it is only possible to speculate as to why her presentations were not embraced. It is possible that since she was a new member of the school faculty, her lack of established relationships contributed to the apathy (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). On a related note, perhaps the proposed changes needed time to percolate (Tomlinson & Allan, 2002). It is entirely feasible that with the competing demands that many teachers face, the idea of adding a new practice to their plate felt overwhelming (Swain & Swain, 1999). Another speculation is that Jan, like a large portion of veteran teachers today, was a victim of the current “reformer” rhetoric in which an anti-veteran bias is taking root (Ripp, 2011; Rosales, 2012). Ageism in education will be further unpacked in the following scene.
Finally, it is entirely possible that all of the above factors played a role in how her new colleagues responded to her first two professional offerings.

Rather than indifference, Jan’s suggestion to teach explicit grammar revealed conflicting philosophies. Garmston and Wellman (1999) explained that cognitive conflict over “ideas and approaches” (p. 185) can bring energy to a system, serving as a catalyst for innovation. Although many people are conditioned to avoid conflict, when school leaders are able to foster healthy disagreement around the topic of serving students, necessary change in practices can follow (Garmston & Wellman; Tomlinson & Allan, 2002; Wheatley, 1999). The energy revealed in cognitive conflict also un masks engagement and thinking (Senge, 1990). So rather than the indifference Jan sensed in her first two in-services the philosophical conflict between best approaches to teach grammar, although uncomfortable, fueled energy around the topic.

This energy also revealed conflicting generational perspectives on education. It is common for teachers to form deeply ingrained impressions of how to teach based upon how they were taught (Lortie, 2002; Sherman, 2009). Many new teachers today were taught from a “whole language” perspective that became misconstrued by countless educators to mean avoiding explicit language instruction at all costs (Fox, 1996). As Jan mentions in her narrative, this perception has imparted a generation that struggles with their own grammar usage. Still, the energy Jan catalyzed led one teacher to embrace Jan’s mentoring in order to improve her grammar instruction.

Can the boomers and the Y’s unite? One sub-question of this study is how Jan’s story can contribute as a counter-narrative to teacher bashing? Teachers experience
low status in our society (Giroux, 2012; Karp, 2010), with veteran teachers being the lowest on the status totem pole (Ripp, 2011). New teachers often portray confidence, boundless energy, and fresh perspective (Miner, 2010; Ripp). Paradoxically, however, they also lack the foundation that only years of teaching can afford. Ripp reflected upon her first year of teaching:

> How I wished to be a veteran, how I yearned for years of knowledge and experience that could really wow parents and engage the students at such a high level that they would love coming to school every day…I could not wait to be a veteran. (para. 2)

Age bias in the United States is one of the most socially-condoned and institutionalized forms of discrimination (Nelson, 2005) and is becoming more prevalent in schools (Ripp, 2011; Rosales, 2012). The media cultivates age discrimination through associating beauty and worth exclusively to the young (Toland-Frith & Meuller, 2010). Under the premise of education reform, the media and politicians contribute to age bias by spinning a negative connotation of veterans as “stubborn and stuck in their ways” (Ripp, para. 3). Institutions such as Teach for America exasperate the issue by focusing reform efforts on new college graduates, many of whom are taking the jobs of veteran teachers, under the premise of saving school districts money (Hulpuch, 2013; Ripp; Rosales).

Although some veteran teachers do experience burn in as discussed in previous chapters, many do not fulfill this stereotype (Ripp, 2011). Moreover, when Jan was in such physical pain that it began to cloud her attitude, she opted to retire, rather than becoming a stereotypical “grumpy old teacher”. Veteran teachers like Jan bring schools
knowledge, expertise, tried and true methods, and a deep-seated passion for their work (Ripp).

Johnson (2004) contended that while novice teachers are often very committed, they are most likely to succeed and remain in the profession when experienced veterans guide them. The ideal school, according to Johnson, has a culture that integrates veteran and novice teachers. Jan maintains that collaboration with colleagues fuels her eternal optimism. She explains:

I’ve found that because I’ve been alive a number of years, that people do come to me and I’m thrilled to share anything I have. I want to be that resource for people and have them know that. And at the same time, if I need something I know who I can go to. So it’s that sharing.

**Enough ripples can create a wave.** Although Jan felt little acceptance around her professional development offerings, she began to lead the team of electives teachers. Through this process, she learned that electives teachers often feel like outsiders of the school circle (Anderson & Collins, 2004). In this era of high-stakes testing, the arts, foreign language and physical education are pushed out of schools, making room for more classroom time to be spent on test preparation. Ironically, these “electives” or “specials” have shown to have the most positive social and academic impact in struggling rural and urban schools; the same settings where they are most commonly pushed out (Purnell, 2011).

Jan began to develop a sense of community with her electives team. Over the last few years this team of “outsiders” has perpetuated enough ripples of change to foster a
school-wide wave of effective reading intervention. As we continue to explore this final act of Jan’s career narrative, further attention to the topic of her experience in a new professional learning community will manifest.

**Scene 4: Steady As She Goes**

At the end of my second year at Skinner, like the year prior, there wasn’t money to fund my position. However, my principal was creative with the budget and managed to hire me back for a third year. By the start of that school year, state testing data showed my students’ exceptional growth. This contributed to our school’s reading growth going up. We were finally moving away from earlier threats of school closure. That year it was decided to prioritize my position and we made cuts in other areas. I now have permanent living quarters on the SS Skinner!

The year prior, my team had started an action research inquiry on the question: How can we get students to comprehend what they read? The first year, we were just getting our feet wet and didn’t discover anything groundbreaking. But what’s so neat about them is that they are totally on board with anything that Patricia and I suggest. Patricia is the librarian and a fellow veteran teacher who shares my passion for language and literacy. The rest of our team consists of newer teachers and Patricia and I are like the teaching parents! They say “You are our reading gurus” and they are totally invested. They are willing to embrace reading. I mean, here’s our art, music, P.E., Spanish teacher, and librarian all incorporating reading strategies into their classes. It’s really started to make a difference. Kids have realized reading is universal. We were starting to feel like captains of the Skinner ship, instead of measly deck hands!
That year for our action research inquiry, we interviewed the kids after completing a reading passage with a short constructed response. We asked them to tell us the specific reading strategies they used and how they thought they did. And then we showed them the grade they had. They all did a miserable job, but they thought they’d done well. So when they saw the results they said, “Oh, well I didn’t expect that.” But it was really revealing. I remember one student put it so well when he said, “Well I thought I did good, but good wasn’t really my best, but it was all I was willing to give.” They recognized when they were just trying to get it done, as opposed to trying their best. Our presentation was compelling enough that the rest of the staff started to take notice. What’s great is our entire school has since embraced reading, and it’s making a big difference.

So our reading program really started to build momentum. Along with other staff taking notice, other schools started to visit to learn what we were doing. We even decided to hire another part-time reading teacher.

What I love about the reading intervention is having the kids read a little bit about the Hindenburg and then they’d go check out a book. And they come back and tell me, “Ooh look what I found in the library!” or Amelia Earhart, the Loch Ness monster, Big Foot, you know anything that gets them excited about something and leads them to read more. I have kids that graduate from reading intervention stop by to tell me what they are reading and that they actually like reading now.

One of the things I loved about my job at ACMS was building relationships with the kids for three years. The same thing happens with my role at Skinner; a lot of them
end up staying with me the whole time. I just love it! One thing I pride myself on is my persistence. I can tell them a hundred times in a row, without changing the modulation of my voice, “I need you to get out a piece of paper, I need you to get out a piece of paper.” I can say it so many times that they finally are like “Okay, okay, okay!” And I smile and respond with “Thank you very much!” I can outlast you and I will outlast you!

David was a student that I had during my first three years at Skinner. He had to have his own individual escort to get him from class to class because he would just get in trouble. He got in trouble for pushing kids on the stairs, just all kinds of things like that. He was one of those kids that just tried all the other teachers. He would get kicked out of class all the time. I just kept working with him, working with him, working with him. It drove him crazy! He’d say, “Well why don’t you send me to Mr. Dolan’s (Dean of Discipline) like everyone else does?” I would respond, “Because Mr. Dolan is busy and he can’t do for you what I can. So you’re staying here with me.” At one point, he finally got so exasperated he yelled out, “Miss, why do you keep trying? All the other teachers have just given up. Why, why, why do you keep trying?” And I looked at him, as honestly as I could and I said, “Because I care about you, and because I care about you, I am not giving up on you. I will keep trying to help you get as good as you can be.” David let out a big sigh of frustration at that moment!

From that point on, we developed a new understanding of each other. And so I tried to help him get through some of the other things. He’d come in just steamed about something. I’d pull him out in the hall and I’d say, “Okay, you look like you’re really mad, tell me what’s going on.” Maybe he just had an encounter with another teacher.
That’s what happens to kids like him. They come in with baggage from something else then take it out on you and can’t do the work. So if you just give them a minute, you know, talk it out, try to figure out what they need, you can always arrive at a better place.

One day, we were reading about family feuds. I was telling them about my Dad and his Dad. I told them about how my Dad had run away from home and cut ties with my grandfather. When my Dad married my mom she went to the trouble of trying to reconnect with my Dad’s father so that we could have that sense of family connection. And David asked, “Well, did your mom manage to get them back together again?” And I said, “Yes she did.” My mom had just passed away the year before, and I reminisced, “My mom was really an incredible person.” David responded with, “Miss, that’s you. What you just said about your mom, you’re always trying to make it better for everybody else.” Well, I’m a big emotional sap so I just started crying. He said, “I’m sorry.” You could see in his face that he felt really bad about making me cry. And I said, “No honey, these are good tears. You honored my mom in way that you didn’t even know just now, and honored me in the same way. That’s a beautiful thing, please don’t worry about it.” Well it just weighed on his mind. When I escorted him to his next class he said “Miss before we go in there, can I talk to you for a minute? I just want to apologize again. I didn’t mean to make you cry.” And I said, “David, honey I made myself cry; you didn’t make me cry. What you said just touched my heart. You honored my mom in a really special way, and made me see that. Thank you for that, these are tears of joy, please, you don’t need to apologize for them.” And he said, “Okay, but I’m still really sorry”. It just stayed with him for whatever reason.
David and I developed a really good relationship. He knew he could come to me if he was having a difficult day or another person didn’t understand him, or he got himself in trouble. So the very last day of school, after continuation, he came back into the school, gave me a big hug and said, “I just want to thank you Miss. You really have helped me a lot.” And I thought. “I’m not done. I’m not done.” There will be plenty more David’s in the world that need someone, just even one person that understands them. That can help them see things differently.

Scene 4 Discussion

By Jan’s third year, Skinner became a permanent home to her. Her students were making incredible gains. Her team was becoming leaders in fostering systemic change. A sense of family, relationships, and connection permeated Jan’s relationships with colleagues and students alike.

**Melding creative autonomy and professional capital.** In 1981, despite her exemplary performance at ACHS, Jan was let go for the sole reason that she had the least amount of years of service. Paradoxically in 2010, with a shift towards staffing based upon performance (Colorado Department of Education, 2013a; Education Next, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2009), Jan was given a permanent home on the SS Skinner. She is able to unite creative autonomy with the requirements of standardization. This union allows her to simultaneously motivate struggling readers and sustain the professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullen, 2012) necessary to meet teacher effectiveness guidelines (Sherman, 2009).
The power of teacher inquiry. During her first two years at Skinner, Jan’s attempts to offer professional development to the staff were met with either apathy or controversy. By the third year, Jan and her team of electives teachers began to make waves through their research findings. Their inquiry was a catalyst for a school-wide commitment to student literacy.

Teacher inquiry, also known as Participatory Action Research (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; Sagor, 2005), is defined as “systematic, intentional study of one’s own professional practice” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, p. 6). The process of teacher inquiry begins with posing relevant questions, followed by collecting data to gain insights into posed questions. The practice continues with data analysis and reading of relevant literature. Finally, teacher inquirers adjust practices based upon findings and share their findings with others (Dana & Yendol- Hoppey; Sagor).

The teacher inquiry movement focuses on the concerns of teachers and engages them in the design, collection, and interpretation of data (Sagor, 2005). Traditionally, teachers’ voices have been absent from wider discussions about educational change and reform. Teacher inquiry cultivates teacher voice and transforms the profession to one that highlights the teacher’s role as that of a “knowledge generator” (Dana & Yendol- Hoppey, 2009).

I have hosted a first-year teacher Community Based Participatory Action Research mini-conference for several years. The inquiry, findings, and subsequent further wonderings that new teachers, in collaboration with their students and community members, have shared are always inspirational and regularly foster grass-roots
community driven change. Similarly, Jan and her team presented powerful school based findings (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) to the wider community in a manner that was relevant to the staff and sparked system-wide change (Sagor, 2005).

**The extended education family is carried on.** As she settled into the SS Skinner, the *extended education family* values that were paramount to Jan’s success in Adams City began to transplant their roots to Denver soils. She began to experience a meaningful sense of team collaboration, offering her the collegiality, friendship, and care she values so deeply. In addition, her relationships with students became long term, allowing her to foster academic success and concurrently support troubled students socially and emotionally. The story of David is an example of the types of impact Jan still has on students today.

**Scene 5: Staying the Course in Choppy Waters**

*By my fourth year, my reading intervention students continued to show exceptional growth, exceeding state expectations on standardized tests. I was one of four teachers in our building invited to a reception to recognize three or more years of consecutive growth. It felt great to know that we are not only impacting individual students, but also our school in a positive way.*

*Our professional development requirements shifted from team action research inquiry to interdepartmental book groups. This wasn’t feeling as impactful to my team, so we decided to continue our action research thread on our own accord. With a solid foundation in our reading programming, we shifted focus to student writing. So next*
school year\textsuperscript{18} we are all going to focus on short constructed writing responses. The P.E. teacher will explore health-related topics, music will pull from composers, Spanish will look at current events in the countries they study, and so forth. We even rearranged our Friday enrichment scheduling to have a longer block of time to work on writing with our students. We’ve started to realize as an elective team, unlike grade specific teachers, we get to be with the students throughout their middle school career. So, we are really trying to make the most of the three years we have with them. I just love how invested and creative my team is!

In 2011, the district was piloting a new teacher effectiveness evaluation system. Skinner volunteered to take part in the pilot. It’s funny because sometimes when I look at the framework I see all of these bits and pieces of things that allegedly I’m supposed to be able to do within one class period. I have young colleagues that say, “Oh, I think I do all of that.” To me, it’s like. “Really, really?” I don’t think being effective means that you can balance a dozen different things at once. For me being effective is: Knowing what my kids need, who my kids are, and how am I going to deliver that learning to them in a way that makes sense and that can get them excited about it. You also have to have command over the classroom, and know how to make real time adjustments. If I do those things then I feel I’m being pretty effective.

Today, on top of our participation in the teacher evaluation pilot, adoption of the Common Core Standards is looming. With that comes preparation for a new standardized test, called the PARCC. There is a lot going on to prepare for this big shift.

\textsuperscript{18} 2013-2014
I worry about where testing is going to lead us. The stakes are so high. The kids are sick of testing by the time we get to that point. Our district gives a test three times a year, and then state testing in spring, and then I do a reading inventory every month. So these poor kids are just tested to death. I worry for that. I mean, what does that do to them in the long haul? I really worry about that. I’ve seen what the upcoming PARCC assessment looks like. That scares the bejeebers out of me. I’m afraid that it will push them over the edge in one direction and it’s not going to yield that complete person. I really think a well-rounded education is crucial.

It really feels like there are so many hoops to jump through; it’s not even funny. I understand why some of them need to be in place. Yet, there are so many responsibilities to take care of, so many things to think about, so many things to complete, so many things to log in. Sometimes I think technology makes it even more consuming. I feel sometimes that I’m under a microscope. I think we all are, and when every single little thing is being looked at, some days are not going to be great, others will be fabulous. There’s a lot going on, there are a lot of expectations. I think in that respect, teaching today is much more difficult than it used to be. And I’m not saying that the expectations aren’t needed, some of them definitely are. There were not a lot of things that we were held accountable for early on and I know that. But, now it’s almost like too much!

With school-wide reading progressing, our staff has decided it’s time to add math intervention to our focus. We determined it’s equally important to engage all subjects in math and modeled an intervention system after our successful reading programming. In order to make the necessary progress in math, we have added a seventh period to our
daily schedule. As a staff, we agreed that during this block, everyone is either teaching math intervention or offering an enrichment class. I cannot teach math to save my life, so I opted to teach Skinner History. We sort, catalog, and showcase memorabilia from Skinner’s past, starting from 1922. It’s been a lot of fun so far!

So now I am teaching six reading intervention classes, from sixth through eighth grade, with each group having different needs. In addition, I have my seventh period Skinner history class and another Friday Enrichment offering. That’s eight classes to prepare for! I’ve been teaching for 40 years and have honestly never worked as hard in my life. It’s a good thing I have my numerous bionic body parts!

Scene 5 Discussion

Jan’s expertise has lent itself to district recognition and contributed to school-wide adaptation of RTI that now includes a math focus. In this scene she reflected upon the numerous pressures of teaching today: external measures of teacher effectiveness, state and national adoption of Common Core Standards (CCS) and upcoming CCS inspired high-stakes testing, extra teaching responsibilities, and the many systems put into place to ensure teacher accountability.

Teacher as change agent: “It’s for the greater good”. Career teachers in Huberman’s (1999) study experienced a sense of renewal every ten years. Many who sustained a career as long as Jan’s spent their latter years in specialized roles such as Title 1, reading teacher, or special education. These long haul teachers tended to emotionally pull back from larger school reform efforts, sometimes even articulating what Huberman interpreted as a “narcissistic entitlement” (p. 49). Although Jan shares in common her

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specialized role as reading intervention teacher, she defies the trends in Huberman’s study to pull back from larger school reform. She sees her work as “for the greater good” and willingly takes on projects that she feels will be impactful.

She still experiences times of apathy when offering professional development and sharing school-wide data analysis. Yet, Jan’s contributions are influencing systemic change. Once reluctant to rock the boat, Jan respectfully shares her perspective with a goal of ensuring that school decisions are in the best interest of students. She is proving results in the classroom and through team inquiry. These ripples of change have combined energy to impact waves of systematic change (Wheatley, 1999). The team of teachers who feels on the outskirts of what is truly valued in this era of standardization is taking center stage in ensuring that all students are empowered with literacy and the creative subjects that are crucial for “whole child” development (DuBois-Maas, 2013).

**Teaching in an era of standardization.** Since the inception of the NCLB Act (No Child Left Behind), urban schools have experienced surmounting pressure to increase student performance on standardized tests (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2008). In many instances, these pressures create competing priorities among administration, teachers and students (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Strauss, 2013). Consequently, teachers perceive their worth and priorities to center around student test preparation and performance, rather than deep level student-centered outcomes (Intrator, 2002; Nieto & Bode; Palmer, 1998). In some instances, students in urban schools spend their days receiving low-level instruction on test-taking strategies rather than the higher-level thinking and interventions necessary to function and excel in a global society.
(Darling-Hammond, 2010; Schmoker, 2006). Luckily for Jan’s students, she is able to balance the pressures of standardization while simultaneously sustaining progressive teaching practices (Sherman, 2009).

The Common Core Standards (CCS) are the newest national response to NCLB with full implementation enacted by 2014-2015. Proponents boast that national adoption allows America to remain globally competitive. Additionally, backers boast that CCS prepares our students for college and work force readiness and allows for common expectations for all students, with potential to close “equity gaps” (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2012; Parker, 2013; Sloan, 2010). Critics point out the CCS are funded, created, and supported by special interest groups, foster less local control and more federal government control over education and schools. Opponents also project CCS will perpetuate heavy amounts of testing and eternal “teaching to the test” in public schools (Enghdal, 2013; Parker, 2013). Currently five states have fully opted out of CCS adoption, with other states refraining from components (Parker). Many anti-CCS activist groups are gaining large-scale momentum in speaking out against adoption. Some circles project a massive movement against government and corporate takeover of public education (Naison, 2013; Newman, 2013; Parker).

In addition to the demands for students to perform on standardized tests, teachers are facing increased pressure to meet their own professional standards. The “Teacher Effectiveness” movement is as equally controversial as CCS. Colorado’s version of

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19 Many states will be replacing standards-based state designed testing (such as Colorado State Assessment Program) with the national Common Core inspired PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) assessment by the 2014-2015 school year. States will be compared against each other in this new system.
teacher effectiveness policy, Senate Bill 191, includes an annual teacher evaluation system that ties 50% of a teacher’s rating to student achievement, mostly attributed to standardized assessment data (Colorado Department of Education, 2013; SB 10-191; Education Next, 2010).

Through adoption of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), Colorado and many other state boards of education have required teacher candidates to demonstrate a multitude of distinct teaching competencies that are categorized into standards. These teaching standards include categories such as: learning environment, instructional delivery, and human development to name a few. There are eight performance-based standards that all Colorado teachers must meet, with some standards showcasing as many as 18 sub-standards or “competencies”. In addition, for each licensure area teachers must meet a long list of subject-specific standards (CDE, 2013b).

The same standards that are used for teacher licensure have found their way into state-level teacher evaluation systems (NCATE, 2013). This emphasis has forced teacher preparation programs and school level professional development alike to shift toward a standards-based technical orientation (Sherman, 2009). Sherman asked, “How can new teachers come to value the importance of nonstandardized learning environments that respect the uniqueness of individuals within the current educational climate of standardization, which also permeates teacher preparation?” (p. 56). Similar issues inundate the evaluations systems that are now tied to teacher’s jobs.
Intrator was initially shocked when his parents, both career-long teachers were not elated that he chose to follow in their footsteps. In his fathers’ words (2002):

This job can wear you down. There’s a lot of gratuitous clucking about how we must value and support teachers. Then you get in there and it’s pretty lonely and tough. You wish your son might find something easier—find something that has more prestige, status, and honor.” (p. xxvi)

As Jan shares, “there are so many hoops to jump through” and teaching in today’s climate is exhausting. So, what keeps her going in spite of it all (Nieto, 2003)? Jan says it best in the final scene of her career narrative.

**Scene 6: The Open Sea Beckons**

*Despite the challenges of teaching in this era, I wouldn’t change it for the world. I am preparing for my sixth year at Skinner and I don’t foresee an end in sight. As long as I can keep making a difference, I am going to do that. The kids always ask me, “Miss, why are you always so happy?” and I respond, “Because I just love being here with you. I love teaching you. I already retired once and hated it. You keep me young. I just love being here with you!” And they respond with a disbelieving “Really?” 

Although I work exceptionally hard, this is not a job because it's too much fun. I feel like there's just so much involved in these kids. They really are precious, even when they misbehave. They are so precious, and you can see that in them. I want to make sure that my time with them is well spent. And so you know the moments of teasing, the moments of learning, the moments of disciplining; each moment counts. It’s that interaction with each kid so they know, “I care about you” and in more than just the teaching way. It’s definitely not just a job, but it’s that nurturing and taking care of. I feel like I have those motherly qualities, and by golly, I’m going to use them! I am really*
honest with them and tell them, “I treat you just like I would my son, my daughters, and what I would expect of them I expect of you”. It’s important for them to know that I expect the most they can possibly give me, and then maybe some, if at all possible. I want them see what their potential is and to be able to reach for that potential.

It’s the mothering part that’s probably never really going to go away. Those qualities are just there, they just come out and so it works for me. The kids unconsciously call me Mom or Grandma sometimes. They will say, “Sorry Miss, I just accidentally called you Grandma.” And I respond, “Not at all honey, that’s an honor. It means you are comfortable with me.” The kids need me. I think that’s part of my personality. I thrive on being needed. I need them and they need me; it works. They keep me going. So, I am going to keep doing this as long as I can. The open sea beckons me to keep forging ahead!

Act 3 Conclusion

Although a second retirement is not in sight, I asked Jan what she would hope students, community members and colleagues would say when that day comes:

You know, first and foremost that I made a difference. I think that would be the biggest compliment that anybody could give. That I loved and was loved. That they [students] felt love, they felt cared for, that I nurtured them, that I treated them like I do my own children.

This final Act of Jan’s story reveals that the core of her teacher identity maintained deep roots despite hopping aboard a new ship. She continues to make a positive difference in the lives of countless students, freely giving unconditional love, care, and nourishment.
She has fostered a sense of community, kinship and shared vision with her new team. Concepts such as creative autonomy, the extended education family, and Jan’s collaborative disposition have not wavered. In fact, she has gifted these values into a new culture.

Contrary to stereotypes of veteran teachers being “stubborn and stuck in their ways” (Ripp, 2011, para. 3), Jan is thoughtfully on board the 21st century “education bandwagon” (Sherman, 2009). However, instead of suffering debilitating seasickness from the extreme waves in the educational pendulum, she remains grounded in the core of her teacher identity. Rather than complacent surface-level implementation of the latest and greatest educational “best practices”, Jan has been using many of these techniques for decades because they make sound educational sense. She has remained dedicated to compassionately addressing the unique needs of her students, boosting individual growth by meeting them at the point of their instructional need, while motivating them to work hard and earn their educational success. This philosophy is similar to the open education movement of the 1970’s (Perrone, 1972) which has been reinvented, renamed and repackaged (Sherman, 2009) into current practice known as differentiation (Tomlinson, 1999).

Currently, educators are called to partake in professional learning communities, RTI and differentiated instruction, all while ensuring that students meet the “rigor” of Common Core Standards. As a veteran teacher, Jan has deeply rooted beliefs, values, and dispositions that align with many of these practices as well as tried and true understandings of technical implementation. Simultaneously, her disposition as a
lifelong learner allows her to constantly reflect, refine, and adapt to ensure that today’s students get her very best. The final chapter will unpack the most compelling lessons behind Jan’s story, the implications for theory and practice, and ideas for future research that her narrative solves in relation to the research question and sub-questions.
Chapter Seven: Analysis, Implications, and Conclusion

“Mrs. Sullivan was the most influential teacher in my life. She encouraged me to achieve more than I ever thought I could. Today I am a teacher and I find myself asking myself if this is the way Mrs. Sullivan would have done it. By far my favorite teacher.” (Former student commenting through Commerce City Historical Society Facebook page, 2013)

Overview of the Study

As an urban teacher educator, I always ask new teachers to name why they teach. Over the years, a pattern of very noble reasons has emerged. Some tell me that they teach to make a difference; to give back; and to dismantle injustices suffered by students of color, those living in poverty, students with disabilities, CLD (Culturally Linguistically Diverse) students, and anyone else victimized for being “different”. Others tell me they teach out of hope, out of love for students, and for the sake of humanity or social justice. Some feel they are passionate about education or a particular subject that they want to share with others. Others describe a memorable teacher who impacted their life course. Finally, others impart that they or a loved one suffered injustices in the course of their education, instigating their drive to promote change. Yet, the rate of teacher turnover predicts that by the fifth year or sooner, at least half of these new teachers will have lost their original idealism that called them to teach. Consequently many will exit the profession (Boyd, et al., 2009; Carroll, 2007; Chandler, 2004; Jensen, 2005).

Teacher turnover is rampant. This conundrum creates a revolving door in which novice educators end their careers before they have developed into fully effective
practitioners (Cuban, 2010; Huberman, 1989; Lipka & Brinhaupt, 1999; Prietula, & Cokely, 2007). Students, especially in high-poverty urban contexts, are placed in an imbalanced system in which most of their education is left in the hands of beginners, leaving scarce opportunity to benefit from master teachers.

Teachers become burned out for a plethora of reasons, including a demanding workload, a steep learning curve, high stakes accountability pressures, lack of experienced veteran support necessary to fully develop, and toxic school cultures (Ayers & Ford, 2008; Johnson, 2004; Kozol, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2008). These problems contribute to teachers feeling increasingly dishonored, degraded, and demoralized, leading to loss of heart, hope, and passion for their work (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Giroux, 2012; Kozol, 2005, Nieto, 2003, Nieto & Bode, 2008; Palmer, 2007; Pizzigati, 2012; Wilson, 2012). When teachers are left feeling this way, they cannot provide the emotional energy necessary to adequately support students (Graves, 2001).

Out of those teachers who remain, many still lose heart for their work (Graves, 2001; Intrator, 2002; Karp, 2010). This can lead to teacher burn in, a predicament in which teachers experience symptoms of burning out, but rather than leaving the profession, they choose to stay, existing in a state of disengagement from their work, students, and original idealism that summoned them to the profession (Cornbleth, 2008; O’Reilley, 2005; Palmer, 2007). Burned in teachers physically remain, but are spiritually, mentally, and emotionally absent from their work (Huberman, 1989; NCTA, 1996).
Teachers have historically experienced low-status in our society (Giroux, 2012; Karp, 2010). Their behaviors in response to burn out and burn in contribute to negative public perceptions of teachers. Additionally, a pervasive culture of teacher bashing has become increasingly prevalent. Educational policies are now focused on improving and tracking teacher effectiveness (Chaltain, 2012; Giroux, 2012; Naison, 2013; Rethinking Schools, 2010; White, 2012; Wilson, 2012). Some of these legislations have contributed to negative perceptions of teachers. Furthermore, as discussed in chapter 6, current “reformer” rhetoric has spawned an increased anti-veteran bias, making it even more challenging to entice teachers to commit for the long haul. Others want to commit, but are pushed out of the system that no longer provides protection under tenure. There are reports of a national trend in which school districts are opting for the short-term low-cost benefits of new teacher salaries, commonly displacing veterans who are swiftly replaced with Teach For America corps members (Ripp, 2011; Rosales, 2012).

Although there are teachers whose symptoms of burn out or burn in contribute to negative perceptions of teachers, there are others who defy these obstacles. For the purposes of this study, I refer to spirited teachers as highly skilled educators who vehemently preserve their passion, commitment, and capacity to thrive, in spite of the many trials that accompany teaching (Baldacci, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Mitchie, 1999; Wolk & Rodman, 1994). In my own teaching career, I was profoundly influenced by a few spirited veteran teachers whose passion, courage, love, and pure talent created classrooms that felt like magical places in which even the most troubled students were engaged, happy, and learning. These individuals were gifts to the profession, but not
always fully recognized as such. For this reason, I chose to focus this study on the more hopeful counter-narrative to teacher burn out or burn in: *teacher thrival*.

Through the method of narrative inquiry, one spirited veteran teacher and I were able to share in the collaborative endeavor of making sense of her career story. Narrative inquiry imparts participant voice and unpacks identity as it relates to the individual, and the social, historical, and cultural contexts (Angrosino, 1989; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Denzin, 1989; Kelchtermans, 2009; Maynes, et al., 2008; Nespor & Barylske, 1991). Over the course of six months, Jan and I engaged in four open-ended interviews in which she told me her story. In addition to interviews, she shared teaching artifacts that spanned her career of 40 years, introduced me to esteemed colleagues and cherished family members, and let me into her magical classroom. She carefully read drafts of my retelling and interpretations. She consistently offered new memories that the process invoked, more artifacts that helped fine-tune the story, and clarifications and suggestions. Our method was a spiral process that involved regular dialogue and a shared investment.

Chapters three through six of this study retell Jan’s career narrative that is textured with correlations to the literature, my interpretations, and scholarly considerations. I borrowed from career theorist Huberman’s (1989) method by engaging Jan in pre-interview “homework” of mapping out her career trajectory. Jan identified distinct career phases and attached original thematic titles to each. Her interpretation of this assignment inspired a metaphorical form of representation that reflects her personality and helped us make sense of her narrative. With a musical and drama
background, she chose the theme of a comic opera including acts, intermissions, and various scenes; each symbolically tied to her conceptualization of focal career experiences.

Act 1 of Jan’s metaphorical comedic opera tells the story of her career beginnings as a high school English teacher from 1972 to 1981. Themes of early career survival were influenced by collegiality, an autonomous culture, and opportunities to create student-centered curriculum. Her eternal optimism and creative nature surfaced as salient traits that were foundational to her career thrival.

Chapters four and five relay Act 2 of Jan’s career that took place in one urban middle school from 1981-2007. Her first five years in the middle school were decisive to a transformation that cultivated a love of middle school students, a love of cherished colleagues and team collaboration, and fueled her zeal for ceaseless learning. She began to view teaching as alike to parenting. Throughout her middle school career, she continued to experience what I call creative autonomy. She and her team members developed an intimate community, inclusive of students, parents, guardians, teachers, and apprentices that I have named the extended education family. Through their shared values, trust, solidarity, and mutual respect her team engaged in innovative grassroots practices including: mainstreaming of special education students, curricular integration, co-teaching, cross-curricular formative assessment, and looping. During this era Jan blossomed into a respected teacher-leader who provided consulting to other educators, mentoring to new teachers, and developed district and state-level curricula; all while remaining in the classroom. These periods were not without their moments of
heartbreak, but Jan’s eternal optimism proved crucial to her resilience. She relates her optimism to the idiom “hope springs eternal” (Pope, 1891).

Act 3, relayed in chapter 6, tells the story of Jan’s short-lived retirement and current position (2009-2013) as a reading intervention teacher in Denver Public Schools. This chapter of her story reiterates concepts such as creative autonomy, the extended education family, and Jan’s collaborative disposition. Jan’s sense of optimism continues to instill hope in students and her colleagues alike. All of these factors have contributed to Jan’s sustained spirit and career thrival.

**Discussion of Themes and Response to Research Questions**

Three themes: *hope springs eternal*, *the extended education family*, and *creative autonomy* resonated throughout Jan’s narrative. Each theme is influenced by her internal disposition as well as external working conditions. These constructs, which will be further explored below, offer solutions to the research question:

1) How did this veteran teacher not only survive but also thrive as a career-long urban teacher?

Moreover, the above themes provide explanations to the following sub-questions:

a. How is her spirit sustained throughout her teacher lifecycle?

b. How can her story contribute to the literature as a counter-narrative to the current rhetoric focused on “teacher bashing”?

The previous section of this chapter offered an overview of the problems of teacher turnover, the promise of spirited teachers, how Jan and I co-constructed her career story, and themes from each stage of her career. In this section, I define
dispositional and conditional factors. Then I show how these factors influenced the three most salient themes that Jan’s narrative offers in response to the research question. Each theme and its impact on Jan and others is discussed in detail, in relation to the research question.

**Dispositional and Conditional Factors of Teacher Thrival**

Many researchers and policy makers agree upon a common set of principles—knowledge, skills, and dispositions—as primary paradigms impacting teacher effectiveness (Knopp, Skarbeck, & Hurst, 2005). Studies attempting to define teacher disposition range from descriptors that include: personality (Peck & Tucker, 1973), sense of efficacy (Ashton & Webb, 1986), affective characteristics (Guskey, 1984), conceptions (Fieman-Nemser, McDiarmid, Melnick, & Parker, 1989), perceptions (Avery & Walker, 1993), attitudes (Sparks, 1988), and beliefs (Hollingsworth, 1989; Mahlios & Maxson, 1995). In addition, Raths (2001) pointed out a distinction between “pre-disposition”, which is more innate, and disposition, which can be learned and altered by focusing on the philosophical rationale behind chosen teaching practices (Knopp, Skarbeck, & Hurst). Disposition, knowledge, and skills are interrelated. Disposition impacts the types of knowledge and skills that are enacted in a teacher’s craft (Hernandez-Sheets, 1995; Hollins, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2009).

For the purposes of this study, I refer to *dispositional factors* as those connected to a teacher’s identity. These factors encompass teacher attitudes, beliefs, values, and intuition. I include intuition as an important component of this construct because many of Jan’s curricular choices are attributed to her intuition. Fairbairn (1999) explained that
expert teachers developed intuition as a result of accumulated knowledge and experience. Furthermore, I see teacher intuition as an extension to Palmer’s (2004) idea of the “inner teacher” which in his mind provides guidance that is “more reliable than anything we can get from a doctrine, ideology, collective belief system, or leader” (p. 25).

The practices that I justified through the academic literature were intuitive to Jan. As a practitioner, she implemented them because they made intuitive sense. As a researcher, I attempted to connect them to theory. I view dispositional factors as innate to the core or spirit of a teacher, similar to Palmer’s (2007) contention that good teaching stems from the identity and integrity of the teacher. This entails a marriage and self-awareness of one’s attitudes, beliefs, values, and conviction in one’s intuition.

Spirited teachers like Jan are passionate about their work and view teaching as a vocation. Palmer (2007) asserted that teaching is a vulnerable act and a calling, arguing that teaching “holds a mirror to the soul” (p. 2). A major foundation of Palmer’s theory was that effective teaching cannot be condensed to technique; instead, good teaching stems from the identity and integrity of the teacher. Palmer proposed that identity comes forth through the union of the diverse forces that make up one’s life.

The dispositional factors that influenced Jan’s career Thrival are deeply rooted in her attitudes, values, beliefs, and intuition. In essence, these factors came together to project her identity in both tangible and intangible ways. However, Jan would not have thrived without conditional factors that supported her disposition.

The construct of hope springs eternal was primarily supported by dispositional factors. Still, as I will argue below, each of the themes in Jan’s story were influenced by
both dispositional and conditional factors. I refer to *conditional factors* as environmental or cultural elements that characterize organizations, in this case schools.

Conditional factors include how others influence a teacher’s capacity to either spiritually prosper or perish. This idea goes beyond common “working conditions” which tend to focus on the physical environment, availability of resources, policies, or compensation packages in schools (Horng, 2005). Rather, conditional factors that impacted Jan’s thrival were present in her schools’ cultures and included interpersonal and organizational contexts (Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2012), or as Bryk and Schneider (2002) coined, “relational trust”. These social and transformative conditions include collaborative interactions and shared investment between teachers, students, families, and administration (Johnson et al).

Johnson et al. (2012) argued that teaching is a career in which social relationships are central. In a sample of over 25,000 teachers, they found that although a range of working conditions mattered to teachers:

> The most important—are those that both retain teachers in low-income, high-minority schools and make it possible for students there to achieve—are the ones that shape the social context of teaching and learning….the elements like school culture, the principal’s leadership, and the relationships with their colleagues. (p. 16)

The theme of *creative autonomy* in Jan’s narrative was most heavily impacted by conditional factors that empowered her to take ownership of curriculum development and innovative practices. In addition, the conditional factors that empowered Jan and her colleagues to collaborate and build familial-like relationships within their team sub-culture heavily influenced the construct of *the extended education family*. 
Dispositional and conditional factors on the thrival Mobius strip. Palmer (2004) visually related the human quest for wholeness to the “Mobius Strip” (Szpiro, 2007). This symbolic representation imparts the message that:

Whatever is inside us continually flows outward to help form, or deform, the world—and whatever is outside us continually flows inward to help form, or deform, our lives. The Mobius strip is like life itself: here, ultimately, there is only one reality. (Palmer, p. 47)

Palmer (2004) equates the Mobius strip to the human quest to unite one’s “onstage” and “backstage” lives (p. 47). As depicted in figure 7.1, I extend this concept to also reflect the relationship between dispositional and conditional factors that influence teacher career thrival. The trends that address this study’s research question exist on a metaphorical Mobius strip in which dispositional factors continuously flow into the conditional factors and vice versa. This study’s findings were not exclusively impacted by dispositional or conditional factors, but rather an ebb and flow between each. In Jan’s case, her dispositional characteristics flourished through conditional factors that supported her identity. For example, creative autonomy allowed her to maintain her zeal for life-long learning and teach with integrity. Concurrently, school conditional factors, such as the extended education family, were impacted by dispositional factors such as her view of teaching as alike to parenting. She imparted this value set upon each school’s culture. Consequently, the dispositional factors that fueled Jan’s spirit and career-longevity were contagious, allowing others in the community to “catch” them.

Each of these factors was influential to the other and helps solve the question: How did this teacher not only survive but thrive as a career-long urban teacher? In the section that follows, I will explain each theme, how dispositional and conditional factors
shaped the theme, and how the theme impacted Jan, her colleagues, students, families, and novice teachers. I will describe how each theme helps address the research question, and explain its relationship to the wider academic community.

Figure 7.1: Teacher Thrival Mobius Strip: Dispositional and Conditional Factors

![Mobius Strip Diagram]

Image retrieved from http://www.marchland.org/woodturning/mobius/mobius_1.htm

**Hope Springs Eternal**

During our first interview, I asked Jan to reflect upon what keeps her going today. In her words:

The first thing that popped into my mind was hope springs eternal. I am an eternal optimist. You have to be, you absolutely have to be. The minute the glass is half empty, you’re doomed. You might as well throw it away.

The well-known phrase “hope springs eternal” is derived from Alexander Pope’s (1734) poem titled “An Essay on Man”:

Hope springs eternal in the human breast;  
Man never Is, but always To be blest:  
The soul, uneasy and confin’d from home,  
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.
Pope’s (Pope & Applelbaum, 1994) message symbolizes the tenacity of the human spirit and ability to find hope, even in the darkest of situations. Throughout Jan’s narrative, she consistently portrayed a hopeful disposition, a steadfast belief in the capacity of education to transform lives (Haberman, 2011), and an optimistic spin on even the most difficult situations.

Nieto’s (2003) statement, “Hope is the very essence of teaching” (p. 53) reflects her belief that although eternally tested, hope was the distinctive quality that all good teachers shared. She found hope present in teachers’ work in three respects: “optimism in the promise of public education and in their students; faith in their abilities as teachers; confidence in trusted colleagues and new teachers” (p. 53).

The theme of hope springs eternal is primarily a dispositional factor that impacted Jan’s career thrive. Her identity is deeply rooted in an optimistic outlook that she portrays in her attitudes toward students, her beliefs in the power of positivity, and her values of surrounding herself with like-minded others. Her teacher intuition has advanced through years of experience, sustaining her faith that optimism, positivity, and a hopeful outlook will pay off. Jan’s teaching spirit was heavily present in this theme. In addition, colleagues, parents, guardians, and novice teachers were equally impacted by her hopeful disposition, influencing school conditional factors. These stakeholders upheld her endurance of this important trait, while she concurrently impacted the school culture.

The impact of hope springs eternal on Jan. Hope springs eternal is likely an innate disposition that Jan carried with her through her childhood. Her parents created a home in which optimism, opportunity, and hope were pillars of their family value system.
Despite her father’s hard upbringing that led him to run away from home, he put himself through school, grew a happy family, and was a self-made success.

Jan’s hopeful disposition allowed her to forge past distressing setbacks and see the promise in a new day. As she puts it, “Sometimes teaching is a real uphill battle and so optimism is absolutely necessary to keep on. I’ve developed what I call my Scarlett O’Hara kind of attitude. The idea that tomorrow's another day.”

Nieto (2003) found that those who maintained faith in public education and believed that they can change lives carried hope that kept them going. She also noted that hopeful teachers had tremendous faith in their own abilities, while they simultaneously “lose sleep trying to find just the right approach or the lesson or book that will reach students who might seem at times ‘unreachable’” (p. 58). Solnit (2006) said, “Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope” (p. 5).

Jan’s embrace of hope springs eternal cultivated her persistence to never give up on herself or her students, choosing action over indifference. When relaying her efforts with one particularly challenging student, she reminisced, “He wasn’t being as successful as we had hoped, but we felt like we were making some progress, we kept trying. Kept trying, kept trying, kept trying.” That same student came back years later to thank her for her care and persistence.

Thriving on being needed, students feed Jan’s sense of eternal hope. David was a troubled student in whom Jan instilled hope. In return, during a conversation in which she reminisced about her mother, he gifted her with the following words: “Miss, that’s
you. What you just said about your mom, you’re always trying to make it better for everybody else.” Jan felt that his words honored her and her mother. David’s words fed Jan’s spirit and faith that investment in students pays off. He added sustenance to her bucket of hope, nourishing this important dispositional factor.

My first teaching assignment took place in a culture that permeated an insidious pessimistic outlook. It was hard to walk through the halls, into the teachers’ lounge, front office, or staff meetings without feeling a perpetual cloud of doom. I faced a constant internal battle to keep my mind focused on the joy, energy, and hope that my students imparted. Often I kept my classroom doors closed during those years, even volunteering to move to an isolated mobile classroom in order to separate myself from disheartening colleagues. My students fueled my spirit, but the conditional factors of a toxic culture eventually drained me enough to find a new teaching position.

When I first interviewed Jan and was digesting her exceptionally hopeful outlook, I questioned how someone could possibly stay so positive in the face of so many appalling injustices that permeate urban public schools. Jan taught me that optimism is a choice. She consciously chooses hope and optimism over pessimism:

You have to believe that there is something better. Because if there is not something better then you’re doomed to just live with the way things are and that’s not acceptable. It’s too depressing. I’ve been there. I know when that’s happened…and it was a horrible feeling. Why would I want to stay that way?

**The impact of hope springs eternal on colleagues.** In addition to choosing an optimistic outlook for herself, Jan consciously chose to be in the company of like-minded
Hope springs eternal is a dynamic process in which Jan’s bucket of hope was filled by the presence of optimistic colleagues. The conditional factors of like-minded colleagues helped maintain Jan’s positive disposition. She considered her first five years teaching middle school (1982-1987) as transformational, attributing much of the wisdom gained during this period to her colleagues: “Everything I learned and have put into place materialized then. It wasn’t necessarily about the [cluster] approach, but the people who were in it.”

Jan developed close relationships with her colleagues over the span of her career. They shared in planning, innovation, problem solving, loss, and celebration. In addition, her team developed a culture which embraced humor, laughter, and joy. When fostering the energy to teach, Graves (2001) suggested that laughter is a key element. Jan and her team took the education of students very seriously while simultaneously making room for laughter. Education issues “are too serious a matter not to laugh at our pretensions as we seek to do the near impossible” (Graves, p. 168). The joyful banter that developed between Jan and her colleagues sustained their collective hope.

Jan’s colleagues were vital to filling her spirit during a difficult divorce. Phil and Sally, her cherished colleagues who became life-long friends, lifted her through times of trouble, keeping her hope alive. In her words:

That’s when I realized the value of really connecting with other people and a sense of community at school. Teaching really was my salvation during that time. It gave me a sense of purpose; it gave me a sense of belonging when everything
else was out of whack. I felt successful at school, like I mattered. I felt loved. I was giving love back. Sally and Phil were my life preservers that year.

In return, Jan’s unwavering hopeful disposition inspired her colleagues to push past moments of despair. She saw the hope and promise in her colleagues and was consistently available to support them: “The idea is to have somebody to lean on, somebody that can encourage you. It’s just like the kids. Other teachers become an extension of the kids. You have to hone your teaching group as well as your student group.”

Although *hope springs eternal* is primarily a dispositional factor that contributed to her career thrival, this attitude spilled over into the school community, offering others hope to sustain their own spirits, thus conveying hope into the school conditional factors.

**The impact of hope springs eternal on students.** Jan and long time colleague Phil asserted that good teaching is fundamentally “love between human beings”. Jan and her team furnished innovative curriculum and academic press (Lee et al., 1999), while simultaneously imparting love through unwavering persistence, care, compassion, and hope (Kessler, 2000; Nieto, 2003; 2005). *Hope springs eternal* is a factor that influenced countless students over the span of Jan’s career.

Although there were students tragically lost along the way, Jan gifted them with glimmers of hope. Mukki was a middle school student who committed suicide. Jan cared for him and appreciated his unique personality and needs. She saw past his challenging behaviors to his brilliance and gifts. Jenny had lost her own mother at an early age and clung to Jan as a second mother. She was another student tragically lost to
suicide. However, Jan’s availability to Jenny beyond academics offered her love, compassion, and hope during the vulnerable middle school years. Kim was already a part of the juvenile justice system when she was in Jan’s classroom. Despite Kim’s hard exterior, Jan saw her gift of writing and fostered this talent. Although Kim is now incarcerated, Jan holds onto her work in the hopes that someday a brighter future is conceivable. Darlene lived a neglectful and chaotic home life that included taking on adult responsibilities of raising her nieces. Jan gifted her with a “Believe in Yourself” plaque upon eighth grade continuation. Darlene eventually won a full ride scholarship to college and is now a teacher. She attributes Jan’s acts of kindness and belief in her as inspirational to her success and desire to teach. These are just a few examples of the students that Jan has imparted eternal hope upon, never giving up, despite harrowing obstacles.

Jan and her colleagues have imparted hope on the wider system of special education, influencing school conditional factors. Her middle school team successfully pioneered mainstreaming before it was legally mandated. They offered numerous vulnerable youth opportunities to experience academic success and social support. General education students also benefited as they learned compassion and empathy for disability (Duetsch-Smith & Tyler, 2010).

Shared investment through team teaching allowed special education students to fully prosper in the general education environment (Downing, 2005). Special education services were thoughtfully imbedded in the community routine (Stetson, 2013). In her current teaching role, Jan has fervently collaborated with her colleagues to develop an
RTI (Response to Intervention) identification system and accessible curriculum that gives struggling readers genuine chances for academic and life success. These practices have offered eternal hope to many students who habitually experience what Haberman (1991) called the “pedagogy of poverty” that perpetuates injustices in our education system.

**The impact of hope springs eternal on parents and guardians.** Effective schools foster authentic partnerships with parents and caregivers, realizing that families are indispensable to educational outcomes (Ayers, 2001; Epstein, 2001; Sarason, 1995). As a mother herself, Jan understood how important it was to establish caring relationships with parents. She imparted *hope springs eternal* to parents, helping fuel their faith for the future of their children. In her words:

> You want to know that your kids were loved. I think it’s important that parents know that it is for that greater good. It’s more than about just the teaching, the lessons, and the grades. It’s the relationships that we build along the way.

**The impact of hope springs eternal on novice teachers.** Over the years, Jan has mentored at least 25 student teachers. Johnson’s (2004) research demonstrated that new teachers who collaborate with veteran teachers are far more likely to remain in the profession. Studies of effective mentors show common qualities which include: commitment to the role of mentoring, empathy for beginning teachers, skilled at providing instructional support, ability to navigate varied interpersonal contexts, models continuous learning, and communicates hope and optimism (Glenn, 2006; Rowley, 1999). Through Jan’s leadership, *hope springs eternal* was passed on to student teachers.
Her hopeful, empathetic, and encouraging stance allowed student teachers to successfully learn how to teach urban students. Many of the novice teachers she mentored went on to be hired at her school, and some are still going strong today. This is another example of how her hopeful disposition carried over into school conditional factors. One student teacher, Susan, had lost hope and was on the verge of being cut from the teaching program. Jan took her under her wing, always encouraging her, saying, “You can do this”, and instilling the skills necessary for success. Susan is now in her tenth year of teaching and thriving.

**Hope springs eternal: synopsis of impact.** Despite the many perils of teaching, Jan maintained *hope springs eternal* as core to her being. In her words:

You know life is very difficult. It can be very rich, very rewarding, but it’s very difficult too. And I think for them [students] to be aware that they are not the only people maybe who have suffered, or who have had hardships. I think it’s really important for them to know that and to see how that fits in. I tell them all the time that a friend of mine always taught this to her kids, “Somebody will always have it better than you, somebody will have it worse than you, so maybe where you are right now isn’t so bad”. And I find that to be very true.

This disposition not only sustained her spirit, but imparted hope on colleagues, students, novice teachers, and families. Members of her circle also returned promise and optimism, filling Jan’s bucket of hope. This symbiotic exchange not only impacted Jan’s career thrival, but also influenced the wider system, allowing for hopeful dispositional and conditional factors to unify on a metaphorical Mobius strip.
In a recorded interview that went viral over social media, 109 year old Holocaust survivor Alice Herz-Sommer shared her secret to feeling good: “Optimism…and looking for the good. Life is beautiful. You have to be thankful that we are living. Wherever you look is beauty…I know about the bad things, but I look for the good things” (YouTube, 2011, para. 6). This type of unwavering hope, positivity, and optimism were keys that pushed Jan beyond survival to career thrival. Pope’s famous line, “Hope springs eternal in the human breast” has resonated with Jan, representative of her ability to see promise in education, her students, colleagues, families, and most importantly, herself.

**The Extended Education Family**

During her first two years of teaching Jan felt “stranded on my own little island” due to little interaction or collaboration with colleagues. As a naturally social person, Jan craved collegiality. Nieto (2003) found that when teachers experienced a close companionship with their peers, they “often feel as if their colleagues—or at least their colleagues’ wisdom and insights—are walking in with them” (p. 124). Community among teachers is crucial if they are to remain bonded to the profession, students, and one another (Nieto). Like Nieto, Palmer (2007) emphasized that community is essential to sustaining a teacher’s heart. He emphasized community connectedness as central to good teaching.

By her third year of teaching, Jan found the kinship she craved. She and two other novice teachers began to gravitate towards one another. The threesome engaged in extensive curricular development, co-planning, and co-teaching. They were able to offer
students engaging course topics that fueled their interests. The sense of community that
developed fostered Jan’s spirit, her curious disposition, and allowed her to develop into
an accomplished teacher.

Jan served in a middle school team cluster for over 20 years. Three of the team
members were stable throughout these two decades. The team members shared values of
learning with and from one another. They each had their own strengths, perspectives,
passions, and talents that when brought together created an innovative and cohesive
teaching unit. Their individual dispositional factors merged to impact school conditional
factors.

This team eventually went on to add looping to their practices. By teaching the
same group of students for three years, feelings of family, consistency, and continuity
were generated. Students, parents, and teachers experienced a solid sense of community
and shared quest. Sharing, nurturing, following, learning, collaboration, and connection
permeated. The culture established stretched past common rhetoric of classroom
community and relationship building (Marzano, et al., 2003; Wong & Wong, 2009) to
one synonymous to a thriving family (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

The extended education family included teachers who viewed their relationships
with students as similar to parenting. They were steadfast in their determination to
provide students with simultaneous social support and academic press (Lee et al., 1999)
necessary for life success. Genuine love and care were developed between all
community members. The extended education family concept was a leading factor in
Jan’s thrival. Her dispositional social nature was satisfied through this arrangement.
Concurrently, the conditional factors that the family-like culture created allowed all members to thrive. In fact, she has imparted many of the values of her previous middle school team culture to her new position, showing transference of this eminent theme.

The following sections will discuss the personal, collegial, student, family, and novice teacher impacts of the extended education family. However, it is important to point out the interrelationship between each stakeholder, similar to how an ecosystem relies on all elements to survive and paradoxically suffers when one element is off balance.

**The impact of the extended education family on Jan.** During her first two years of teaching, Jan was disheartened to learn that her high school culture did not value collaboration:

Teaching is a profession where collaboration works so well. Why would you not want to do that? Li’l Abner [a play in which the drama teacher did not like feeling “upstaged” through Jan’s involvement] was my first glimpse into how, in the teaching profession, we often say that our actions should reflect the best interest of the students, but we don’t always act that way. That was shocking to find out.

She persevered and by the third year found the kinship that fueled her social nature, capacity to act in the best interest of students and allowed her to continually develop her expertise.
Upon entry into middle school, Jan experienced an initial culture shock that included having a difficult time relating to middle school students. However, through collegial support, she found her footing:

I watched and practiced the way Phil and Nancy related with kids. I learned that it’s really about respect, limits, and fairness. Those are really the keys. The kids want limits. They want to know what their boundaries are. They don’t think they do, but they do. But you have to approach limits with respect, and you have to be fair about it. That was a critical lesson for me.

This important lesson followed Jan throughout her career and has profoundly influenced the warm, compassionate and parental-like relationships she has with students. Her dispositional value of the *extended education family* fueled her teaching spirit.

Analysis of teaching artifacts, including a collection of letters from former students, reveals that many saw her as a second mother. Brendtro and Brokenleg (2001) discussed the African adage, “It takes a village to raise a child” and the Cree belief, “Every child needs many mothers” (p. 40). A similar dispositional mindset impacted how Jan views her relationship with students. Although her motherly qualities certainly had a profound impact on the lives of students, thus impacting the school conditional factors, Jan was equally fueled by these relationships. Feeding off of her “need to be needed”, the familial qualities established in her classroom fed her teaching spirit. This bled into her personal identity as a single mother. She explained that over the years:

We've [referring to long time colleagues Phil and Sally] really noticed that, when you’re a parent, being a parent, makes you a better teacher. Being a teacher made
me a better parent. Because I’ve had that opportunity to work with kids and know
how they're going to respond, whether it’s according to what you think, whether it’s
the total opposite, but to be able to be ready for those moments, of both instruction,
of redirection, of brutal honesty, maybe trying to even give motherly advice, to
mend a broken heart, to you know, try to talk them out of something that maybe is
not in their best interest...And I think teaching is, it’s definitely, it’s parenting.

Similar to Palmer’s (2004) metaphor of the Mobius Strip, Jan merged her “onstage”
teaching life with her “backstage” parenting life, with each seamlessly flowing into the
other (p. 47). This steady surge allowed her to experience the rewards of parenting both
at home and in the classroom. For Jan, both inside and outside the classroom “there is no
greater love than parenting, and there is nothing that even comes close to being as
rewarding. This really is the job that keeps giving back, long after your responsibilities
end” (More4Kids, 2010, para. 6).

In addition to meaningful student relationships, Jan was equally fueled through
close-knit collegial ties. During her fifth year at the middle school the principal had
divided up their team in an effort to have their individual strengths impact the wider
system:

I understood the idea, but hated it. Hated it. By then, our team was a well-oiled
machine. Being split up was abysmal. I was with two other teachers and I don’t
think we collaborated on anything, at anytime, for any reason. So I was back to my
own island. I was exhausted by mid-afternoon. In retrospect it was probably a kind
of a depression. I felt perpetually drained. I was dragging all of the time. It was a
terrible time. I didn't have any sense of joy. Thankfully, this team was reunited, rekindling Jan’s spirit. In her words: “I felt invigorated again! There was a restored sense of family, consistency, and continuity.” She has taught as a thriving urban educator for 25 years since this reunion. In the following section, I will elaborate on the extended education family and its collegial impact.

The impact of the extended education family on colleagues. Jan described her second year teaching middle school as follows: “That year was really the start of a feeling of family. Our team knew that we were all working toward the same thing. We were in it for the same reasons and had the same frame of mind.”

Over the course of 20 years, this team continued to develop into a tightly bonded unit. Their shared sense of purpose evolved into extensive collaboration that included curricular integration, team teaching, mainstreaming of special education, and the practice of looping. Researchers contend that these types of approaches can only be fruitful through team effort (Loepp, 1999). Colleagues who are willing to technically and emotionally challenge one another prompt shared growth and impel one another to reach new understandings (Canter & Canter, 1994). Team members experienced “psychic rewards” through collegiality that kept them connected to the greater purpose of their work (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Johnson et al., 2005). These relationships equally fueled individual teaching spirits while simultaneously imparting a sense of family upon the wider conditional factors, or school culture.
In their extensive study of Chicago Public Schools, Bryk and Schneider (2002) found that the top quartile of schools had teachers who reported strong trusting relations with colleagues. These teachers said that they trusted, confided in, and cared about one another. Similarly, the collegial aspect of the extended education family in Jan’s team flourished into a trusting atmosphere in which:

That era really felt like that “one for all and all for one.” We were there for each other. It was to the point where we were fine-tuned to each other… We knew what a kid was doing for another teacher. If somebody were giving me a hard time, I would let my team know…The kids knew, it was kind of like a strong parent team, you know, “Don't ask Mom if Dad says no.” The kids knew that we were all on board; they couldn't get away with anything.

During the course of fieldwork, I had the opportunity to meet Phil, one of Jan’s cherished long time colleagues and dear friend. As we sat at Jan’s kitchen table and discussed the themes of this study, it was clear that genuine love, care, and friendship still exist between them today, even though they haven’t taught together for over a decade. They still share a sense of purpose, viewing teaching as an act of love, a mission done for the greater good. It was inspiring to listen to them recount memories of their time together and the impact they made on the lives of students and each other.

Although the original team that sparked the extended education family is no longer intact, Jan has imparted the spirit of this theme into her current position. She is the team leader for the school electives team, and a shared sense of purpose and drive to make a difference in the lives of youth has fostered a meaningful collegial bond.
The impact of the extended education family on students. Schools often fail to satisfy the basic human desire for bonding (George & Lounsbury, 2000; Ullman, 2005). Through their collaborative endeavors, Jan and her team were able to defy this critique and promote a sense of family amongst students, teachers, and their caregivers. The practices of looping, integrated curriculum, and team teaching created a culture in which genuine long-term relationships were established. The familial sense resulted in meaningful bonds between all stakeholders. Reflecting on looping, or multi-year instruction, Jan reminisced:

That was probably one of the most profound changes that helped with the whole sense of community, and sharing, and nurturing, and following, and learning…We brought them more than just an education, but an experience in collaboration, family, and making connections.

Looping creates support networks for youth to navigate the profoundly complex middle school years (Thompson et al., 2009; Ullman, 2005). Long-term and meaningful relationships enable teachers and students to develop a united investment in student achievement (George & Lounsbury, 2000; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 2003; Nichols & Nichols, 2002; Simel, 1998). These practices influence school conditional factors by increasing opportunities for bonding and shared investment in student achievement.

The school had a very transient population with Jan estimating that nearly half of the students enrolled in the sixth grade were no longer there by eighth grade. However, veteran students took on the role of ambassadors, helping new students acclimate to the
extended education family culture. Students shared an investment in peer success. Similar to case study findings on looping, her team found that attendance improved and incidents of disruptive behavior decreased (George & Lounsbury, 2000).

As Jan recounted, the extended time together developed feelings of love, care, and shared quest. The time and opportunities to appreciate students beyond the confines of typical academics also contributed to strong bonds and mutual respect amongst all community members (Cistone & Shneyderman, 2004). As Jan put it, “there is always something endearing to uncover, even in the most difficult kid.”

Jan values being authentic, empathetic, and honest with her students. She explained:

I have always been open with sharing my life stories with my students. I think they need to know, “This is reality.” I can remember sitting down with my advisory group. I would say, “Let’s get to know each other. I’d like you to tell me something about you and you can ask me any questions about me.” And so, one of the first things was, “Are you married?” “No I’m not, I’m divorced.” They’d say, “Oh we’re sorry.” And I’d answer, “No, it’s okay, you know I’m at a good place with that now.” They wanted to know what happened and I told them. I am sure at least half of them are going through the same thing. So when kids are going through divorce, stuff like that, I’ve got that empathy for them. Those life experiences just add an important layer to what we are doing.

In her current position, Jan and her electives team have come to realize they are the only teachers in the building that see their students throughout their middle school
career. This presents a unique opportunity to develop similar relationships to those fostered through looping. This epiphany has spawned a collective effort to infuse reading and writing into their respective subject matters, gifting students with the benefits of multi-year instruction from a cohesive team of educators. As the next section will reveal, parents and guardians have also felt the power of the extended education family.

**The impact of the extended education family on parents and guardians.**

Many parents, especially in high-poverty urban contexts, carry memories of their own pain and oppression in the public school system (Epstein, 2001). In my early teaching, several caregivers often appeared uncomfortable, distant, defensive, and out of place in parent-teacher conferences. IEP (Individualized Education Plan) meetings tended to project the most discomfort and pain, as many parents recounted memories of what it felt like to spend their schooling labeled with a disability. In addition, some came from cultures in which their voice was customarily left out of the educational equation, making it challenging to foster culturally responsive lines of communication (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001).

Sarason (1995) pointed out that although educators have historically recognized that parents have a stake in public education, issues of power, including holding onto the educator’s role as the “professional” have significantly limited parental influence on schools. He argued that in order for schools to realize the democratic principal, these walls must come down, allowing parents equal power in school governance and authentic voice in the education of their child. Similar to Jan’s recount of how bonds with parents and students were cultivated, research on looping has been found to improve
relationships and communication between teachers and families and improve student learning outcomes (Thompson et al, 2009).

The types of partnerships that Jan and her team fostered with families dismantled traditional barriers that historically leave parents feeling unwelcome and unvalued in their child’s education. As Jan recounted, relationships with families flourished to the point where parent-teacher conferences were a collaborative partnership between youth, families, and the teaching team. In addition, Jan and her team took it upon themselves to engage with students beyond the traditional curriculum through service-learning, choir, drama, and art projects. These extended opportunities were shared and celebrated with families. Parents appreciated the extra interest they took in their child. It was not uncommon for parents to inquire, “Oh I have another child coming up. Are they going to be able to get into your cluster?” As Jan put it, “It became this extended family in education”, imparting a strong community into the school conditional factors.

**The impact of the extended education family on novice teachers.** Throughout her career, Jan has mentored countless student teachers and first year team members. During the same period that the extended education family developed, she reminisced that when new teachers joined their team, they embraced the veteran teachers as “the parents of the team”. She recalled that “they took to that; they were accepting of that”. Similarly, in her current role, Jan and the school librarian are considered the team “teaching parents”, showing transference of her motherly qualities between schools and beyond youth.
Although developmentally appropriate practices exist that are distinctive to various teaching disciplines (Ayers, 1989; Cummins, 2000; Gay, 2000; Downing, 2005; Routman, 2005; Wood-Ray, 2003), there are also qualities that are common to all good teaching. Universal themes such as authentic care, warmth, respect, ability to uncover one’s unique potential, and capacity to press learning forward tend to be embraced by youth and adult learners alike (Ayers, 2001; Kessler; 2002; Lee et al., 1999; Noddings, 2005; Palmer, 2007). Most student teachers welcomed the experiences and mentorship offered from Jan and her team. Jan’s stories, accompanied with letters from memorable student teachers, revealed her unwavering kindness, compassion, care, and honesty. Like past students, former mentees described her as a second mother. Her natural maternal qualities, combined with her masterful teaching skills, proved fruitful when supporting novice teachers. Although she has experienced intergenerational tensions, (Lipkin & Perrymore, 2009), Jan’s caring disposition, along with her skilled mentorship, have proved invaluable in molding the next generation of teachers and inspiring their own extended education families.

The extended education family: synopsis of impact. Jan carries an innate desire to be in the company of others. This fostered her drive to seek authentic relationships with colleagues, students, and families. Long before the term “professional learning community” became fashionable, Jan craved and flourished through team collaboration. Her naturally social nature, a dispositional factor, impacted her ability to share in the shaping of the extended education family, which consequently became a school conditional factor. The love, care, joy, and friendship that permeated the extended
education family influenced the school culture and accordingly imparted systemic change. Like the earlier theme of hope springs eternal this symbiotic exchange not only shaped Jan’s career thrival but also influenced the wider system, allowing for dispositional and conditional factors to seamlessly unite on a metaphorical Mobius strip.

Creative Autonomy

The construct of creative autonomy is the final thread that helps address this study’s research question. According to McGrath (2000), an autonomous teacher is one who has control over her own life by engaging in “self-directed professional development” (p. 100) and who operates with “freedom from control by others” (p. 101). Jan has lived a largely autonomous career in which conditional factors, such as supportive colleagues and leadership, allowed her to develop her unique teaching philosophy and craft curriculum that fueled her sense of creativity.

Autonomous conditions allowed Jan to capitalize off her zeal for learning to develop innovative student-centered curriculum. According to Geasair (n.d.):

Many people have said that creativity is the process by which we connect spiritually, connect with people, and connect with the world. It is safe to say that through creativity, we connect with some energy, some force, some thing. And it is through this connecting process that we have the opportunity to use our creativity to effect change in our lives. (para. 2)

Autonomy allows for meaningful self-reflection. Reflection allows teachers to develop personal theories about teaching and learning. Continuous reflection fosters teachers’ confidence and enables them to be grounded in their beliefs about teaching and learning. Continuous reflection and deeply rooted beliefs are fundamental to the development of effective autonomous teachers (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). An
autonomous school culture supports teachers as they hone their intuition or “inner
teacher” (Palmer, 2004). In effect, conditional school factors that support creative
autonomy fuel dispositional factors, allowing them to come to life.

The following sections will explore how creative autonomy impacted Jan’s
thrive. This will be followed with analysis of collegial, student, parent and guardian, and
novice teacher impact of this final theme. Finally, since Jan has contributed to wider
curricular efforts impacting individual schools, school districts, and the state, a discussion
of systemic impact will tie together this important finding.

The impact of creative autonomy on Jan. Rather than following a scripted
curriculum, creative freedom fueled her hunger for life-long learning. Jan views teaching
as an art form in which curriculum and pedagogy are dynamic, ever evolving, and
provide for constant reflection and refinement. Her dispositional factors of an open
mind, curiosity, and zeal for learning have propelled her classroom practices forward. To
this day, Jan has never taught the same thing, in the same way, twice. She explained:

I am not on a set curriculum. That’s what I appreciate about what I am able to do.

My principal is wonderful at letting me take the curriculum where I think it would
be best suited for the kids. I have an awful lot of fun doing that!

After 40 years in the classroom, she is still fueled by the creative work of figuring out the
best content, strategies, and approaches to motivate and inspire her students. Their
successes feed her creative spirit.

Upon recounting a breakthrough with a reluctant reader who also displayed
perpetual behavioral issues, Jan recalled their conversation. When she asked him how he
knew what “molasses” meant while the other students were still trying to figure this out, he replied:

“Cause I went home and looked it up online and I found four really good articles about it.” I [Jan] said, “You did, well then you know the story?” and he said, “Yeah, it’s a really good one!” I [Jan] just wanted to cry right then and there, because he was excited enough to research that on his own. I mean he’s like bad boy number one. And yet, that caught his attention. He was totally hooked.

Through an autonomous school culture, Jan was trusted to select professional development that best suited her needs. Her participation in the Colorado Writing Project allowed her to dig deep into writing on a personal and professional level (Colorado Writing Project, 2009). She experienced first-hand the complex process of writing, practiced crafting writing, and engaged in peer-to-peer sharing and feedback (Hindley, 1996). These forms of deep professional development opportunities allow teachers to both personally and professionally grow (Graves, 1994; Routman, 2005), which consequently impacts their ever-evolving philosophy of teaching (Sherman, 2009).

Deep, meaningful, and relevant professional development experiences allow teachers to better understand themselves (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999; Palmer, 2007). Self-awareness cultivates understanding of one’s students (Hindley, 1996). Creative autonomy is a win-win situation for teachers and students alike.

Teachers who thrive are intrinsically motivated. Concurrently, they face the never-ending pressures of the educational pendulum that perpetually shifts from one extreme of educational philosophy to another (Sherman, 2009). Throughout these shifts,
creative autonomy has allowed Jan to stay grounded in her beliefs about teaching and learning. This grounding has allowed her to teach with integrity, rather than complacent surface-level implementation of the latest and greatest educational “best practices.” Her disposition for learning and creativity are supported through school conditions that empower her to take ownership of curriculum.

The impact of creative autonomy on colleagues. Novice teachers who are deemed successful are more likely to stay (Boyd et al., 2009; Henry, Bastian & Fortner, 2011). In her first teaching assignment, Jan and her team were autonomous in the courses they offered. They were empowered to be creative in curriculum design and instructional delivery. Consequently their courses were very popular and deemed successful. Through collaboration and sharing in learning, Jan was able to learn how to develop curriculum:

Those two ladies [high school colleagues] really had vision of what that looked like. I learned from them. So knowing that I could depend on people who were more expert really allowed me to become that expert on my own too. Because where else do you learn it?

Farris-Berg, et al. (1975) examined the experiences of teachers they called “liberated.” They argued that teacher autonomy could influence classroom and whole school success. Teachers, they reasoned, must be trusted in order for schools to become high performing. When trusted, they collectively operate in ways that emulate the cultural attributes of high-performing organizations. This includes a shared purpose
focused on students as individuals and development of learning programs that customize student learning.

The *creative autonomy* that Jan and her colleagues shared allowed them to experience success and feel liberated. Her long-time middle school team intuitively began to experiment with numerous innovative approaches, long before they were educationally “en vogue”. They naturally discovered the connections between their subject specialties. Through conditional factors that included an autonomous culture combined with strong collegiality, this team was empowered to engage in curricular innovations from the ground up (Farris-Berg et al., 1975; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). The *creative autonomy* this team experienced was motivating to each member and cultivated a team dynamic of constant refinement and further innovation.

Jan and other teachers who thrive (Johnson et al., 2005; Steele, 2009; Stronge, 2007) play an important role as “knowledge generators” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). Through *creative autonomy*, these teachers highly invest in designing and constantly refining their curriculum (Marzano et. al., 2001; Pohlman, 2008; Stiggins, 2005). When teachers are valued as autonomous knowledge generators, they view curriculum as tailored to unique student needs, abilities, linguistic and cultural roots, and interests (Cummins, 2000; Herrera, 2010; Tomlinson, 2003; Wormeli, 2006). In addition, they see curriculum as ever evolving through a spiral of inquiry, formative data gathering (Pohlman, Stiggins), reflection, refinement, and consequent new inquiry (Dana & Yendol-Hoppy, 2009). These important elements cannot be provided through mass-produced impersonal scripted curricula. Jan and her team collaborated as creatively...
autonomous knowledge generators and consequently learned with and from one another. As Jan put it, “These were all just natural things to do.” and “We were never stagnant, always evolving, always trying new ideas, and always refining. I truly loved my work!”

**The impact of creative autonomy on students.** *Creative autonomy* inspired Jan and her colleagues to continuously improve and innovate. This fed their teaching spirit, which in turn promoted student success. Eisner (1994) argued that students need to “see the connection between what they study in school and the life they lead outside of school” (p. 84). This same conviction led Jan and her team to adopt curricular integration in the middle school:

We had noticed students would say things like, “Well this is Social Studies, why should we have to write in here?” Or, “This isn’t math, why are we adding in Language Arts?” They saw everything as fragmented. Our integrated units brought it together into a total experience. And I think it really produced well-rounded kids.

Eisner (1994) explained that in order to increase relevance and transference, it is important to help students see relationships across fields. Additionally, he argued that offering a variety of forms of representation through which meanings can be construed fosters cognition. Jan and her creatively autonomous team offered students opportunities for transference and multiple forms of representation. Along with curricular integration, their commitment to offering opportunities to promote student creativity beyond the confines of typical academics included enrichment periods, service-learning, teaching of choir, dramatic re-enactments of social studies content, and cross-curricular creative
writing. Jan and her colleagues found that these opportunities fostered student creativity and transference across subjects.

In addition to the social support that benefited students through themes of *hope springs eternal* and the *extended education family*, Jan’s students were provided with academic press (Lee et al., 1999). The academic press that Jan has provided relied upon *creative autonomy* to unlock student interests and customize curriculum to suit their needs. Reflecting on the early years of her career, Jan said:

> Things were so much easier before No Child Left Behind. That probably sounds sacrilegious, but it’s true…we did a lot of good things, in terms of those times.

> And you can’t tell me that kids weren’t learning, because they were.

Even though in the early years of her career standardized assessment and accountability were limited, Jan chose exemplary practices that helped lift urban youth out of mediocrity and fostered a culture of academic excellence. In her current role, her students consistently make exceptional growth on formative and standardized measures. She has been recognized throughout her career for making remarkable gains in student achievement. Jan is steadfast in her commitment to develop student-centered, relevant, and appropriate curriculum that motivates and propels academic achievement. She and her students mutually benefit from this arrangement that relies upon her autonomous creative curricular innovations. Her intellectual and curious disposition is empowered through an autonomously creative school culture. The *creative autonomy* conditional factors are rewarded through student achievement.
The impact of creative autonomy on parents and guardians. In addition to the personal, collegial, and student impacts of creative autonomy, parents and guardians were simultaneously influenced. Many were able to witness the gift of seeing their children experience academic success in an innovative environment. Parents of special education children were comforted knowing that their children were cared for and given the best learning environment possible and in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Friend & Bursuck, 2002). The conditional factors of creative autonomy empowered Jan and her team to seek unconventional means that ensured all students were thriving. For example, one young man lived with cerebral palsy. He loved to hear Jan read and his face would light up in her presence. She would constantly catch up with him and read to him if he had to leave for services in the middle of her class. This commitment fostered shared joy and a creative spirit. Years later he came back to her school to vote on election day. Jan recalls that his face still lit up with joy when he saw her.

Even when budget-cuts eliminated electives, Jan and her team pooled their resources, believing that it was imperative to serve the “whole child” (DuBois-Maas, 2013). She recalls that parents continuously expressed appreciation for the extra investment that fostered student creativity and went beyond the confines of traditional academics.

The impact of creative autonomy on novice teachers. Creative autonomy has also impacted the manner in which Jan mentored student teachers and first year teachers alike. She explains:
I’ve found that because I’ve been alive a number of years, that people do come to me and I’m thrilled to share anything I have. I want to be that resource for people and have them know that.

The same standards that are used for teacher licensure have found their way into state-level teacher evaluation systems (NCATE, 2013). This emphasis has forced many teacher preparation programs to prioritize a standards-based technical orientation over more progressive ideas (Sherman, 2009). Sherman asked, “How can new teachers come to value the importance of nonstandardized learning environments that respect the uniqueness of individuals within the current educational climate of standardization, which also permeates teacher preparation?” (p. 56). Jan’s ability to balance the demands of standardization with progressive ideas allows novice teachers under her care to benefit through her example. She is able to demonstrate a balance between meeting requirements of standardization, while simultaneously developing creative autonomy.

**The impact of creative autonomy on the wider system.** Jan’s sense of creative autonomy has not only influenced the schools she has taught in, but the wider system. Beginning in 1986, she was invited onto district curriculum writing teams. In her words:

I realized that was my chance to make a difference. If I could craft something toward an end that I felt was important or necessary then I needed to be able to do that. This was a new leadership endeavor for me that I have contributed to ever since.
Since the *creative autonomy* of her close-knit middle school team fostered a number of innovations, it was not uncommon for other teachers and administrators to visit their school:

> We had people coming in from other schools, other states, and even other countries to see what we were doing. Visitors wanted to know about Special Education inclusion. They wanted to know about looping with the kids. A lot of it was around curriculum; you know the whole idea of the co-curricular units was really starting to come into play and we’d been doing it for a while.

Additionally, Jan and long time colleague Phil were hired to consult with other schools across the state. In 1993, their team won the “Phi Delta Kappa Teacher Team of the Year Award” recognized for the simultaneous social support and academic achievement they accomplished. In the late 1990’s Jan was one of a few distinguished teachers in the state invited to set benchmarks for the seventh grade CSAP (Colorado Student Assessment Program).

In her current position, Jan has been charged to author a school reading intervention curriculum, inspired off of the creative and successful innovations taking place in her classroom. She has facilitated Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; Sagor, 2005) that has led to a school-wide commitment to embracing reading intervention. District leaders are taking notice of the student results she produces through her creative adaptations to district curriculum. She is proving results in the classroom and beyond. These ripples of change have combined energy to impact waves of systematic change (Wheatley, 1999).
Creative autonomy: synopsis of impact. Jan’s career longevity and capacity to thrive have been heavily influenced by creative autonomy. Conditional factors including like-minded colleagues and supportive leadership have propelled her natural curiosity and propensity for learning forward. As Robinson (2009) said, “We are all born with extraordinary powers of imagination, intelligence, feeling, intuition, spirituality, and of physical and sensory awareness” (p. 9). These birthright powers, or innate dispositional factors, were preserved in Jan’s career, allowing her to thrive. In addition, the collective creative autonomy that she and her colleagues maintained remind us that “learning is social” (Bandura, 1977). Teachers and students benefit from conditions that embrace the social and creative nature of learning.

The three salient themes that emerged from Jan’s narrative – hope springs eternal, the extended education family, and creative autonomy – each had important influence on her career longevity. In addition, as portrayed in figure 7.2 they each influenced and supported one another. Finally, each theme was impacted by dispositional and conditional factors.
Sustaining Spirit in Times of Trial

Jan told her career narrative through an optimistic lens, always finding the wisdom, joy, humor, and hopeful implications of each story. However, like all teachers, especially urban teachers, she experienced her fair share of heartache, stressors, trials and tribulations.
In chapter 3, I equated her career beginnings as similar to teacher career theorist Huberman’s (1989) “easy beginnings”. Yet, had she not united with like-minded colleagues during her third year, her novice teaching years could have easily led to symptoms characteristic of “painful beginnings”. During her first two years she experienced isolation and lack of resources or guidance. Other hardships included an attack on her principal, which spawned the patrol of school grounds and realization of how profound school violence can be. Finally, her forced transfer from high school to middle school was a painful experience that generated temporary disillusionment with the education system.

In chapter 4, I related her middle career to Huberman’s (1989) findings that career teachers tended to sustain their drive through regular opportunities for novelty or change. Jan described her middle career as transformational to her current teacher identity. However, through the many inspiring experiences, there was also the painful loss of beloved students. Some were lost through suicide, others in tragic accidents, still others through violent encounters. Some are still alive, but living in prison. This loss of students surfaced sorrow and pain that she still shoulders today. In addition, she experienced a period of depression when her close-knit team was broken apart by administration. There were countless frustrations with district shifts, or the swing of the education pendulum (Sherman, 2009), in curricular adoptions and mandates. In her personal life, Jan went through a difficult divorce, the challenges of single-parenthood, harrowing physical pain that clouded her spirit, and other painful experiences.
As discussed in chapter 6, Jan’s later career shares some similarities to Huberman’s (1989) findings that teachers in their veteran years often move to specialized roles. In Jan’s case she is now a reading intervention teacher. Her current position has demonstrated transference of the themes foundational to her career thrival. However, she also experienced the uncertainty of two years of job instability due to budget constraints and it took time to find the level of kinship, collegiality, sharing, and collaboration that fueled her in the past. Like many teachers in this era of standardization and accountability, she battles to juggle the needs of students with high-stakes testing, surmounting teacher effectiveness requirements, school improvement plans, and many other pressures. As Jan put it, “I’ve been teaching for 40 years and have honestly never worked as hard in my life.”

The first sub-question of this study asks: How is her spirit sustained throughout her teacher lifecycle? In this study, I refer to spirited teachers as highly skilled educators who vehemently preserve their passion, commitment, and capacity to thrive, in spite of the many trials that accompany teaching (Baldacci, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Mathews, 2009; Mitchie, 1999; Wolk & Rodman, 1994). Moreover as Jan’s narrative has revealed, spirited teachers are willing to deeply reflect upon who they are. They believe that their selfhood holds a mirror to which students will become (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999). Put simply, spirited teachers are able to align their values and beliefs to their teaching (Britzman 1991; Korthagen & Vasalos; 2005, Lipka & Brinthaupt). These values and beliefs relate to the dispositional factors—attitudes, beliefs, values, and intuition—discussed earlier in this chapter.
One’s spirit is commonly known as their non-physical self and synonymous to the word ‘soul’. Teacher spiritual sustenance entails one’s ability to unite their soul with their role as an educator (Palmer, 2004). One’s ability to preserve the idealism that called them to teaching is a form of spiritual work (Palmer, 2007). In my experience, some teachers sustain their spirit through drawing strength from religion and faith-based belief systems and related sub-cultures. For others teachers like Jan, their teaching spirit is sustained through non-religious practices and belief systems. Either way, as Jesuit priest, paleontologist and philosopher, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1955) famously put it, “we are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience” (p. 382). In Jan’s case, she does not belong to an organized religion. Her spiritual connection to teaching is driven by her steadfast faith that teaching is “for the greater good”.

Although Jan tells her story through a hopeful lens, which is natural to her identity, she experienced many of the stressors that lead others teachers to burn out or burn in. The theme of hope springs eternal is foundational to her personality, how she interacts with others, and her resilience to the painful and stressful aspects of teaching. This disposition is the quintessence to her ability to sustain spirit. While each theme discussed above – hope springs eternal, the extended education family, and creative autonomy – contributed to Jan’s sustained spirit, the most salient answer to this question is simple: students.

Throughout her narrative, Jan consistently returned to her love for students, concern for students, lessons imparted from students, and how students keep her going.
Students are “the greater good” that unites Jan’s soul to her role of teaching (Palmer, 2004). To this day, when her students ask why she is so happy, she responds: “Because I just love being here with you. I love teaching you…you keep me young.” Students are the root of her sustained spirit and their inspiration permeated throughout her story.

**Examples of students as spiritual sustenance.** Upon her first glimpse into the realities of school violence in the mid-1970s, Jan’s leading concern was protection of students: “That’s the year I learned that we need to protect our students. What are you willing to do to put yourself on the line? You know, for that kid.” In 1981, although angry that she had to be transferred due to having the least amount of years of service, Jan was most profoundly troubled about the impact on her students: “I just felt really sad that that [creative writing program] was being taken away from these kids. It wasn’t their fault and what was going to be substituted in its place? What would happen to the kids?”

The tragic loss of students always spawned wisdom and insights that Jan carries with her today. When recounting the death of Christy, who had confided to a colleague that she sensed she would die young and was killed in a car accident in 1985, Jan reminisced:

> The notion struck me that, “Oh my goodness, these kids are speaking to us. They are speaking to us and we need to really be able to listen.” I need to listen outside of what I teach. I mean that is so minimal compared to what kids might need as a person, as a human being.

Describing the loss of former student Joshua Dawson [student of Jan’s in the 1990’s who died in 2005 in a police shootout], Jan reflected:
He had stolen a car, tried to hide out in somebody’s garage, and got killed in the
gun exchange. Broke my heart. Broke my heart. I mean to see this big man;
something had to have clicked with him, somewhere along the way. I think at
least knowing that while he was here he did some good for himself. He did some
good for other people [referring to his earning of GED and helping others earn
theirs while in prison]. And it made sense to him. He learned something. So you
know, I still teach today for the Joshua Dawson’s of the world.

Reminiscing about Darlene Olivas, a student of in the mid-1990’s who defied
harrowing obstacles and attributes Jan’s support as inspirational, Jan said:

She is an example of why I teach. If you can make a difference for even one kid
in their life then that’s amazing… I received a letter from her a few years later.
She had an assignment to write a letter to a memorable teacher…I was so
incredibly touched by her letter and still hold on to it today. It’s one of those feel
goods that keeps you going.

Reflecting on a relationship with a student who graduated from her current middle school
in 2011, Jan said:

David and I developed a really good relationship. He knew he could come to me
if he was having a difficult day or another person didn’t understand him, or he got
himself in trouble. So the very last day of school, after continuation, he came
back into the school, gave me a big hug and said, “I just want to thank you Miss.
You really have helped me a lot.” And I thought. “I’m not done. I’m not done.”
There will be plenty more David’s in the world that need someone, just even one person that understands them. That can help them see things differently.

I visited Jan at her school a few days before the start of the 2013-2014 school year. She was in the midst of numerous meetings and had her first few hours of time in her classroom to prepare for student arrival. A few days later, she wrote to me and confided:

Earlier last week when you came to Skinner to get the artifacts, you asked if I was excited about the coming year and I replied yes. But it was more of a perfunctory answer at that point rather than heartfelt (it was hot, we had had endless meetings, not enough time in our rooms, and my head was crammed full of "This year we need to focus on...") and I started feeling a little panicky. I'm thinking this wonderful story of my teaching life is unfolding and I'm not quite feeling it "in person." Then the kids started. Whew!!! The moment they started coming through my actual classroom door, I was flooded with excitement. As I greeted them and saw their faces smiling back at me and already trusting me, knowing each one of them had their own personal story of a life lived so far and the promise of how I could interact with each of them to help them realize their potential, I felt buoyant again. This is the part I love! Interacting with them, getting to know their "stories", motivating them, helping them see the futures they can have—it’s exhilarating! Needless to say, I was very relieved to know that in spite of my lackluster feelings that first week, the passion was still there when it really mattered.
Students are central to Jan’s core or teacher spirit. Similarly, effective culturally responsive teachers are known to keep students and their biographies as their faithful focal point (Gay, 2000; Herrera, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Throughout our time together, Jan shared more stories of students than any other topic, consistently referring back to them as central to every idea we explored. Ayers (2001) coincided, “People are called to teach because they love children and youth, or because they love being with them, watching them open up and grow and become more able, more competent, more powerful in the world” (p. 8). Students are the key to Jan’s sustained spirit.

A Counter-narrative to Teacher Bashing

The second sub-question of the study asks: How can her story contribute to the literature as a counter-narrative to the current rhetoric focused on “teacher bashing”? Counter-narratives critique the hegemonic stories that are a societal norm (Maynes, et al., 2008). As Matyók (2009) put it, counter-narrative re-humanizes. Senehi (2000) proposed that “If voice is power, storytelling which facilitates voice is empowering”, hence when:

Personal stories are shared in a social context, individual stories may come to represent a group’s shared experience, and in this way gains import…As personal stories begin to shape a group narrative, the individual stories gain power. The personal becomes political. (p. 26)

Society projects a contradictory view of teachers. On the one hand our society conveys value of teachers and the promise of public education (Dewey, 1997; Rose, 1995); while on the other hand, teachers are held liable for the educational ills currently faced in public education (Giroux, 2012; Karp, 2010; Nieto, 2003, Palmer, 1998). Socio-
political theorists view schools as direct reflections of societal values, norms, and beliefs (Anderson & Collins, 2004; Kozol, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Traudt, 2002). From this perspective, the culture of power silences and oppresses those not in power in order to preserve reign (Au, 2009; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto & Bode). This includes placing teachers low on the status totem pole, where they are vulnerable to imbalanced policies and rhetoric (Ayers, 2001; Giroux; Karp).

Reform efforts aimed at closing the “achievement gap” point a discouraging finger at the ineffectiveness of teachers, often ignoring the larger realm of educational “equity gaps” that broader societal issues of poverty and systemic racism contribute to (Rethinking schools, 2010; Spayde, 2011; Thomas, 2013). Additionally, age bias in the United States is one of the most socially-condoned and institutionalized forms of discrimination (Nelson, 2005). “Veteran bias” is becoming more prevalent in schools (Ripp, 2011; Rosales, 2012). Under the premise of education reform, the media and politicians contribute to veteran bias by conveying a negative connotation of veterans as “stubborn and stuck in their ways” (Ripp, 2011, para. 3). Institutions such as Teach for America exacerbate the issue by focusing reform efforts on new college graduates, many of whom are given the jobs of veteran teachers, under the premise of saving school districts money (Hulpuch, 2013; Ripp; Rosales).

All of the factors mentioned above paint a harsh picture that bears down on the lives and careers of teachers serving high-poverty contexts. The deterioration of the energy, vitality, and heart of our teachers has led many teachers to quit (Intrator, 2002; Karp, 2010; Naison, 2013; Pizzigati, 2012; Wilson, 2012). However, when they
experience success, research indicates that teachers tend to report higher job satisfaction, a lower rate of burnout, and a tendency to remain in diverse high-need schools (Boyd et al., 2009; Henry et al. 2011; Naison, 2013).

Teachers like Jan maintain a deep spirit of passion and hope, countering the common burn out epidemic. *Hope springs eternal* fosters resilience to the harsh realities of teacher bashing. In addition, the *extended education family* and *creative autonomy* fuel teacher spirit, allowing them to maintain passion for their work.

Ayers (2001) argued that “If teaching is to become vital and honorable again, it is teachers who will have to make it so. It is the voice of the teacher that must at last be heard” (p. 9). Jan’s narrative counters public perceptions of teachers as ineffective or the source of our educational perils. She and many thriving teachers like her are in fact the solution. Her interactions with students including consistent gifts of love, care, support, and academic excellence transform lives on a daily basis.

Jan and I conservatively estimated that she has taught over 4,000 students in her career. It is no wonder that the running joke is that her family members can’t take her anywhere without bumping into a former student. As a result of Jan’s career thrival, 4,000 student lives have been impacted. 4,000 at-risk youth have experienced the promise of *hope springs eternal*, the *extended education family*, and *creative autonomy*. Add to the equation another modest estimate of at least 25 student teachers that have benefited under Jan’s mentorship. If only 5 of these teachers have the longevity of Jan, this could equal to 20,000 students impacted. It is clear that this one thriving career
matters. This one life has guided thousands of lives for the better. Lee Iacocca once said:

In a completely rational society, the best of us would aspire to be teachers and the rest of us would have to aspire to something less, because passing civilization along, from one generation to the next, ought to be the highest honor and responsibility anyone could have. (Iacocca, 2007, p. 26)

Not only has Jan passed on civilization, she has made it more just and opportune. She has dedicated her life to inspiring urban youth to change the course of the “Mathew Effect” (Stanovich, 1986) in which the “rich get richer and the poor get poorer” by equipping society’s underprivileged with the academic and social tools necessary to succeed.

Jan’s story offers insurmountable wisdom as it relates to the promise of education and how teacher thriving can dismantle educational injustices. Her narrative is an example of the type of teacher voice necessary to negate a “grand narrative” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that condones teacher bashing and contributes to low status. As I will elaborate in the following section, the next important step is to make narratives such as Jan’s accessible to fellow teachers, administrators, policy makers, and the media. Stories of thriving teachers have the potential to “re-humanize” (Matyók, 2009) education for social justice. The voices of thriving career teachers are imperative in shifting educational policy to one that truly supports a democratic education and sustainable reform for our most vulnerable youth. Without hearing these thriving teachers, “reform” is just rhetoric.
Implications of Study

Through the process of narrative inquiry in which Jan and I carefully unpacked her career story and the significance behind it, three salient themes emerged: hope springs eternal, the extended education family, and creative autonomy. Combined, these important themes help explain how she not only has survived but thrived as a career-long urban teacher. Each theme was influenced by internal dispositional factors and external conditional factors that complemented one another, existing on a metaphorical teacher thrival Mobius strip. Jan’s spirit was sustained by each of the themes along with a deep love and commitment to her students. Her narrative is simultaneously her story, reflecting her individual experience and uniqueness, and part of a larger story, through contextualization in the realm of the social and political.

The passion, hope, and wisdom portrayed in her story have implications for the wider education community. Stories offer readers the unique opportunity to draw their own conclusions and personally relevant implications. However, in the following sections, I will share salient implications that I have drawn for teachers, school leaders, teacher education, and researchers.

Implications for Teachers

Most people are called to teach for moral reasons and motives of the heart (Ayers, 2001; Nieto, 2003; Palmer, 2007). However, as explored in this study, it is entirely too common for teachers to lose heart as they face the disparities that permeate public education. Jan’s narrative is powerful in demonstrating the tremendous impact that one career can hold when dispositional and conditional factors support teacher thrival.
Implications for teacher thrival include sharing in story, seeking close-knit collegiality, finding tools to sustain hope, seeking the right external conditions for sustained spirit, and striving for steadiness on the ever-swinging education pendulum.

**Sharing in story.** Teachers like Jan offer inspiration, and in times of despair her story, and stories like hers, can rekindle one’s sense of purpose. Nieto (2003) found that through the process of formulating teacher inquiry groups, educators shared in storytelling, allowing them to garner support and renew their spirit for teaching in the company of others. Palmer (2007) agrees and offers the practice of Quaker inspired “clearness committees” as a means for practicing safe and supportive teacher dialogue. Through this process, members recognize the vulnerability in sharing beyond the technical aspects of the profession. They commit to creating a safe space for authentic listening, relating matters of the heart to metaphors, and asking only honest and open questions that lead the speaker to garnering their own truth. Clearness committees do not aim to advise, solve or fix, but rather to plant seeds “as in authentic education—and there is no way of knowing when, where, or how those seeds will flower” (p. 160).

Humans are natural born storytellers (Gottschall, 2013). Through the sharing and hearing of stories like Jan’s, teachers gain a sense of their commonalities and create shared wisdom. In addition, as group narrative takes shape, empowerment is cultivated. Teachers can formulate support networks, borrow ideas from the literature, and create systems for sharing and offering support that best suit their collective needs.

**Seeking close-knit collegiality.** This study shows that in order for teachers to thrive, they must find like-minded colleagues that they can share both the intellectual and
spiritual work of teaching. Graves (2001) suggested that teachers who forged a long-term relationship with at least one colleague profited from a mutually beneficial bond that was a source of joint personal and professional energy. Although the conditional factors of some schools would make it difficult to formulate a full-fledged extended education family, the spirit of this notion can be creatively fostered in partnership with even one trusted colleague. Alternatively, if teachers struggle to find the types of connections necessary to develop their own site-based extended education family, they can network with like-minded teachers serving in different schools. In this era of technology and social media, I have found teachers across the globe create forums to connect and support one another.

In her current context, Jan has resourcefully developed a sense of family with the electives team. Even when the larger school doesn’t fully embrace this level of collegiality, it is possible for courageous teachers to band together and create what Elliot Wiggington (1985) and Myles Horton (1990) called “islands of decency” for students. These smaller sub-cultures can be similar to the one Jan and her colleagues created in their middle school cluster team for over twenty years. There are conventional and unconventional ways to connect with other teachers and develop mutually beneficial relationships that offer the technical and spiritual support to sustain teaching.

**Sustaining hope.** Jan reminds us that behind every hardship, “tomorrow is a new day” therefore a hopeful and optimistic outlook can help teachers survive the hard parts, striving for the promise of a new day. In my own teaching journey, I have found that

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collecting and revisiting artifacts such as student work, letters from students and families, 
pictures, and other memorabilia in a “Why I Teach” file replenishes my hope during 
stressful times. Likewise, Jan saved an impressive collection of memorabilia that she 
passionately shared with me throughout this study. It was clear that these keepsakes 
evoked memories and refueled her spirit. In addition, new teachers and I have created 
“Why I Teach” mantra’s that we hang over our door or by our desk as a constant 
reminder as to our greater purpose. Teachers must develop a deep connection to why 
they teach and keep continual reminders at arm’s reach.

Courageous teachers find the right urban “home”. Although it is noble for 
teachers to stay in a teaching position because of their students, the effects of a toxic 
school culture can make it an uphill battle to sustain spirit. Many new teachers are placed 
in the most dysfunctional schools in which teacher turnover is rampant. I have witnessed 
many teachers on the verge of prematurely quitting the profession rekindle their spirit 
through transfer to a healthier, but still urban, school culture. This change took 
tremendous courage and adaptation, but resulted in rekindled hope. These teachers could 
have become disenfranchised from the profession but are now thriving in their 
professional home away from home and making a difference for youth. It is important 
for teachers to find a school culture that supports their teaching spirit. In turn, their 
optimistic spirit will contribute to more hopeful school cultures.

Infusing creative autonomy with professional capital. Jan’s story demonstrates 
that even in this era of standardization, which can often lead to teachers feeling like 
technicians who are reduced to following strict mandates and scripted curriculum, there
are ways to earn professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullen, 2012), while also maintaining creative autonomy. In fact, much of the creative autonomy Jan enjoys today can be attributed to the professional capital earned through successful innovative practices. These two paradoxes in fact supported one another. This balancing act is best accomplished through collaboration with other teachers. As Ayers (2001) said, exceptional teachers are those who tend to “teach against the grain, and teaching against the grain can best be accomplished with allies” (p. 126).

As this study demonstrates, maintaining focus on students is imperative to sustaining spirit. This is a difficult challenge with the many conflicting demands that teachers juggle, but through prioritization, students can surface as the foremost priority. Ayers (2001) found that successful urban teachers tell countless stories of “creative insubordination” to school regulations that serve bureaucracy but not students. For him, this included taking apart the intercom that incessantly disrupted student learning with insignificant announcements. His guiding principle to this idea is simple: “Creative insubordination is justified if it serves student learning” (p. 125).

The ideas of hope springs eternal, the extended education family, and creative autonomy can be carried over as pillars to inspire others in their own career thrival. Specifically, teachers can create networks of like-minded colleagues that share in the power of narrative, develop their own creative versions of the extended education family, and collaborate in the imaginative work of innovation from the ground up. Finally, teachers who thrive find ways to sustain their hope and ideals, they seek out a school
culture that supplies the conditional factors that support their spirit, and work to find balance in an era of standardization.

**Implications for School Leaders**

Jan’s success can largely be attributed to school conditional factors. Although she experienced her fair share of hardships and disillusion with the education system, she was also gifted with some inspiring principals that supported her thrival. These leaders fostered creative autonomy that led to numerous innovations. In turn, Jan’s innovative spirit supported student achievement. Additionally, her results in the classroom led to district and state level recognition and opportunities for wider systemic influence. School and district leaders can create the conditions for teacher thrival by thinking beyond conventional team makeup and fostering a culture of thrival.

**Autonomous collegiality.** Jan’s first team that fueled her spirit was self-selected. She and two other colleagues gravitated to one another and began to share in planning and team teaching. The middle school team that birthed the extended education family was at one point broken apart; however, through an innovative proposal to pilot looping, they were brought back together and flourished for many years. Jan’s current team consists of reading teachers, the school librarian, the physical education teacher, two Spanish teachers, a music teacher, and the art teacher. Although this group does not share in a common subject matter, they have forged a solid kinship that propels student achievement and feeds Jan’s collaborative nature.

The teams that have helped sustain Jan’s spirit were largely autonomously formed. This implies that school leaders must be keenly observant of dynamics between
teachers and open to collaborations beyond conventional norms. This requires listening to teams and their ideas of how to function or develop “islands of decency” (Horton, 1990; Wiggington, 1985) within the broader system. As Jan’s story reveals, team subcultures have cultivated wider systemic changes such as school-wide adoption of looping and a system wide embrace of reading strategies in all subject matters.

In congruence with autonomous collegiality, Jan’s story reveals a need for intergenerational team building. Jan’s mentorship of novice teachers proved fruitful in developing dedicated and effective new teachers. Many of these teachers were heavily inspired by her sustained spirit and learned how to accomplish academic achievement and social support. They also learned through Jan’s modeling how to retain optimism and resist burn out or burn in.

Jan’s narrative also revealed intergenerational tensions. It is important that school leaders understand the qualities of the different generations that make up a school and the types of tensions that are common, and build a culture that respects and builds off of the strengths that each generation offers. Young teachers provide schools with an abundance of energy and fresh perspective. Thriving veteran teachers provide schools with a wealth of wisdom, intuition, and educational know-how. It is important that school leaders foster school cultures that appreciate the gifts that each generation offers and avoid falling into the “veteran bias” trap that permeate many schools today.

**Fostering a culture of career thrill.** School leaders can support career longevity through facilitation of a culture that values career thrill. This entails understanding and supporting the three themes of *hope springs eternal*, the *extended*
education family, and creative autonomy through recognition of teacher dispositional factors and creation of conditional factors that support thriving. Jan reported that great principals were fundamental to inspiring her, while others perpetuated symptoms of burn in:

I’ve had a few principals that were just kind of lack luster, and I felt lack luster on those times. And they didn’t last that long, thank god, because I would try my absolute best, and it was kind of like, my heart wasn’t quite in it either. I wasn’t feeling valued for what I could do or bring to the school. You know, it’s kind of that cycling down, so you want to do that same thing for the kids, feeling value about what they do too.

Principals who recognized and valued Jan’s contributions inspired her. In recalling one such principal, she explained: “She would frequently visit our classrooms and leave little notes, complimenting what she observed. You know, just like kids need feedback, teachers need that too.” In her current role, Jan is valued as a teacher leader whom the administration trusts and relies upon to guide school-wide literacy improvement efforts.

To complement autonomous collegiality and cultivation of a career thriving culture, school and district leaders can create the space to honor the heart and spirit of teachers. This could entail facilitating the suggestions provided in the teacher implications section of this chapter. As Jan’s narrative demonstrates, investment in the longevity of inspiring teachers benefits all stakeholders and the wider system.
Implications for Teacher Education

Pre-service teacher education should have a goal of developing effective career-long teachers. In addition, in-service teacher education, including continuing education, district and site-based professional development, and graduate programs should continue to foster career longevity. The following sections will offer implications specific to pre-service teacher development, in-service development, and connections between the two.

Pre-service development. Through adoption of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), Colorado and many other state boards of education have required teacher candidates to demonstrate a multitude of distinct teaching competencies that are categorized into standards. All Colorado teachers must meet 8 performance-based standards, with some standards requiring as many as 18 sub-standards or “competencies”. This results in a list of over 120 competencies that pre-service teachers must demonstrate for licensure. In addition, for each licensure area, teacher candidates must meet a long list of subject-specific standards (Colorado Department of Education, 2013b). The pressures of current education reform have dramatically altered the focus of teacher education. In a response to education reform policies, many teacher preparation programs have shifted toward a standards-based technical orientation (Sherman, 2009).

Most of the standards required for licensure make sense and paint a conglomerate picture of “good teaching.” However, when teacher preparation programs focus primarily on ensuring that candidates have met standards, an unanticipated consequence (Merton, 1936) is the resulting “check-list” mentality that permeates the profession. This
mentality crosses over into schools in which it is entirely too common to hear educators say “Well I did that” rather than communicating a deep understanding of the purpose behind their actions.

Pre-service teacher preparation must strike a balance between preparing new teachers for the realities of a standardized education system while simultaneously fostering dispositional factors that universally make up effective teaching. For the purposes of this study, I refer to dispositional factors as those connected to a teacher’s identity. These factors encompass teacher attitudes, beliefs, values, and intuition.

Dispositional development requires moving beyond the technical to the heart or core of the teacher. Aspiring teachers should have ample opportunities to explore the deeper questions as to why they are called to teach. They need to know that burn out is an epidemic that they are vulnerable to. They need to read about, talk with, and be offered mentorship by thriving teachers like Jan. They need to understand the factors, such as the themes uncovered in this study, that foster career thrival. Finally, teacher preparation programs must help novices develop plans for sustaining spirit, surviving the hard parts, and ultimately thriving.

**Continuing education.** In-service teacher education faces many of the same pressures of standardization as pre-service education. Teacher effectiveness initiatives require a long list of competencies that practicing teachers must showcase which impact many graduate programs and how school systems prioritize professional development. As one teacher in an earlier pilot study put it, “I am currently inundated with plenty of professional development, but what about my spiritual development?” (Valtierra, 2010).
Graduate programs and other forms of in-service teacher education must strike a balance between warranting teachers as technically effective while also ensuring that we preserve, nourish, and rekindle the spirit that sustains teachers. This entails value and incorporation of the themes uncovered in this study. In-service teacher education ought to find space to not only professionally develop teachers, but spiritually develop them as well. Many of the suggestions offered in this section would be appropriate starting points for in-service teacher development.

Teacher inquiry, also known as Participatory Action Research (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; Sagor, 2005), is one way in which in-service teacher education can support career thrival. This process offers a forum to professionally develop teachers, while empowering their voice as change agents. This process of “systematic, intentional study of one’s own professional practice” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, p. 6) allows teachers the creative autonomy to propel their practices forward. This type of professional development fosters team collaboration, examination of practices, and wider systemic change that teachers are bought into. Teacher inquiry has significantly impacted Jan’s contributions to her current school and was also an intuitive practice adopted by her long time team in her previous school. Graduate programs and school based professional development alike can adopt this method to support sustainable professional development that often bleeds into opportunities for teacher thrival. I have witnessed many teacher inquiry projects facilitated through graduate programs and school based professional development that simultaneously offered solutions to real-time classroom problems while showcasing the voice of students, community, and teachers in a powerful manner. These
teacher inspired research projects influenced the intellectual and spiritual aspects that support teacher thrival.

Both pre- and in-service teacher education should prioritize career thrival. This requires striking a balance between current realities of meeting technical competencies and fostering dispositional qualities. Preparing teachers for the realities of teacher burnout, learning from veteran teachers like Jan and stories of thriving teachers, and offering continuing education that goes beyond professional development to “spiritual development” are all important components for preparing and sustaining thriving urban educators.

Implications for Future Research

The themes of hope springs eternal, the extended education family, and creative autonomy hold significance for taking urban teachers beyond survival to thrival. Additionally, Jan’s narrative is an example of one teacher’s capacity to preserve student needs as the focal point of her practice. This in turn impacts both her sustained spirit and her students’ achievement. Furthermore, the inspiring lessons contained in her narrative offer a counter-narrative to current rhetoric focused on teacher bashing. Teachers, school leaders, and teacher educators alike will benefit from reading Jan’s narrative and the findings that emerged. However, there is still much research to be done.

For example, few career narrative studies take a deep look into one teacher’s entire career. Replication of this study would bring forth the voices and insights from career-long thriving teachers. Such narratives would both allow stakeholders to appreciate the unique ways in which individuals sustain their spirit and reveal
commonalities between their stories. Further, deep explorations into career narratives would help change the face of the “grand narrative” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that currently perpetuates teachers’ low-status in our society.

Additionally, attending to career narratives from urban teachers of color would ensure that the career thrival consortium is inclusive of race. Although recent statistics show progress in recruitment and career sustainability of teachers of color (Ingersoll & May, 2011), a large disparity remains between the number of white teachers and teachers of color in urban schools (Achenstein, Ogawa, Sexton & Freitas, 2010). Studies of inspiring culturally responsive teachers clearly denote that students benefit when teachers of various racial backgrounds teach them. Minority students especially benefit from teachers who share their heritage and linguistic background (Au, 2009; Gay, 2010; Herrerra, 2010; Howard, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McIntosh, 1988; Nieto, 2009).

Further research should also explore the career narratives of long-time teams of thriving teachers. Jan’s sustained relationships with Phil and Sally were fundamental to her thrival. In the time I spent with Phil, it was apparent that he was equally impacted by these relationships. These three teachers (Jan, Phil, and Sally) supported and trusted one another, and appreciated each individual’s unique contributions to their professional practice. They complemented one another and would not have achieved the many innovations that they implemented without each member’s contributions. From hearing Jan’s storytelling and witnessing the dynamics between Phil and her it was clear to me that this team shared a special relationship that impacted each of their careers. An expansion of this study to include the narratives of Phil and Sally would simultaneously
allow for further insights into individual teacher career thrival and analysis of how group
dynamics supported this phenomenon. This is something that I might consider doing in
the future. A similar study exploring the individual and group aspects of other thriving
teams would also contribute to the wider body of literature. Any increase in the number
of teams under study would naturally lead to consideration of other qualitative
methodologies, such as case study and grounded theory (Creswell, 2007).

Finally, although this narrative offers implications for teachers, school leaders,
and teacher education, it is imperative that these types of narratives reach a wider
audience. When media and policy makers read and hear counter-narratives that explore
spirited teachers who defy pervasive negative stereotypes, the perception of teachers may
challenge policies that undermine teacher and student success such as legislation like
Race to the Top (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 2013, Thomas, 2013).
Although qualitative research has gained significant respect since the 1970’s (Schwandt,
2000), policy makers and the general public still view empirical research as the main
source of “scientifically based” and “valid” data (Polkinghorne, 2007). However, in my
involvement with education policy, I have been able to make qualitative studies speak to
policy makers. For example, through short digital stories and sharing of salient quotes
gathered through interviews and focus groups with students and parents, I was able to
shift a local school board’s mindset toward appreciation and use of qualitative data. In
addition, through the creative production of a short film telling the story behind a local
social justice orientated teacher licensure agency, I served on a team that was able to help
state level decision makers see the wider implications of our work. By revealing the
people behind the statistics, state leaders gained a deeper appreciation for student, community, teacher, and administrator stories and their importance to decision making. In order to foster systemic change, narratives such as Jan’s need to be transformed into accessible sound bites that speak to the sensibilities of those in power. As a result, change could be initiated from the ground up as well as from the top down.

**Closing Comments**

Jan viewed her parents as ordinary people who did extraordinary things with their lives. However, she and her parents were not without their share of hardships. C.S. Lewis once said, “Hardships often prepare ordinary people for an extraordinary destiny” (Martindale & Root, 1963, p. 307). Jan’s narrative reveals that she continued her parents’ legacy, contributing to our society as an extraordinary teacher who touched the lives of thousands of vulnerable youth. In turn, while the lives of high-poverty urban youth are filled with adversity, Jan’s career thrival has inspired countless students to turn hardship into their own thriving destinies. Furthermore, she inspired the lives of her colleagues and new teachers. As one former student teacher wrote to her, “You have touched so many lives in so many ways…you will never really know how much you have done for me.”

Narrative, according to Creswell (2007), can be both method and the phenomenon of study. Through the union of narrative as method and phenomenon, this study has revealed that one teacher’s career story can offer inspiration and implications to the wider community. Themes of *hope springs eternal*, the *extended education family*, and *creative autonomy* can be carried over to other teachers, school cultures, teacher educators, and
research. Teacher educators should aim to develop and support career thrival by making teachers aware of the pervasive burn out epidemic and preparing them with survival tools to endure hardship and thrive. Teachers should be keenly aware of the “why” behind their decision to teach and remain steadfast in sustaining identity and integrity. School leaders should be carefully observant of teacher dispositions and establish conditions that support the unique and collective gifts that teachers bring to their organizations. Researchers should continue to explore the lives of thriving teachers and ensure that their contributions are recognized and used to inform the profession. These actions will help urban students experience education delivered by thriving teachers who carry the skills, knowledge, understandings, and wisdom to gift our youth with a socially just and democratic education.

Post-Script

This study not only provides important implications to the wider education community but also was personally meaningful to Jan and me. Throughout the process of constructing and interpreting her narrative I regularly shared drafts with Jan. She consistently offered compliments, clarifications, new insights, and feedback through email, phone and in person. Initially I was anxious to share my writing with her; the sharing of writing is a vulnerable act. In addition, I was especially sensitive to ensuring that I portrayed her story in a manner that felt authentic and respectful to her. I wanted my account to celebrate her contributions while also allowing the theoretical contextualization to inform wider educational implications. Her enthusiasm and
compassionate feedback fueled my passion and offered me consistent motivation to forge ahead. Our partnership proved mutually beneficial.

Just as I am honored to know and tell her story, Jan consistently expressed to me that she was honored and humbled to be a part of this project. The following quotes demonstrate some of the ways in which this partnership has proved valuable to her.

Upon reading the first chapter of her narrative, Jan sent me the following email message:

I wanted to let you know, first of all, that I LOVE, LOVE, LOVE what you've written so far! You have done a spectacular job capturing my narrative voice in your writing. I am so excited to read the next chapter. I also appreciate you being so receptive to Phil's contributions.

Jan included clarifications, a few edits, and new stories with this message. Her feedback allowed me to improve the first chapter and gave me the confidence to continue.

Soon after, chapter 4 evoked the following feedback:

You have done a phenomenal job with ACT II!!!!!! I have laughed, cried, and even wondered "Oh, what's going to happen next—even though I know!" You have captured the very spirit of my teaching memories. I am both proud and humbled by the way you have so eloquently described my experiences. They truly have been my life's blood and you have made them come alive in a most profound way. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

She continued to offer feedback that helped me add sustenance to the first two chapters. We spent time in email dialogue and on the phone celebrating the story that
was taking shape and sharing in new insights. This dialogue inspired my writing of chapter 5. Chapter 5 resulted in Jan sending me the following message:

WOW, WOW, WOW!!! I feel like I've traveled back in time – I just want to keep reading. Tina, I can't tell you enough what a truly remarkable job you have done with my narrative and the related research. I feel silly for even saying this, but I'm mesmerized by my own story— that’s how beautifully you have told it!

Once again she extended clarifications and provided new stories. This spawned her retrieval of more teaching artifacts that she enthusiastically shared with me when we met at her school.

Finally after reading chapter 6, Jan offered the following:

You have done an amazing job! Again!!! I love your discussions of each chapter. I've realized that teaching has always been more of an intuitive practice for me – I'm embarrassed to say that I don't read a lot of educational research texts – so when you put a name to something I've done or a practice I've shared, I'm relieved to have been doing the "right" thing; I only did it in the first place because it seemed like the best thing to do. I hope this revelation doesn't make me look like a complete idiot! Your commentaries make me feel really proud of what I've done over the years. Thank you.

This message spawned reflection around the concept of teacher intuition that helped shape the findings of this chapter. We discussed the power in our partnership and value of individual expertise; hers as the practitioner and mine as the theorist.
Throughout the process, Jan emailed me recounts of teaching stories that came to mind. I came to look forward to her stories. Not only did this regular discourse help refine the account, but her stories and the spirit in which she told them fueled my spirit. Many stories were quite humorous and allowed me opportunities for laughter in the midst of hours of writing.

Jan came into my life at a point where I had become especially disheartened by the educational system. The opportunity to tell her story has rekindled my hope and determination to make a difference in education as a platform for social justice. The lessons she has imparted are countless. Foremost, she has taught me that optimism is a choice; a choice that I am now inspired to and committed to sustaining. The honor is all mine Jan!
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Appendix A

Recruitment Email

Greetings (name),

My name is Tina Valtierra, a former DPS teacher, and I am working on my doctoral dissertation in Curriculum & Instruction through the University of Denver.

I am writing to see if you know of any excellent teachers who would be interested and fit the qualities of my research study:

I am looking for a career long urban teacher- close to retirement, or recently retired- who you would describe with words such as inspired, passionate, resilient, reflective- someone who has defied the typical teacher burn out & drop out epidemic, and has thrived throughout their career.

My study is an in-depth study of one urban teachers career long “story”.

As you know, teacher burn out is all too common. There is a plethora of research that discusses the cause for the burnout epidemic, but little that uncovers or honors the educators who not only survive the hard parts of teaching, but also thrive through their work. I believe that by uncovering the stories of career-long “spirited” urban teachers, we can learn how to set up more teachers for a successful career in education. Educational research and common sense tell us that when teachers thrive, students receive a better education!

Please let me know if you have a teacher in mind, or feel free to share my contact information, which is below.

Thank you for your consideration.

Be Well,

Tina Valtierra, ABD
PhD Candidate, University of Denver
tinavaltierra@me.com
303-359-9190
Appendix B

Informed Consent Protocol

Project Information

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<tr>
<th>Project Title: “The Story of an Urban Spirited Teacher: Surviving and Thriving in a Complex Professional Career Lifecycle”</th>
<th>Email: <a href="mailto:tinavaltierra@me.com">tinavaltierra@me.com</a></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal Investigator: Kristina (Tina) M. Valtierra, ABD</td>
<td>Location: Denver, Colorado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Supervisor: Dr. Nicholas J Cutforth</td>
<td>Phone: 303-359-9190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor Address: Morgridge College of Education, Katherine A. Ruffatto Hall, 1999 East Evans Avenue, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208</td>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:ncutfort@du.edu">ncutfort@du.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution Review Board Contact: Paul Olk</td>
<td>Phone: 303.871.2477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phone: 303-871-4531</td>
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1. **Purpose of this research study**

You are invited to participate in this study due to your long career as a thriving urban educator. This study aims to understand how you defied the typical teacher burnout epidemic. The researcher hopes to provide a personable, anecdotal narrative of your career that will enrich the education community, while providing further material form which researchers and teacher educators can draw. In addition, this study is being conducted to fulfill the researchers requirements of a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Denver, Morgridge College of Education.

2. **Procedures**

Participation in this study should take about 20 hours of your time, over the course of 3 months. You will be asked to partake in 4-5 in-depth interviews. Each interview is anticipated to last 2-3 hours. During the interviews, you will be asked questions about your teaching career, your life related to teaching, moments of career burnout, and how you thrived as an urban teacher. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. You will be asked to review the written transcripts and the researcher’s interpretation of interview themes. If there is anything in the transcripts or written report that you want to have edited, you will have the option to do so. There may be additional follow-up/clarification through email or a secure blog, unless requested by participant. Additionally, classroom observation and notes will be used to depict your teaching style. Finally, archival data (e.g., notebooks, pictures, writing) that adds to the telling of your story will be requested.
3. Possible Risks and Benefits

The risks associated with participation in this study are minimal. However if you experience discomfort you may discontinue the interviews at any time. The researcher respects your right to choose not to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable. There are no direct benefits to you from participation, but your willingness to share your knowledge and experiences will contribute to the scholarly field of teacher education and policy.

4. Financial Considerations

There is no financial compensation for your participation in this research.

5. Confidentiality

a. The interviews will be audio recorded; however, your name and identifying information will not be associated with any part of the study. All of your information and interview responses will be kept confidential. However, as this is a study of one local teacher, the researcher cannot guarantee that readers could potentially identify the participant. Additionally, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Although no questions in this interview address it, we are required by law to tell you that if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities.

b. The participant will have the option to forgo confidentiality should he/she opt to be named.

6. Termination of Research Study

Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the study, please contact Paul Olk, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-4531, or you may email du-irb@du.edu, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs or call 303-871-4050 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.
7. Authorization

A copy of this agreement will be provided for your records. Please sign the next page if you understand and agree to the above. If you do not understand any part of the above statement, please ask the researcher any questions you have.

I __________________________________________________ have read and understand the foregoing descriptions of the study called “The Story of an Urban Spirited Teacher: Surviving and Thriving in a Complex Professional Career Lifecycle”. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature ___________________________ Date _________________

___ I agree to be audiotaped.

___ I do not agree to be audiotaped.

Signature ___________________________ Date _________________

___ I request that my identity remains confidential and understand that confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed, due to the nature of this study, explicated above.

___ I am opting to be named in this study and understand that my identifying information will not be confidential.

Signature ___________________________ Date _________________

____ I would like a summary of the results of this study to be mailed to me at the following postal or e-mail address:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Appendix C

Pre-interview Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire! The purpose of this questionnaire is for me to learn more about you and how you became a teacher. Please return the completed questionnaire by our first scheduled formal interview.

1. Tell me about yourself.
   For example (but not limited to):
   Where do you live?
   Tell me about your family?
   How would you identify yourself in regards to nationality?
   What about culture?
   Race? Ethnicity?
   Religion?
   Linguistic background?
   Do you have hobbies or special interests?
   What do you like to do in your free time?

2. What led you to choosing teaching as a career? Is there anyone who influenced this decision?

3. Where did you study to become a teacher?

4. What was your pre-service teaching experience like?

5. What did your education prepare you for? Is there anything you wish it had prepared you for?

6. Who was your most influential teacher and why?

7. Please provide Tina with your resume, vita, or a list of teaching positions you have held.

You can return this form via email, USPS, or in person- whatever works best for you!

-Thank You!-
Appendix D

Interview Protocol 1

The purpose of this interview is to gather information about the career narrative during the participants “affirmation” years. This interview will explore the participants later career experiences. This interview is anticipated to take 3-5 hours. Should it take longer than 3 hours, this initial interview will likely be broken into 2 interview sessions. This will be an open-ended in-depth interview, aimed to further answer the following research questions:

1) How did this teacher not only survive but also thrive as a career-long urban teacher?
   
   Sub-questions:
   a) How is her spirit sustained throughout her teacher lifecycle?
   b) How can her story contribute to the literature as a counter-narrative to the current rhetoric focused on “teacher bashing”?  

1. **Introduction**: Investigator follow up questions for questionnaire and informed consent. Collect informed consent.

**Interview Prompts & Guide**: This interview is meant to solicit the participants’ *later career biography*. The following prompts are anticipated to *guide* the interview and will be used in an open-ended, conversation-like interview. Prompts will be selected flexibly, based upon responses to initial prompts and exercises. Some questions are likely not to be asked, should the participant answer them through previous prompts.

   - **Stage 1: “Feeling, dispositional” prompts**-

2. Describe **yourself** as a teacher today. What are you most proud of? Why?
   1) Let’s pretend we were listening in on your retirement dinner- a dinner in which your loved ones, past students, colleagues, community members, friends and such were there to celebrate you and your accomplished career. What would you hope students, community members, and colleagues would say about you at your retirement dinner?

3. Some people view teaching as a job and means of earning an income. Others view it as a vocation or **calling**. How do you view your place in education? What **gifts** do you bring to the classroom? Perhaps you didn’t recognize these gifts initially, but what gifts have sprung up as important? Have you acquired new gifts along the way?
4. What is important to know about your school and students? What stands out? How does your school support your passion/drive for teaching? What gets in the way?

5. As a teacher myself, there are many times when I have to remind myself- and have trained my newer teachers to also do this- remind myself/ground myself in why I teach. For me, I teach out of hope, passion, and because I see education as an agent towards social justice. I also see teaching as dangerous- when put in the hands of the wrong person who doesn’t sincerely believe in our vulnerable populations. Why do you teach? Has your reason for teaching changed over the years? How? How do you stay grounded in your reasons for teaching? What gets in the way of this? (example standardized testing, etc.)

6. If you were to give one idea to fill in the following metaphor, what would it be: “When I am teaching at my best I am like ……..” (PI-share my own answer if a helpful example)

7. If you were to choose a metaphorical theme to describe the who you are as a teacher today, what would it be? Possible prompts: “the year of the…” or a quote, or saying, or song, or line from a poem, line from literature. Do you think, at that time, that you would have chosen this same metaphor? If you were to travel back in time, not knowing what you know now, what would the metaphor have been named?

8. Sonia Nieto, one of the researchers who have inspired this study asked the following research question: “What keeps teachers going in spite of everything?”

   1) What keeps you going today?

   Have participant rate & explain her own themes from most important to least

   Nieto found 5 themes:

   . Teaching as love
   . Teaching as hope and possibility
   . Teaching as anger and desperation
   . Teaching as intellectual work
   . Teaching as democratic practice

   a. How would you interpret these themes?

   b. If you were sitting with Sonia Nieto right now, what would you tell her keeps you going?
c. Are there any of her themes that resonate with you?

d. If you were to rate these from most important to least, how would you rate these?

9. O’Reilley (2005) said that teaching “at root, is a spiritual occupation” (p. 2) How would you respond to this idea today?

-Stage 2: Contextual prompts-

10. I know we talked briefly about this previously- but is there something specific that you go/do to maintain your spirit for teaching? For example, I have found that journaling is important to allowing me to “vent” and process. I also love to read and have found books about other teachers’ lives and experiences helpful. Some people really enjoy poetry, music, religious materials, etc. What is your trick? What else?

11. So, of course one of the latest and greatest “buzz words” is the idea of teacher effectiveness. What is effective teaching in your mind? Can you define it? What does it look like? What skills are necessary? What knowledge and understandings? What about beliefs and dispositions? How has your view of effective teaching evolved over your career?

12. Do you have a specific philosophy of education? What is it? How does this philosophy resonate in your classroom? What does it look like? How are your students impacted by your teaching philosophy? How does this impact you? Others?

13. Politics: 
    There are many, Freire for example, who view teaching as a political act. By politics here, I don’t mean party affiliation, but how you choose to live your life- what you believe in, value, the things you care deeply about. How did your politics or perhaps your beliefs, values, the things you care deeply about impact your choice to become a teacher? How were the various phases of your career impacted by your politics your beliefs, values, the things you care deeply about? How has teaching impacted your politics, your beliefs, values, and the things you care deeply about? How did politics impact your teaching?

    Culture: 
    In my mind, culture goes far beyond how others label us based upon our skin, language, religious practices, lifestyles, etc. Some say that culture is the air we breathe. I have learned, as a white woman that I have had to come to a deep understanding of what it means to be white in our society and in our schools. I
have had to realize my white privilege and work hard to breathe the world in with a critical filter on my white privilege. What about you- how does culture influence your identity, specifically in your work as an educator?

14. What is hard in this era of education?
   1) How do you combat these influences? Do you have an example?
   2) How do you maintain your teacher identity and integrity? How do you maintain hope? Example…

15. In your mind, what were the best years in educational reform? Why?
   1) What were the worst? Why?

16. What words of wisdom would you offer someone entering the teaching profession today?
   1) What wisdom would you offer to the following stakeholders: universities, teacher educators, policy makers, curriculum companies, principals, district leadership, students in schools today and their families?

17. What are your hopes for the future of education?

18. Why do you think you not only survived teaching but also thrived?

19. Do you maintain a sense of balance between your personal life and your professional lives? What does that look like? How does your professional life influence your personal and vice versa?

20. Do you see retirement? What are your thoughts and feelings about retirement?
   1) How do you see your identity evolving?

21. What else is important for me to know as I tell this phase of your story?
Appendix E

Original Interview Protocol 2

The purpose of this interview is to gather information about the significant periods in the participants’ career. This interview will be participant led and is inspired by Huberman’s study (1989) in which he asked 160 participants to reflect on their own career trajectories, identify distinct phases, and affix original thematic titles to each. Aside from the structure of placing their career stories into phases, there were no constraints on participants who could choose any theme, sequence, and configuration of features. As “homework” between the first and second interview, the participant will be asked to create a visual representation of their career. Like Huberman’s study, she will be asked to identify distinct phases and affix original thematic titles to each. This participant led-interview will aid in answering the following research question:

1. How did this teacher not only survive but also thrive as a career-long urban teacher? Sub-questions:
   a) How is her spirit sustained throughout her teacher lifecycle?
   b) How can her story contribute to the literature as a counter-narrative to the current rhetoric focused on “teacher bashing”?

Introduction: Investigator follow up questions for interview 1 (this study will use a constant comparative analysis method in which each interview will inform subsequent interviews). In addition, allow for time for the participant to ask any questions or add any insights from the initial interview.

Huberman Follow-Up & Interview Agenda:
Thank you for taking the time to map out the pivotal points in your teaching career. I would like to spend our time together with you walking me through this piece. I would like us to use this visual as a guide as you talk me through the important points in your career.
Possible prompts-
Can you tell me about distinct phases in your career?
How did you choose the thematic titles to each and why?
What is important for me to know about each phase?
How did each phase impact your ability to thrive as a career long teacher? What parts were challenging? How did you overcome challenging times?

Closure:
Thank you for your time and sharing such important stories from your life with today. Next time, we will delve further into the middle years of your career. I really appreciated your stories today. As we go our separate ways, I would invite you to continue to think through your professional story and then let me know if there is anything that you might add, revise or alter now that you have had the time to think through this important story.
In addition, I would love to visit your classroom and spend some time there, in preparation for upcoming interviews. Finally, I would be honored if you would be willing to share other artifacts that help tell your career story- pictures, journals, mementos, etc. Finally, would it be possible for you to introduce me to (possible significant colleagues or family). I would love to ask them a few questions to add to your narrative.

Schedule opportunities for 3rd interview time and date- about 2 weeks later.
Appendix F

Original Interview Protocol 3

The purpose of this interview is to gather information about the participants’ mid-career narrative, or “stabilization” years. This interview is anticipated to last 2-3 hours. This will be an open-ended in-depth interview, aimed to further answer the following research question:
1. How did this teacher not only survive but also thrive as a career-long urban teacher?
   Sub-questions:
   a) How is her spirit sustained throughout her teacher lifecycle?
   b) How can her story contribute to the literature as a counter-narrative to the current rhetoric focused on “teacher bashing”?

Introduction: Investigator follow up questions for interview 1 & 2 (this study will use a constant comparative analysis method in which each interview will inform subsequent interviews). In addition, allow for time for the participant to ask any questions or add any insights from the initial interviews.

Huberman Follow-Up
Last time we met, you talked me through a visual representation of your teaching career. Now that we’ve both had some time to sit with our discussion from last time, I am wondering if you have any additional thoughts to add to this dialogue? Is there anything you would add, edit, or change? Tell me about it. Why?

Interview Prompts & Guide: This interview is meant to solicit the participants’ mid-career biography. The following prompts are anticipated to guide the interview and will be used in an open-ended, conversation-like interview. Prompts will be selected flexibly, based upon responses to initial prompts and exercises. Some questions are likely not to be asked, should the participant answer them through previous prompts.

-Stage 1: “Feeling, dispositional” prompts-

1. What fears did you experience during these time periods? Did you recognize these fears at the time? How did you cope?

2. What other emotions do you recall experiencing during these time periods? Tell me about them and how you coped.

3. Looking back now, would you have considered yourself motivated by teaching during the time periods? If so, why? Can you share some examples? (If not, why? Can you share examples?). What are some words that would explain how you felt about teaching during those time periods? For example, when I am at my best, I find myself passionate about teaching.
4. What significant events happened in your life during the “stabilization” years? How did these life events impact your teaching? How did teaching impact your life outside of work?

5. What was easy about these years and time periods? Are there parts of teaching that felt more natural or fluid? Did you realize any new gifts during those years? How did those come about?

6. What was challenging about these years and time periods?
   1) How did you cope during challenging periods? What kept your spirit and passion for teaching alive when challenging periods occurred.
   2) How did you maintain hope during these experiences?

7. If you were to choose metaphorical themes to describe the middle parts of your teaching career, what would it be? Possible prompts: “the year of the…” or a quote, or saying, or song, or line from a poem, line from literature. Do you think, at that time, that you would have chosen this same metaphor? If you were to travel back in time, not knowing what you know now, what would the metaphor have been named?

8. Palmer (2007) contends that in our hurry to reform education:
   We have forgotten a simple truth: reform will never be achieved by renewing appropriations, restructuring schools, rewriting curricula, and revising texts if we continue to demean and dishearten the human resource called the teacher on whom so much depends. Teachers must be better compensated, freed from bureaucratic harassment, given a role in academic governance, and provided with the best possible methods and materials. But none of that will transform education if we fail to cherish—and challenge—the human heart that is the source of good teaching (p. 3).

How did you continue to grow professionally during these years? Graduate school, reading, conferences, leadership opportunities, etc.? Did these help you grow spiritually as well? How so?

-Stage 2: Contextual prompts-

9. How did the following play into the factors that were easy and challenging such as-Political factors? Personal factors? School factors? Relationship factors? Students? Curriculum? Colleagues? Other?
10. What is important to know about your teaching contexts (urban, high poverty school) during the middle years? Why did you choose this context and community to work in? How did your teaching settings impact your career vitality?

11. Were you able to maintain a sense of balance between your personal life and your professional life during these time periods? What did that look like? How did your professional life influence your personal and vice versa?

12. Can you share some examples of how teacher burn out was evident in your teaching experiences? Is there a significant example(s) you could share about yourself and/or colleagues?
   1) Why do you think you thrived when most others did not? What is it that you did differently? Believed? How did you keep your passion, hope, spirit alive?
   2) Were there times when you thought about leaving teaching? Why didn't you? What parts of teaching kept your spirit alive? What almost “broke” your spirit?
   3) Who did you lean on to maintain or reinvent your passion for teaching? How did you support one another?

13. What was considered “effective teaching” during these time periods? What changed from the first years? What stayed the same? How did you feel about these trends?
   1) What were the technical skills, knowledge, understandings, beliefs you possessed to be “effective”?
   2) What were the non-technical skills, knowledge, and understandings, beliefs that made you effective?

14. Do you recall talk of education reform over your stabilization years? What were they like? Or what was valued by the public during these time periods.
   1) Did you feel cherished and challenged during these reforms? How so?

15. What else is important for me to know as I tell about this phase of your career story?

Closure:
Thank you for your time and sharing such important stories from your life with today. Next time, we will delve further into the later years of your career and who you are as a teacher today. I would love to visit your classroom and spend some time there, in preparation for the last interview. In addition, if you are willing, I would be honored if you would be willing to share other artifacts that help tell your career story- pictures, journals, mementos, etc. Finally, would it be possible for you to introduce me to (possible significant colleagues or family). I would love to ask them a few questions to add to your narrative.
Appendix G

Original Interview Protocol 4

The purpose of this final interview is to gather information about the participants’ career beginnings. This interview is anticipated to take 2-3 hours. This will be an open-ended in-depth interview, as data are gathered, alteration of this interview protocol is anticipated based on earlier fieldwork findings. This interview is aimed to help to answer the following research question:

How did this teacher not only survive but also thrive as a career-long urban teacher?

Sub-questions:

a) How is her spirit sustained throughout her teacher lifecycle?

b) How can her story contribute to the literature as a counter-narrative to the current rhetoric focused on “teacher bashing”?

Interview Prompts & Guide: This interview is meant to solicit the participants’ early career biography. The following prompts are anticipated to guide the interview and will be used in an open-ended, conversation-like interview. Prompts will be selected flexibly, based upon responses to initial prompts and exercises. Some questions are likely not to be asked, should the participant answer them through previous prompts.

-Stage 1: “Feeling, dispositional” prompts-

1. (Possible prompt- As a teacher, I (PI) remember my first year as being quite the learning experience. Many parts were wonderful and very rewarding. But many parts of that first year were devastating. I was in a state of culture shock absorbing the day-to-day realities of many of my students. In addition, the conditions of teaching were hard- lack of materials, support, no curriculum and students who struggled academically and emotionally.)

2. Do you remember what if felt like to be a teacher that year? What about the first few years? Tell me about the hard parts of this first year?

3. What did they feel like?


5. What fears did you have coming into your first year of teaching? How did you handle those fears?

6. During that first year/ few years of teaching, did you know that this was your “calling”? (If yes- how did you know? If no- when did you know?)
7. What natural **gifts** did you bring to teaching that first year? What about years 2 and 3? Did you know you had these gifts at the time? How did you discover them?

8. If you were to choose a **metaphorical theme** to describe the beginning of your teaching career, what would it be? (Possible prompts: “the year of the...” or a quote, or saying, or song, or line from a poem, line from literature. Do you think, at that time, that you would have chosen this same metaphor? If you were to travel back in time, not knowing what you know now, what would the metaphor have been named?)

9. Sonia Nieto said, “**Hope** is the very essence of teaching.” What were your hopes when you started teaching? How have you maintained hope over the years? How have your hopes changed?

10. If you were to describe the less tangible- but important- things that led you to teaching- such as love, hope, passion, etc. what would these things be? What would you call them? Why?

   -Stage 2: Contextual prompts-

What is your most **vivid memory / favorite story** from that first year? What about the 2\(^{nd}\) and 3\(^{rd}\) years?

1. What else do you remember about that **first teaching assignment**?
   i. Possible probes:
2. **Where** did you teach?
3. For how long?
4. Tell me about the **school**?
5. Follow up probes:
   a. What were the **student** demographics
   b. What were your students like? What do you remember most vividly about your students?
   c. Are there **particular students** that stick out in your mind? Why? Tell me about them.
   d. What was the building **leadership** like?
   e. Tell me about the **curriculum** in your first teaching assignment.
   f. Tell me about your **colleagues**. What were they like? Were there colleagues that supported you through your first year? How? Were there colleagues that were unsupportive or added to the challenges of being a beginning teacher?
   g. Is there a specific student, family, or colleague that sticks with you from that time period? Why?
6. Do you recall any significant **historical events** (Possible Prompt—such as impact from Brown versus Board, 1974 Equal Education Opportunity Act, Back to Basics trend, etc.) were taking place when you started teaching? How did these impact your first teaching experience?

7. How did your **politics** (Possible explanation—this doesn’t necessarily mean your political affiliation, but perhaps your beliefs around significant issues occurring at the time) impact your decision to become a teacher? How did they impact how you approached teaching that first year? What cultural influences impacted you? Historical factors? Family factors? Spiritual factors? Social factors? Religious factors? Relationship factors? What else?

8. Was there anything similar to the concept of **teacher effectiveness** when you started teaching?
   i. Were you effective? Why? How?
   ii. What would say were the **technical** skills that an effective teacher needed to have in place?
   iii. What were the **non-technical** aspects of effective teaching during these first years?
   iv. What did you need to learn during that first year? Few years?
   v. What, challenges did you experience your first year and first few years?

9. Teachers who survive and thrive are often found to have a strong sense of identity or **self-knowledge**. What self-knowledge did you have when you started teaching? How has this evolved?

10. Is there anything else I haven’t asked?
Appendix H

Sample of Researcher Data Reduction Plotting & Timeline

Timeline of Jan’s Career
- Acts and Scenes -
- Pre-Play - 1971 - Student Teaching (doesn’t feel welcome beyond cooperating teacher)

ACT I
Career Beginnings (Year 1-9.5)
- Title: ACHS Presents: With apologies to Gilbert from Sullivan
- Setting: Adams City High School
- Starring: Jan Sullivan
- Supporting Roles: High School Students, Drama teacher, A & V (fellow English teachers), Principal, Director of Secondary Education, tenured Coaches

Scene 1: Thrown into the Mix (year 1)
- Creative Writing Teacher
- No curriculum, no mandate
- Lots of outside duties - class sponsor, press, camping
- Drama musical director a highlight
- Secretarial/ procedural tasks
- Survival

Scene 2: Mere Year Station (year 2)
- All school production
- Facilitates student border crossing
- Learns unwritten law of “no border crossing for teachers”*

Scene 3: Setting Sail (year 3)
- Collaboration begins
- Curriculum notebooks

Scene 4: Smooth Sailing (years 4-7)
- Building confidence
- Co-teaching
- Creative Writing 2 & 3
- Creativity & autonomy

Scene 5: Trouble in paradise (year 7)
- Principal attached
- Troubling campus

Scene 6: Walking the Plank (year 9)
- Janet RIF’d
- Student Walkout
- Injustice & Politics
- Convenience versus Excellence
- Convenience wins
- Anger & Sorrow
- What about the kids*

War on Poverty = 1965 (ESEA)
Appendix I

Sample of Jan’s “Huberman Project” to aid in Narrative Retelling

THE ACHS PINAFORE
(with apologies to Gilbert from Sullivan)

ACT I

PROLOGUE: Voyage temporarily postponed due to teacher strike!

SCENE I: On Board
- Junior class sponsor (prom fundraiser)
- Camping chaperone
- Musical director for Li'l Abner
- No mentors
- No curriculum, just book storeroom

SCENE 2: Man Your Station
- Don’t upstage the captain (all-school musical)
- Out and about meeting other teachers (shop, art, sewing)
- Isolated --- everyone is an island, doing their own thing

SCENE 3: Setting Sail
- Building curriculum (teaching notebooks)
- Refining courses
- Offering courses
- Team planning
- Co-teaching

SCENE 4: Smooth Sailing
- Expanding classes --- Creative Writing I, II, and III
- Publishing literary magazine
- Summer school --- J R (Lttn. Gov. to...)

SCENE 5: Trouble in Paradise
- Principal attacked
- Campus supervisors during planning
- Expecting first child

SCENE 6: Walking the Plank/Sink or Swim
- RIF action
- Choice of middle schools
- Seniority VS excellence
Appendix J
Adapted Interview Guides # 2 & 3

(Note: Interview 1 remained the same as that shown in Appendix A)

The purpose of these interviews is to gather information about the significant periods in the participants’ career. This interview will be participant led and is inspired by Huberman’s study (1989) in which he asked 160 participants to reflect on their own career trajectories, identify distinct phases, and affix original thematic titles to each. Aside from the structure of placing their career stories into phases, there were no constraints on participants who could choose any theme, sequence, and configuration of features. As “homework” between the first and second interview, the participant will be asked to create a visual representation of their career. Like Huberman’s study, she will be asked to identify distinct phases and affix original thematic titles to each. This participant led-interview will aid in answering the following research question:

1) How did this teacher not only survive but also thrive as a career-long urban teacher?
   Sub-questions:
   a) How is her spirit sustained throughout her teacher lifecycle?
   b) How can her story contribute to the literature as a counter-narrative to the current rhetoric focused on “teacher bashing”?

Introduction: Investigator follow up questions from previous interviews (this study will use a constant comparative analysis method in which each interview will inform subsequent interviews). In addition, allow for time for the participant to ask any questions or add any insights from the initial interview.

Huberman Follow- Up & Interview Agenda:
Thank you for taking the time to map out the pivotal points in your teaching career. I would like to spend our time together with you walking me through this piece. I would like us to use this visual as a guide as you talk me through the important points in your career.
   Possible prompts-
   Can you tell me about distinct phases in your career?
   How did you choose the thematic titles to each and why?
   What is important for me to know about each phase?
   How did each phase impact your ability to thrive as a career long teacher? What parts were challenging? How did you overcome challenging times?

Closure:

Schedule opportunities for next interview time and date- about 2 weeks later.
Appendix K

Adapted Interview Guide # 4

The purpose of this final interview is to explore major themes that emerge from the data previously gathered. This final interview will aid in answering the following research question:

1) How did this teacher not only survive but also thrive as a career-long urban teacher?

Sub-questions:
- a) How is her spirit sustained throughout her teacher lifecycle?
- b) How can her story contribute to the literature as a counter-narrative to the current rhetoric focused on “teacher bashing”?

Introduction: Investigator follow up questions & name trends that are emerging from previous interviews (this study will use a constant comparative analysis method in which each interview will inform subsequent interviews). In addition, allow for time for the participant to ask any questions or add any insights from the initial interview.

Major trends to explore with Jan include:

- Eternal Optimism
- Collegiality
- Students as family, teaching as love?
- Implications of NCLB